

Solemnity of the Epiphany
Cycle B
January 8, 2012 5:30pm, 9:30am and 11am
Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

What Does It Mean to Be Catholic?

Several months ago, one of you – one of our parishioners – had a very thoughtful conversation with me about Catholicism.

This man was asking: What does it mean to be Catholic today? It is a good question and it is worth talking about.

This past week, as I reflected on this familiar story about the three wise men, I recalled that conversation about Catholicism. And I recalled it because I began seeing this story in an entirely different way.

I see here at least some of the ingredients of what it means to be Catholic. Here is what I am thinking.

Primary Ingredients of Catholicism

First, maybe most obvious, being Catholic means being centered on Jesus.

These wise men are seeking the newborn king, the Messiah. They find him and go down on their knees in respect and reverence.

So Jesus is the center of what it means to be Catholic. Jesus and our personal relationship with him is foundational.

And then, from this relationship, there are certain truths that are core or essential to our being Catholic.

The wise men leave the manger and Bethlehem convinced that Jesus is the Promised One of God. It is this belief or truth that leads them not to return and tell Herod where the baby is.

Over the centuries, we as Catholic Christians have developed an understanding of what is core to our faith and this is contained in the Profession of Faith that we will recite in just a few minutes. These beliefs are also foundational for what it means to be Catholic.

Being Catholic also allows for some diversity.

The wise men foretell this diversity. They are persons of a different culture, a different faith background, and maybe a different race from Jesus.

So in Catholicism, there are different ways of celebrating Mass in India and the Middle East and Eastern Europe. And beyond this, people of our faith community can have different outlooks on things like the just war principle and yet still remain Catholic with this diversity.

Additional Ingredients of Catholicism

Being Catholic means being a sacramental people.

The wise men give gifts that are signs pointing to who Jesus is. The gold points to Jesus' spiritual power; the frankincense points to his divinity; and the myrrh points to his death on the cross.

We Catholics believe in signs that we call sacraments and we believe that these not just point to but actually make the reality present – that the bread and wine here at Mass actually become Jesus' body and blood, Jesus present to us. So being a sacramental people is core to being Catholic.

Being Catholic means that we are universal or inclusive in our embrace.

The presence of both the wise men and the shepherds at the manger foretells this. The educated and the uneducated; the wealthy and the poor; the Jew and the Gentile – the newborn Jesus attracts and includes everyone.

Being Catholic means that we respect everyone as on a journey, like the wise men. The best of Catholicism is inclusive, as Jesus was even with Judas at the Last Supper.

And finally, being Catholic means that we are not just individuals, but a community on a journey.

The wise men come to Jesus as a group or little community. In fact, as a group, they complement one another in bringing to Jesus three gifts that collectively point to who he is.

We Catholics have a community and a structure to our community that we call the Church. We receive support and guidance from this and this too is part of what it means to be Catholic.

Conclusion

There is more to say but I will stop here.

I am grateful for the parishioner who entered into this conversation with me. And I am also grateful for the wise men who help me in sharing these thoughts with you today.