

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

The Birth of Christ is a celebration of joy. The fact that God became man and entered into our human life is seen in the Icon of the Nativity. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger is the Christ Child. All the details of the Icon relate to His presence. This presence shines radically with the black opening of the cave in which He was born. This contrast is often seen in the Fathers' writings in terms of the spiritual light of Christ's birth radiating through the shadow of death encompassing man. The black mouth of the cave, then symbolically, is precisely this fallen world in which the "Sun of Righteousness" has dawned, this wilderness which the "Light of Wisdom" has illumined.

The Virgin Mother is shown half-sitting, supported by a hammock-type bed used by the early Jews in their travels. Striking is the absence of the usual sufferings of childbirth which is iconographically seen to be an indication of the virgin-birth of Christ.

As in the Gospel, all mankind is called to this event. The Wise Men represent the learned and astute, and the shepherds represent the humble of this world. A multitude of Angels give glory to God and announce this good news to mankind.



Your Nativity,
O Christ our God,
has shed on the world
the Light of Wisdom.
For by it, those
who worshipped the stars,
learned through a Star
to worship You,
the Sun of Righteousness,
and to know You as the
Orient who rises
from on high.
O Lord glory to You!
TROPARION OF THE
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In the Icon, several episodes are grouped together and shown simultaneously. In the bottom left corner, Joseph sits in painful thought, while the Devil, under the guise of an old and bent shepherd, suggests new doubts and suspicions to him. In the opposite corner, two women are seen bathing the new-born Infant, to show the real humanity of Jesus.

All of creation takes part in the birth of the Savior. In the cave, the Infant lies guarded by an ox and a donkey. While the Gospels do not speak of them, all icons of the Nativity portray them because of the manifest fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, "An ox know its owner, and an ass its master's manger." (Is. 1: 3) The mountain-side is a backdrop to the event. While it bears little correspondence to the terrain of Bethlehem in Judaea, it parallels a line from the prayer of the Prophet Habakkuk: "God comes from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Covered are the heavens with His glory, and with His praise the earth is filled." (Hab. 3: 3)

One final detail is the tree painted across from the image of Joseph, included not only in its own right as an offering to Christ, but also as a symbol of the Tree of Jesse. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him." (Is. 11: 1-2)

The Icon of the Nativity calls us to praise and glorify the Birth of Christ. With the hymns of Vespers we too say: "What shall we bring to You, O Christ, Who, for our sake, was born on earth as man? Every creature brings thanks to You: Angels their songs; the heavens a star; Wise Men gifts; Shepherds amazement; the earth a cave; the wilderness a manger; but we - the Virgin Mother."

Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent in Essence,
and the Earth presents a cave to the Inaccessible,
the angels with the shepherds sing His glory,
and the wise men with the Star travel on their way,
for to us is born a Young Child,
who is God from all eternity.

KONTAKION OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD