

EPIPHANY (January 8, 2023)

Our Christmas season continues today with the feast of Epiphany, a word meaning ‘appearance’ or ‘manifestation’—Jesus appears or is manifested as the Savior of the entire human race. In so many ways this feast is all about light. Isaiah proclaims the good news to Jerusalem that its light has come and that nations would walk by that light. That light took on a specific form and purpose in that star that led the magi to the place where the newborn Jesus was to be found.

We find in the gospels many images to describe Jesus and our relationship with him, and ‘light’ is among the most prominent of those images. Jesus refers to himself as ‘the light of the world’ (John 9:5) and also declared “I have come into the world as its light” (John 12:46). In the Creed we profess our belief in Jesus as “God from God, light from light, true God from true God”. And then, in the Sermon on the Mount, he tells us: “You are the light of the world...your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father” (Matt. 5:14a, 16). What a challenge Jesus extends to us—to reflect the light that he is to others; the light of his truth and love that should be apparent in how we conduct ourselves and in how we treat others.

And on the last day of 2022, the world lost one of the great contemporary examples of reflecting that light of Christ with the death of Pope Benedict XVI. This coming Tuesday, January 10, we will have our monthly Eucharistic Holy Hour at Lourdes at 5 p.m.; we will begin that Hour by praying the Rosary for the blessed repose of his soul. I invite you to make a special effort to join us for that prayer.

Pope Francis offered the funeral Mass for his predecessor this past Thursday, and it actually sounds a little strange to put it that way. Normally, of course, the pope serves in that role until his death, and the election of his successor does not take place until after the funeral of the pope who died. But that was not the case here because of Pope Benedict’s surprise resignation from his office back in 2013. Such a thing—a pope resigning his office—had not happened for about 600 years. He explained then his reasons for resigning: he was almost 86 years old at the time, and after great prayerful reflection and discernment, he thought he no longer had the physical strength and energy necessary to be the chief shepherd for over one billion Catholics around the world. It really was as simple as that.

The Church and the world were greatly blessed by the papacy of Benedict XVI from his election after the death of St. John Paul II in 2005 to his resignation in 2013. For one thing, he was a brilliant theologian—his writings both before and after his election as pope were filled with profound insight and great clarity. He believed deeply and firmly the teachings of our Catholic faith, and his writings were of great help in helping to explain and defend our faith. I’ve had the opportunity to read much of his work and have learned so much from it. One thing that stands out for me personally is his basic message that we need to remember over and over again: Jesus Christ is God incarnate; as he said in one of his writings, Jesus is “the God with a human face”.

Pope Benedict also reminded us that we are all called to have a deep, personal and loving relationship with this Jesus. Brilliant theologian and writer that he was, he was not afraid also to speak and write with a wonderfully genuine and holy simplicity about his love for Jesus—he

wasn't embarrassed in the least to share with us the joy of that love. You may remember me speaking over the past several months about the importance of having a personal relationship of love and friendship with Jesus; well, that came largely from the teaching of this very wise pope. It has become more and more an very important part of my spiritual and prayer life.

One more example of Benedict's profound yet simple and accessible wisdom: in a homily he gave back in the 1980's (before he became pope), he spoke of the reality of God's personal love for each one of us: "God is not simply infinite distance; he is also infinite nearness. [We] can confide in him and speak to him; he sees and hears and loves. Although he is not within time, he has time: even for me." God has time for every single one of us—what an incredibly powerful and liberating truth! Do we know and realize that? And do we act on that truth by determining to make time for God on a regular basis?

According to someone who was caring for Pope Benedict in his last moments in this life, his last words were: "Lord, I love you." He could speak in that way as one who had a personal relationship of love and friendship with Jesus who he knew as the light of the world, and that relationship was at the heart of his many years of faithful ministry first to the Church in Germany, his homeland, and then to the Church throughout the world. This pope's service was focused like a laser light on the God-man who is Jesus Christ. Our traditional prayer for the dead expresses beautifully the saving power of that 'light of Christ' please join me in praying for the blessed repose of the soul of Pope Benedict XVI:

Eternal rest grant unto his soul, O Lord,

--and let perpetual light shine upon him.

May he rest in peace – **Amen.**

May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in
peace –

Amen.