



# Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Australia, New Zealand and All Oceania

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## A Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Blessed Nativity of our Lord, God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, 2025 and for the Feast of the Glorious Theophany, 2026

*“In the East, we have seen his star, and we have come to worship him.” (Matt 2:2)*

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, the God-Who-Is-With-Us,

Most people are generally familiar with the depiction of the nativity of our Lord. There are still some public places that set up a diorama of the stable-cave with an assortment of figurines representing the principle individuals in the story.

If we were to enquire of even the unchurched, they would say that it had something to do with Mary and Joseph and Jesus, and shepherds and angels, and three wise men; and all this without any particular understanding of the theology of the event. What happened at Bethlehem that night some two thousand years ago, still occupies the popular imagination even as we sleepwalk into the indifference of a multifaith, multicultural society.

Perhaps the most mysterious characters commonly included in the stable-cave nativity scene are the Magi, Zoroastrian scholars, scientists and astronomers, although it is possible that they did not arrive in Bethlehem 'till sometime after the birth of Jesus. They first enter the Matthean narrative in verse one of chapter two and they return to their Mesopotamian homeland at verse twelve of the same chapter.

It is worth recalling that we do not know exactly from where the Magi came, although Persia was the fastness of Zoroastrianism; we do not know how many Magi made the journey, although we usually speak of three because there were three gifts; we do not know their names, although the names we have given them, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, are possibly Mesopotamian names, or at least their echo; we do not know how long their journey took them, although it was probably several months along the Silk Road, and we do not know how long they remained in the Holy Land.

As early as the third century, Tertullian, the north African Christian lawyer, suggested that they were kings, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the radiance of your dawn.” (Is 60:3)

Why have the enigmatic Magi become a significant part of our wider Christmas lore? I suspect for reasons not immediately apparent. They were not simply travellers or tourists but pilgrims. They were making a journey which was prompted by a scientific observation but which was also *in-formed* by faith. They had a person and a destination in mind, however the details were not clear; certainty would come at the end of their journey, when they saw the infant Jesus, face to face; and we can see in their journey along the Silk Road, a metaphor of that journey which we all must take.

It is to these Messianic-Zoroastrian Magi, the first fruits from amongst the Gentiles, that I turn my thoughts this Christmas that their journey may speak to us.

They were led by a Star. The nature of the Star has been considered by such dissimilar individuals as Origen, St. Ignatius the Great, Pope St Leo the Great, St John Chrysostom, and many others. We might note the general consensus was that it was not a natural star, such as we see whenever we look up at the night sky, but either an angel or a specially created energy or entity. One 19th century scholar suggested that it was actually the Shekinah, and that ἀστέρη/star can also be translated as *radiance*; the *radiance* of the Divine Presence. Be all that as it may, the Star moved as a conscious being, at times at rest, at times resuming the journey, and finally “standing over the place where the child was.” (Mt 2:9)

The Evangelist indicates that the Star had not been visible to the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and that it continued being unseen the whole time the Magi were with Herod, only to reappear to lead them to Bethlehem. “This star brings the Magi as a birthday gift to God born upon the earth...” (St Gregory Palamas, Homily on the Holy Nativity)

Why did the Star disappear over Jerusalem? Possibly because it was the religious and administrative centre of a corrupt and compromised regime. The Magi went to the national capital, and to the royal palace because their worldly wisdom marked this as the only place fitting for the birth of a king.

Also, in withdrawing from sight, the Star gave the Magi their freedom to seek the new King wherever they believed him to be; yet the only king they found in that palace was the duplicitous degenerate client of Rome, and the one destined to be ever remembered as a child murderer.

At the outset, the Magi did not trust in their own “sense of direction”, physical or spiritual, and so throughout the journey they obediently followed their heavenly guide. They travelled *together*, and it was *together* that they found the Divine Child; they worshipped him *together*, and *together* they offered their treasures to him.

Was it the splendour of the palace that impressed the Magi, and in which they sought the new-born King? Is it that each year, we are seduced by the sights and sounds of the commercial Christmas? In the midst of it all, do we ever pause to consider if Christ is really present in the palace-like shopping malls, even if the endless canned music does include “Silent Night”? Why are we so often content with a counterfeit celebration rather than the genuine festival?

Like the Magi, we have that same freedom to seek Jesus wherever we believe him to be; and just as they did not find him in the palace of Herod, we must admit that we do not really find him in the glamour and glitter of the modern festive season, the Christless Christmas.

A detail of the Magi’s pilgrimage often overlooked occurs at the end of their visit. In a dream they were warned not to return to Herod, and so they went to their homeland by another way. (Mt 2:12) After the fulfilment of their pilgrimage, their encounter with the Child Jesus, they changed their plans, or rather God changed their return itinerary.

When we meet our Lord in the Divine Liturgy and in the Holy Mysteries, is there a change, an ongoing conversion, or do we simply continue along the same path, and not necessarily the best one?

At this blessed and joyful Feast, as we draw near to the place where the Child was, let us kneel before him, as did the Magi, and offer him the very best gift we have, our resolve to change, to ever follow a new path that leads not to the palace of Herod but rather to the King of Kings, the Child in a stable-cave.

“For the divine power has been manifested through the human body as light through glass, and shines upon those who have the eyes of their hearts purified. May we also be found among them, with “unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord” so that we too can be transformed ‘from glory to glory’ by the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and his love of humankind.” (St Basil the Great)

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Jesus Christ, born for us in Bethlehem,

May this Blessed Feast of the Divine Nativity be for each of you, and those dear to you, a time of Peace and Great Joy, and of every Good Gift from Above.

With my paternal blessing and with prayers assured,

**Christ is born! Glorify Him! Χριστός γεννάται! Δοξάσατε! الْمَسِيحُ وُلِدَ، فَمَجِّدُوهُ**

✠ Robert Rabbat, DD

Eparch, Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Australia, New Zealand and All Oceania.

17 December 2025