



# The Carmelite News

NOVEMBER 1993



Twice in the past I have got within hailing distance of the Feast of the Epiphany and twice had to leave it out for want of space. So it is third time lucky, and it's at the front of the queue.

## THE EPIPHANY

It comes as a surprise to many people to learn that Christmas on 25th December is not the original celebration of the birth of Our Lord: that at one time most of the Church celebrated it, if they did at all, on a different day, and that even today one part of the Church still does not celebrate it on 25th December, nor as a separate feast on its own.

Christmas became fixed, for a mixture of reasons, on 25th December in Rome, probably in the early 4th Century. Only slowly did this new Feast spread to the rest of the Christian world because there already was a major feast at the same time of year which included the

Incarnation in its celebrations. And even where, as now in most of the world, Christmas is celebrated, this other feast is still considered by many outside of the English speaking world to be more important. The feast concerned is the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, celebrated from earliest times on 6th January. Christmas celebrates one historical event: the birth of Jesus. The Epiphany celebrates an idea: the coming of God to his people, and it celebrates it by considering together three historical episodes in which Jesus was shown (which is what the word 'epiphany' means) to be a divine king come to visit his people. **1.** The **Nativity** is seen to be of universal significance in the Adoration of the Magi. **2.** The voice of the Father acknowledges Jesus as his Son at the **Baptism of the Lord** in the Jordan. **3.** St. John's first "sign" of Jesus using his power to reveal his divine nature

when he changed water into wine at **The Marriage-Feast at Cana.**

Out of this cluster of events, each "showing forth" the nature of Jesus, many different customs have developed as different parts of the Church at different times stressed different parts of the cluster. As we look more closely let us keep in mind the beautiful and very ancient Benedictus antiphon used in Morning Prayer (Lauds) on this feast and which so clearly binds the three events into the story of our salvation. (It is in the coloured box in the centre of this page). With the growing importance of the feast of Christmas the actual nativity faded from the Epiphany leaving the centre of the stage to the Magi, the "wise men" from the east. Scripture says little about them beyond their

journey and their gifts, but tradition has supplied other details to flesh out the story. By the 3rd century their number had been fixed at three (because of the three gifts) and they were considered as kings (influenced by psalm 72, verse 11: "May all kings fall down before him"). By the 8th century they had been given names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Different countries of origin were assigned to them - Arabia, Persia and India. Later the Venerable Bede suggested that they symbolise the people of Africa, Europe and Asia (the whole known world at the time) and to fit this idea one of them is shown in art as being black. During the Middle Ages devotion to the Three Kings was very strong and they were celebrated as the patron saints of travellers on a separate feast on 23rd July.

There is a central European custom of blessing houses at the Epiphany and (since journeys begin and end by passing through a doorway) marking the lintels of the house doors - using blessed chalk - the year and the initials of the Three Kings, thus:

**19 + C + M + B + 94**

When I visited Bamberg last year every large doorway in the Priory was marked like this. Two other themes are introduced by the Magi story: LIGHT and GIFTS. These themes are taken up in the magnificent First Reading at Mass (Isa. 60:1-6):

Arise, shine out, for your light has come,  
the glory of the Lord is rising on you . . .  
Camels in throngs . . .

bringing gold and incense,  
and singing the praises of the Lord.

The theme of the light of this birth drawing us back to God as the star drew the Magi to the manger occurs in all the prayers of the Mass, and in the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer.

You can see the Three Kings with their gifts in the cover picture of this Newsletter.

The Baptism of the Lord has left little trace in the Roman Catholic celebration of the Epiphany

because like the Nativity it came to be celebrated separately, originally as the Octave day of the Epiphany, now on the Sunday after the Epiphany. But even on that feast, the words "reveal, revelation, see" in the prayers and the Gospel acclamation show its connection with the Epiphany celebration. In some

parts of the Church the Epiphany was (and is still) the time for baptisms as an alternative to Easter.

The blessing of the water into wine at the marriage-feast at Cana, the first "sign" that Jesus wrought to reveal his power, introduced nuptial imagery into the celebration, imagery which occurs widely in scripture to express human/divine relations. The joys of the next world are described in terms of a wedding feast going on and on. Christ comes into our world as a bridegroom arriving for his wedding; the redemption is his marriage with the Church; and the Eucharist is the marriage banquet to which we are all invited.

