

Nurturing spirituality through icons

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[Note Icon slides can be found at the end of this paper]

Icons are part of the rich spirituality of the Eastern churches – Greek, Russian, Serbian Orthodox and the Maronite, Melchite, Ukrainian and Russian Catholic and Coptic Church. In a global context, with more frequent travel and a positive ecumenical climate icons have gained a more universal appeal. They have gone beyond the bounds of Orthodoxy. Nes (2004) identifies the contemplative qualities of icons as a factor in increasing contemporary interest, “icons can also open the door to a spirituality that fulfils a deep, religious need “(p7).

The information society we live in produces a continuous stream of intrusive and rapidly changing visual stimuli. The mass media makes it possible for images to be devoured like consumer goods. And such a continuous, cursory stream of pictures has a disturbing effect on people’s minds. Orthodox iconography has a form which inspires serenity and a content which invites meditation“ (Nes, 2004, p7).

Contemporary youth often distinguish between spirituality and religion. In *Reasons for Living* Crawford and Rossiter (2006) report an increasing disconnectedness between the lives of young people and the life of the church. While acknowledging that spirituality and religion are distinct, Ranson (2002, p18) argues for an intrinsic connection. He identifies four core activities related to spirituality and names them attending, inquiring, interpreting and acting. The *attending phase* involves a spiritual moment of awakening or awareness. There is a recognition of something beyond. The *inquiring phase* invites a deeper level of investigation and engagement. According to Ranson (2002) the last two phases, *interpreting* (reflecting on deeper meaning) and *acting* translate the spiritual moment into a religious movement. A study of icons however can be approached from either perspective – spiritual or religious.

In a seminal article *Understanding religion and being religious* Moran (1991, p. 249) argues that religious education consists of two contrasting processes: (1) teaching people religion and (2) teaching people to be religious in a particular way. “In the process of teaching people religion, the aim is the ‘understand’.” Moran (1991) writes that to understand religion a person need not be a devotee. He advocates an educational perspective that honours the classroom as a zone of free inquiry, where “a space and time is set aside for a group of people who wish to understand some ‘subject matter’” (Moran, 1991, p. 250).

A gift to the child approach developed during two research projects at the University of Birmingham, allows for a ‘zone of free inquiry’ and a confluence of the spiritual and the religious. “A religious item is chosen for presentation to the children. This is called a ‘numen’ or (more simply) a bit of religious stuff” (Hull, 2007).

Hull (2007, p.179) identifies the principle criteria of choice as:

- (i) The material occupies a more or less autonomous position within the life and faith of the religion, that is, it possesses a certain integrity as a self enclosed entity.
- (ii) It is charged with numinous power, or with the sense of the sacred or with the power of devotion.

- (iii) It has gifts to offer the children.

An icon fulfils these criteria. Icons provide a concrete point of entry in an educational context for helping students (of all religious backgrounds or none) to understand the significance of religion for people of faith. Icons allow for both a retelling of the Christian story and a way of exploring one's personal story. Icons are key to orthodox spirituality and liturgy and can be used to help students along their journey of religious understanding, spiritual journey, and self-knowledge. Icons are another text by which students can begin to engage with religious understandings that belong to a community of faith and have their foundation in the biblical text. In addition the icon as a concrete religious item can allow for the movements of attending, inquiring, interpreting and acting (Ranson, 2002).

The workshop uses an interactive process in which participants engage with an icon, asking of it a series of questions. Websites are provided for future retrieval by teachers. The workshop will model a process that can be used in an educational setting. It enables the creation of a teaching and learning space that gives room for reflection and metacognition, allowing the learner to stop and think and make connections between the icon and their own personal story. The workshop will focus particularly on some icons of baptism. Background information on elements of icons will further enable participants to understand the purpose and language of icons. Participants will brainstorm ways icons can be used in a variety of religious education settings.

