

How many ways are there to God?

This Feast of the Epiphany is an occasion to reflect on Christ the One Saviour, drawing all people to himself. The Magi were pagans, but they wanted to pay homage to the king of the Jews. They knew enough to look towards Israel; and by turning to the Jews and receiving from them the ancient promise of the Christ to be born in Bethlehem, they come to share in Israel's heritage. They find the salvation which God made for all of humanity.

The wise men have traditionally been seen as a symbol, a first fruits, of all peoples and cultures, indeed of non-Christian religions, searching for divine truth and finding fulfilment in Christ.

We recall the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on non-Christian religions: 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life. (*Jn* 14:6) In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (*2 Cor* 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.' (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* 2)

True, if people do have sufficient knowledge to lead them forward to Christ and the Catholic Church, then they have the responsibility to follow that lead. Again we recall Vatican II: 'They could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.' (*Lumen Gentium* 14) As Pope Francis recently reaffirmed: 'To remain in the Church not only "with the body" but also "with the heart" is a condition for salvation.' (*Letter to the Bishops of the Whole World*)

But what of those who never truly have the chance to know and accept Christ? Scripture tells us that God wills all people to be saved, (*1 Tim* 2:4) and in some way he gives every single person the opportunity for salvation. (Cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 22; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nn. 846; 1260) Yes, salvation is surely easier, safer, more joyful, if people do have clear knowledge of Christ, his Church, his teachings, his sacraments – and so we never cease proclaiming the Gospel. But if with the help of grace, those not knowing Christ and the Church nonetheless follow God's will as they understand it through their conscience, they are united by God with Christ, the One Saviour, in a hidden way, and so can reach salvation. (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 16)

God has placed in the human heart a desire for himself, and the human search for God has expressed itself especially in the different religions. And from the ancient Church Fathers, there has been the belief that even outside the Church, the Holy Spirit has scattered seeds of truth and goodness – seeds of the Word, St Justin called them – to help lead people on the path towards God, towards Christ. And those seeds of the Word are often found in the non-Christian religions, even though mixed with errors and limitations. St Paul, speaking to the Athenians at the Areopagus, (*Acts* 17:22-34) is the great scriptural example of drawing upon the religious truths his hearers already possess. Simply disdaining these is not true to Catholic tradition.

In the midst of humanity's religious striving, God has reached down to us and come to meet us in our search, by God the Son himself becoming man in Christ, giving us the divine religion and the fullness of salvation, the fulfilment of our strivings.

One thing that means is that when someone from another religion becomes a Christian, they do not have to give up everything they believed in their previous religion. Certainly anything false, anything wrong, any worship of false gods must be given up: Jesus purifies us and frees us from error and evil. We do not say that all beliefs are equal; and obviously, when two beliefs contradict each other, only one can be true. So any beliefs that contradict the teachings of Christ must be given up when someone becomes a Christian. But the seeds of goodness and truth that were present in their previous religion, planted by the Holy Spirit: these blossom when they come into contact with Christ.

The story of the wise men shows us two different paths that a person, a nation, or a religion can take when it meets Christ. Someone can take the path of Herod, who saw Jesus as a threat and rival to his own kingship. Likewise, someone from another religion can see Christ as a threat to what they already have. But someone can instead take the path of the wise men, who realised that Jesus did not come to take away the good things they already had, but to fulfil them. They came to Jesus offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In the same way the different cultures, over the centuries, have brought their own riches to Jesus and laid them at his feet, and those cultures, within the Christian family, have risen to a new richness.

Pope Benedict XVI, as cardinal, was asked by interviewer Peter Seewald, 'How many ways are there to God?' And Cardinal Ratzinger responded: 'As many as there are people. For even within the same faith each man's way is an entirely personal one.' But he then explained that all these ways must ultimately go through Christ, the One Way. (*Salt of the Earth* (1997) p. 32) As God made man, Christ is large enough to contain all our individual paths without them losing their uniqueness, and to give them their full meaning – a fuller meaning really, than we had dared to dream.

So we can value and learn from each of these paths and pointers to Christ that God has planned for different individuals, in all the diversity of the seeds of the Word that the Holy Spirit has planted. And the same is true not just of individual people, but of all the nations and cultures of the world. Each one finds its special fulfilment in Jesus, perfect God and perfect man, and in the universal family of his Church, without giving up its uniqueness. Because when the human comes into union with the divine, the human is not destroyed – it is made perfect and becomes fully itself.

God can thus be said to positively will the diverse and complementary aspects of truth and goodness in the different cultures and non-Christian religions (while their negative aspects are there only by his *permissive* will – in which, for the sake of some greater good in the mystery of his providence, for now he withholds his hand from removing those aspects).

Our whole theme today is relevant to our practice of evangelisation – as Catholics, as legionaries. When we engage with non-Christians, whether or not they belong to another specific religion, we must remember that God has surely already been working in their lives. We come not only to fill an emptiness, but to recognise and be blessed by what the Holy Spirit has already planted – and by his grace, to help bring those seeds to fulfilment in Christ.