

## The Icon of the Feast of Holy Theophany

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The feast of the Holy Theophany is one of the greatest in Christianity.

It celebrates the event of the Lord's Baptism in the streams of the Jordan and, at the same time, it manifests the Triune God to the world.

The importance of the feast is clear from historical evidence: after Easter, the feast of Theophany is the oldest in Christianity.

The event of the baptism is of immense theological significance. Through colors, icon-painters have managed to capture the wealth of meanings in the event.



Christ is between high rocks which come together to form a 'gorge'. The waters, which are not yet sanctified, remind us of the image of death/inundation. The symbolism of the rocks in the icon of the nativity continues in that of the baptism and, finally, in that of Christ's descent into hell. The icon of the baptism depicts Christ as entering the river, the watery tomb and is thus a prefiguration of the descent into the tomb of the cave of Hades, where he would destroy the power of the ruler of this world. As Saint Cyril of Jerusalem puts it, Jesus 'descended into the waters and bound the powerful one'.

Christ's descent into the River Jordan signifies the sanctification of water, which is the basis of life throughout creation. By extension, this means the sanctification of creation itself, which, because of human sin, 'has been groaning in labor pains until now' (*Rom. 8, 22*).

Christ stands in the middle of the Jordan naked except for a white cloth around his waist. His body appears to have been carved from wood, with certain features sharply drawn, without bulk. He is clad in the nakedness of Adam and, in this way, shows us our glorious raiment as it was in paradise. With his right hand, or

perhaps both of them, he blesses the waters and prepares them to become the waters of baptism, which he sanctifies by his immersion. Christ has no need of purification because he was pure pre-eternally. He accepted baptism at the hands of John out of humility and respect for human tradition. When he was baptized, Christ wasn't sanctified by the waters, but instead sanctified them and, thereby, the whole of creation.

One of his legs is slightly in front of the other, to show his supreme initiative in being baptized by John and entering the public sphere. John's testimony regarding Christ is: 'Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (*Jn. 1, 29*) and this was definitive. In some icons of the baptism, Christ is depicted as standing on a stone slab under which snakes are writhing, their heads sticking out in an effort to escape. This representation is taken from the book of Psalms and is based on the verse: 'you held the sea in your power; you crushed the heads of the dragons in the water' (*Ps. 73, 13*).

Saint John Chrysostom sees a deep allegory in the turning back of the waters of the Jordan. He says that the river springs from two sources, one of which is called Jor and the other Dan. So the name of the river, which flows into the Dead Sea arises from a combination of the two words. The human race is also derived from two sources, our forebears Adam and Eve. After their apostasy, the human race engaged in sin, which resulted in spiritual death, symbolized by the Dead Sea. Through his incarnation, Christ the Savior liberated human nature from enslavement to corruption and death, with the result that even the River Jordan wished to return and not flow out into the Dead Sea.

The baptism of Christ is also called the feast of the Theophany. The painter indicates the manifestation of the Holy Trinity by the hand of the Father, who is blessing from part of a semi-circle, which represents the heavens. From this circle radiate rays of light which are a characteristic of the Holy Spirit and which illumine the dove. This is the moment when the Father testifies to the divinity of the Son and calls him his beloved Son. The Son who is baptized in the Jordan illumines the whole world, redeeming it from the dominion of the devil. The Holy Spirit, who descends in the form of a dove, confirms the testimony of the Father and gives us the unshakeable foundation of our faith. It is the Spirit who 'directs' Christ and guides him in his earthly mission.

According to Saint John the Damascan, by analogy with the dove and olive branch in the story of the flood, the dove here is a sign of peace. At the creation of the world, the Holy Spirit hovered above the newly-created waters and brought about life (*Gen. 1, 2*). So, today, too, at the baptism, he is poised over the waters of the

Jordan and gives rise to the second birth of the new creation.

At the left of the icon, Saint John the Forerunner bends in humility and respect towards the person of the Messiah. He's turned towards the Holy Spirit, who is descending 'in the form of a dove'. His face is painted from the side, because of the supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit. His right hand touches the head of Christ, while his left is held in an attitude of supplication. His hair is unkempt and his beard sparse. His expression is austere and serious. His arms and legs are thin because 'his food was locusts and wild honey' (*Matth. 3, 4*). His face is somewhat gaunt and dark, to indicate the heat of the desert. His clothes are made of camel hair and cinched with a belt at the waist (*Matth. 3, 4*).

Next to the Forerunner is an axe embedded into the branches of a tree. This is to represent the words of John as prophet: 'The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire' (*Matth. 3, 10*). This indicates divine justice, which is already with us and separating the productive trees from the unproductive.

On the right of the icon are the angels. Their hands, which are stretched out to Christ, ready to serve him, are covered. A special piece of material or part of a robe covers their open palms which are in an attitude of supplication and, at the same time, show willingness to serve.

The stark, light colors streaming down from the heavens and directed towards Christ, the Angels and the Forerunner, 'create the sacred aura of a transcendental atmosphere appropriate to an icon of the baptism, which is full of supernatural elements such as the majestic voice of the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit'.