

## ***Focus on the Faith***

### **The Adoration of the Magi**

Joseph and the Most Holy Mother of God with the Infant Jesus were still in Bethlehem when Magi came to Jerusalem from a distant land to the east (Persia or Babylon). Learned men, engaged in observing and studying the stars, were called Magi or wise men. At that time, men believed that, at the birth of a great man, a new star appears in the sky. Many pagans within the confines of Persia, had learned from the dispersed Jews of the coming of the Messiah, the Great King of Israel. From the Jews, they could even have learned the following prophecy of Balaam relating to the Messiah: I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab (Num. 24:17). ("Moab" is understood here as a personification of the enemies of the Messiah.) The Persian Magi thus expected that, when the promised King would be born, a new star would appear in the sky. The prophecy of Balaam spoke of a star in the spiritual sense; nevertheless, the Lord, in His mercy, to bring the pagans to faith, gave a sign in the sky in the form of the appearance of an extraordinary star. Having seen it, the Magi understood that the expected King had been born.

After a protracted and long journey, they finally reached Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish kingdom, and began to ask: Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. These words from such conspicuous strangers, stirred up many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, including King Herod, to whom the arrival of the exotic eastern scholars was immediately reported.

From the first days of his accession, Herod's throne had been shaky. The people hated him as a usurper of the Davidic throne and a tyrant. The last years of Herod's life were complicated still more by personal adversities and bloody reprisals. He became extremely suspicious, and for the least cause executed enemies both real and imagined. Thus perished several of Herod's children and even his wife, whom earlier he had loved ardently. Sick and decrepit, Herod now resided in his new palace in Zion. Having heard of a King Who had been born, he became particularly agitated. Vulnerable in his old age, he feared that his rule would be overthrown and handed over to the new-born King.

In order to clear up just who this new pretender to the throne was, Herod gathered all the priests and scribes - men that knew the books of Sacred Scripture well - and he inquired of them where Christ should be born. They answered: In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet Micah. Then Herod privately summoned the Magi, found out from them the time of the appearance of the star, and sent them on to Bethlehem. Feigning piety, the cunning Herod said to them: Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. In fact, Herod was going to use their report to put the Infant to death.

The Magi listened to King Herod without suspecting anything, and went to Bethlehem. There again that star appeared, which they had seen before in the east. Moving across the sky, it went before them,

indicating the way. In Bethlehem, the star stopped over that spot where the Infant Jesus was, Who had been born.

The Magi went into the house and saw the Infant Jesus with His mother. They bowed down to the ground before Him and presented to Him their gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh (a precious aromatic oil). In the gifts of the Magi, one may see the following symbolic significance. They brought gold to Him, as to a King (as tribute or taxes); frankincense, as to God (incense is used at divine services); and myrrh, as to a Man Who must die (the dead were anointed with oils mixed with aromatic myrrh).

Having worshipped the King awaited by all, the Magi would have returned to Jerusalem and to King Herod. However, an angel appeared to them in a dream, revealing Herod's perfidious designs, and commanded them to return to their own country by another way, without passing through Jerusalem. Tradition has preserved the names of the Magi, who afterwards became Christians: Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar.

Thus, the first to worship the Saviour Who had been born were shepherds, nature's true children, who could open up before Him only the treasure of their hearts, full of simplicity, faith and humility. Significantly later came the Magi from the East, imbued with erudite wisdom, who laid down gold, frankincense and myrrh, together with reverent joy, before the Divine Infant. They had had to make a long journey to reach Judea, and even from Jerusalem they were not immediately able to find the birthplace of the King of the Jews. Does this not indicate that both simplicity of heart and profound, conscientious erudition lead equally to Christ? But the first way is more direct, short and sure than the second. The shepherds were guided directly by angels, while the Magi were "taught" by an unreasoning star, and, through Herod, by the scribes and the Jewish elders. Not without

difficulties and dangers did they attain their desired goal, and they did not hear the heavenly harmony that sounded over the earth - Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.

### ***From the Fathers on Christmas***

#### **The Wonder of Christ**

Of all the marvelous and splendid things about the Son of God there is one that utterly transcends the limits of human wonder and is beyond the capacity of our weak mortal intelligence to think of or understand, namely, how this mighty power of the divine majesty, the very Word of the Father, and the very Wisdom of God, in which were created "all things visible and invisible," can be believed to have existed within the compass of that man who appeared in Judaea; yes, and how the wisdom of God can have entered into a woman's womb and been born as a child and uttered noises like those of crying children; and further, how it was that he was troubled, as we are told, in the hour of death, as he himself confesses when he says, "My soul is sorrowful even unto death"; and how at the last he was led to that death which is considered by men to be the most shameful of all-even though on the third day he rose again.

When, therefore, we see in him some things so human that they appear in no way to differ from the common frailty of mortals, and some things so divine that they are appropriate to nothing else but the ...nature of deity, the human understanding with its narrow limits is baffled, and struck with amazement at so mighty a wonder knows not which way to turn, what to hold to, or whither to betake itself. If it thinks of God, it sees a man; if it thinks of a man, it beholds one returning from the dead with spoils after vanquishing the kingdom of death.

For this reason we must pursue our contemplation with all fear and reverence, as we seek to prove how the reality of each nature exists in one and the same person, in such a way that nothing unworthy or unfitting may be thought to reside in that divine and ineffable existence, nor on the other hand may the events of his life be supposed to be the illusions caused by deceptive fantasies.

But to utter these things in human ears and to explain them by words far exceeds the powers we possess either in our mortal worth or in mind and speech. I think indeed that it transcends the capacity even of the holy apostles; nay more, perhaps the explanation of this mystery lies beyond the reach of the whole creation of heavenly things.  
by Origen (185-254 AD)

## ***Orthopraxis***

### **Why do we place a star on the tree?**

Because it represents the Heavenly Star that guided the Magi to the place where the young Christ Child lay!

Here is a meditation on that Star from long ago, written by an Orthodox monk living in China!

#### *The Star of Bethlehem*

By Hieromonk Methodius  
Harbin, 1936

In Thy Light shall we see Light (Psalm 35:9)

Did you ever contemplate, brethren, the meaning of that heavenly guide the Star of Bethlehem?

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, the Lord drove them from Paradise and clothed them in garments of skins. These clothes of skin are the weight of the flesh and everything connected to it the weight of the world.

Adam after the Fall became a slave. He lost the joy of being the son of God, and began to procure his small slice of earthly bread, as well as his heavenly bread, by the sweat of his brow. The heavens withdrew from the earth.

And the tragedy of both that Old Testament man who lost Paradise and the man of our own day who is unable to make use of its restoration, consists in the fact that man, frequently without realizing it, cannot live without Heaven. Man is tortured in his attempts to find it. This searching expresses itself in strivings towards truth, towards goodness, towards light, towards happiness, but also frequently towards temporary and unworthy things. These strivings do not return Paradise to man, but rather, draw him further from it, throwing him into deeper unhappiness, despair, and disillusionment with life.

And then, it alone, the blessed Star of Bethlehem, shows the path to the One Who truly reconciles heaven and earth the Divine Infant Christ. In Him, by means of His incarnation, this reconciliation occurs: earth comes to repose in the embrace of the heavens. He came to put death to death. He gave the world a perfect law of love and truth in which lies the way to Paradise.

O Christ the true Light, Who enlightenest and sanctifiest every man that cometh into the world; let the light of Thy countenance be signed upon us, that in it we may behold the unapproachable Light. Guide our

footsteps aright in the doing of Thy commandments, through the intercessions of Thy most pure Mother, and of all Thy saints. Amen  
(Prayer of the First Hour)

### ***Just for Fun***

#### **A Christmas Quiz**

1. Can you name the parents of Jesus?
2. Where did Joseph and Mary live before they were betrothed?
3. What was the name of the angel who appeared to Mary?
4. Where did Joseph and Mary live after their marriage?
5. Where was Mary when the angel appeared to her, and what was she doing?
6. Who did Mary visit immediately after Gabriel appeared to her?
7. How long was her stay?
8. Why were Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem?
9. What determined the city to which they had to travel?
10. How did they travel?
11. Why couldn't Joseph and Mary find space in the inn?
12. Who were the first people to come to see Jesus according to Scripture?

13. What chorus did the angels sing to the shepherds?
14. What sign did the angels tell the shepherds to look for?
15. What is a manger?
16. What animals were in the cave?