

“A MOST PLEASANT SURPRISE” AN INTREPID WOMAN’S TRAVELOGUE

Before you toss that old travel diary in the trash, you might want to reconsider. Not only is it nostalgic to peruse scrapbooks years later, but someday it might be worth something. Consider the case of **Egeria**, an intrepid woman who penned possibly the most significant travelogue in Church’s history. Thanks to her, we have gained valuable insight into the celebration of the Christmas feasts in Jerusalem (ca. 380 A.D.), all because she kept notes of her pilgrimage. You might call it a late antiquity “**Trip Advisor!**” Clearly, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land was on her “bucket list,” though she certainly did not use that phrase! But it surely was the trip of a lifetime. That she did it alone in the late 4th century only makes her all the more remarkable a woman. So too the fact that this text was only “discovered” (in an 11th century version) in 1884 A.D. by a researcher rummaging through a **monastery library in Arezzo**, Italy. Egeria hailed from **Galacia**, a region in the northwest corner of modern-day Spain. If I ever am blessed to be able to complete the **Cammino di Santiago di Compostela**, that journey will terminate in the Galacia region.

Travelling must run deep in the veins in that neck of the woods, as she made it all the way to Constantinople and Mount Sinai. In any case, among her many descriptions of her travels that took place between 381-384 A.D., we find one of the **earliest mentions of the Feast of Epiphany**. She related that something happened quite by chance (Divine Providence, if you ask me!) on her travels through the Holy Land. She states: *Nobis autem fortuito hoc gratissimum evenit, ut ea die, qua venimus ad mansionem Arabia, pridie beatissimo die Epiphania esset; nam eadem die vigiliae agendaerant in ecclesia.* “A most pleasant thing happened to us quite by chance, for the day on which we arrived at the resting station of Arabia was the eve of the most joyful day of the Epiphany, and on that very day the vigils were to be held in the Church.” (*Peregrinatio Aetheriae IX,1*) By Arabia, she meant the Province of Arabia, as set by the Emperor Trajan († 117 A.D.) She was visiting Jerusalem and in the early Church, Epiphany trumped Christmas!

I realize that the decrees approved during the **Second Council of Tours in 567 A.D.** are not exactly on the New York Times “Best Sellers” list! But we all ought to be grateful for these church leaders because they staved off quite an internal dispute between East and West with respect to the celebration of the Christmas liturgy. You see, the birth of Jesus was celebrated on different dates in the West and East, December 25 and January 6 respectively. This relatively obscure Council entered the fray and unified divergent traditions by **linking the days** between December 25 and January 6 (the traditional date of Epiphany) into one festal cycle (Canons xi, xvii). This Council is thus the origin of our “**twelve days of Christmas.**” Over time, Epiphany took on different characteristics in the West, most notably in its focus on the appearance of the Magi.

The same Council of Tours II encouraged the lay faithful to **tithe** from their own resources to help those affected by an “imminent calamity,” quite possibly due to a plague. It is likely the first official Church endorsement of the practice of tithing, that is of giving 10% of one’s resources to charitable causes in the Church. But the Council was not a complete success. It clearly struck out in moving the start of the new year from January 1 to March 1, as a way of distancing the Church from the “pagan” Julius Caesar. That decree didn’t have legs and it was eventually moved back to January. However, remnants of the March new year date remain. For example, the months of September (**Sept**– Latin for seven) and October (**Oct**–Latin for eight) only make sense if the first month is March.

Saint Clement of Alexandria is likely the first writer to have mentioned the celebration of the **Baptism of Jesus** in the Jordan, one of the three elements that comprise our celebration of Epiphany. The other two are the **Adoration by the Magi** and the manifestation of Jesus with his first public miracle, the **Wedding Feast at Cana**. Most of us only think of the Magi when this Feast is called to mind, but history helps us to grasp the multifaceted nature of the celebration. Many Latin-rite Catholics (that’s us!) are surprised to learn that **Epiphany is an older celebration** than Christmas. But in fact, it is. One of the most significant days in Eastern Christianity is the blessing of water, known as **Theophany**, when the Orthodox priest blesses the water, often celebrated outside by a river or the sea shore, commemorating Christ’s baptism. In colder climates, the priest stands on the ice as brave lay faithful jump into the icy waters to retrieve the Precious Cross! Obviously, the polar plunge did not originate in Minnesota– Brrr!

Saint Ephrem the Syrian, a 4th century deacon, theologian and prolific hymnographer, clearly referenced Epiphany in one of his compositions. Hymn 15:4-5 reads: “His light shone out over the east– Persia was enlightened by the star: His Epiphany gave good tidings to her and invited her–He has come for the sacrifice that brings joy to all. The star of light hastened and came and dawned– through the darkness, and summoned them– that the peoples should come and exult– in the great Light that has come down to earth.” Our Catholic faith is rich in tradition and symbolism, and both East and West have contributed significantly. Let us bask in the joy of this magnificent season.

- While visiting the official State of Minnesota website, I noticed a curious omission in the biography of newly appointed **U. S. Senator Tina Smith**. From 2003-06, the former Lt. Governor served as Vice President of Planned Parenthood Minnesota. Nearly 10,000 abortions occurred in that period, during which Planned Parenthood became the single largest provider of abortion services in the state. Yet not a word about her previous employment was listed in her resume. Hmmn... inquiring minds want to know.
- The first 18-wheeler for the final Crashed Ice race rolled onto Selby Ave. at 6:00 a.m. on December 27. Standing outside his cab, the driver looked a little confused as to where to deposit the materials. So, I ventured outside in the -9° cold only to learn that he had driven all the way from Nashville, TN! I shared my love of **Country Music**, but he only shook his head. “You know these new acts...they don’t even wear cowboy hats anymore!” Amen, brother– a country music curmudgeon after my own heart.
- I realize it’s schmaltzy, but **The Sound of Music** is my favorite film of all time. I did a double take when learning that **Heather Menzies-Urich** (who played Louisa, the third-oldest of the von Trap children) died at the age of 68 from cancer. Could the children be that old? Christopher Plummer and Julie Andrews are still going strong after all these years. The 1965 film won **five Academy Awards**, including Best Picture, all while retaining a “G” rating.
- Mark your calendars for an ecumenical (Lutheran-Catholic) Vespers on Sunday, January 21 at 7:00 p.m., in observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Archbishop Hebda will preside and a reception will follow. Let us pray for Christian unity.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector