

## EPIPHANY, 2026

All of early Christianity's regional churches agreed that Easter and Pentecost Sundays, celebrating the Lord Jesus' triumphant Resurrection and His sending of the Holy Spirit upon the infant Church, were the two primary Christian feasts. From very early times, perhaps nearly from its beginning, the Roman Church added a third ranking feast, Christmas Day on December 25, following the ancient tradition that the Lord Jesus' earthly life began and ended on the same date, March 25. December 25 was a logical date for celebrating His birthday. The Egyptian Church also added a third ranking feast, but it wasn't Christmas. The Egyptian Church focused instead on the moment when the adult Lord Jesus came out of the waters of the Jordan, as a voice from Heaven cried out "This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased!" This was the "Showing Forth", the "Epiphaniea" in Greek, of Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Savior.

All of the Latin speaking Churches, of Roman Africa, Hispania, Gallia, Sicily, and Milan, followed the Roman Church in celebrating Christmas, the December 25 feast of the Lord Jesus' Birth. The Palestinian and Syrian Churches, on the other hand, followed the Egyptian Church in celebrating Epiphany, the January 6 feast of the Lord Jesus' Showing Forth. Preaching in 384 in Antioch, St. John Chrysostom explained that the day of the Lord Jesus' Showing Forth to the whole world was more important than the day of quiet birth. Even in Bethlehem itself, noted St. Jerome 20 years later, the practice of the Palestinian Church was to celebrate not the Lord Jesus' Birth, but His Epiphany, His Showing Forth to the world as Christ and Lord.

The Greek Church, for its part, decided to celebrate both Christmas on December 25, and Epiphany on January 6. St. John Chrysostom himself is a witness to this. Once he was consecrated Bishop of New Rome/Constantinople, he inherited that double celebration, and he made it clear that he thought it was actually a very good idea to celebrate both the Lord's Birth, the delightful marvel of the Eternal Word as a Human baby Boy, and His later "Showing Forth." As Rome did on Christmas, the Greek Church observed the Lord's birth with multiple Masses and processions. As Egypt did on Epiphany, the Greek Church celebrated Epiphany with the blessing of every available body of water. Rather rapidly, before 430, almost every regional Church had come to celebrate both feasts. Almost the entire Catholic Church had both a December 25 feast of the Lord's Birth and a January 6 feast of the Lord's "Epiphaniea", His "Showing Forth."

Now, the Roman Church, having originated Christmas, naturally tended to link Epiphany directly to Christmas. Quite quickly, the Roman Church, without forgetting about the Lord Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan, began to associate Epiphany with the Magi. The Magi were, after all, non Jews. That made the presentation of the Baby Jesus to the Magi His first "Showing Forth" to the Gentiles, to all the Nations, as their Lord and Savior. The Sermons of Pope Leo the Great in the 430s and 440s show that the Roman Church had already firmly connected Epiphany with the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem. The Roman Epiphany celebrates the Lord Jesus being Shown Forth as Lord and Savior not just of the Jews, but of all mankind, represented by the Magi.

The Bible doesn't actually say how many Magi there were, but by the time Pope Leo the Great the Roman Church settled on three Magi. The Magi were the aristocratic Priests/Magicians/Astronomers/Astrologers of ancient Persia. Much is uncertain about the Magi, but it is certain that there were many more than three of them. They all saw the new star.

They all admired its unusual brightness. The great majority paid no further attention to it. The first lesson to be learned from the Magi is that the true importance of anyone and anything is not measured by the number of people who pay immediate attention. Majority vote is a quite stupid way of evaluating truth. While the majority of the Magi noticed the star and then moved on, three Magi, helped by God's Spirit, guessed its true importance, and followed the route it marked out for them to distant Judea.

Boldly, the Magi came before King Herod the Old himself, notoriously one of the world's most unpredictable and quick tempered characters, and getting worse as he got older. Informing that gangster king of illegitimate lineage that a rightful King of the Jews had been born took courage, courage that the God's spirit gave them. The second thing to learn from the Magi is that God can never be well served without courage, courage both in seeking the truth and in defending it.

In Bethlehem, the Magi learned that the Prophet Micah had long ago foretold that the Messiah, or Christ, would be born in Bethlehem, right outside Jerusalem. Accordingly, they went there.

A third thing to learn from the Magi, one a little hard for me to admit, being what you might call a "religious professional", is that sometimes religious professionals are too busy being professional to be truly religious. Jerusalem, the Jewish religious capital, was full of priests of the Temple and Scribes of the Torah. Did any of them join the Magi in the very short trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, even out of curiosity? No. Lacking the true religious spirit of awe before Almighty God, they expected Him to behave predictably. Being informed of the Messiah's coming by three wandering Persians was not part of the script. Let them go to Bethlehem - we have real work to do! There isn't anything wrong in being professional, but there isn't as much right to it as people suppose, at least not when it comes to matters of Faith and Morals. In those matters, what is essential are Fear of the Lord and Charity for Men. Fear of the Lord means accepting reverently His sovereignty, so unpredictable to us mortals. Charity for Men means accepting that the Lord's chosen for a particular purpose may be people who look quite dubious from a respectable and professional point of view, as three wandering Persian Magi must have looked dubious to Jerusalem's priests and scribes.

For their humble Faith, of course, the three Magi were well rewarded. They entered a stable that the eyes of Faith recognized as more glorious than any imperial palace. Falling to their faces, they worshiped the Baby of Bethlehem as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As Pope Leo the Great pointed out in a magnificent sermon for this day, the Magi did not encounter any miracles, except a miracle of humility. They saw no healings or exorcisms. They saw only a Baby and His mother. A fourth thing to learn from the Magi is the humble Faith to look for God's work not in extraordinary miracles, but in the daily marvels that surround us, and which receive no attention precisely because they are daily. Let us notice them. Let us be aware of God's presence through them. Let us give thanks to God for them.

Then the Magi presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold declared the Baby to be a King. Incense declared Him to be God. Myrrh declared Him to be a sacrifice for the redemption of the world. The final lesson to be learned from the Magi is simply to give God what gifts we have to offer at this moment now. Let holy love be our gold. Let fervent prayer be our frankincense. Let the offering of our very selves by our myrrh.

And eternal life will be our reward.