The blessing of water, connected with both the Baptism and the Cana Feast, is a very important part of the Epiphany celebration in the Eastern Churches and gives rise to some impressive liturgy with beautiful prayers as a cross is slowly lowered into the water and then lifted out. I particularly remember attending the Epiphany celebration in the Ethiopian Rite when I was a student in Rome. After the long and elaborate blessing of the water the container (which was actually a large blue plastic baby-bath because the ceremony had been arranged at very short notice in an empty church and the proper liturgical equipment was not immediately available) was carried round the Church by two deacons while the principal celebrant using both hands to hold a big bundle of branches for a "brush" sprinkled the congregation. Well, "sprinkle" is not the right word. He spread the

On this day the church is joined to her celestial Bridegroom because Christ washed away her sins in Jordan, The Magi hastened to the royal espousals, and the guests are gladdened with water changed into wine.

(Benedictus antiphon)  
(for the Epiphany)

water round like there was no tomorrow, and drenched the congregation. All the Ethiopians present laughed and sang and reached up to make sure they got plenty of the water, but I fear the European visitors (including me) ducked as the water was launched over us. And that was not the end. Dishes (actually chipped tin mugs) of "Jordan Water" were then passed round the congregation for everyone to take a turn at splashing the people on either side of them. Definitely a ceremony better suited to Ethiopia than to Rome in January! In some places, especially in Greek Orthodox practice, there is a procession to some convenient river or spring which is blessed, and in some places a cross is thrown into the water for the local youth to retrieve. A special blessing may be given for the lucky diver. This part has developed (without a lot of religious significance left) into quite a show in the Greek sponge-fishing community in Florida where the blessing and the cross retrieving are done from a boat in the harbour.

So, all in all, the Epiphany is a pretty important celebration outside the English-speaking world. The medieval Christmas was very religious, but when Christmas was restored after the Puritan Commonwealth had banned its celebration, the religion had largely gone, leaving an empty shell of gluttonous jollification decorated with holly and ivy, yule logs and robins, which has degenerated into a commercial bonanza. Presents that most of the Christian world gave on the Epiphany became Christmas presents, and the spread of the English/American version of Christmas has reduced it to a travesty of its former self.

Perhaps if we cannot rescue Christmas from the forces of mammon we can make something more of the Epiphany? Have a word with your parish priest and see what can be done to restore the former glory to this great Feast.

### **SAINTS OF CARMEL (11)**

Two Carmelite feasts fall in January, and they represent the two extremes of local pastoral activity (St. Andrew Corsini, in and around Florence) and the diplomatic activity of St. Peter Thomas who ranged over most of the Christian world of his day, both men working out of the ideals of Carmelite life. Although it is only a coincidence, the feast of the Epiphany provides a link with this issue's Saint, who died on the 6th January 1366. But to begin at the beginning, and to set the scene.

During the 14th Century, while the Popes resided in Avignon (developing the machinery of centralised administration modelled on that of the French state) the Church passed through a crisis perhaps second only to those attending her early

growth. The background was the incessant wars of the city states, the Black Death (which killed one in three of the population of Europe), the abortive attempts at reunion of the Eastern Church with Rome, and the Last Crusade. And one of the great men sent by God in response to the cry of those times was a Carmelite whose career takes us into the thick of 14th century affairs, especially the Eastern affairs of the Church.

Peter was born in (or about) 1305 at Salimaso de Thomas (near the village of Lebreil) in the south of France. From the name of his birthplace he is always known as **St. Peter Thomas**. He was a farm labourer's son who left home at about 12 years old, when his father died, to reduce the burden on his mother. He set out to acquire an education by begging and teaching children younger than himself - the standard way of financing education at the time. At the age of 20 he was invited to join the Carmelite Community at Bergerac to continue his education. This he did, moving from Bordeaux to Albi to Agen and then for three years to Paris. In 1335 he went to teach in Cahors at a new Carmelite House of Studies, and it was there that his great gift of persuasive speaking became apparent. He could preach and debate with spell-binding effect, and bring real changes in his hearers' lives. He returned to Paris for four more years of study (and teaching to finance it) and graduated bachelor in Theology. The next stage would have been more study for his doctorate, the final and highest degree, but his steady progress up the academic tree was interrupted when the General Chapter of the Carmelites meeting in Milan in 1345 elected him Procurator General. This was a headquarters job and so he moved to the Curia in Avignon where his brilliant preaching and skill in debate soon brought him to the attention of the papal administration. At the end of his term of office (3 years) he went again to Paris, obtained his doctorate, and then returned to Avignon. In 1352 the new Pope, Innocent VI, faced with a number of delicate political problems, saw in Dr. Peter Thomas a saintly, learned, highly skilled debater and persuader. Just the man to conduct the delicate negotiations in view, and so Peter Thomas was launched in a new career of what we today



The preacher began his first retreat sermon dramatically: "Everybody in this parish will die!" And he repeated it again for greater effect. All the congregation looked grave - except one man who was smiling. This unexpected sight surprised the preacher so he asked the man why he was smiling. "Well, you see, Father, I don't belong to this parish!"

would call shuttle diplomacy. Consecrated bishop (to give him status and income) he negotiated in Venice, Genoa and Naples. He undertook a politico-ecclesiastical mission to Serbia to discuss re-union, then to Venice again, and Hungary. He travelled to Constantinople to negotiate reunion with the Byzantine Emperor John V Paleologus. He made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He was promoted to Papal Legate in the East and shuttled round Crete, Cyprus, Rhodes, Venice, Genoa, Milan (where he saw the beginning of preparations for a Crusade), Bologna (where he helped found a new theological faculty in the University) and finally back to Avignon. There he was commissioned to get the Crusade under way. He saw it idealistically, but the military leaders who were eventually persuaded to form the army saw it as an opportunity for getting rich. As befitting his (anticipated) status after the Crusade he was appointed (somewhat prematurely as it turned out) Latin Patriarch of Constantinople. As the preparations went ahead he worked tirelessly to transform the motley band of soldiers of fortune into soldiers of God to serve under King Peter I of Cyprus, which island Peter Thomas made his headquarters.

The first target of the Crusade was Alexandria, which despite all the problems of getting the crusade under way was captured quickly in 1365. The hope in Peter's mind was to use Alexandria to bargain for the freedom of Jerusalem without any fighting in the Holy Land itself. But the human heart being what it is, the riches of Alexandria were too tempting to the soldiers: the capture led to looting and the city was left in ruins. Then, fearing a Turkish counter-attack, the army insisted on retiring immediately back to Cyprus.

Back in Famagusta Peter wrote a report of the disastrous enterprise to the Pope and to the Emperor. But he still clung to the ideal and hoped to organise another try. But it was not to be. Taking part in the Christmas Liturgy - walking barefoot through the freezing streets - Peter caught a chill which became a fever and he died on 6th January, 1366, in Famagusta.

After his death strange things were noted. His body was surrounded by light; cures occurred as the body lay in the chapel for six days. After the burial more cures were reported and verified. Four months later the body was exhumed to move it to another spot in the Church and it was found to be incorrupt. His friend King Peter I petitioned for his canonization, and the slow process began. The Capture of Cyprus by the Turks in 1571 delayed the process, but the cult was approved for the Carmelites in 1609 and confirmed in 1628. The Feast day is celebrated

today on **8th January**.

An earthquake in 1735 destroyed the Church and all trace of St. Peter Thomas on Cyprus was lost. The last material link is his reliquary cross which he carried with him at all times: it is now preserved in the Church of St. John in Venice. A small chapel was established in his honour at Lebreil where pilgrims prayed for cures, especially from fevers, but this chapel was destroyed during the French Revolution.

Physically St. Peter Thomas was a small man, of a nondescript appearance. Indeed, his Prior General was so ashamed of his appearance that when he first arrived at Avignon the Prior General would not introduce him into high ecclesiastical society, and it was a Cardinal who spotted his virtues when he was overheard in a discussion at a dinner which revealed his golden tongue. And he was a Carmelite in the great tradition of Elijah, a man who lived in the presence of God in the solitudes of Carmel and Horeb, but who was equally capable of facing Ahab and Jezebel on their own ground. Peter's whole career developed into a living of Elijah's words - and Carmel's motto - "With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts".

Peter Thomas used his talents to do that as the 14th Century thought it should be done. He was a man of prayer - on his death-bed he said he had never missed his Office since the day of his profession - and a man of action in a world that still thought that a Crusade could solve a problem. Whether or not he was mistaken in his policies is a different question from his holiness or his undoubted personal charm. He had a gift which he freely and untiringly put at the service of God's Church as that was understood then. Sanctity does not mean political infallibility, and historical hindsight gives us today a very different view of events from that seen by the people who lived through those times and made the history on which we now tend to sit in condemnatory judgement.

*"Lord, you inspired in your bishop*

*St. Peter Thomas*

*an intense desire to promote peace  
and Christian unity.*

*Following his example*

*may we live steadfast in faith*

*and work perseveringly for peace". /*

*Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Let us ask the Lord to send more people like St. Peter Thomas, people who inspired by a love of Jesus and Mary will do their best in the here and now with men and women and events as they meet them. May we all in our own small ways be zealous for the Lord God of Hosts before whom we stand.

## THE HOLY CHILD

In 1526 the nobles of Bohemia (the Czech Kingdom) elected as King of Bohemia the Hapsburg Prince Ferdinand I, and in doing so opened the gates for a flood of Spanish baroque culture to pour into Bohemia. Baroque architecture transformed the cities, baroque art decorated them and with the Spanish culture came (eventually) the ascendancy of the Catholic Faith in a region where originally there was a strong Protestant tradition. As part of this enculturation many of the Czech nobility

married Spanish brides, drawing Bohemia and Moravia into the mainstream of European politics and the strong cultural and spiritual influences originating in the Iberian Peninsula - and among these, as we shall see, was a strong Carmelite strand.

The young Czech nobleman Vratislav of Pernstejn was sent by his king, Maximilian II, on a mission to Italy (in 1552) where he met Doña Maria Manrique de Lara, the daughter of an envoy from the Spanish Emperor Charles V. Vratislav and Maria were married in September 1555 and went to live in Bohemia where Maria worked hard (and successfully) to further the Catholic cause which was led by the Jesuits, until her death in 1608. She and her mother, Doña Isabella Manrique de Lara y Mendoza, were inspired in their spiritual life by St. Teresa of Avila, the Carmelite reformer who had been doing great things in Spain. St. Teresa had had a vision of the Holy Child, and encouraged others to have a devotion to the Infancy of the Saviour. To help her devotion Doña Isabella had had made a copy of a wooden statue of the Infant Jesus venerated in a monastery between Cordoba and Seville in Spain. Her copy was also of wood, but coated in wax to give a more life-like appearance to the flesh. The wax was applied over a cloth sheath which acted as a reinforcing to stop the wax cracking (in the same way as the steel rods inside reinforced concrete strengthen it). When Doña Maria, Isabella's daughter, married Vratislav she gave her daughter the figure to take to Bohemia to help maintain her Carmelite inspired devotion in the true Spanish tradition. Doña Maria in her turn gave it to her daughter Doña Polyxena when she married - first to Vilém of Rozmberk in 1587, and then to Zdenek Vojtech of Lobkowicz in 1603, both of them important (and pro-Spanish) officials in the kingdom. When Vojtech died in 1662 Doña Polyxena retired from public life and

Some people complain because roses have thorns; rather be thankful that thorns have roses.

gave the treasured image of the Infant Jesus into the keeping of the Discalced Carmelite Friars who served the Church of Our Lady of Victory, a refurbished Lutheran Church housing a miraculous picture to which the title of the Church alludes.

The Prior of the House placed the image in the novices' oratory where it became one of their common devotions. But in 1630, because of the uncertainty of the times, the novices were moved to Munich, and in 1632 the invading Saxon army plundered the priory and the image was believed

lost. It was found again in a store-room in 1638 by Fr. Cyril-of-the-Mother-of-God who had been posted to Prague from Luxembourg the previous year. He repaired its broken arms and restored it to its place of honour. An unexpected access of funds that paid for the repair recalled the traditional words of Doña Polyxena when she gave it into the keeping of the Carmelites: "I am giving you what I most esteem of my possessions; keep it in reverence and you will be secure" and Fr. Cyril saw in the recent fortunes and misfortunes of the house a reflection of the esteem and lack of esteem in which the image had been held.

He publicised this view of events in his preaching, and others, hearing him, also prayed to the Holy Child and attributed their relief to his intervention. Many people claimed changes in their fortunes sufficiently unusual to merit the term "miraculous", and the reputation of the veneration of this image began to spread beyond Prague, and the efficacy of the devotion and the gratitude of the clients was reflected in gifts to the priory. So, in 1641 it was decided to put the statue in the public Church.

Now, the devotion to the Divine Infancy by honouring statues of the Holy Child, is found all over the Christian world, dating back a thousand years, but the reputations of these shrines are mostly confined to the local area around them. The big change in the reputation of the Infant of Prague came when Fr. Emerich of St. Stephen, prior at Prague, collected many of the stories of miraculous help attributed to the Infant at Prague and published a book on the devotion in 1736 in German. (Translated into Czech only in 1749). It was this little book in a well-known European language that drew wide attention to the Prague statue and the efficacy of devotions centred on it. The trickle of suppliants at the Church in Prague became a flood of pilgrims and the statue was moved in 1741 to its present more conspicuous place in the Church. Then

began the stream of votive gifts to decorate the image and the shrine. Originally gowned in white, the shrine now has more than 60 sets of robes from all over the world, in all sorts of materials. As a sign of official approval the statue was solemnly crowned, with the crown's design based on the imperial crown of Bohemia. The whole is framed in a baroque blaze of angels, clouds and rays of glory. Here at Faversham the Shrine is rather less ornate, but very dignified. Our statue is an exact copy (made in Prague) of the original, and over the last few years a devoted client has made a beautiful collection of robes for it.

So much for the history of the statue and the spread of the devotion: a devotion that has its roots in the Middle Ages when it was popular to dwell on the humanity of Christ. What can the devotion mean for us today who inhabit a completely different mental world, who worship the risen and glorified Christ who calls us to follow his rule of love, rather than dwelling on the com-*passion* of Christ sharing our flesh with its ills and weaknesses. Some people see it as a prolonging of the sentimental side of Christmas, the "little king", more suited to children than to adults. Some people see it as a magic charm - if I light a candle, say a Novena, to you, you will find the money to pay the rent!

But I think it is possible to see in it something more profound and suited to our day. Most of the locally honoured statues of the Infant Jesus are just that - figures of a baby. Look again at the Infant of Prague pictured in its oldest robe (about 1700) on the Novena leaflet with this letter. It is not a baby we see there but a miniature adult, and one holding the orb of the world in one hand and the other raised in solemn blessing. It is I believe no accident that this particular image acquired the attributes of the royalty of its time. It is the figure of an infant who is also a king, in fact Christ the King who shared through his birth and infancy our flesh, and who calls us to share his work as prophet, priest and king. He is honoured in the feast of Christ the King rather than Christmas, as the Ruler of Creation in his glorified body, a loving kingship, a caring ruler of his creation. We are called to be loving,

carers of that same creation of which our flesh is one frail part and which has been put into our hands. We must, through our human activities exercise a stewardship entrusted to us. The image in Prague calls us to entrust ourselves to the one who is like us in all things but sin and has the power and the will to provide all that we need to fulfil his plan for us - all that we NEED, which may not be what we think we WANT, but which will be sufficient to bring us to our true home.

Lord, we honour this representation of your divine infancy and majesty knowing that as we do so you will provide what is needful for our salvation and the means to obtain it. In honouring you through this image we know that we are secure indeed.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

I must say that this business of finding an image that shows both the humanity and divinity of Christ is a difficult one. Too much realism (which always tempts artists), leads to trouble. The Crucifix, the Sacred Heart and the Infant Jesus all tend to fall into excess on the human side if they show the event too accurately, while the Christian Majesty - the great Judge in the final consummation of God's plan - errs equally on the side of divine awesomeness when drawn or carved too realistically as the early middle ages did over the doors of our cathedrals. We all have our own personal preferences, some image, statue or picture that strikes the right balance for us and expresses the essence of our loving God as we perceive him/her. In art as in prayer we come to God by our own route, knowing that he loves us whichever route we try to take on our journey towards the promised land.

Keep going along your own route, and we will all meet in the heavenly Jerusalem.

God bless you now, and Our Lady watch over you till we meet again.

David J. Fox, O. Carm

### FORTHCOMING NOVENAS

To the Infant of Prague .....	Dec. 25th-Jan 2nd
For Reconciliation .....	January 17th-25th
To St. Jude .....	February 12th-20th