

## How to Read the Icon of the Baptism of Christ



An icon ('image, resemblance') is a religious work of art, most commonly a painting, in the cultures of the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Catholic churches. They are not simply artworks, but rather "a sacred image used in religious devotion". They are seen as "windows" or "portals" into spiritual reality, and are used as aids to worship and prayer.

The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River is a common theme for icons. All icons of this scene are not painted the same way, however, and present some differences. However, all of them underscore the fact that Jesus is the Son of God and that this 'sonship' is assured and confirmed by the Holy Spirit. All of them depict the gospel story (found in Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9- 11, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:29-32), yet they include several reminiscences taken from texts from worship and the writings of the Early Church Fathers.

We notice at the top of the icon a half circle representing the heavens opened in order to hear the Father's voice, "This is my beloved Son, My favor rests on Him" (Matthew 3:17). From that half

circle rays of light projects a dove, the visible sign of the Holy Spirit. The descent of the Holy Spirit is the movement of the Father towards the Son. St. John of Damascus (675-749) makes an analogy between the Holy Spirit and the dove as a sign of peace that descends after the flood; and compares the life-creating descent of the Spirit upon the waters before the flood (cf. Gen. 1:2) with his descent upon the waters of the Jordan, bringing forth the birth of a "new creation."

The Jordan River is depicted as strong waves cascading from a distance and canalized between two great cliffs: this is the Jordan Valley. Jesus is represented in the waters half-nude (sometimes completely nude). This picture of Jesus indicates that He descended from heaven to take flesh; He took off His glorious apparel and He put on human flesh. This is his humiliation and condescension (see Philippians 2). This nudity, which minimizes His heavenly glory, recalls that Christ will clothe mankind with His own glory and free them from the slavery of the human sinful condition.

Jesus' right hand blesses the waters. Thus, he prepares them for our baptism and sanctifies them by His immersion. Water gains a new value: it becomes a life-giving fountain (Revelation 21:6). Jesus is standing and we notice the opening at his feet: He is walking through the waters. This is a sign to teach us that the faithful must follow Christ in their baptism, which will be in water and the Holy Spirit (cf. John 1:33).

We notice that the whole body of Christ is immersed, wrapped about by the flowing waters. This is in prefiguration of His death and resurrection (cf. St Paul's parallel imagery of baptism and death in Romans 6). At this point, St. John Chrysostom would say, "the immersion and emersion are the image of the descent into hell and of the resurrection"

We also see two little human figures in the water. The first one, carrying a jar, represents the Jordan River; the other one, holding a scepter, represents the Red Sea. Sometimes these figures are depicted as riding fish or sea monsters. The iconographer takes his idea from Psalm 74: "...You smashed the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan..." (Ps 74:13-14). In a hymn of the feast a hymnographer puts a dialog between John and Christ who said: "Be in no doubt at all: for I am in haste to slay the enemy hidden in the waters, the prince of darkness, that I may now deliver the world from his snares, granting life eternal in my love for mankind" (Sixth Royal Hour, on the eve of the feast).

We see John the Baptist at Jesus' right side. He looks up, either in response to the voice of God resounding from heaven, or in protest at Jesus' request for Baptism (see Matthew :14) A hymn of the feast echoes the words of the Gospel: "Why do You command of me what lies beyond my power? For I have need to be baptized by You. O sinless Christ our God, glory to You!"

On the same side of the river, we find an axe lying at the bottom of a tree trunk. This recalls to our mind a theme of John's preaching, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire," John says (Matthew 3:10). On the other side of the river angels stand in an attitude of adoration with their hands covered by towels. This is a sign of reverence, for not even angels, pure spirit though they be, can fittingly touch the immaculate body of the Word of God. It is also a sign of the shroud (cf John 20: 6-7) and the white cloth which is the priestly, royal and nuptial sign of the risen Christ.

A final important aspect of this icon is that all the persons represented look at Christ: asking with repentance for the saving grace His incarnation brings. This action reminds us of the words in the Gospel of John when He Christ speaks of His crucifixion: "And I, once I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32). This aspect of the icon is echoed by the following hymn, full of happiness because the world is saved:

Upon Galilee of the Gentiles, upon the land of Zebulon and the land of Nephthalim, as the prophet said, a great light has shone: even Christ. To those who sat in darkness a bright dawn has appeared as lightning from Bethlehem. The Lord, born of Mary, the Sun of justice, sheds His rays upon the whole world. Come then, naked children of Adam, and let us clothe ourselves in Him that we may warm ourselves. You are a protection and veil to the naked, a light to those in darkness; You came, You are made manifest: O unapproachable Light.