

In the 1930s a German Catholic philosopher named Dietrich Von Hildebrand wrote a spiritual classic called **Transformation in Christ**. In the years leading up to the War he was very vocal in his denunciation National Socialism. His writings were deemed so antithetical to the ideology of Nazism that if people were found with his books during the war, they would be sent to the Concentration Camps.

It was in this crucible that Von Hildebrand formulated the basis for his book **Transformation in Christ**. Before the book came out he gave a series of 18 lectures over the summers of 1935-36 that were the genesis for the later book. Hildebrand was to his generation, in relation to the Nazis, what the Magi were in relation to King Herod. He learned the wisdom of the Gospel in the face of such tyranny so as to conform his life to Christ's and to offer himself fully to Jesus, as did the Magi.

In the opening chapter of the book Von Hildebrand presents the following image that he uses to help us better understand how we are transformed in Christ, He speaks of the necessity on our part to want to change. He writes of a glowing desire to become a new person in Christ; a passionate will to give oneself over to Christ. For this to happen he says we should be like soft wax, ready to receive the imprint of the features of Christ.<sup>1</sup> A couple of pages later he picks up this image again and drives his point home when he states:

***In the measure only in which we yield like soft wax to the formative action of Christ, shall we attain genuine firmness.***

Let's sit with this image for a minute. Picture in your mind's eye a wax seal. It conforms to the image imprinted onto it. Our soul is like soft wax, it conforms to what we choose to imprint upon it. In today's Gospel we are told that Herod was troubled. He was filled with fear. His life was governed by fear and this motivated everything he did. Fear was so imprinted on his soul that he was suspicious of everyone and was always needing to control all in his sphere of influence. The wax of his soul became hardened with distrust, deceit, bitterness, and hate.

There is a cautionary warning for us all here. If we choose to harbor un-forgiveness towards others, if we allow our souls to be embittered, resentful, angry, lustful, distrustful and domineering such disreputable character traits can become hardened so as to imprint our souls with the traits of the fallen and sin centred character.

To be people whose souls are therefore truly malleable and open to transformation in Christ means rather than being like Herod we want to learn from the Magi. Contrast Herod's troubled spirit with the spirit of the Magi. They were filled, we are told, "with exceeding great joy". Joy is a wonderful word and is the relative to the word grace. To be joy-full is the result of encountering the grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Such souls are constantly willing to receive more of his grace. Whenever such people are aware of how they are being malformed they are willing to be reformed to Christ. Think again of the wax impression. When the sincere

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<sup>1</sup> Von Hildebrand, D. (2001). *Transformation in Christ: On the Christian Attitude* (pp. 8–9). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Christian knows there has been an impression on their soul contrary to the character of Christ, they choose, to so to speak, to soften up the wax, and receive forgiveness and commit themselves again to the way of Christ like transformation.

There are three ways of the Magi exhibit the way of the malleable soul. Such souls

1. adore Christ
2. serve Christ
3. and live for Christ.

We are told that the Magi went to the house where Jesus was with Mary. Most people missed entirely what the Magi saw. They recognized in that ordinary setting the presence of the extraordinary Messiah. Such an attitude is something that is fully embodied in the Catholic imagination. Ours is a faith that discerns the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle and monstrance, in the Sacrament of the Altar. Ours is a faith aware that we are surrounded by a heavenly hosts to whom we can turn for intercessory prayer. Ours is a faith that understands Jesus makes himself present to us in happenings of our everyday lives and that it is here where we live each day that transformation in Christ happens.

Many of the people who lived in Bethlehem saw in Jesus a child like any other. The Kings knew how to see Him as the Child, who, from then on, would be adored forever. Their faith gave them a unique privilege: to be the first among the gentiles to adore him when the world did not know him. How immensely happy must these men have been, having come from so far, when they were able to contemplate the Messiah soon after he came into the world! We have to be attentive, because our Lord also shows himself in the normal events of every day. May we know how to recover this interior light, which for us breaks through the monotony of days which are all the same, and find Jesus in our ordinary life!

Not only did they adore Jesus they also served him. I want to concentrate on the second gift of the frankincense to illustrate this

We offer him incense, the perfume which was burned each evening on the altar in Jerusalem as a symbol of the hope placed in the Messiah. Incense is our desire to live a noble life of service which gives off the 'aroma of Christ' (2 Cor 2:15). To impregnate our words and actions with his aroma is to sow understanding and friendship.

Now think about incense this way. Its pleasant smell comes from some small, hidden grains of aromatic material placed upon the burning charcoal. Likewise is the sweet fragrance of Christ, noticed among men and women – not in a sudden burst of flame, but in the constant red hot embers of virtues such as justice, loyalty, faithfulness, understanding and cheerfulness.

At the end of today's gospel we are told the magi went home by another route. As we allow our souls to be always malleable and receptive to the imprint of grace as we deepen in our adoration and service of Christ Jesus, the transformation of which Von Hildebrand writes can become ever more our experience. Remember he was writing about transformation amidst the tyranny of Nazism. When we are truly receptive to Jesus' imprint on our souls we discover that this is an inside job where Jesus' work within allows us to grow as those whose souls are less troubled and

more joyful. This isn't because life is easy but because even though life is very hard we know Jesus is good. Because of this we can offer ourselves to him each day as we pray:

*Jesus may my soul be like soft wax ready to receive daily the imprint of your nature. Amen*