

The Holy Theophany



When Thou wast baptized in the Jordan, O Lord, the
worship of the Trinity was made manifest; for the
voice of the Father bare witness to Thee, calling Thee
His beloved Son. And the Spirit in the form of a dove
confirmed the certainty of the word. O Christ our
God, Who hast appeared and hast enlightened the
world, glory be to Thee.

● **The Feast of the Theophany**

The Lord Jesus Christ assumed human nature in its fullness, also including its weaknesses, for the purpose of cleansing it and reconnecting it again directly with the Spring of Life and eternal love. In order to be truly human, His human nature undergoes a natural and gradual growth (*“And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”* Luke 2:52). Having been living a humble and obedient life, at the age of 30 (the age of maturity for Hebrews), the Saviour Christ begins his earthly mission, that is, the work of the salvation of mankind enslaved by sin, not by an extraordinary or miraculous act, but by subjecting Himself to the laws of human condition, through his kenosis. Thus, He comes to St. John in order to be baptized with the baptism of repentance, He Who is sinless and God Himself – the Spring of all purity and holiness. He humbles Himself in His complete obedience to God the Father in order to fulfill “all righteousness” of the old Law, perfecting it through His New Covenant. (*“The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.”* Luke 16:16). Thus, the event of the Lord’s Baptism marks the pinnacle of Christ’s maturity, the fullness of His humanity.

Forerunner, baptizer, but also disciple, Saint John performs Christ’s Baptism in obedience. At the same time, by touching the Son of God, by seeing the Holy Spirit as a dove, and by hearing the gentle voice of the Father, he becomes a true witness, revealing to the world the Divinity of Christ, as at one time the magi and the shepherds did at His Nativity, or the righteous Simeon and prophetess Anna, upon welcoming Him at the Temple in Jerusalem, and others who, like them, recognized Him guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit. This revelation of the Holy Trinity testifies to the meta-historical reality of God: the loving Father begets from eternity His Son, and from the Father the Holy Spirit proceeds, in Whom the Son rests.

The eternal and beloved Son of God, by entering Jordan’s waters, enters inside His own creation, itself subjected to corruption through man’s fall, in order to exorcize it of all the demonic powers and to sanctify it.

The world’s sanctification begins, therefore, through the sanctification of the water that Christ performs at His Own Baptism and through the Baptism *“with Spirit and fire”* (Matt 3:11), preparing for all of us who believe and unite ourselves with Him in His Church, the entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Until the 4th century, the Lord’s Nativity and Theophany were celebrated on the same day – 6th of January. The Feast of the Lord’s Baptism was celebrated initially by the Christians of the Holy Land. It is mentioned by St. Hippolytus of Rome and Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John Chrysostomos, and St. Ambrose of Milan preached on the occasion of the Feast, proving its generalization across the whole Catholic (Universal) Church.

● **The Icon of the Theophany – Explanation**

(a) Scripture References

- Matt 3:13-17
- Mark 1:9-11
- Luke 3:21-22
- John 1:29-34

(b) Icon Description

As in the services of the Feast of the Sanctification of Water, the icon of the Theophany does not focus on the historical setting, but conveys a spiritual understanding, emphasizing three essential aspects of Christian spirituality:

- The Divinity-Humanity of Christ (Theantropos)
- The Theophany or the Revelation of the Holy Trinity
- The restoration of the whole creation

	Left	Centre	Right
Upper Region	- mountainside	- Skyline - Beam - Dove	- mountainside
Central Region	- St. John	THE SAVIOUR CHRIST in the middle of Jordan River	- ministering angels
Lower Region	- tree and axe - shoreline	- marine creatures	- shoreline

(c) Persons, meanings and symbols in the icon of the Lord’s Baptism

- **Skyline, Beam, Dove**

In the upper part of the icon a gray-blue three part hemisphere is represented. It is the iconographic depiction of the heavenly realm, and it represents the heaven opened.

At the same time this hemisphere shows the presence of God, the Holy Trinity, which sometimes is also drawn as a blessing hand. In the case of the icon of the Theophany, this hand signifies the Voice of the Father Who was heard saying: *“This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.”*(Matt 17:5)

Out of this hemisphere a beam comes pointing at Christ.

Close to the end of the beam, above the Head of the Saviour, a white dove surrounded by a circular boundary is depicted. It is a representation of the Holy Spirit, Who appears at the time of the Lord’s Baptism *“according to [Divine] Economy as having a passing nature”* (St. John Chrysostomos).

