

# ICON OF THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST: EXPLAINED

Fr. Ayman Kfouf

**T**he Nativity icon tells the story of Christ's birth, as found in the Scriptures and the Holy Tradition. Like most festal icons, the Nativity icon is not only a mere historical record of Christ's birth but also a reflection of the theological meaning of the feast. The feast's central theme is the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, who emptied Himself of His divine glory and accepted a human flesh for the salvation of the world.

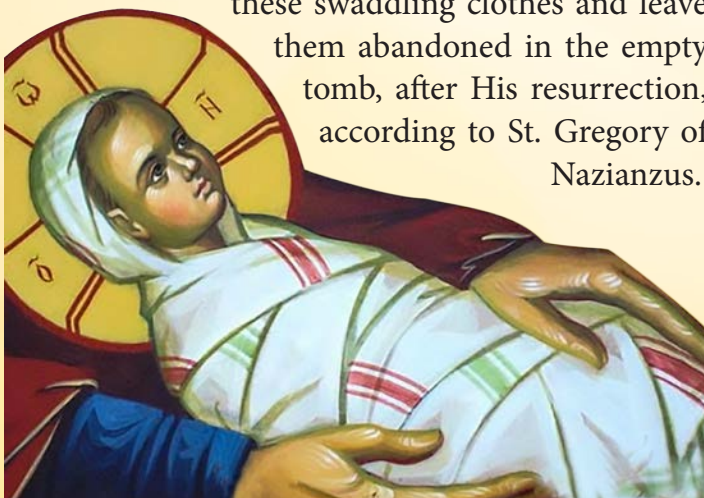
The icon's focal point is the newborn Child, shown in a cave, lying in a manger. The Gospel records that when the time came for the Virgin Mary to give birth, she and Joseph were unable to find a room at an inn, and so Mary gave birth to Jesus in a manger in a cave.

The infant Christ is shown wrapped in white swaddling clothes, foreshadowing His death and His burial. The white swaddling clothes remind us of the white linen shroud that will wrap Jesus' body after His death on the cross, "And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in His own new tomb" (Mt. 27:59). Thus, as we see Christ wrapped with white swaddling clothes at His birth, we are assured that He will release

these swaddling clothes and leave them abandoned in the empty tomb, after His resurrection, according to St. Gregory of Nazianzus.

The dark cave, where the newborn Child lies, represents the world's darkness in sin before Christ. It also symbolizes the tomb of Christ, where He was buried after His death on the cross.

Notice how the Nativity icon draws conjunction between the dark cave as Christ's birthplace and the dark tomb as the place of His resurrection. On the one hand, at Christ's birth, the dark cave becomes the place from which the Sun of justice shines forth His light upon the whole world. On the other hand, at His resurrection, the dark tomb becomes the place from which the light of the resurrection shines forth upon the whole creation.



The manger of Christ is depicted as a coffin, a symbolic indication of Christ's sacrifice for the life of the world.

Other variants of the Nativity icon depict the manger as an altar table, symbolizing the Prothesis, Table of Oblation, on which the holy gifts are offered, and later become the Body and Blood of the Lord, Jesus Christ. St. Cyril of Alexandria explains that by the way that the manger is a crib for feeding cattle, then [metaphorically]

as we see Christ lies in the manger, He, Himself, becomes the fodder and heavenly bread that feeds all; a clear indication of Christ's eucharistic sacrifice: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51)

In the Nativity icon, the white swaddling clothes, the dark cave, and the manger draw powerful parallelism between the birth and the death of Christ: the newborn Child is Himself the Son of God incarnate, who accepted to die on the cross for the life of the world. St. Ephraim the Syrian (c. 306-373) explains this parallelism between the birth and death of Christ, expressing that "... because death was not able to devour Him without the body, nor Sheol to swallow Him up without the flesh, He came unto the Virgin, that from thence He might obtain that which should bear Him to Sheol... With the body then that [was] from the Virgin, He entered Sheol and plundered its storehouses and emptied its treasures." Thus, as we celebrate the Lord's Incarnation at His birth, the Nativity icon prepares us, by anticipation, to celebrate the fullness of Christ's redemptive work: His crucifixion, His Death, His descent into Hades, and His glorious resurrection.



At the center of the icon, the Virgin Mary is depicted kneeling towards the newborn Child. Compared to the rest of the characters, her larger size and unique position, beside the Baby, at the heart of the icon, emphasizes her essential role in the divine plan of salvation. Her model of obedience, accepting the incarnate Word of God, gave her a dominant place in the mystery of the Incarnation.

In some icons, Mary is depicted reclining on a mattress and looking towards Joseph with compassion, as if she was encouraging him to overcome his doubts and his inability to comprehend the mystery of the Incarnation.

In Orthodox iconography, the Virgin Mary is always depicted wearing a veil with three stars on her forehead, the right, and the left shoulders. The three stars signify her inviolate and perpetual virginity, before, during, and after giving birth to Christ.



The Angels in the icon have two roles: to announce Christ's birth and give Him glory. To the right, we see the angel announcing the good news to the shepherds. To the left, the angels appear dressed in long garments, standing in a posture of reverence for the newborn Child, offering praises: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men" (Lk. 2:14).

