

## Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 7 Theme: **Our Incarnate God**

Title: **“Icon and Nativity, God Revealing Himself”** Author: **Deacon Dustin Lyon**

Soon we will celebrate the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Many in our society see this as a season of “peace and goodwill towards men.” Others, who are a bit more religious, see this season as the birth of a savior and sing Christmas hymns such as “Away in a Manger” or “What Child Is This,” which emphasize the child-like quality of our Savior. Despite all this, the Church puts in front of us an icon that constantly humbles me because it’s not an icon of a birth, but of a death.

The icon of the Nativity reveals the incarnation of Christ, to be sure, but it reveals a deeper insight into the incarnation. This icon doesn’t just show us a baby who will one day preach, teach, and die, but rather this icon shows us that the baby born of Mary is already the crucified messiah. For example, we often see that the baby Jesus is placed in a manger, but how many of us stop to realize that a manger is a feeding trough? If this event took place today, perhaps the baby Jesus would be placed in a salad bar indicating that we must eat the bread of life to live – an obvious connection to the Eucharist. Some icons depict Jesus not in a manger, but on an altar to be sacrificed. This immediately draws our minds to the passion.

Whether the iconographer places Jesus in a manger or on an altar, Christ is always depicted in a cave. Poetically this isn’t just a cave, but rather the empty tomb in which he lay after his crucifixion. Jesus is depicted lying here wrapped in swaddling clothes, clothes that now become his burial shroud.

During Pascha we are presented with the icon of the empty tomb, from which Christ is resurrected. If we consider empty and virgin to be parallel terms as well as resurrection and birth, then it is clear that the Nativity celebrates not just the birth of a child from a virgin womb, but the resurrection of Christ from the empty tomb. Interestingly, both the virgin womb and the empty tomb are related to a man named Joseph – one Joseph being the husband of Mary and the other Joseph being the man from Arimathea.

This icon reorients our view of the Incarnation; because of it we don’t see the birth of Jesus as just a historical narrative, but rather, we see the Incarnation from the very start as a confession about the exalted and risen Lord. In other words, the Incarnation we celebrate on Christmas is an interpretation; it is an understanding that Christ reveals the Father through the passion on the cross. But this orientation isn’t just the perspective of the Nativity icon; it’s the perspective of all icons and is inherent even in the way an icon is made.

These past two summers I’ve been blessed to be able to take the iconography workshops offered at St. Vladimir’s Seminary. The time spent in these workshops has been some of the most rewarding and personally enriching time spent here at seminary. I can honestly say that I don’t think I’ve prayed as sincerely and humbly as I did while writing my icons. What made these experiences such rewarding ones was the way in which the face of Christ was revealed through

each step of the painting process. It was as if the icon board was giving birth again to Christ. In this way, I experienced the Incarnation of Christ firsthand.

After prepping the board by sanding and applying gesso (a white primer), we carefully applied an outline drawing of Christ to our boards. In this class everyone's first icon is that of Christ, and this is planned very specifically. There are several schools of thought behind what a person's first icon should be, and my instructor fell into the school that believed one should first paint Christ because every icon, not matter what the subject matter is, always reveals Christ. The martyrs incarnate Christ by imitating his death. The evangelists, apostles, theologians, and church fathers incarnate Christ through their words. When these people get depicted in an icon, we see Christ through the saints' life or words. By having my first icon be of Christ, the point is driven home that I am always to see Christ in every icon I paint.

After applying an outline drawing, my next step was to apply the gold leaf. Having never worked with gold leaf before in my life, I did so very carefully and attentively. Finally, I was ready to paint!

The first task in writing an icon is to paint the solid background colors. For example, the red that Christ wears is painted a solid red. The blue cloak is painted a solid blue. His hair is painted a solid brown, and his skin is painted a dark green. After I had done this, I was able to start painting the highlights and shadows. Wow, what a difference they make! The image before me came more and more alive with each paint stroke I laid down.

The more alive the icon became, the more it hit me: I'm not painting Christ; rather, it was Christ who was revealing himself to me through this process. Learning to paint an icon can be a frustrating process, but it can also be a very rewarding one. I couldn't have done it alone. I needed the guidance and patience of my instructor, and the grace of God. Seeing Christ reveal His image through this process made me realize that I wasn't painting a picture of a man who lived 2,000 years ago. I was painting the living God, who reveals Himself through the Incarnation for the life of the world, even in our time, and even to a simple student such as myself.

### **Discussion Questions:**

Are icons necessary for prayer? What role have icons played in your prayer life?

What does it mean for you personally to believe in a God who became a human being for our sake and salvation?

Could you believe in a God who did not enter his own creation in the sacrificial way that Christ did?

Search for an icon of the Nativity online. Does it remind you Christ's crucifixion and burial at all? Compare to an icon of Christ's tomb. What stands out for you in both icons?