The Holy Fathers make an analogy between the appearance of the Holy Spirit at the Lord’s Baptism as a dove, and the flood:

“As, at that time the world was cleansed of sin through the waters of the flood, then the dove brought an olive branch to Noah’s Ark announcing the end of the flood, and peace came to the Earth, so, in like

manner the Holy Spirit descends as a dove to announce forgiveness of sins and God's mercy on the world. Then [it was] an olive branch, now it is our Lord's mercy." (St. John of Damascus).

▪ **CHRIST THE SAVIOUR**

He is shown standing, in the middle of Jordan River, as in a "flowing tomb" which engulfs Him on all sides, emphasizing that not only a part but His whole Body was immersed as a sign of His burial, because Baptism signifies the Lord's death. (*"having been buried with Him in the baptism, in which also you were raised with Him through faith in the energy of God, Who raised Him from the dead."* Colossians 2:12)

His Face is gentle and humble being at the same time serious and focused.

Christ the Saviour is shown either naked, or having a white cover around His hips. Older icons portray Him with no clothes at all emphasizing the Divine Economy of His Incarnation:

"Joseph marveled. Jordan River, tell us do: What did you see and were amazed? I saw naked Him whom none can see, and shuddered in fear. And how was I not to shudder at Him and be frightened? The Angels, when they saw Him also shuddered in awe. And heaven was astonished, and astounded was earth. The sea recoiled along with all things both visible and invisible. For Christ appeared in the River Jordan, to sanctify the waters. " (Kathisma 2, the Feast Orthros).

Thus, the purpose of Incarnation is also presented, because by becoming naked He clothes Adam's nakedness, and that of the whole of humanity in the cloth of glory and immortality.

Although early icons show Christ naked, today it is more appropriate to present Him covered around the hips in order to emphasize the purity of the One "*without sin alone*" (this approach is also used in the icon of the Lord's Crucifixion).

▪ **The Jordan River**

The widening Jordan River flows between the two tall mountain sides, which are a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In some icons, the water which Christ entered covers Him up to the shoulders, in others, the flowing water of the river appears on the sides of His Body and under His feet, without covering His Body. The latter representation is used in order not to blur the clear outline of the Body, since clarity is one of the principles employed by iconographers.

But the first representation, with the water covering the Body is more appropriate because it emphasizes the form of the Body. It shows that the Baptism was done through a total immersion in the waters of the Jordan as the Gospels narrate (Matt 3, 16; Mark 1, 10).

The Jordan River is depicted like a dark cave (image of hell in iconography), or of a liquid, flowing tomb, which engulfs the Body of the Saviour (image of burial, reproduced in the Mystery of Baptism through complete immersion).

The cave symbol also appears: (1) in the icon of the Nativity, as the place that shelters the manger with the Baby Christ, (2) in the icon of the Resurrection, under the Cross where the skull of Adam is placed, (3) in the icon of the Pentecost, in the shape of a dark dungeon where an old king appears, and not in the least in the icon of Descent to (or Harrowing of) Hell, which the dark cave represents

Thus, the presence of the cave shows the permanent contrast between the darkness in which the mankind was trapped until the coming of the Saviour and the Divine Light that comes into the world after His Incarnation.

The theme of water has a special place in the Holy Gospels. Previously an image of death (the flood), now it is a “*spring of living water*” (Revelation 21:6; John 4:14). Beginning with Christ’s entering the Jordan River, the fallen state of human nature together with the whole creation is changed, being sanctified through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

▪ **The marine creatures**

At the bottom of the icon, at the feet of the Saviour, often, in small dimensions, appear the shapes of two persons – a man and a woman. Both are with the back turned toward Christ and look astonished. The two shapes illustrate texts of the Old Covenant and are prefigurations of the Baptism: “*The sea beheld and fled; Jordan turned back*” (Psalm 113:3).

The male figure – a person immersed in the river watershed holding a vessel from which water is poured out, is an allegoric representation of the Jordan River. This person turns his face from Christ, being overtaken by astonishment, even dread, the reason as per liturgical texts being: “*I saw naked Him whom none can see, and shuddered in fear*”. The troparion explains the presence of this figure:

“The River Jordan was once turned back by the mantle of Elisha, when Elijah had been taken up, and the waters were divided hither and thither. And for him the watery path became dry, Truly as a type of baptism, whereby we cross the flowing stream of life. Christ hath appeared in the Jordan to sanctify the waters.” (Prefestal Troparion)

The female figure – a half clothed woman, with a crown on her head and a sceptre in her hand, rushing while riding on one or two fish – is an allegory of the sea and refers to one of the prefigurations of Baptism: the passing of the Hebrew people through the Red Sea.

