



Office of the President Rector

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Reflections from the Park

#1

January 7, 2024

Baltimore: Roland Park Neighborhood

Epiphany

During the Covid Pandemic I wrote a series of letters we called *Letters from the Park* as a way of keeping in touch after our seminarians were sent home, and throughout the “lockdown” period. I have wanted to resume something like that ever since, to share some theological and pastoral reflections on matters of current interest. I travelled in Italy during the Christmas vacation, which gave me some food for thought for beginning again some reflections as pastor of the seminary community, drawing on my life as a pastor and Rector, and in the context of St. Mary’s mission of forming priests after the heart of Jesus who are confident, skillful, sensitive, and effective as ministers of the Gospel and leaders of Catholic Christian communities.

Our seminarians return for the spring semester on Sunday, January 7, the Feast of the Epiphany. This Feast celebrates the Magi’s arrival at the manger of Jesus to see what the star and their studies led them to want to see: the Birth of a great King, whom we recognize as the Savior of the World foretold by prophets of old. As we reflect on Epiphany, Christmas 2023 has already started receding into the past as we enter Ordinary Time. There is a progression in the liturgical year, beginning with anticipation of the Birth of Jesus during Advent, arriving at our celebration of his Birth, then moving into our walk through his life and ministry during Ordinary Time, punctuated by our celebration of his Passion, Death and Resurrection during Lent, Holy Week, and Easter.

As I reflect on this progression, a common theme occurs to me that first appears at Epiphany. The Magi came to see what they had been anticipating, what the people of Israel have been waiting for throughout their history: the Birth of a great King, the Birth of a Messiah who would be the Savior of the World, Who would save the human race from the

debacle resulting from the sin of our first parents. Christians, followers of Christ, still live in anticipation of His Second Coming, the final and complete fulfillment of the Salvation of the World. The common theme I discern is not what we anticipate as a result of religious formation, study and belief, but rather what we see when we arrive at the manger with the Magi and open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to what is right there in front of us.

According to the Gospel of John, the day after Jesus' baptism two of his disciples heard John declare "Look! There is the Lamb of God!" They followed Jesus and when he noticed them, he asked "What are you looking for?" They said "Rabbi (which means Teacher), where do you stay?" He said to them, "Come and see," and they went and stayed with him. The next day he came upon Philip and said, "Follow me". Philip then sought out Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses spoke of in the law—the prophets too—Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip replied, "Come, see for yourself."

We all have a natural curiosity, a yearning to see for ourselves what's "out there", especially whatever might help us understand our lives better and the point of it all. In response to that natural curiosity, our yearning to "know what it's all about", God attracts us by various means to come and see for ourselves. Jesus, God come to earth as a human being, says "Come and see." Philip says to those who are curious, "Come, see for yourself." The mark of disciples and of those called to be ministers of his Gospel, it seems to me, is saying



*That's what evangelization is all about:
a call to "Come and see; come and see
for yourself."*



to others: "Come and see; come and see for yourself." It's not about elaborate argumentation, or efforts to convert others, or eliciting an explicit "act of faith". It's simply about encouraging others to "Come and see; come and see for yourself." That's what evangelization is all about: a call to "Come and see; come and see for yourself."

Seminary formation is about forming men to say to others, "Come and see; come and see for yourself". Then about their making available what is there to be seen: Jesus Christ

present in the Eucharist and the other sacraments; present in the Word of God proclaimed; Jesus Christ present in others, especially the poor, for those who will simply open their eyes, their minds and their hearts to see.

I visited the Basilica of Mary Major in Rome during my trip, where Pope Sixtus III constructed a “cave of the Nativity” shortly after the basilica was completed in 432 A.D.

Pilgrims began to bring fragments of what was reputed to be the crib of Jesus in Nazareth to Rome, which were incorporated in the shrine at Mary Major. Were the fragments really from the manger in which Jesus lay? Who can say? We know that the crib in Nazareth had long been an object of veneration and pilgrimage. Whether or not it was actually the crib in which our Savior lay seems to me beyond the point, to succumb to a modern worldview preoccupied with history and science



Fr. Brown visits the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome and views the chapel dedicated to the relic of the manger in which Jesus lay.

and authenticating objects as “the real deal”. What’s important, it seems to me, is not the object but the veneration; the sense of the sacred that believers invest in these objects used as a focal point for reflection and prayer, for veneration and worship. What is venerated and worshipped is not the object but what it represents. As though if the crib preserved at St. Mary Major were not the actual crib in which Jesus lay it would call into question whether he ever lay in a crib; if he ever was born; if he was actually the Son of God, born into our world as a human being in order to save us. What we worship, what we venerate, what we give thanks for, what we rejoice in, what we wonder at, is Salvation accomplished through saving events. Coming and seeing these objects of veneration helps us to reflect on those events and, aided by hearing and studying the Word of God, helps us call to mind the meaning of those events. Coming to see and to understand, to perceive in our hearts the meaning of these sacred events fills us with hope, a hope that leads to perseverance, whatever the challenges faced in living out our lives on earth.

Visiting these places considered holy, and focusing attention on the objects they preserve for us that help us call to mind and reflect on the mysteries of our faith, is worthwhile and edifying. It cultivates a lively faith and sustaining hope, whatever is going on in our lives. I

recommend visiting places considered holy, and reflecting on the mysteries of faith they



Fr. Brown prays at the relic of the manger in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome.

inspire us to call to mind. In a very human way, they strengthen and help to sustain our faith and hope in the promises of our faith. They reinforce our sense of the reality of what our faith tells us life is all about. With all the others who have heard the call of God, the call of Jesus to “come and follow me”, I say as his first disciples said, as so many have said throughout the ages and continue to say:

“Come and see; come and see for yourself.” As Christmas and Epiphany pass, come and see,

come and see for yourself in the events of Jesus’ life, in his teaching, and in his call to us during Ordinary time the saving mystery of our Salvation.

Fr. Phillip J. Brown, P.S.S.

Fr. Phillip J. Brown, P.S.S.
President-Rector