

The Icon of the Theophany

Our Lady of Kaftoun Monastery

Antiochian Orthodox Media Center

www.antiochpatriarchate.org



1- Definition:

This icon from the 13th century is found in the Monastery of Our Lady of Kaftoun-Lebanon. It has many particularities that differentiate it from other Theophany icons, which we will tackle gradually.

It is 104 x 76 cm in size, and double-sided: on one side is written¹ the icon of the Mother of God, dating 12-13 AD, and slightly older than the icon on the other side, the Theophany.

It is written on natural wood with the tempera method that uses egg yolk, natural colors, Arabic gum, and animal glue.



2- Main icon parts:

The icon consists of seven sections, according to the figures and scenes in it, and we will explain them by turn.

2.1- The Dove:

It represents the Holy Spirit, according to the Gospel: “Suddenly the heavens were opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on Him” (Matthew 3,16).

- The dove also refers to the era of peace coming in the New Testament, and this reminds us of the dove that Noah sent from the ark, the dove which heralded the end of the flood.

Here we preach the end of death and our liberation from sin when we make Christ truly the master of our lives.

¹ - We say an icon is written not painted because it is a kind of a gospel.

The shape of the dove in this icon is well-known in our Antiochian land. It is distinguished by its yellowish color, imitating gold, which reflects the pure color of the Kingdom of God. It has no halo and reaches directly down to Christ.



The semi-circle above the dove indicates the perfection of God and the dome of heaven that opened up in this great event.

The colors of the circle go from dark to light to indicate the ineffability of God's essence. It moves in three parallel lines, symbolizing one Godhead in three consubstantial hypostases: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The dove pointing at the Lord reminds us of the star in the icon of Nativity, which led the Magi to the Savior.

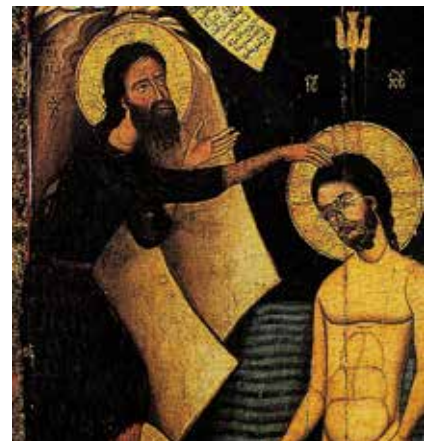
They came, believed and worshiped Him, calling us to imitate them. The position of the dove reminds of the first page in Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light".

This is why Theophany is also called the Feast of Lights because it is the first revelation of the Holy Trinity in the New Testament.

2.2- Saint John the Baptist:

The garment of Saint John the Baptist is very simple and depicts the description in the gospels: "John wore a garment of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist".

His face is ascetic since the gospels say that "His food was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4). He bows in humility. He is not the Light, but he came to witness to the Light.



- With his right hand, he baptizes the Lord and with the other hand, he points to the dove and looks upward, reminding us of what the Gospels say, especially in John: “I have seen the Spirit descending like a dove” (1:33).

2.3- The Angels:

- There are six angels in this icon, that can be given the following interpretations:

Some Fathers of the Church, such as Saint Clement of Alexandria (3rd century) speak about the great role of first-ranking angels who help God in His economy of creation. These Fathers spoke of the role of the angels in creation, saying that an angel came out from the hands of God every day during the six days of creation to be present and to supervise His Providence.

The book of the Shepherd by Hermas (2nd century) also spoke of six angels and virgins surrounding the rock that is Christ and the constellation that is the Church. Is in this sense, we have the presence of angels in this beautiful icon. Hence, we see to the left of the Lord six angels: «Michael - Gabriel - Uriel - Absasaks - Rafael - Ezrael».

- All this indicates the character of this icon, closely related to the people’s faith and traditions, in addition to the depth of its theological connotations. If angels were present during the first days of Creation, wouldn’t they be present in the new Creation of the whole world by the Incarnation of God and the manifestation of His Trinitarian nature?



This is the theology that inspired the writer of this icon. He wanted to express the glory and the magnitude of the event. The writer of the icon is not merely a painter but rather a theologian, or at least he draws from theology and translates it with a God-driven hand as a visible gospel and an call for prayer and praise.

- The angels created by God to preserve the process of creation in the Old Testament today also bear witness to the new creation of humankind in the New Testament.

- The garments of angels are light and transparent, indicating their spiritual nature, and their red robe is reminiscent of the description of the psalms: “ He makes His angels winds, His servants flames of fire”(Psalm 103, The Septuagint). As for their colorful halos, they are characteristic of the local medieval iconographic tradition. One could link the color of the red garment carried by the first angel to dry the pure body of Christ with the suffering on the cross that precedes resurrection. Here it must be pointed out that the salvific events are inseparable from one another, and this is what the icons and liturgy strongly show.

For example, the swaddling clothes in the icon of the Nativity are the same ones that we see in the icon of the empty tomb where women come to embalm Jesus.

Angels bear witness to their Creator and come to serve Him as he takes a human form.

2.4- King David

At the upper left corner of the icon, over the head of Saint John the Baptist, we see King David



carrying a banner with an Arabic text used by the Orthodox Church on this feast. It is composed of verses from Psalms 87 and 114:

- The sea saw him and fled.
- Jordan went back, the mountains jumped like rams and hills like lambs.
- What have you, O sea, you have fled? And what have you, Jordan, you have returned to the back.

- But what, O mountains, have jumped like rams, and hills, like lambs?
- O earthly earthquake, before the Lord, before the God of Jacob! Converting the Rock to a Waterfall ...
- Granites into springs ...