In some icons Christ is represented standing on two stone blocks arranged as a cross (similar to the gates of hell from the icon of the Descent into Hell) under which there are snakes with their heads risen or sometimes even a dragon appears under His feet. Thus, in this way the icon portrays Christ’s victory over the powers of darkness (the devil and his angels) symbolized through the marine monsters – dragons, snakes, -on the run or crushed-, detail inspired from Psalm 73:14 “*...You did crush the heads of the dragons in the water*”.

“When You bowed Your head to the Forerunner, You crushed the heads of the dragons; And when You stood in the midst of the stream, You let Your light shine upon all creatures, That they might glorify You, Our Saviour, Who enlighten our souls!” (Lord I Call – Vespers of Theophany)

“The Lord refashions broken Adam in the streams of the Jordan. And He smashes the heads of dragons lurking there. The Lord does this, the King of the ages; for He has been glorified.” (Vigil for the Theophany, First Canon)

Sometimes around Christ there are small fish, even children, but usually too many irrelevant details are to be avoided.

All these aquatic elements belong to the background in order to maintain the proper focus and convey the true understanding of the significance of the Feast

▪ **Saint John**

He is portrayed wearing a tunic and cloak or a camel hair garment covering his body, standing, on the shore of the river, at the right of Christ, stepping firmly toward Him. At the same time he bows showing obedience and reverence toward the One Whom he is not *“worthy to untie His Sandals”*.

St. John’s hesitation at the moment of meeting Christ is emphasized in the service of the Feast:

“In the streams of the Jordan today, the Lord cried to John: Be not afraid to baptize Me, for, I am come to save Adam, the first-fashioned man”. (Pre-festal Kontakion)

St. John identifies Christ as soon as he sees Him: *“...Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world.”* (John 1:29)

With the right hand above the Head of the Saviour, using the specific gesture for the rite of Baptism, St. John expresses the turmoil that overwhelmed him:

“The Baptist became all trembling, and cried aloud, saying: How shall the candlestick illumine the light? How shall a slave lay hands upon his Lord? Sanctify Thou me and these waters, O Saviour, who takest away the sins of the world.” (Hymn from the Blessing of the Waters)

He holds a scroll in his right hand - a symbol of his preaching- or, he has a prayerful posture. At the same time his gaze is directed upward, as proof that he himself touched Christ, he saw the Holy Spirit descending on Him as a dove (John 1:29-34), he heard the Voice of the Heavenly Father: *“This is My Son, the Beloved, in Whom I am well pleased .”*(Matt 3:17), and then he testified about these things to the world.

▪ **The Axe**

At the bottom of the icon, at the feet of St. John, a shrub is represented with an axe at its root. The meaning is fearfully sobering, teaching each newly baptized that:

“And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; therefore every tree which produces not good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you in water toward repentance, but the One Who comes after me is mightier than I, of Whom I am not fit to bear His sandals. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.” (Matt 3:10-11)

▪ **The Angels**

Across from St. John, on the other side of the river, there are two, three or even more angels bowing, with the wings low in an attitude of worship, prayer, and obedience.

The angels’ presence is mentioned in the services without specifically describing their role in the event, thus: *“The choirs of Angels were amazed with fear and joy”* (Ninth Hour Troparion). Regarding their role, there are various representations in the icons of Theophany.

The angels are represented either having their hands covered with their cloaks, as a sign of veneration and obedience to the One being Baptized, or holding towels. The custom of covering the hands is of oriental

origin, being adopted at the court in Constantinople. There, the objects handed to or received from the Emperor were held with covered hands as a sign of high esteem.

In some icons, the angels have the role of servants and hold towels, ready to clothe the Body of the Lord when He comes out of the water. This indicates once more that Baptism was performed by complete immersion, thus the need of wiping the body when coming out of the water.

Although the role of the Lord's servants is not specifically mentioned at the moment of the Baptism, this role is revealed in a further passage, where it is mentioned that: "*Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*", and when the devil left Him: "*then the devil left Him and behold, angels drew near and were ministering to Him*" (Matt 4:1 and 4:11)

Altogether, the presence of the angels in the icon of Baptism, as well in the other icons such as: the Nativity, the Annunciation, the Resurrection or the Ascension, prove the fact that the angelic hosts were the unseen witnesses of the Lord's life on Earth, and were longing to grasp the understanding of the "*mystery kept secret since the world began*" (Rom 10:25);

