Epiphany comes from the Greek word, “epiphaineo,” which means “to make manifest.” The Feast of Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to the whole world. Today’s readings report that magi followed a bright star from the East to Bethlehem. There they adored the “newborn king of the Jews.” Today’s astronomers verify that in fact a bright cluster of stars coalesced above Bethlehem in 4 BC. The gospel reports that these magi, or early astronomers, placed at the feet of Jesus three costly gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Tradition since the sixth century holds that these kings were three in number, probably because they brought three gifts, and that the skin color of these kings is portrayed as white, black and yellow, thereby representing the three known continents of Europe, Africa and Asia. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to the whole world.

As we celebrate Jesus’ manifestation to the world, let’s review the status of Christianity in the world. Today, one-third of the world’s seven billion people identify as Christian. The world’s religions with the most adherents are Christianity with 2 billion, Islam with a billion and a half, and Hinduism with one billion.

Geographically, the Christian population has shifted dramatically in the last hundred years. A century ago, more than 90% of Christians lived in Europe and the Americas. Now, Europe includes not 65% but only 25% of the world’s Christians. Growth through conversion and high birth rates has occurred in Africa and Asia, where Christians burgeoned from almost none to 25% and 13% respectively.

Where is Christianity thriving? … The countries with the highest number of ordinations in recent years have been Nigeria and India. In the USA, while Anglos, African-Americans and Hispanics are under-represented in both priesthood and sisterhood, Filipinos and Vietnamese are over-represented.

Where is the Church suffering today? … Various international agencies, including the US Senate, annually list countries with the “least religious freedom.” Each year, Muslim-majority countries and Communist countries top these lists. Perhaps where Christians suffer most critically is in the Middle East, where Christianity began and where the magi came. Today, Christians represent barely one percent. Pope Francis describes the Middle East situation as a “genocide against Christians.”

Where is there hope? … The Catholic Church continues for the last half century to lead the ecumenical movement. The Church has initiated dialogues with all major religions and Christian denominations. The Church desires that all major religions know and respect each other. Here in the USA, hope resides too in the two decade long ever-increasing number of seminarians, and the vibrancy of new communities of religious sisters.
Perhaps the biggest factor for hope lies in the ever increasing role of the laity. Virtually every parish has many dozens of laity involved in the Parish Council, the Finance Committee, in Religious Education, the liturgy team, the RCIA team, and numerous societies. Where would our parishes be without this active lay involvement? ... We’d be in really big trouble! As a priest, I publicly thank the laity for being so generous in time, talent and treasure in manifesting Jesus to the world.

On this Feast of the Epiphany, how might we evangelize in our time and place? ... Human contact works best. Being our best selves, being faith-filled, prayerful, charitable, helpful and involved demonstrates that we Catholics care about our families, our professions, our local community, our nation and our world. Virtual contact through various forms of media helps. Distributing literature about our faith helps. Nothing, however, beats human contact ... as long as that contact is positive!!! We meet people as fellow travelers on the journey of life, as fellow pilgrims on the way to heaven. We meet people where they are. We invite them in non-threatening, welcoming ways to come to Jesus.

The Holy Spirit guides the Church. I pray every day the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila, “Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing. God alone remains constant. Whoever has God lacks nothing.” ... We keep trying our best, in our particular time and place, to manifest Jesus wherever we live, work, play and pray. Happy Feast of the Epiphany!