**EPIPHANY**

In earlier times, there were twelve holy nights between Christmas and Epiphany—called “Smoke Nights,” because the people went through their houses and barns burning incense, blessing their homestead. Only one such night is left, but this is celebrated with great solemnity: the Vigil of Epiphany, January 5. After the supper dishes are done, the whole family, dressed in Sunday clothes, follow the father, who goes ahead with a shovel of charcoal, on which he burns incense, while the oldest son has a bowl with holy water—Epiphany water, blessed with a much longer formula than for ordinary holy water, a formula that contains a prolonged exorcism, which makes it efficacious against all demoniacal influence—which he sprinkles freely all over house and grounds and barns, while the rest of the family follow behind, saying the Rosary and singing hymns. While the father and the oldest son are incensing and blessing the house, the youngest child carries on a plate a piece of chalk. This has been blessed with a special blessing from the *Rituale* after the morning Mass.

In the old country every household would be most careful to send somebody into church for the blessing of the chalk. At the very end, when the whole homestead had been blessed, room by room, the father took the blessed chalk and wrote over every room that led from the house into the open:

AD 19 C M B 55

This stands for “Anno Domini 1955—Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar” and means that the three Holy Kings, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, in this year of Our Lord, 1955 (or whatever the year may be), are protecting this house against all evil spirits.

Epiphany is also known as “Little Christmas.” As a feast, it is even much older than our Christmas. On the Vigil, the eve before the feast, there comes to the table a special Epiphany cake, in which three beans are hidden. Whoever gets a bean in his piece has to dress up the next day as a Holy King. On Epiphany Day, the three Holy Kings, with golden crowns and richly dressed in oriental splendor, are the guests of honor at the table. Afterward the whole family tries to entertain them, and they have the say of the evening. This is always an evening much looked forward to by the whole house. We have had the most fantastic-looking magi at our table. Before the three majesties leave the house again, they hand over their gifts—equivalents of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.