(d) Detrimental Innovations to the Icon of the Lord's Baptism

- The work presents numerous characters, angels and people, who are no longer grouped separately as humans and angelic hosts but interact together in a socializing manner.
- In some paintings the characters are engaged in activities foreign to or even independent of the main event, diminishing the magnitude of the event.
- All characters seem to be witnesses of the Theophany, while the Holy Scripture mentions only St. John being the one found worthy of this revelation, and in turn sharing this revelation to the others.
- The Theophany is interpreted in a naturalistic manner, with a theatrical depiction of the opened heavens, which show multitudes of angels among whom there is an old man's figure, attempting an impossibility: to represent God the Father.
- The beam and the dove have a more sensual appeal, with the purpose of gratifying the senses, reducing the event only to an emotional level, foreign from the Divine Revelation.
- The work presents someone, in an attitude of "too human" humility, unlike the Divine humility of the One Who became man "taking the form of a servant"
- The person does not bless the waters, but holds his arms gathered on his chest, introverted, in a prayer that does not "embrace" the whole world but concerns only himself. In some examples, the prayer itself is transformed into a contemplation broken from communion with God, the gaze being directed toward the ground and not the heavens; thus it becomes an expression of either self-centeredness or hopelessness.
- The Jordan River looks rather like a brook that covers the Lord up to the ankles, no higher than the knees.
- The person performing the baptism is represented half clothed, with an athletic stature (like most of the characters in the composition), thus his body no longer shows the signs of asceticism.
- A shell or a vessel is used for sprinkling, distorting the historical truth according to which the Baptism was a total immersion and not just sprinkling with water.
- The whole composition concerns a horizontal setting, with emphasis on the "earthly" as a result of a sensual perspective, based exclusively on the senses, and thus, contaminated by subjectivity and corruptibility. This is in opposition to the Orthodox perspective in which the vertical axis is

emphasized, as an expression of spiritual uplifting and of true understanding which testifies of the magnitude and universal importance of the Lord's Baptism.

(e) Conclusion

Through His own Baptism, the Lord Christ destroyed the power of the devil who poisoned man by suggesting man not pay heed to God. If, through the sin of our protoparents' disobedience and hiding from God the curse of estranging the whole creation from God, that is suffering and death, entered the world, then through Christ's obedience, (Philippians 2:7-8) blessing and eternal life came into the world. Christ came to the baptism of repentance, performed by St. John, on our behalf, to reconcile us to God and also with the whole creation, which we have separated from the Spring of Life and stirred up against ourselves through sin.

According to the Orthodox Church's teaching, the Lord's Baptism is not only a Theophany, a thorough Revelation of God - The Trinity, and a revelation of the Saviour Jesus Christ as true God and true man in the presence of the whole creation, but is also an Epiphany of the whole creation, man and nature, in a new state of being. The Lord's Baptism ushers in a new life, full of light and meaning for the whole world, where the renewed and Christ-glorified man will reside.

If in the beginning "*the Spirit of God was Hovering over the waters*" (Genesis 1:2) bringing together His Uncreated Energies and the created energies of the world, at the Lord's Baptism, the Holy Spirit is again in union with the water and all creation, and thus, prepares the bosom of the Church in which there will be born again "*from water and the Spirit*" (John 3:5) all the people who believe in Christ.

Adapted from a presentation by Archimandrite Mihail Stanciu

"When our Lord reached thirty years from His physical birth, He began His teaching and salvific work. He Himself signified this "beginning of the beginning" by His Baptism in the Jordan River. St. Cyril of Jerusalem says, "The beginning of the world - water; the beginning of the Good News - Jordan." At the time of the Baptism of the Lord in water, that mystery was declared to the world: that mystery which was prophesied in the Old Testament; the mystery about which in ancient Egypt and India was only fabled; i.e., the mystery of the Divine Holy Trinity. **The Father** was revealed to the sense of hearing; **the Spirit** was revealed to the sense of sight, and in addition to these, **the Son** was revealed to the sense of touch. **The Father** uttered His witness about the Son, **the Son** was Baptized in the water, and **the Holy Spirit** in the form of a dove hovered above the water. When John the Baptist witnessed and said about Christ, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world*" (St. John 1:29), and when John immersed and Baptized the Lord in the Jordan, the mission of Christ in the world and the path of our salvation was shown. That is to say: The Lord took upon Himself the sins of mankind and died under them [immersion] and became alive again [the coming out of the water]; and we must die as the old sinful man and become alive again as cleansed, renewed and regenerated. This is the Savior and this is the path of salvation. The Feast [...] is also called the Feast of Illumination. For us, the event in the Jordan River illuminates, by manifesting to us God as Trinity, consubstantial and undivided. That is one way. And, the second: everyone of us through baptism in water is illumined by this, that we become adopted by the Father of Lights through the merits of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit. "

St. Nicholas Velimirović