The shepherds stand, on the right, listening to the good news brought to them by the angel: "...I bring you good tidings of great joy, ... For unto you is born this day... a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." (Lk. 2: 11).

Additionally, we see a young shepherd sitting on a rock playing his flute, showing humanity's joy in the Good tidings of Christ's birth, adding the music of humankind to the angels' hymns in glorifying the incarnate Word of God.

On the left side of the cave are the Wise Men, royal figures from the East, who came to witness the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus's birth. Guided by the star, the Magi came to honor Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh gifts.



Symbolically, the gift of gold signifies Christ's kingship; the gift of frankincense signifies His divinity; the gift of myrrh signifies His sacrifice, His death, and His resurrection.

The Magi's gifts, therefore, indicate the purpose for which Christ was born: He is the royal king of all (gift of gold) whose kingdom shall have no end; He is God Himself, the divine Son of God (gift of frankincense); who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and was born from the Virgin Mary, to die on the cross (gift of myrrh) and to grant us life through His glorious resurrection.

An ox and a donkey stand inside the cave near the manger. The Gospels do not mention an ox and a donkey, yet they appear in all images of the Nativity of Christ, as early as the 4th century.

The ox and donkey direct our attention to the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah about the birth of Christ: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger..." (Is 1:3). According to St. John Chrysostom, the ox symbolizes the Jews and the donkey symbolizes the Gentiles. Before the cross, neither the Jews recognized Christ nor the Gentiles knew Him, while after His resurrection, the whole world flocked to Him.



On the bottom left side of the icon, the righteous Joseph sits distant from the cave, perplexed and confused, questioning in his heart how a virgin can give birth and remains a virgin.



In front of Joseph, we see the Devil disguised as an old hunchbacked shepherd holding a stick, confronting Joseph and planting the seeds of doubt in his heart. According to tradition, the Devil stands pointing to Joseph, telling him sarcastically that if it is possible for this dry stick to sprout leaves and branches, then it may be possible for a virgin to give birth and remains a virgin.

Joseph's confusion reflects humanity's disbelief and struggle to understand the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ. Eventually, however, Joseph overcomes his doubts and serves the mystery of the Incarnation, as he becomes the human guardian of Christ, the Child.

Above the cave, the radiant star shines out brightly from heaven and descends upon the infant Christ in the dark cave. According to Matthew, this is the star that led the Magi to the place of the newborn Child (Mt 2:9). The three rays of the star, above the Baby, represent the involvement of the Holy Trinity in the divine economy of salvation at the birth of Christ.

At the lower right corner of the icon, we see a midwife and a woman called Salome, washing Christ. According to tradition, Joseph brought the two women to help with the birth of Christ. The



washing scene affirms that Jesus was fully human at His birth and that he came to the world through a real physical birth and assumed a complete human nature, excluding sin.

Some church fathers view the washing of the infant Christ in the Nativity icon as an indication of the sacrament of the holy baptism. Thus, some icons depict the basin, where the Baby is washed, in the shape of a baptismal font.

The Nativity icon reveals the story of Christ's birth and portrays the purpose of His Incarnation: "The Son of God was born as a child so that we may become perfect humans. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes so that we may become free from the snares of death. He was in a manger so that we may be in the altar. He was on earth that we may be in heaven. He had no other place in the inn, so that we may have many mansions in the heavens," according to St. Ambrose, the 4th-century bishop of Milan.

The Nativity icon is not bound by space or time. Instead, it brings together many images and events from different points in time, forming a complex composition that reveals both the historical reality and the spiritual meaning of the feast.

The icon of the Nativity of Christ is a timeless image that combines paradox elements around Christ, the Child. Consequently, we see the earthly with the heavenly, the human with the divine, the wise with the humble, and the entire creation united in synergy and harmony to receive the incarnate Word of God: “The Father has been pleased and satisfied; the Word has become flesh, and the Virgin has given birth to the incarnate God. The star proclaims, the Magi worship, the shepherds wonder, and the creation rejoices” (Praises stichera for the Nativity of Christ).



# Did You Know!

Some icons portray St. Joseph the Betrothed holding in his hand a staff budding with lilies or green leaves. This beautiful image illustrates the following:

1- The blooming staff of Joseph represents the miraculous birth of Christ from the virgin. As shown in the icon (to the left), the devil appeared to Joseph, disguised as a shepherd, holding a rod in his hand, saying sarcastically to Joseph that if this dried wood was to sprout leaves and branches, then it may be possible that a virgin gives birth and remains a virgin. Accordingly, the image of the blossoming staff of Joseph appears in icons to accentuate the miraculous birth of Christ. Some icons show the staff of Joseph budding forth white lilies, symbolizing the purity, chastity, and virtue of the Theotokos.

2- The blooming staff of Joseph signifies the high priesthood of Christ. This image is taken from the staff of Aaron, which blossomed miraculously and declared Aaron to be the high priest of God's chosen people (Nm 17:16-26); likewise, Christ, is the rod that came forth from the root of Jesse and became the high priest of the church. As the high priest, Christ became the offeror (the mediator) and the offering (the lamb), who was born from a virgin to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our salvation.

