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Answering spiritual hunger

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We don?t know all that much about the Magi. Mentioned briefly in Matthew?s Gospel, we?re only told they?re ?from the east,? and are looking for the newborn Jesus to pay him homage with gifts.

Yet what we do know about these men is crucial. They are the first to ask where the ?king of the Jews? can be found. With that question, they are the first to announce God?s human presence on Earth. They are the first evangelizers.

The Magi are the first to listen to that still, small voice many of us still hear today. Like a person in a crowded room, it whispers: ?God is here.? All these years later, we?re still trying to figure out what to do with the message.

Lately, our bishops have tried to lead the way, encouraging a ?new evangelization,? apparently focused on bringing us back to the core of the Christian life, and proclaiming it in ways anew. However, many of those most able to help us understand what it means to know that God is among us -- our theologians -- are afraid their work might not be able to continue as they see necessary.

At the center of their concern are questions about the U.S. bishops? March condemnation of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson?s book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

The saga between Johnson and the bishops -- brought into the headlines again with the College Theology Society and the Canon Law Society of America replying to the bishops? October reaffirmation of their condemnation (Page 13) -- continues to be regrettable, especially as the professor has never been given an opportunity to come before the committee to explain her work. But what is most saddening is that, in their moves against Johnson, the bishops have cast a dark shadow on the work of one of our best evangelizers. And, in so doing, they may scare some of her peers into silence.

Explaining her book in a 2008 interview, Johnson said part of the reason she wrote it was to answer a spiritual hunger in today?s society that is ?widespread? and ?isn?t often met? (*NCR*, June 13, 2008). Johnson?s is an elegant attempt to examine how God is proclaimed among us in new and meaningful ways. ?A tradition that cannot change cannot be preserved,? Johnson writes in the book.

Evangelization and theology, of course, are not one and the same. But one cannot survive without the other. The evangelizer tells us God is here. The theologian helps us understand what this might mean.

A successful evangelization effort will find ways to tie the two together, to proclaim God?s presence by answering today?s questions as honestly as possible.

Professor George Worgul, professor and chair of the theology department at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, worries aloud that those questions aren?t being adequately answered.

?Both theologians and bishops face the same challenge that?s coming,? Worgul said. ?That?s the challenge of being declared irrelevant, of people saying, ?What you?re saying is interesting, but we don?t know who you?re talking to.? ?

Considering the Gospel story, it must have been with a certain amount of trepidation that the Magi first approached the infant Jesus. Imagine it. There, in a simple manger, surrounded by animals and wrapped in swaddling, lay a baby. Expecting a king, the foreigners find a pauper.

Their next moves echo through the ages. They prostrate themselves and offer gifts. Quietly, triumphantly, their actions cry out: ?God is among us. God is here.?

Two millennia later, we?re still trying to figure out exactly what it means in our lives today.

God is here, among us and with us, be we kings or paupers.

We cannot be afraid to pursue whatever questions that truth raises, and to proclaim our faith in new and exciting ways. Irrelevancy should never be an option. There?s just too much of a bounty of faith to allow spiritual hunger.

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