At all the Masses this weekend we will be collecting materials for welcome kits for current refugees in Ohio. These are people from other nations who have been forced to leave their native lands because their homes and livelihoods have been destroyed, through no fault of their own. They have sought out a safe haven for their families -- a place where they can live peaceful and productive lives once again. They have all gone through a long process to obtain refugee status through the United Nations, and have undergone the even more rigorous screening required of those who are accepted as refugees by the United States. I can’t even imagine how hard it must be for a family to resettle in a new land after having been forced to flee their native land with almost nothing. Today and in the future, we will be doing what we can to help them -- not because they have asked us to, but because compassionate outreach is an essential part of being the followers of Christ.

I think what we are doing today provides us with a fitting entry into our celebration of the feast of the Epiphany, for this feast reveals to us God’s love for all people -- particularly those who come from distant lands.

Today in the gospel we heard the familiar story of Magi coming from the East. They were foreigners that the people of Palestine knew very little about. They came from a culture that observed different laws and customs, worshiped different gods, and valued different traditions.

It seems that King Herod and the people of Jerusalem didn’t want these foreigners meddling in their affairs. Though the magi had come there because they had seen signs in the heavens that signaled the birth of a great king in Israel, the magi were not welcomed by the residents of Jerusalem, even though they supposedly had been longing for the birth of a great king -- the messiah -- for many generations. Actually, the Jews had very little to do with people of other cultures and traditions. They deemed such foreigners to be a threat because of their different ideas about gods and how one came to know the truth about things. Many in Jerusalem feared that the magi would stir people up, disrupt the status quo, and thus threaten their security. So rather than welcoming these foreigners as people of worth who had something important to contribute, Herod and the people of Jerusalem did everything they could to get them out of town as quickly as possible -- though Herod was certainly not averse to using whatever knowledge these strangers possessed to his own advantage.

But as we continue on with the story of the magi, we discover that when they found the newborn king, their reception by the Holy Family was very different from what they had experienced with King Herod and the people of Jerusalem. Rather than being pushed away or excluded, they were welcomed and embraced. The gifts they had come to offer were received graciously by the Holy Family. And through this gracious receiving of the magi and their gifts, Mary and Joseph had received something more -- a strong confirmation of what they had been told about their son -- that he had been born for the benefit of all people.

The prophets had proclaimed it centuries before. We heard it in the today’s reading from Isaiah, “Nations shall walk by your light and kings by your shining radiance . . . Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of God.”

This is what God had announced to his people through the prophets -- that when the messiah came, he would draw people from all nations together and would welcome the gifts that all people had to share. And that’s what this feast of the Epiphany is about. This story of the magi helps us to understand that in the birth of Jesus we have been given the most brilliant manifestation ever of God’s love for all people. In Christ, God reaches out to people of every nation -- of every race and culture -- inviting them to come to him.

But sadly, over the years, we Christians have trivialized this story. Instead of seeing its implications for how we view and respond to others, we have taken it as an affirmation of our own exalted place among the world’s peoples. Though there is absolutely no evidence that the magi had realized that
Jesus was something more than just a great king, when we look at the magi in our nativity sets presenting their gifts to the infant Jesus, we often find ourselves thinking, “Why, even those strange men from a foreign land paid homage to our Jesus! Isn’t that wonderful?” And while the extraordinary visit of the magi certainly is wonderful, by focusing our thoughts this way, we fail to see the most extraordinary thing of all -- that in beckoning these people from a foreign land through the stars they studied, God was making known his love for all people.

And we should be thrilled at such a revelation. For the truth is that we are among those foreigners that God was reaching out to through the birth of Christ, and which is symbolized so beautifully in the story of the coming of the magi. I mean, we all know that Jesus wasn’t born in America, nor was he born in the lands of most of our ancestors. Though there may be a few, we do not have many among us who are the descendants of Palestinian Jews.

This means that we are here only because some Palestinian Jews, who came to realize that Christ was born into this world to reveal God’s love for all people, actually embraced this epiphany and acted upon it. They became that light to the nations that God had called them to be. They accepted the blessed vocation of being emissaries of God’s love to all the world’s people. And so they reached out to people to whom they were just as foreign as were the magi to the people of Jerusalem.

But though they gave everything for the sake of this mission, the only reason it was successful is that they were welcomed by at least some, even though they were foreigners. I mean, think of it. If everyone would have responded to the apostles the way that Herod and the people of Jerusalem responded to the magi, there would be no church today. So, this business of welcoming the foreigner is really pretty important stuff. And if anyone should know this, it is us.

My own experience has taught me a lot about this. When I decided to leave the Methodist ministry to become a Roman Catholic some thirty-plus years ago, I really had a hard time finding anyone in the Catholic Church who would receive me as a person who had something significant to offer. For instance, one priest, who was the head the theology department at a Catholic college invited me to come and see him. I made the two-hour drive only to be told by him that there really wasn’t anything I could do there and then suggested that I consider selling insurance. Now I’m not saying that selling insurance is a bad thing. Actually it can provide a great service, but it certainly wouldn’t have fit into my particular package of background, experience and talents.

Thankfully, though I was a recent immigrant into the Catholic Church, there were a few people who did welcome me as the Holy Family had welcomed the magi – that is, as someone who had gifts to share. And it is because of them that I have been able to do a little good for people in the Catholic community over the past thirty years. And I know that many of you have only been able to do some of the good you have for others because someone welcomed you and invited you to share your gifts.

The feast we celebrate today is a call for all of us to be such welcoming people to those who come to us from afar.

Fr. Rod Damico
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