2.5- Prophet Isaiah:

Facing King David, to the right, above the angels, we see Prophet Isaiah holding a banner with a text in Syriac. It is a text that calls for purification, also used in the Liturgy of the Feast.



The Syriac language, not at all strange to the Orthodox Church, is also used in prayers because it was simply the language of the people. This is attested by the many liturgical books dating to several centuries after the first millennium.

- “Wash and cleanse yourselves. Remove your evil deeds from My sight. Stop doing evil!” (Isaiah 1:16).
- “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters” (Is 1: 55).
- “With joy, you will draw water from the springs of salvation” (Is 3: 12).

2.6- The Old Man:



Below, in the depths of the waters and under the feet of Jesus, a defeated old man pleads the Lord not to perish; he represents Satan defeated before God incarnate. Evil was overcome, and water was no longer his home. At baptism, creation was renewed, and everything became pure and fresh.

The human being is called to maintain this condition, and if one falls, one can repent from his sins and wash himself with his tears, asking for forgiveness.

“I am weary from groaning; all night I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears” (Psalms 6:6).

2.7-The Lord Jesus Christ Our Savior:

He is the epicenter of the icon and the feast.

The first thing that draws our attention in this icon is the Lord Jesus Christ standing naked in the middle. The nakedness of Jesus refers to the first state of Adam in Paradise before the fall, the condition of purity in which the human being was created. The human being is created in the image of God and is called to fulfill the likeness. In fact, sin is alien to human nature for God created everything good.

Let's take a close look at the Lord Jesus. He is the only one standing straight. As mentioned earlier, his position in the water above the defeated man that symbolizes Satan can be compared to his posture in the icon of the “Harrowing of hell”, above the broken doors.



The Lord is always risen and we are risen in Him and by Him. He is always victorious, and He grants us resurrection if we are stand steadfast in him: “Abide in Me and I in you” (John 4:15).

- The Lord Jesus bends his head in a voluntary condescension because God's Trinitarian will is the salvation of mankind. Jesus is the suffering servant, "My beloved Son" (Isaiah 53).

God, Himself was pleased to come down to us because He loved us first. Therefore, God the Father testified to the Son through "a voice from the heavens, saying: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" (Matthew 3:17).

This particular posture with a bowed head prefigures the image of the crucifixion and reminds of the last moments on the Cross. "When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished." And bowing His head, He yielded up His spirit" (John 19:30).

This standing position of Jesus does not end here, but it extends to the resurrection. As He stands amid the dark waters, He actually stands in Hades, that is, in the midst of death, so that the resurrection will take place. That is why Saint Basil the Great describes the waters here as "the flowing tomb."



Here we find the true meaning of the word "baptism". In the Greek language, ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ refers to complete immersion - death and life. Hence, Saint John is called the Baptist.

This is why the Orthodox Church adopted the complete triple immersion in the rite of baptism: "We die with Christ and rise with Him".

Now, let us recall what happened with Jesus as he ascended to Jerusalem.

He would be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, who would condemn him and deliver him to the nations to be mocked, flogged and crucified. Then, he would rise on the third day. At that time, the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and knelt to make a request. "What do you want?" He inquired. She answered, "Declare that in Your kingdom one of these two sons of mine may sit at Your right hand, and the other at Your left ... "You do not know what you are asking," Jesus replied: "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized, Jesus said. "But to sit at My right or left is not Mine to grant. These seats belong to those for whom My Father has prepared them" (Matthew 20:20-23).

Baptism is a prefiguration of resurrection, because as Jesus destroyed the kingdom of hell by descending into it and made of us a new creation that enters the waters to defeat the evil one and come out as a new creation.

- How could hell capture the Savior even for a while? !!

Thus we cannot be overcome by death if we are truly united with the risen Christ.

- This explains the muscle divisions that appear on the body of Jesus, to represent that the Lord is not weak, but triumphs over Satan and his kingdom. It is good to know that these divisions are also present in the icon of the Crucifixion.

Note: The four Greek letters to the right and left of the Lord Jesus Christ are the first two letters of the words Jesus Christ in the Greek language. In the halo behind his head, we always find the Cross, with letters: O \Omega N (I AM).

2.8- The Colors in the Icon:

The author of this icon adopted a dark blue background, which is one of the colors that express the ineffability of God's glory. This color sometimes replaces gold. This way the icon writer

was made the personalities in the icon of this divine event stand out by contrasting the dark background with the bright colors such as the light skin color of the Lord Jesus Christ in the middle and the red color in the clothing of the angels. We note the following:

The semi-circle in the upper part of the icon ranges from dark blue to light, in an attempt to express the unfathomable essence of God, Who reveals Himself to us gradually.

The dark water behind the Lord Jesus symbolizes the multitude of sins, and this justifies the presence of the man in the bottom, who represents sin from ancient times.

- The colors of the clothes of the angels reflect their fiery movement in the Holy Spirit, while the clothes of Saint John the Baptist are earthen green, symbolizing his life in the wilderness and asceticism.

2.9- Conclusion:

The title of the icon, written above in Greek: “Baptism”, calls us, together with the liturgical chants, to remove the old man, the sinful, selfish dead earthy, ephemeral, human being.

Then we enter with the Lord naked from all lust and sin, to wear the new man, the human being that belongs to light and resurrection. Otherwise, we are molded with sin.

Therefore, the Lord tells us in the Book of Revelation:

You say, ‘I am rich; I have grown wealthy and need nothing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, white garments so that you may be clothed and your shameful nakedness not exposed, and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” (Revelation 3:17-18).