

Days of Light, Days of Glory.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a Great Light.” (Is 9:2)

It is a pity that the term *Festive Season* has been hijacked by the secularists, and is now used as a substitute for *Christmas time*; just as *happy holidays* has become an acceptable alternative to a *Happy Christmas*. It is to be regretted, because ironically that is precisely what this time of year is for Christians – a time of celebration, a time of feasts, a truly festive season. One wonders if those who wish each other “happy holidays” even know that it actually means happy *holy days*, from the Old English word *hāligdæ*, meaning *holy days*. For the Household of the Faith this time of year is indeed *happy* and it is certainly *holy*.

An especially beautiful and significant description of the time from Christmas to Theophany, 6 January, is the Days of Light. The theme of light and glory is an integral part of the Christmas celebration – singing a hymn of glory, the Angels, the Bodiless Powers of Heaven, appear to the shepherds, and light shines about them. The fire-worshipping Magi are led to Bethlehem by a star, a heavenly light.

The significance of the Feast differs between East and West. In the Latin Church, January 6, commemorates the arrival of the Magi (Epiphany); in the Byzantine East, we recall the Baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptizer, and the revelation of the Holy Trinity (Theophany).

Indeed, these are the days of light and glory, celebration and festivity. In much of Europe before the spiritual vandalism of the so-called “Reformation”, the twelve days of Christmas – Nativity to Epiphany – were a joyful respite in the depths of the northern winter. Indeed, in many places the Christmas festivities continued until Candlemas on February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple.

At its most basic, the Feast of the Theophany commemorates the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, as recorded in the three synoptic Gospels. However, beyond this historical fact, the Feast is a remembrance of the revelation of the Most Holy Trinity. It would seem that the triune nature of God is implicit in the Old Testament – for example, in the plural *us* and *our* in the Genesis (Gen 1:26) account of the creation of Adam, and in the use of the singular *thou* when Abraham speaks to the three heavenly beings who visit him at Mamre. (Gen 18:1-8)

At the baptism of Jesus, the revelation of the Divine Trinity is as clear as our frail human minds can grasp – the Father speaks, the Son is seen and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. At that moment, “He alone was shown to be united with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as he existed with them before anything was made.” (St Gregory Palamas, Homily 60, *The Feast of Theophany*)

For this reason, the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus is called in the Byzantine Churches, The Theophany, ἡ θεοφάνεια, God is revealed.

The baptism of Jesus is a *mystagogical* event – it leads us to an understanding which goes beyond the senses. Just as the miracle of the loaves and fishes can be seen as a gospel sign of the still to be instituted Eucharist (Jn 6:9-14), so when Jesus goes under the waters of the Jordan, there is foreshadowed his descent into Hades after his life-giving death on the Cross.

In accepting a form of baptism administered by John to sinners, Jesus, the One without sin, takes upon himself, the sins of humankind; and in doing so, gives notice to the Powers of darkness that their unchallenged reign will come to an end because of His death and resurrection.

The Great Blessing of Water which occurs at this Feast is the liturgical expression of the cosmic significance of Christ's baptism. It is both a blessing of the waters which constitute much of our environment, and an acknowledgement of the priceless gift that God has given us in water – a preservation of life, a source of food, refreshment and recreation.

If we are seeking an environmental or ecological theology, it is to be found both in Sacred Scripture and in the Church's liturgical practice for Feasts such as Theophany.

This celebration should also remind us that we share the world's water resources with countless other infrahuman creatures, and for them it is an irreplaceable and God-given home. As the custodians of this precious gift, we have a responsibility to preserve it as best as we can for our own use and for future generations.

It is the custom to take some Theophany water to our homes as a blessing throughout the year. It is believed by many that this water will not corrupt. In the fourth century, St John Chrysostom wrote, "...on this day, all, having obtained the water, carry it home and keep it all year, since today the waters are sanctified; and an obvious phenomenon occurs: these waters in their essence do not spoil with the passage of time, but obtained today, for one whole year and often for two or three years, they remain unharmed and fresh, and afterwards for a long time do not stop being water, just as that obtained from the fountains." (St John Chrysostom, Homily for Theophany)

We should take the opportunity to invite the parish priest to bless our homes at Theophany as a sign of our unflinching trust in God's loving-kindness, and as a means by which we emphasize that this is a Christian family. Gather your family and friends together and make a special occasion of the blessing. It is a powerful way of saying with the Righteous Joshua, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:15)

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