

## The Place of the Nativity Icon

Protestants use a plain cross to emphasize that they believe in the Resurrection. According to their observation, those denominations that leave the corpus on the Cross deny the Resurrection. We know that is not true. We do not deny the crucifixion with the dying of our Lord on the Cross because, without it, there would be no resurrection.

Have you ever noticed any relevance of the twelve festal icons to the icon of the Resurrection? Sometimes it is called by other names such as the Descent into Hades or the Raising of Adam and Eve—and their progeny. The twelve festal icons include the Nativity of our Lord. This is because all icons are linked together. They are all unified in the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Christ. His offering of self has its climax in the crucifixion, and its beginning at His conception in the womb of Mary, commemorated on March 25. (As an interesting aside, some of the Church Fathers held that Jesus' crucifixion was on March 25. Since they held a cyclic view, Jesus had to be conceived on the same day He died. Then to keep things perfect, His birth is exactly nine months later, December 25.)

St. Maximus the Confessor observes: "Whoever has understood the mystery of the cross and the tomb has understood the underlying reasons of all things." In the self-emptying love of Jesus, everything falls into place so that we can understand all these events. Our time is not God's time so that the Lamb of God (John 1) could be slain before the foundation of the world. (Rev 13:8; 1 Pet 1:19-20). Therefore, all icons are not subject to our concept of time and show the *kenosis* of Christ.

Then taking a closer look at the Nativity icon, we will find the lack of our concept of time and place and Jesus' *kenosis* and self-sacrifice on the Cross. I invite you to look at your icon of the Nativity with new eyes, ones that can go beyond the story of Jesus' birth with Mary and Joseph and see the fullness of our Lord's salvific mission. Unlike Christmas cards and other popular art, it is filled with types, details that should focus our attention on a teaching.

There are usually six scenes around the Nativity. The number six is a number meaning a lack of perfection. The universe was created in six days but was not complete or perfect until God rested on the seventh. So the six scenes belong to created time and are not complete. Completion comes with the seventh scene, the birth of Jesus. His birth brings fulfillment and, therefore, perfection to all of creation, of the new creation or recapitulation, the process restoring of perfection lost by Adam and Eve.

At the center, Mary is resting after giving birth. She has three stars on her garment as a testimony of her perpetual virginity (before, during, and after the birth of Jesus.). Resting on her birthing mat, which by the reddish color recalls the blood of childbirth and the color of the Passion of Christ's death. She is turned away from Him because she has given her all, as the birth of a human child drains the mother. Giving birth was her self-

sacrifice or emptying like her Son. Jesus, like all of us, was created to die, and the color shows the form of His death on a cross made from trees. Near Mary, a tree represents the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. Mary's willingness to give birth to the Messiah shows that she was an obedient daughter, unlike Eve. Near the child, there are animals keeping Jesus warm by their breath. The ox and ass fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah:

"Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth, for the LORD speaks: Sons have I raised and reared, but they have rebelled against me. An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master's manger; But Israel does not know, my people has not understood. Ah! Sinful nation, people laden with wickedness, evil offspring, corrupt children! They have forsaken the LORD, spurned the Holy One of Israel, apostatized."

In this prophecy, God is expressing His disappointment with all the peoples of the Earth. The God who has loved them consistently and constantly has been ignored, and His rules violated. Yet, it is this infant recognized by the ox and ass, which fulfills the prophecy. So also, it's upon this beast of burden that Jesus will ride into Jerusalem on Willow Sunday.

The central scene is Jesus and Mary. Mary is lower, and Jesus is upper. The upper portion of the icon represents divinity, and the lower portion is humanity. Jesus is both, and this is why He is apportioned equally between the upper and lower parts of the icon.

Jesus is in a dark cave. The darkness represents the world of sin into which the Light of the World has now entered. While scripture does not speak of a cave, it was the common belief of Christians up to the fifth century. A stone cave, especially with its sharp edges, reminds the reader of the stone tomb into which our Lord was placed after the crucifixion. The manger in which Jesus is lying also looks tomb-like. Jesus' swaddling clothes cover more than usual, so it looks more like His burial cloth.

The upper portion, the heavenly, has a light streaming from above. The light ray proceeds to Jesus, which is why Jesus could say "when you see Me, you see the Father". In iconography, the divine essence is never shown. So, we do not see the Father, but we know of His energies and see the Son, who is both human and divine. Yet, the icon writer can only depict Jesus' humanity.

The angels are around the throne of God, yet they are singing to the shepherds in the fields. They are pointing to the star that leads the wise men. The angels are in at least two different times and places.

In the human portion, you have the three wise men. Sometimes, there are two groups of Magi, illustrating the omnipotence of God. They represent those who are seeking the truth and all the gentiles. The shepherds represent all the Jews. The wise men are usually presented as kings, and the shepherds are poor, so from the highest to the lowest. (Note that the wise men's gifts, gold is for a king, but frankincense and myrrh are for burial.)

So, all of humanity is represented in the sending of Christ to restore humanity. There are no groups of people excluded from salvation. God's call is universal.

In the lower right, there are one or two women who are the midwives who assisted at the birth of Jesus. This comes from the *Protoevangelium of James*. As such, they would give the newborn His first cleaning. If you look closely at the baby, He may look like a fully-grown man. He may be sitting or standing in two positions a newborn can not do. Then the bowl is very large for an infant. Its shape is more like that of a baptismal font. So, it could point to the mystery of baptism as a person joining with Christ, or it could suggest the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan.

Purity, for a Jew, was a holiness ritually usually symbolized by immersion into water. Washing ritually in a mikvah is an outward sign for always striving to do God's will as well as immersing oneself into God's hands. So, this first plunge of Jesus into the water was a sign of His purity and His immersion into God's life-giving presence here on Earth.

In the lower-left is Joseph. He is separated from the scene because he is not the father of Jesus. He looks solemn, which is why this is called the Temptation of Joseph. The old man before him does not have a halo, so he has been identified as Satan. While this is not directly scripturally-based, it stems from a tradition that has been passed on. Joseph knew he was not the father of Mary's child, which may have made him question her virginity. Some opposed Jesus during His ministry, implying that He was the child of the rape of his mother by a Roman soldier. Joseph may have doubted. He may have gone so far as to think that he should no longer protect Mary and this child. It is for this reason that scripture tells us in Matthew 1: "Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly."

Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her."



This icon places Jesus' birth into the context of His death. We cannot understand this icon without reflecting that our Savior must suffer. Still, those closest to Him at his birth, Mary and Joseph, will also have to suffer. Self-sacrifice is not just the burden on Christ but also on all those who are and will be close to Him. While there is the joy of the angels, there is also the confusion of the Magi, the doubt of Joseph, and the Baptism by John, who will be executed. Jesus' arrival has been foretold, and so has His death. This icon's place is a symphony of salvation from Genesis to the Resurrection.

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