

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”—THE MAGI AND US—BY FR. STEVE LAPE

One of the most popular Christmas decorations is the “crèche” (French for “manger scene.”) St. Francis of Assisi is usually credited for the first one (a “live” one), around 1223 in Italy, based on his visit to the Holy Land. Manger scenes usually include: baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, several sheep, a donkey, and oxen, along with a shepherd or two, based on Luke, chapter 2. Yet, for many people, the crèche does not seem complete without the magi, or “wise men,” as they’re so regularly called. They were very learned men who studied the stars and interpreted the signs of the times to make more sense of things to come. They probably came from other parts of the Middle East and western Asia to seek the Newborn King. It’s assumed there were 3, due to 3 gifts offered to baby Jesus (gold, frankincense, & myrrh.) Yet, Matthew’s Gospel (the only Gospel mentioning magi) never says how many there were, that they were kings, or their names. Later legends named them Gaspar (or Caspar), Melchior and Balthazar, with earliest recordings of such names by the early Middle Ages (6th or 7th centuries).

Many churches (including ours) try not to include the magi in the manger scene at Christmas, but wait till Epiphany Sunday. Although many people like to think of the magi’s arrival soon after Jesus was born, biblical scholars suggest that a passage of time (perhaps up to 2 years) took place before the magi, who followed a very bright star, arrived to offer gifts to Jesus. Matthew records that the magi found the child not in a manger, but in a “house.” (Mt 2:11) The gifts symbolize something about Jesus: gold (for Jesus as King of Kings), frankincense (to honor Jesus’ priesthood, offering sacrifice on behalf of His people), and myrrh (a gummy resin from a Middle Eastern tree or shrub which was used to anoint the dead for burial, alluding to Jesus’ prophetic death).



How do the magi relate to us? First of all, as baptized followers of Jesus Christ, we are called by the light of the Holy Spirit, to offer the very best of ourselves to give glory to God. We share our wealth, our resources, time, talents, energy, and wisdom of experience to help spread the word about Jesus being among us and preparing for His final coming at the end of the ages, a time only God knows (and can come upon us unexpectedly.) We especially should think about how much and how well we’re sharing ourselves with God and others when the gifts are presented before God at the altar at Mass: the bread & wine which become Christ’s Body & Blood, the water (one of earth’s most precious resources, symbolizing Jesus’ humanity & ours, since we’re mostly composed of water), the collection money to help keep local ministry alive & growing, and ourselves (our prayers, our hungers, our strengths & weaknesses, our whole being). All we say & do should somehow point to the Lord!