

HOMILY FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY (Homily 02)

“Journey into Liminal Space”

(Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12)

Noted spiritual writer Richard Rohr, in his recent book *Adam's Return*, speaks of an anthropological term called *liminal space*. The Latin word *limen* means *threshold*. Liminal space is that time or place in our lives when we are in transition, between two realities, on the edge of change, transformation, something new, creative, exiting and life-giving. That was the role of initiation rites in age-old cultures according to Rohr.

The problem with liminal space is that it can also be fearful for some and threatening for others, especially those who are secure and comfortable in the status quo. These might be tempted to settle for a substitute that Rohr calls *liminoid space*. It superficially looks like liminal space, but it isn't. Nothing new happens here, only a confirmation of the old. The systems of this world mostly offer us pseudo initiations, events like graduation, getting a driver's license, unfortunately sometimes even confirmation, liminoid instead of liminal experiences. They do not open the door to a new universe, to real realignment, just self-talk inside our head.

Liminal space, on the other hand, offers those who understand and those who are open to the Spirit of God working in their lives, endless opportunities to go beyond the ordinary, to reach their potential, to encounter God in a deeper way. For Rohr, liminal space is the ultimate teachable moment. In liminal space we choose the chaos of the unconscious over the control of explanations and answers. Thus the language of initiation is the language of darkness not of light, desert not garden, silence not words. People have to be taught and guided in how to live in such an uneasy place. Much of the work of the biblical God and human destiny itself is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there long enough to learn something essential and genuinely new. It is the *ultimate teachable space*. In some sense, it is the only teachable space.

The feast of the Epiphany that we celebrate today is an invitation for us to make our lives faith journeys into liminal space.

The role models for us are the three magi, not to mention Joseph and Mary and Paul. All made journeys of faith into newness. Mary's faith journey was from the annunciation to the incarnation, the birth of Jesus her son, the Son of God. Joseph's

was also a journey of faith into the unknown, becoming the foster father of Jesus. It is the Magi, however, who today take centre stage, and for good reason. They set out on a journey of faith into liminal space. Intelligent, successful, accepted and respected in their field and occupation back home, they nevertheless intuited deep within themselves that there had to be more to life than what they were experiencing. They were sensitive to the Spirit of God beckoning them onwards, upwards and outward, responded by putting their trust in that inner voice and set out on a journey of faith into liminal space.

The Magi's encounter with Herod illustrates the temptation to remain in liminoid space. Herod could not see beyond the material possessions and political power his position offered him. He thought that was what life was all about, and was so hardened in his false security (actually that turns out to be insecurity) that he already plotted violence towards this new child king the Magi has asked him about.

The Magi finally arrive at their goal, to see the King of Kings. They worship him and offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that carry strong symbolic messages of royalty, divinity and – death. Such was the power of their liminal journey that they went beyond the intuition of even the great Old Testament prophet Isaiah who in the first reading, at that stage of his own journey, mentions only gifts of gold and incense to be given to this mysterious child-king who was to come.

The Magi were able to intuit that this child was not only a king and God, but also would be the Lamb of God who would sacrifice his life to take away the sins of the world. They invite us to understand and appreciate who Jesus is more fully: the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah who in the end comprehended fully, the shepherd king who will truly rule with justice and love, and the Suffering Servant who fully reveals that God is love and the love that God has for us.

The Magi invite us to join them in putting into our own lives liminal space where we can encounter this God of Jesus Christ more fully, loving him back in worship and prayer, and loving one another as he has shown us and commanded us to do.

St. Paul is another example of someone who underwent a faith journey into liminal space when he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. He was struck blind for three days and emerged with his belief system totally transformed. The newness of this journey for Paul is expressed in the second reading today. He now understands the mystery that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same Body of Christ, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. This new

awareness is just the opposite of what he believed before his faith journey into liminal space.

The 40 year desert journey for the chosen people was to be their liminal space, moulding and forging them into the new people of God. They were called to put their complete trust in Jesus (the serpent without poison or sin on the standard) and live one day at a time in complete trust (the daily manna and quail). We know they failed at that challenge, preferring to remain in the liminoid space of possessions, prestige and power.

The desert temptations for Jesus after his baptism was his liminal space, where he proved to be the true Israel, the true Son of God. This feast of the Epiphany, with the magi, Paul, Joseph and Mary as our guides, invites to put into our lives, moments of liminal space, journeys into liminal space, where God can speak to our hearts, transform our lives and renew our spirits.

To respond as did Paul, Joseph and Mary and especially the magi, we must deepen our faith and let go of fear and control. We can create moments of liminal space in our lives, times of more intense prayer, reflection, introspection, opening ourselves up to deeper faith, greater love, and especially difficult for most of us, more honest self awareness.

One bishop seeks to enter into this liminal space by entering into a monthly retreat called a poustinia, as taught by the legendary Catherine Dougherty, founder of the Madonna House Apostolate. The poustinia for him is 24 hours of fasting, at least four hours of contemplation, resting and writing, without TV, radio, phone, books or any communication with the outside world. It is a time of renewal and healing, available to anyone who chooses to do so. It would be helpful to read the book *Poustinia* before embarking on this journey into liminal space.

Years ago the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate created a Task Force to explore new and more effective ways to minister among the First Nations peoples of Canada. One of the initiatives they were led to put on was a series of week long awareness experiences in Alberta that involved four days of preparation (sweat lodges and talking circles) and then a four day fast from food and water. About thirty-five people participated each year, opening themselves up to new awareness and insight. This was truly liminal space for these brave folks.

Each liturgy that we celebrate is meant to be an experience of liminal space, speaking to us of life and death. The Eucharist that we celebrate now, if celebrated

with genuine heartfelt faith, can also be a liminal space. We hear God speak to us through his Word, and we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. We are then sent out transformed, forgiven and healed, to live our lives with deeper faith, hope and love for all.

This Epiphany, then, let us resolve to put into our lives, moments of liminal space, journeys into liminal space where God's love can transform us more deeply into the new people of God, called to live a new message in a new way.