

The Christmas Icon¹

Homily for December 30, 2018
Holy Family Sunday

I have projected on the Screen what is called the “Christmas Icon of the Eastern Church” It received its basic form as early as the fourth century. It captures the entire mystery of Christmas and shows the profound connection between Christmas and Easter, the crib and Cross. Here we see the harmony of the Old and New Testaments and the harmony between heaven and earth in the song of the angels and the service of the shepherds. Every figure in the icon has its own deep significance. We can’t read this Icon, as a snap shot, but rather as different scenes associated with the Birth of Jesus.

Look at the Centre scene that governs the rest of the Icon. Here is the blessed Saviour. Notice that Jesus is in the cave but is joined to the celestial realm represented by the beam of light directed downward from the stars. Why a cave? Do you see how Jesus is wrapped? In grave clothes that anticipate His death and burial in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb. Now what about the two animals? There is an ox and a donkey. We read that after the Fall, in Genesis 3:21 there words:

And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.²

The ox and the donkey first of all represent the animal skins the Lord God used to cover the shame and humiliation Adam and Eve experienced after the Fall as a consequence of sin. What is called their “nakedness.” It is representative of an early act of Grace on the part of God to respond to human sin.

But notice that Jesus is now lying in the feeding trough from which these animals are to eat. Here is another detail. In the Old Testament the Ox was considered an animal which the Jewish people could butcher and eat, whereas the donkey was considered unclean and could not be eaten. These dietary restrictions pointed to the separation that existed between the Jews and non-Jewish nations. Now the ox and ass are together and the one who is in their manger, the one they are to eat, is Jesus. This shows us how Jesus brings together opposing peoples as together we gather not now at the manger, but at the Altar, where we are to be reconciled and united in the person of Jesus Christ. Here we have represented the Eucharist and how the effects of the Cross, nourish us today as we feed on Him who said of himself in John 6:

for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.³

¹ See the last page for the Icon

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ge 3:21). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Jn 6:55–56). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

The Icon focusses on this central theme that Jesus was born into this dark world – represented by the cave, so that we could now be clothed, not with the skins of animals to cover up our sinful nakedness, but rather be clothed with the grace of Jesus that comes to us from the Cross.

Notice as well, the size of the angels and the dimension of the heavenly realm. They are hidden from the perspective of the cave but are very active in directing the wise men from afar and the shepherds who are near. That is often our experience too. The angels are near but so often hidden from our view as they mediate between the heavenly and earthly realms.

Now what about the figures in icon's foreground? To the right is our Lord with two midwives. They are to represent that Jesus although born of the virgin, was truly born as a human, and did not merely appear to be human as some early heretics claimed. This is a theme we will consider in greater detail on the Feast Day of Mary, the Mother of God.

Let's now turn to the left foreground of the Icon. Here St. Joseph is given a very strange function. He sits to the side, deep in thought. The tempter stands before him, in the garments of a shepherd. In the liturgical texts of the Eastern Church the tempter says: "An old man like you cannot beget children or a virgin give birth any more than this staff ... can burst into flower." The liturgy tells us that a storm of contradictory thoughts raged in Joseph's heart, and he was perplexed; but enlightened by the Holy Spirit, he sang: "Alleluia!" In the figure of Saint Joseph, the icon portrays a constantly recurring drama—our own drama.⁴

This always takes the same form: again and again, the tempter tells us that only the visible world exists. There is no Incarnation of God, and the Virgin does not give birth. These affirmations deny that God knows us, that he loves us, and that he is capable of acting in this world. On the deepest level, therefore, this is a denial of the glory of God and all that we see in the upper half of the Icon and manifested especially by the glory of the cave.

Pope Benedict XVI in commenting on this portion of the Icon wrote:

This is the typical temptation of our own age, which is put forward with so many clever and apparently quite new reasons that it seems incontrovertible. And yet it is always the same old temptation that the Eastern Church represents in the person of St. Joseph.⁵

Notice, finally the posture of Mary. Rather than being turned towards Jesus the common direction in depictions of Mary and child, her gaze is directed towards Joseph, for whom she is interceding. Notice that both Joseph and Mary have halos. The Eastern Church wants to underscore that Joseph's struggle is a sanctified struggle, and Mary's prayer evokes the understanding she conveys because of the challenge we can have as we choose to live by faith in this world.

This tension is also captured in the Gospel reading for today where we are given the one incident relating to the 12 year old Jesus. At the heart of the story is Mary's concern:

⁴ Benedict XVI. (2007). [The Blessing of Christmas](#). (B. McNeil, Trans.) (p. 115). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁵ Ibid

Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”⁶

Two words here I want to highlight. Searching has an intensity to it like ‘investigating’ and Mary’s “great anxiety” means to be “terribly worried” or to be “pained”. At this moment Mary and Joseph do not understand Jesus’ action but clearly Jesus does as his answer explicitly states:

Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”⁷

St. Luke then tells us:

But they did not understand what he said to them.

This is where the beauty of the Icon joins with the wonder of the Scripture. In a world like this God has come to us definitely in the person of Jesus Christ, all the way down to the dark cave. This is why Jesus is at the Icon’s Centre. But for us who are living in this world of temporality we are at times confused like Mary and Joseph and experience real struggle.

It is this dimension of the Holy Family we see on display today. So when in your family you have children, spouses others close to you who wrestle with making sense of the Incarnation in the cave of this world, remember Mary and Joseph as depicted in today’s Icon and Gospel.

And let’s not forget how the passage ends:

⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.⁸

Jesus in His humanity allowed himself to be subject to the will of his earthly parents that anticipated his full obedience to the Father in Heaven that would take him to the Cross of Good Friday and the Cave of Holy Saturday.

I invite you to make this icon a way to more fully treasure in your heart the Christmas Gospel and to appreciate that as the Holy Family had questions, what was deepest for Mary and Joseph was to ponder in their hearts this story captured so vividly by our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 2:48). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 2:49). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 2:50–51). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

St Mary, and St Joseph and blessed Jesus, most Holy Family, pray for us and our families.

