

## Seeing and Believing

To what end does the Liturgy capture our sense of sight? The Prayer Over the Offerings at Epiphany shows the way.

*Look with favour, Lord, we pray, on these gifts of your Church,  
in which are offered now not gold or frankincense or myrrh,  
but he who by them is proclaimed, sacrificed and renewed,  
Jesus Christ, who lives forever and ever. Amen.*

The Prayer Over the Offerings sets the stage for the drama of the Eucharist. After the gifts have been placed on the altar, the priest prays on our behalf that the Sacrifice of the Mass will be acceptable in the sight of God. This prayer concludes a concert of preparatory actions: the bringing of bread and wine to the altar, their incensation, the priest washing his hands, all of which excite the sense of sight. Yet these actions proclaim the invisible God ‘too bright for mortal vision’. But surely the Light of Christ has come into the world at Christmas (Jn 1:9). This is no trick of the light. It is one of many paradoxes Catholic teaching ponders. It puts us on pilgrimage from an apparent contradiction to the realisation of great truths. It leads us on by the light of the Star of faith.

The Prayer Over the Offerings points to such a paradox: the gifts of the Magi, though valuable in themselves, are but votive-lamps for the true Sacrifice, offered once and for all, Jesus Christ, ‘*a holy sacrifice, a spotless Victim*’ (Canon of the Mass). This is no trick of the light: he is the ‘*icon of the invisible God*’, the ‘*exact imprint of God’s very being*’ (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3), true God from true God. Through him all things were made, and all things serve him (Ps 119(118):91). Since he has given us all these things, how can we repay the Lord for his goodness to us? (Ps 116(115):12).

Things like our gold, frankincense and myrrh in themselves stand for the fashionings of a febrile human culture fumbling in the dark for meaning. But they find their true home in the worship of God, in the Mass. Their use creates a visual atmosphere which helps to manifest the mystery of God-made-man. In our picture, two Magi hold a gold crown and a thurible with incense; at Mass, the bread and wine which will become the Body and Blood of Christ reside in sacred vessels adorned with gold, as a throne befitting his Majesty. Having been placed on the altar, these vessels are incensed, to signify our worship rising before God (Ps 141(140):2).

In our picture, the last of the Magi carries no vessel of myrrh – no vessel other than himself. For myrrh here represents the chrism anointing the priest’s hands and the foreheads of the confirmed faithful, an invisible yet indelible mark of our adoption as God’s children, the Holy Spirit received at our baptism, whom prophets speak of as the ‘*oil of gladness*’ (Ps

45:7(44:8)). Though myrrh was used to embalm the dead, it tells not a tale of misery, but mercy: *'we were baptised into the death of Christ'*, so that *'we might walk with him in newness of life'* (Rom 6:3-4).

The point the Prayer Over the Offerings makes is that we worship the invisible God by means of visible things. God has dignified matter by becoming human, without losing his divinity. He has united himself to our nature, to each one of us. The Incarnation is, therefore, not only an epiphany or revelation of God, but also of who we are. God has made us by himself, for himself, to be like himself. Praying over the offerings that will become his sacramental Body, the Church invites us into this mystery, into the divine drama of the Eucharist, to offer our lives with him, that we may be found in him. At Mass, as in the Manger, he will manifest himself by hiding himself (cf Is 45:15). He will not be visible to the senses, but present in substance, hidden in the form of the Host. We live by faith and not physical sight: let us gaze upon him with the eyes of our mind enlightened (2 Cor 5:7; Eph 1:18), and marvel at the mystery of his love. Let us approach and present him with the chalice of our lives, its contours adorned by his providence, so that we may be filled with him. At the Last Supper, he prays on our behalf, *'How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me? The cup of salvation I will raise; I will call on the Lord's Name'* (Ps 116(115):12-13). Let us give God all we are, for he has given us himself, and we are precious in his sight.