



### ***Pastor's Column***

*Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem*

*December 31, 2017*

*The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph*

In the midst of the Christmas Octave, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. As we know from the Gospel, the couple betrothed for marriage were made to go to Bethlehem from Nazareth in order to register for the census, called for by Caesar Augustus in the year of Christ's birth. There was no room for them at the inn, and so they lodged in a cave that served as a stable, and there, Jesus was born.

Queen St. Helen led excavation efforts throughout the Holy Land in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, having famously recovered the True Cross, but also having famously arranged for the construction of many churches and shrines throughout the Holy Land to commemorate various events in the life of Jesus. One of those shrines was built over the cave where Jesus was born. Three centuries later, that small shrine was expanded to become the enormous basilica that it still is today.

The Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem is the oldest Christian church still in existence and still in use. Whereas every other Christian church and shrine throughout the Holy Land was utterly destroyed by the Muslim invaders beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, the Nativity Basilica was totally left alone. Why? Because mosaics in the Nativity Basilica include depictions of the Magi, and they are portrayed as Persian kings wearing royal Persian attire. When the Muslim invaders saw this, it was their conclusion that this place must have been sacred to their ancestors, and so they left it alone.

The custody of the Nativity Basilica is an ecumenical effort; it is entrusted to the Armenian Orthodox, the Greek Orthodox, and the Roman Catholic Churches. The Altar of the Three Kings is the part entrusted to the Armenian Orthodox; the Altar of the Circumcision is entrusted to the Greek Orthodox; the Chapel of the Manger is entrusted to the Roman Catholics. The two Altars are on the ground floor; the Grotto of the Nativity is the cave upon which the original shrine and then the basilica are built, and this Grotto is the central place of veneration. A silver star on the floor in the Grotto marks the very spot where Jesus was born, and mere steps away is the Chapel of the Manger.

The Nativity Basilica and countless other holy sites in the Holy Land are all visible realities and historical proof of the Catholic Christian faith. Jesus actually was born *here!* Jesus was actually placed in the manger *here!* Jesus actually walked *here* – set His very foot *here!* Jesus died *here!* Jesus rose again *here!* Jesus ascended into Heaven from *this* very spot! May the Lord and His people on Earth preserve these precious places, these holy sites, now and unto the end of days when Christ comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

~Fr. Lewis