

Beginning Again

Reflections As We Move Into Epiphany 2012

Pearl S. Buck once wrote: "Every great mistake has a halfway moment, a split second when it can be recalled and perhaps remedied." Hindsight speaks to the truth of that incredible insight, obvious in many of the world-stage events of 2011 and prior which led the peoples of the Earth to escalating violence and poverty and misplaced myopic egotism and power plays.

*"Great mistakes" could be identified differently. They could be called sins – death-dealing mortal sins: failures to live up to our potential as fully human, fully loving, fully compassionate, fully forgiving children of God. And we all have that split second to diffuse, rather than picking up the "red phone." We all have that split second to **not** react.*

*The mythical magi had a graced epiphany when they set out to seek the "newborn king" who was obviously born into this world for **everybody** – because, as we know from every depiction of those wise men we have ever seen, the magi were from different nations and different religions and even different ethnicities, so the divisions of persons that we continue to perpetuate should have been completely obliterated with Jesus' birth. But then they had another, maybe a more significant epiphany when they **disobeyed authority** and "went home by a different route" – because, as the story goes, if they had divulged the location of the child the king would have had he killed and Christianity would never have happened.*

Isn't Scripture great? And isn't this one of the greatest stories we love to recount every year? And weren't those ancient writers meticulously and prayerfully discerning people as they crafted for us a wonderful nativity story, complete with a full-blown recipe for living the fullness of our humanity as children of God that can be summed up in two succinct parts?

*Part One: Our God is way too big to be **only** God to the Jews ... or to the Christians who weren't even called Christians until sometime after the crucifixion of Jesus ... or to the Muslims ... etc, etc, etc.*

*Part Two: We are divinely-infused with conscience, which acts to give us the right answers to all our life's dilemmas, often in the form of dreams and epiphanies – "aha" moments – and we are obligated to follow that still small voice **even** if it "violates" human authority.*

The magi had a split second to decide to follow their heart, their conscience, their epiphany. They could have reacted, done as they were told to do, made a "great mistake." But they chose the road less traveled by – they went a different way. Given that they even got lost trying to follow that Star to the place where Jesus

could be found, chances are they took many wrong turns while following a whole different route home. Haven't we all "been there"? But they could not do otherwise.

We are called to follow our own Star, the one from whose stardust we were lovingly conjured into being, mixed with the dust of the Earth and molded into breakable clay vessels of earthly divinity. We are called to "finish" the story that so abruptly ends with these wise persons taking off on an uncharted journey home. We are called to journey in ambiguity, needing no answers but continuing to question. We are called to trust that eventually we will arrive at the place from which we began. Perhaps we will know it for the first time.

So the questions for us, as we relive this great Epiphany story once again, are: **Has** Christianity happened on a larger-than-life basis, at any time really since sometime late in the first century of the Common Era? **Is** Christianity happening, even among we who call ourselves Christian, as we engage with others (Christian and otherwise) who see a different reality and live by a different truth? **Can** Christianity happen in 2012 ... even just in St. Louis ... in the Therese Community ... in our families of birth and in our intentional families ... in our work and in our play and in our prayer ... in our own individual and personal life?

Looking back on our decisions and deeds in 2011, and then forward to our new chances for making things "right" in 2012, is what New Year resolutions are all about. Often these are half-hearted attempts at attaining greater self-importance rather than seriously discerning projects for gaining deeper self-awareness. But sometimes, they are very real epiphanies. Providential for Christians, that we celebrate Epiphany as the calendar year is turning over. Nothing remains exactly as it was, and immovable certainty has no place in living. So where do we see ourselves as we round another year and begin – yet again – our individual and collective epiphanies?

Looking Back

*As Advent began, Therese of Divine Peace celebrated a fourth birthday. Four is the age at which kids seem to begin to develop a sense of social skills, a sense of community responsibility, a sense of self. While we **thought** we had all those "senses" as newborns, it does seem as though our maturing has heightened them. That is our hope, as we are far removed from where we started even though we are still meeting in the same space and with many of the same people.*

We've been celebrating liturgy on Saturday afternoons for over a year now, after having celebrated on Sunday afternoons for the first couple of years (sans the first two months of our life). The change was made at the request of the majority of the community, but then some of our members stopped coming, saying they simply cannot get there on Saturday afternoons. Some come with less frequency,

saying it is just really difficult to come on Saturday afternoons. Would it be to our advantage to go back to Sunday afternoon? Hard to say. And we – who live by a mantra of change – are reluctant to change things again.