ACLE 2008 WORKSHOP PROCESS – 50 minutes

STEP 1 Individual analysis

10 minutes

- Hand out laminated images of icons– 1 per person/per pair + handout with grid
- Ask participants to refer to questions on grid with particular focus on first two rows. Explain that questions are designed to help them engage with the icon.
- Ask participants to identify 3 important details about baptism communicated in the icon

STEP 2 Group sharing

10 minutes

- Participants with same icon image form a group
- Ask participants to each share in their group an understanding of baptism that stood out for them

STEP 3 Compare and contrast icons

15 minutes

- Ask participants to form groups of three with others who have a different icon.
- Ask them to identify what is different and/or similar. What fresh understandings of baptism emerge?
- Group feedback – round robin

STEP 4 Conventions and symbolism of baptism icons

5 minutes

- Ask participants to refer to handout (reverse side of grid)
- Go through information provided on sheet and highlight any new information
- Give information regarding some of the other icons given.

STEP 5 Brainstorm ways icons can be used in classroom context

5 minutes

- Refer participants to 2 questions on bottom row of grid. Ask them to work in pairs
 1. Brainstorm ways icons can be used in classroom with students at various levels of schooling
 2. Ask participants to think of alternate questions that could be inserted in grid
 3. Give an example of how icon could be introduced to students (see PPT notes) (if time allows)

STEP 6 General discussion to wrap up session

5 minutes

E.g. Discuss how Ranson's 4 step approach could be incorporated in a study of icons – attending, inquiring, interpreting, acting

A knowledge of Orthodox theology and spirituality helps to unlock the symbolic language of the icon. According to Nes (2004, p13) icons have a dogmatic character, they provide visual expression to Church teaching and belief. Icons are essentially didactic and also have a liturgical function.

The dogmatic character of an icon means that there is a standardised form and content. Rather than an emphasis on personal style, the icon is a visual representation or expression of a community's faith. With consistent form and rules for depiction, an icon uses a symbolic language when it attempts to express dogmas. Nes (2004, p 12) points out that an icon is *conventional*, that is, it is rule bound in both form and content, builds on authorised models, in a customary form and in so doing communicates the official teaching of the church. Thus the painter is not free to incorporate a subjective interpretation into the work. This workshop opens the potential for teaching the Christian story with the use of icons – key liturgical movements of the Church year e.g. annunciation, crucifixion. "An icon is above the personal, it is an expression of the community's faith" (Nes, 2004, p 12). Thus, icons have a didactic purpose. This workshop, demonstrating the use of icons in an educational setting, draws on the connection between spirituality and religion discussed in the work of Ranson (2002), Hull (2007) and Moran (1991).

Icons originated in a very different time from our 21st century secular world. "The world in which icons were produced and viewed was one in which everyone had knowledge of the Bible and of medieval Christian devotional literature, and looked at icons with this awareness always at the front of their minds... (Cormack, 2007, p 49). Today icons can serve as a vehicle to teach about religion, i.e. introduce students to the foundational events of the Christian story, in an educational context. Icons can also educate students what it means to be religious in particular way, i.e. the orthodox way.

Orthodox Churches contain many icons. Orthodox religious art, writes Ware (1964, p 277), involves an elaborate system of symbols that take in the church building and its decorations. Icons thus have a theological and liturgical function.

The icons which fill the church serve as a point of meeting between heaven and earth. As each local congregation prays Sunday by Sunday, surrounded by the figures of Christ, the angels, and the saints, these visible images remind the faithful unceasingly of the invisible presence of the whole company of heaven at the Liturgy. The faithful can feel that the walls of the church open out upon eternity... (Ware 1964, p 277).

Icons are an expression of presence, rather than representations as in western art. They allow access to another dimension of reality that shapes our consciousness. In that sense they are 'windows to heaven'. The viewer is drawn to look in and through the image as an icon points to something beyond. Icons embody an invitation to mystery. A study of icons fosters a coming to attention, a spirit of attentiveness, an awareness of self and an awareness of the activity of God in one's life.

Just as icons were a 'window to heaven' for illiterate medieval Christians, icons can be a 'window to heaven' for the secular religiously illiterate. They are an invitation for youth in a secular society to engage or reengage with religious literacy.

