

SESSION 3 CHRISTMAS ICONOGRAPHY

OBJECTIVE

To show the Nativity of Christ depicted through iconography and how it reflects the Church's understanding of Christ's entire life.

PREPARATION

Familiarize yourself with the narratives of Christ's Nativity in Matthew 2:1-14 and Luke 2:4-20. Also learn more about the feast by visiting the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Website (www.goarch.org).

Familiarize yourself with different Nativity icons. Note differences and similarities. Look at the icons available through St. Isaac of Syria Skete (www.skete.com). Also, become familiar with the icon of the entombment of Christ (note this icon has many variations, try to find one where his white linen wrapping resembles his swaddling clothes in the manger). Look at the icons available through St. Isaac of Syria Skete (www.skete.com). Create a way to display the icons for all to see (projector, laptop, poster-board, large icon from chapel, etc.).

Locate a CD or Tape of the Apolytikion of the Nativity of Christ in English. *First Fruits* by the Boston Byzantine Choir is available from Light and Life Publishing (www.light-n-life.com)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (*with Old and New Testaments and Concordance*)
- Icons (*see list above*)
- Handouts of Nativity narratives (*see attachment...*)
- Handout of prayers (*see attachment...*)
- Handout of GOYA Notes (*see attachment...*)
- Journals and large envelopes to seal them in
- Pens/Pencils
- Flip Chart and Markers
- A CD of the Apolytikion of the Nativity of Christ (*see above recommendations*)

OPENING PRAYER (*all together*)

Grant, Lord, to keep us this day without sin.

Blessed are You, Lord, God of our fathers, and praised and glorified is Your name forever. Amen.

Lord, let Your mercy come upon us, for we have trusted in You.

Blessed are You Lord; teach me Your commandments.

Blessed are You, Master; make me to understand Your commandments.

Blessed are You, Holy One; enlighten me with Your commandments.

Lord, Your love endures forever; do not turn away from the work of Your hands.

To You belongs praise, song, and glory, to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

ICE BREAKER: JOURNAL STORIES

- Invite everyone to sit in a circle and Pass out journal envelopes and pencils.
- Ask the GOYAnS to write their thoughts on the following questions in their journals: Our last meeting was held on (fill in the date that you met). Take two minutes to fill out a historical account of what happened that day—if you were not here, try to remember what you did on this date and write about that.
- When sufficient time has passed, have the young people share what they wrote. After one person shares, ask if anyone else had a different perspective on what happened that day. Continue building on the day from everyone's different perspectives, including those that were not at the last meeting.

ACTIVITY: CHRIST'S LIFE

Select two volunteers—have one read aloud the Nativity narrative in Matthew 2:1-14 and the other read Luke 2:4-20.

- What differences do you notice between the two narratives?
- What is missing in Matthew?
- What is missing in Luke?

STATE (*paraphrase in your own words*)

Here, we notice what appears to be a discrepancy in the accounts of our Lord's Nativity. However, as we observed just a few moments ago, various people can experience the same event in different ways. In this case, the Gospel writers are faced with communicating an event far beyond what we could imagine. Perhaps, it takes more than one account to grasp the importance of the event.

In iconography, we observe many different hands presenting their interpretations of events depicted in the Gospels—interpretations that are derived from the same accounts we have just heard. Even more exciting, the images we see around our churches and homes present a greater story that not only contains, but also extends beyond the accounts we have just heard.

Now display the Nativity icons. It would be helpful to have one icon with just shepherds, one icon with only magi, and/or one that includes both.

DISCUSS (*accept all answers and reflect back*)

Give the young people one minute in silence to view the icons and then ask the following questions:

- Who can tell me what is happening in this/these icon(s)?
- What has each iconographer chosen to include in his/her illustration?
- What/Who is absent? Present? (*shepherds, magi, etc.*)
- What is the central idea of the icon? (*birth of Christ- emphasize this*)
- Who is gathered around him?

Now change to the icon of the Epitaphios (Entombment) of Christ.

I want everybody to now direct their attention to Christ in the icon. Look at his surroundings, his clothes, his posture, his mother, etc.

