

“WHEN I SEE YOUR HEAVENS...” (Ps. 8:4): GAZING HEAVENWARD AT CHRISTMAS

Astronomy is the detailed study of celestial bodies, encompassing the whole universe. The Astronomers tell us that we'd have to travel back in time to just before dawn on March 4, 1226 to see a closer alignment between Jupiter and Saturn than was able to be seen this year just before Christmas. On December 21, 2020, the two planets were “close” enough that they were separated by only 1/5 the diameter of the full moon. And to top that, for about a week, they were **only 0.1° apart** in the night sky at the moment of conjunction. Now for perspective, they are **still** hundreds of millions of miles apart, yet still able to be seen in the same field of view. Saturn is the sixth planet out from the sun, Jupiter the fifth. This is important for several reasons, including its rarity but also due to its relation to the Solemnity of the Epiphany.

It is the Gospel of Matthew that gives voice to the account of the Epiphany. “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.’” (Mt. 2:1-2) Many have speculated in various articles about the possibility that God may have providentially employed an **extremely rare** naturally occurring planetary conjunction as the sign, the star that the Magi followed. While there is **no way to prove** this, it is at least worth giving due consideration. I encourage you to listen to **Br. Guy Consolmagno** of the **Vatican Observatory** discuss Epiphany in Catholic News Agency’s (CNA) Podcast episode 52 (Dec. 2019) beginning at the 11:00 minute mark. Br. Guy is a Harvard and MIT educated astronomer, who sees science as a route to truth, not the enemy of the faith.

Over the course of centuries, certain Old Testament texts have been interpreted as referring to the Magi, including **Psalms 7:10**, “The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute.” In **Isaiah 60:6**, we read: “Caravans of camels shall cover you, dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and heralding the praises of the Lord.” The planet **Saturn** even makes an appearance in the Bible, albeit under a different form of its name. And in the Book of the prophet **Amos**, we read (5:26): “Yet you will carry away Sukuth, your king, and Kaiwan, your star-image, your gods that you have made for yourselves...” It first names Sukuth, a Hebrew form of the brightest star in the night sky, **Sirius**. The verse then notes Kaiwan, itself also a Hebraized form of a name for Saturn and **worshipped as a deity** in Mesopotamia.

In other words, the reference to the stars cited above was anything but complimentary. Rather, it was a **warning against idolatry**. The early Church Fathers wrote **forcefully** against astrology, the belief that the planets control our destiny. Some defended astrology with an appeal to Genesis 1:14: “Then God said: Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, to separate day from night. Let them mark the seasons, the days and the years.” In his masterful commentary on the Book of Genesis entitled, *On the Six Days of Creation*, **St. Basil** responded that these people “pretend that our lives depend upon the motion of the heavenly bodies” and that they “understand neither the variations of the weather nor the change of seasons; they only see in them, at the will of their imagination, the distribution of human destinies.” *The Six Days Work* 6:5

St. Augustine went further, detailing the point of his gradual conversion by noting “By now I had also repudiated the **lying divinations and impious absurdities** of the astrologers.” (*Confessions* Book VII, chap. 6, para. 8) While Christians affirm the **legitimate science** of studying the stars (astronomy), our Catholic faith rightly rejects the attribution of special powers of the planets with respect to human destiny. In fact, we affirm the **goodness** of gazing upward to the heavens, pondering God’s creation in all its immensity. We affirm this because of our conviction that when we see the stars, the handiwork of God’s creation, we are drawn to wonder and awe at the creator. (cf. Psalm 8:1) It is God who directs our steps, not the planets. Catholic teaching rejects all forms of divination, including astrology, because they “conceal a desire for power over time, history and in the last analysis, other human beings” and “contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph # 2116)

In the earlier-cited work, St. Basil began: “It is right that anyone beginning to narrate the formation of the world should begin with the **good order** which **reigns** in visible things. I am about to speak of the creation of heaven

and earth, which was not spontaneous, as some have imagined, but drew its origin from God.” Indeed, it is right to observe and marvel at the “good order” of the universe. We city dwellers too often miss the stars; it is only when we get out in the exurbs or the country that suddenly they come alive. We encounter God in the **magnificent** universe He created, if we but take the time to gaze and wonder. Today’s feast is a wonderful reminder of that fact. Like the stars that beckoned the curious to follow, God’s grandeur speaks to the soul. May we never lose sight of God’s glory.

- As a follow up to my column on vaccines last week, the Church recognizes that in the current situation “there exist differing degrees of responsibility” in the cooperation of evil. Catholics are **not morally obliged** to be vaccinated, especially if they have moral qualms, though the common good is a very strong reason to receive them. Certain vaccines did not make use of aborted stem cells in their production, and they ought to be preferred.
- Keep ‘em guessing. Of all the pitches one could face in the batter’s box, a **knuckleball** might just perhaps be scarier than a 100-mph fastball. Atlanta Brave **Phil Niekro**, Hall of Fame pitcher with 318 wins (16th place all-time), died at the age of 81. One never knew where that knuckleball would go— it gave batters, catchers and umpires alike a fit. It is all but extinct in today’s game. The son of an Ohio coal miner, Niekro played for **24 seasons**, unimaginable today.
- It is worth noting, though not celebrating, that today marks the **500th anniversary** of the excommunication (3 January 1521) of **Martin Luther**. May understanding and cooperation between Catholics and Lutherans continue to grow. I recall the powerful exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts four years ago. May we specially pray for unity among Christians and for an end to all religious strife.
- Forgotten amidst the pandemic was the long-awaited March 2020 opening of the Vatican Archives concerning the pontificate of **Pope Pius XII**. Reputable scholars note the carefully catalogued materials contain “documented proof of the direct actions of Pope Pius XII to end the arrest of the Roman Jews on Oct. 16, 1943, and then the massive rescue attempt to hide those who were not arrested.” May a careful and sober study allow the full light of truth to shine on this controversial topic.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector