

BRIDGES ... Number 1, 2006: Encountering Epiphany; prepared for the ECCB's American Working Group and PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network by Joyce Michael

In the past, I have occasionally observed that these up-dates frequently appear to come in thematic pairs. Yet, when I wrote the Christmas BRIDGES in mid-December, I could not have guessed that a companion piece to that message would emerge before the new year had scarcely begun. However, significant encounters with the vitality of the Christmas promise continued to emerge even after January had arrived. Thus, this greeting will focus on experiences of Epiphany or, as it is known here, "Three Kings Day."

Already on January 5, I glimpsed three young people wearing crowns from the window of a tram. When I mentioned this sighting to John, he explained that these 'kings' were actually representatives of Catholic Charities seeking donations for their work. Yet, on January 6, a teenaged student waiting with me at the bus stop across from her school was carrying a cardboard crown that she apparently had made during the day, and a tall young man wearing a regal costume of velvet and fur had positioned himself near an entrance to the Metro station where he attracted many curious looks from people like me who were surprised to see a king. Perhaps, he was involved in some sort of promotional activity, here in this city where advertising sometimes takes very creative and immediate forms. However, for me, his very presence provided a reminder of the liturgical quality of this day when the gift of Christmas is received wherever power-possessed people dare to humbly kneel in celebration of a baby's birth.

Likewise, on January 7, John came home after spending a Saturday afternoon at the office, radiating a sense of wonder and delight at his own encounter with Epiphany. He had been privileged to hear a violinist, a guitarist, a keyboard player, and a group of singers who were also associated with Catholic Charities perform a moving rendition of *Adestes Fideles*. "O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord" they sang in Czech, inviting the people who heard them to step out of the cold, dark realities of our wintry world into the light of God's love. As John described his experience to me, I had a strong sense he had encountered a true Epiphany on an ordinary Saturday afternoon in the center of a bustling city nestled within a "secular" society.

My recollections of the post-Christmas milieu in the United States are rather hazy. However, I do not remember seeing many kings or hearing many carols in Ohio after the start of the new year. Church members regularly accompany the shepherds and angels to Bethlehem, but fewer undertake the journey of the Magi unless January 6 happens to fall on Sunday. So I can't help but wonder why, in this professedly atheistic society, Epiphany is remembered in a comparatively active way, especially in light of one person's observation that during the communist era, the tradition of Epiphany was largely forgotten. Perhaps Three Kings' Day is more accessible here where kings figure prominently in national history and in folktales. Perhaps the entire Christmas tradition is so unfamiliar to many Czech people that all parts of the story are given equal weight by those who are seeking to recover its truths. Or perhaps at this time when people in many places are longing so deeply for a starburst of hope, the time to celebrate Epiphany is at hand. I pray that you have had some rare encounters with the God who dares to come as a powerless king, so that we may learn that the ways of humility and peace which are the hallmark of love.