REFERENCES

- Cormack, R, (2007) *Icons*. London: The British Museum Press
- Crawford, M. & Rossiter, G. (2006). *Reasons for Living*. Melbourne: ACER.
- Hull, J (2007) Gift to the child in *Religious Education in early childhood* Brisbane: Lumino Press
- Nes, S (2004) *The mystical language of Icons*. Norwich: Canterbury Press
- Ouspensky, L. (1992) *Theology of the Icon*, Volume 1 New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press
- Ouspensky, L. & Lossky(1982) *The meaning of Icons*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press
- Moran ,G.(1991) Understanding religion and being religious . Professional Approaches for Christian Educators, (PACE) 21,pp249-250
- Ranson.D (2002) Across the great divide: Bridging spirituality and religion today. Strahtfield: St Paul's
- Ware, T (1964) *The Orthodox Church*. London : Penguin Books

WEBSITES

- http://www.musbush.unitingchurch.org.au/Baptism_of_Jesus.html
- <http://heavenlyart.net/baptism.html>
- <http://www.bridgebuilding.com/narr/lbbac.html>
- <http://touregypt.net/featurestories/catherines2-16.htm>
- <http://www.maronite-heritage.com/html/liturgical.html>
- http://www.eternegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet?ee_website_action_key=action.perform.ent_type.search&language_id=1&trait_item_id=10389&search_subtypes=yes
- <http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/icons.htm>
- <http://www.stphilothea.ga.goarch.org/bulletins/Jan05.pdf>
- <http://dce.oca.org/Sections/FocusUnits/index.asp> Department of Christian education developed by Orthodox Church in America

**ICONS: sacred tapestries
that transcend time and
space**

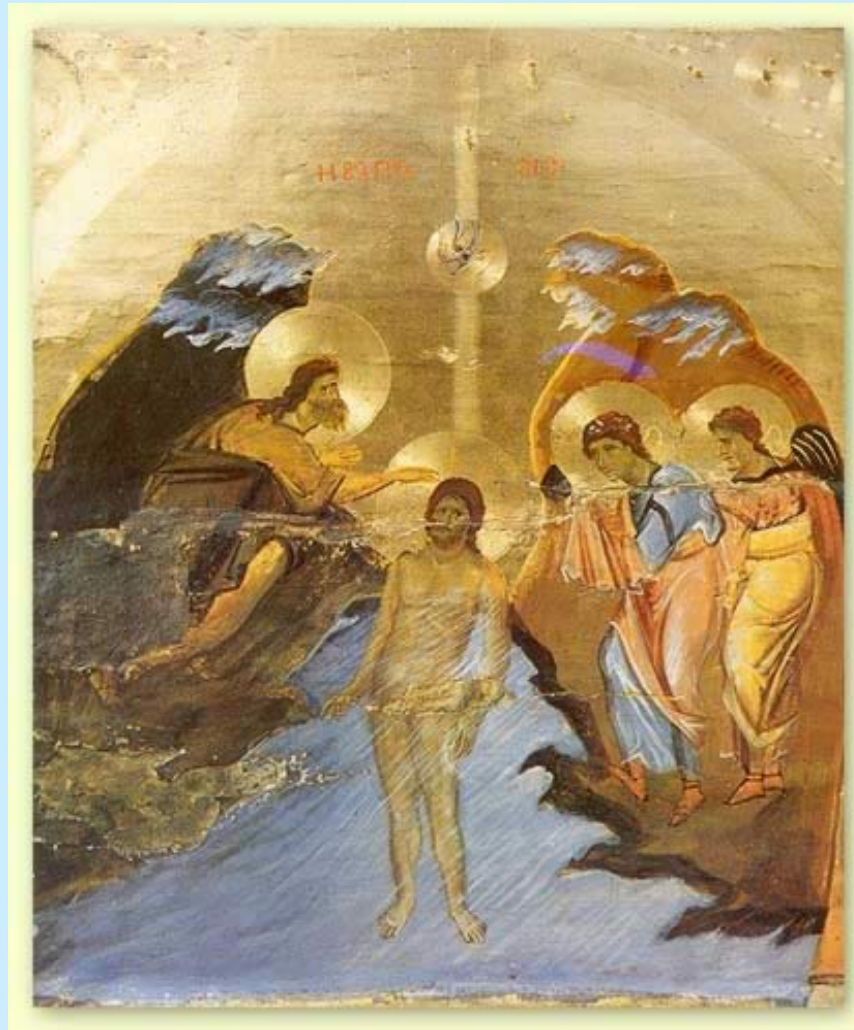
Baptism of Jesus



<http://i.ac.cgu.edu/tune/tcopbaptism.html>
Coptic Church of Saint Mercurius Old Cairo
Note the complete submersion of Christ
reflecting Coptic baptismal tradition
Source: *Coptic Icons*, vol. I (Cairo,
Egypt: Lehnert & Landrock, 1998): 27.