It seemed that we might have a solution to that dilemma when the Hildegard Community took root in a Presbyterian church in Festus. Hildegard celebrated liturgy on Sunday evenings. This gave people a choice, and the opportunity to go to one or the other every week. But the reality was not what it seemed, and Hildegard closed its doors as we began our newest Advent.

So “how many” of us are there? That is always the first question from those who “support” us from afar, apparently the primary criterion for most people for measuring success or failure. We are solidly 15 to 20. We have been bigger, never smaller. We have experienced people leaving ... one year, two years, three years into our life. Why? We question, ponder, throw out suppositions – but mostly we get no answers.

Changing things that need to be changed is complicated when we aren't certain of what those things are. Perhaps they are not even things we can change. Perhaps they have less to do with those who stay, and more to do with those who leave. We think we have experienced a more than normal ebb and flow of persons in our first years of life, but perhaps it was simply more noticed because the community has never been large enough to get lost in. We don't want it ever to be that large.

*We were happy to, for a while, have two communities. We are hopeful to again have two, three, even more. And to get others started along the way, in places both near to and far from St. Louis, in churches, in homes, in nursing homes – wherever there is the need and the desire for a vibrant and renewed church in which all are **truly** welcome. We are hopeful that we are not making too many mistakes along the way, and that those we have made – and will make – are not “great” ones.*

Looking Forward

People who have tried to “stay with the program” in “licit” churches are becoming more and more frustrated. They suffer more and more abuse from the words and the deeds of those who hold the power. They tune out and turn off and eventually walk away. And a few of those, still wanting and needing the support of a liturgical community that is familiar without being elitist, will follow their Star and find their way here.

“Here” isn't an easy place to be, in a community that has been labeled as sinners one and all – excommunicated and heretical. While fear subsides as frustration and anger build, reality dictates the hoops through which “faithful” Catholics are expected to jump. You most definitely may lose your job, a few “friends,” and

*your upstanding Catholic reputation – for starters – by joining the ranks of a Roman Catholic community where **all are welcome**.*

*And we know that “how many we are” matters not one iota in the larger scheme of things. Much is lost as communities grow, much that we need to be constantly aware of and awake to in order to avoid some of those growth pitfalls – because we **will** grow. It is an inevitable result of the state of today’s retrenchment church.*

*As RCWP, we **are** growing – rapidly and with much fanfare (and otherwise) – around this world. During 2011, there were at least 15 new RCWP ordinations and countless new inclusive church communities begun throughout the USA. Jules Hart’s award-winning documentary on our movement, “Pink Smoke Over the Vatican,” debuted around the world. Father Roy Bourgeois, MM, took his “Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling” speaking tour across the country, and eventually into Vatican City itself. Dr. Dorothy Irvin continued her engaging teaching presentations on the historical archeological proofs of women deacons, priests and bishops from the church’s inception and throughout its first 1,200 years of existence. New women and men in our formation programs around the globe are finding more vocal support and a quickly eroding opposition to their journeys.*

In our little community of Therese of Divine Peace, there have been many moments of epiphany during 2011 – weddings and births, deaths and rebirths, illnesses and surgeries and anointings, prayerful days of retreat, enlightening evenings of scripture study, playful times of barbecues and trivia games, collaborative works with Holy Ground, and heartfelt almsgiving for those so much less fortunate than we are. We’ve laughed and cried together, prayed and played together, lived and learned together. Numbers notwithstanding, we have grown into a new awareness of our responsibilities and our liabilities, both within and to the larger Roman Catholic Church. We face the future with faith, and the courage of our convictions. We begin again, as graced 4-year old “new” Catholics.

Epiphanies happen, even when we least expect them: epiphanies of birth, epiphanies of promise, epiphanies of miraculous wonder. Often, and especially at this time of the year, we can almost hear the angels singing of peace and good will, and the oneness of heaven and earth.

May all our epiphanies be blessed and blest. How wonderful to be traveling the road together!

*Shalom,
Elsie*