Allow the young people one minute of silence before discussing the following:

- What is happening here?
- What do you notice about Christ? (*He is wrapped in a shroud*)
- Does anything strike you as similar to the Nativity icon? (*shroud, coffin, etc.*)
- Who is gathered around Him? (*His mother, etc.*)
- How does He look? (*like an infant?*)
- Where is His mother?
- Is she holding Him?
- Does this remind you of any other icons? (*Nativity, Mary holding infant Christ, etc.*)

Now change to the icon of the Resurrection of Christ. Allow the young people one minute of silence before discussing the following:

- What is happening in *this* icon?
- What is Christ wearing? (*white clothing*)
- What happened to his clothes? (*made anew, etc...*)
- Do the objects in the picture remind you of anything? (*coffin-the manger from the Nativity icon*)

Now return to the icon of the Nativity of Christ. Ask the young people to take 5 minutes in silence to reflect on the following in their journals:

- Does anything look different now? (*Christ wrapped and laid in a tomb mirrored in the Nativity icon, held by his mother as a child and at his entombment, jagged cave resembles broken tombs in resurrection icon, we can see the adult Christ in the child, etc.*)
- After all we have seen, what can you tell us about Christ's birth and life based on this icon?

When the time has passed, ask young people to share their answers.

Take a moment to listen to the Apolytikion of the Nativity of Christ. The Apolytikion is the main hymn of the Feast. In the Divine Liturgy, you will hear it after the small entrance, when the priest processes with the Gospel.

*Your Nativity, O Christ our God, hath shined the light of knowledge upon the world;
for thereby they that worshipped the stars were instructed by a star to worship You,
the Sun of Righteousness, and to know You, the Dayspring from on high.*

O Lord, glory be to You.

-Apolytikion for the Nativity of Christ

After reading the Gospel accounts, seeing the icons, and hearing hymnography, how does the birth of God, the Word, impact humanity? (*opens the door to our salvation*)

WRAP UP *(paraphrase in your own words)*

You have accomplished quite a bit during this past hour. Surrounded by the written, visual, and sung Word, you have immersed yourself in the feast of the Nativity of Christ. We wait through the weeks of preparation until the day of Nativity comes—the day when Christ is ‘Glorified.’ Why do we ‘Glorify Him?’ We rejoice with all of creation that Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, has been born of a virgin so that He, fully God and fully man, may take the sins of our world unto Himself, endure crucifixion, and open the doors of Paradise to those in Hades *and* here on earth. The Magi followed a star to the manger only to be taught by the *true* star, the Sun of Righteousness. Likewise, the shepherds, believing in the coming Savior, went to Bethlehem praising and exalting Him. So too, let us pass these days of fasting with the anticipation of the shepherds and arrive at the feast of the Nativity. Like the Magi, let our hearts be converted to the true faith and praise His glorious and miraculous birth. Let us sing with the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!” Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

JOURNAL REFLECTION

Each of you has been given a journal to be used throughout the year. As we mentioned, this is a place where you can write from your heart, and **no one is going to read it unless you choose to share it**. For the next ten minutes, reflect on the lesson we just had. Consider the following (write on a flip chart for all to see):

- Has your perspective concerning the Nativity of Christ changed? In what way?
- As an Orthodox Christian, how does Christ’s birth impact your own life? How can it “shine the light of knowledge” in you?
- Reflect on another Hymn of the Nativity—the Katavasia of the Nativity.

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

Christ comes from heaven; meet Him. Christ is on earth exalt Him.

All the earth, sing to the Lord.

All nations, praise Him in joy for He has been Glorified.

How can we glorify Him in our lives?

We ask that even if you finish, you remain silent. Take this time to pray, think or read a short passage from the Bible (make Bibles readily available for each young person).

After ten minutes, take some time to allow young people to share their thoughts as they wish, then pass out one large envelope to each young person and instruct him or her to put their journal inside. Then ask them to seal the envelope and sign their names where the flap meets the envelope so they feel confident that no one has access to their journal. Collect the envelopes and store them in a safe place where they will be accessible at the next session.

CLOSING PRAYER *(all together)*

Let us pray to the Lord. Lord have mercy.

Your Nativity, O Christ our God, hath shined the light of knowledge upon the world; for thereby they that worshipped the stars were instructed by a star to worship You, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know You, the Dayspring from on high.

O Lord, glory be to You.

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THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

MATTHEW 2:1-14

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ⁶But you, Bethlehem in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel."

⁷Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." ⁹When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy, ¹¹And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

¹³Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." ¹⁴When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt.

LUKE 2:4-20

⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶So it was, that while they were there, the days were complete for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

¹⁵So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into the heavens that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷Now when they had seen Him they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰Then the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

SESSION 3 • PRAYERS
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