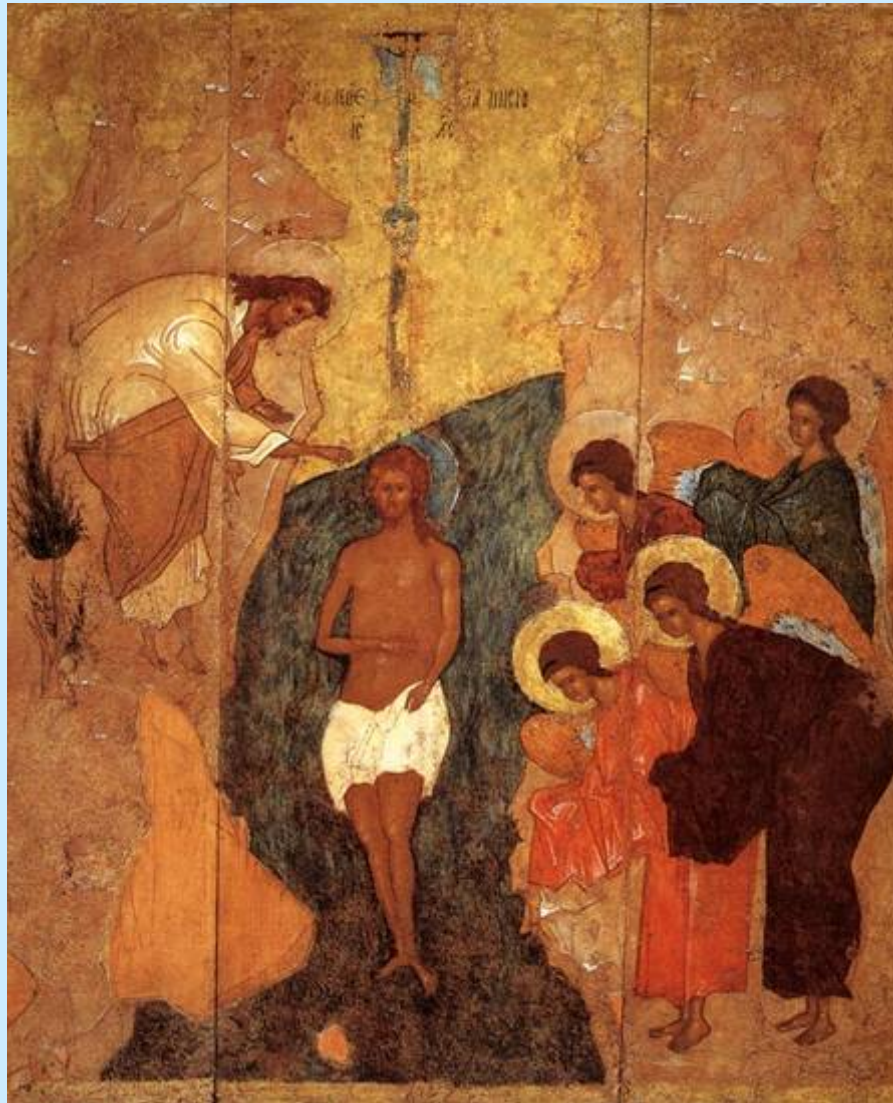
MARONITE Icon http://www.maronite-heritage.com/html/maronite_icons-liturgical_16.html



The Icons of St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt's Sinai
<http://touregypt.net/featurestories/catherines2-16.htm>
The Baptism, from the Twelve Feasts on an iconostasis beam and dating to the 12th century.



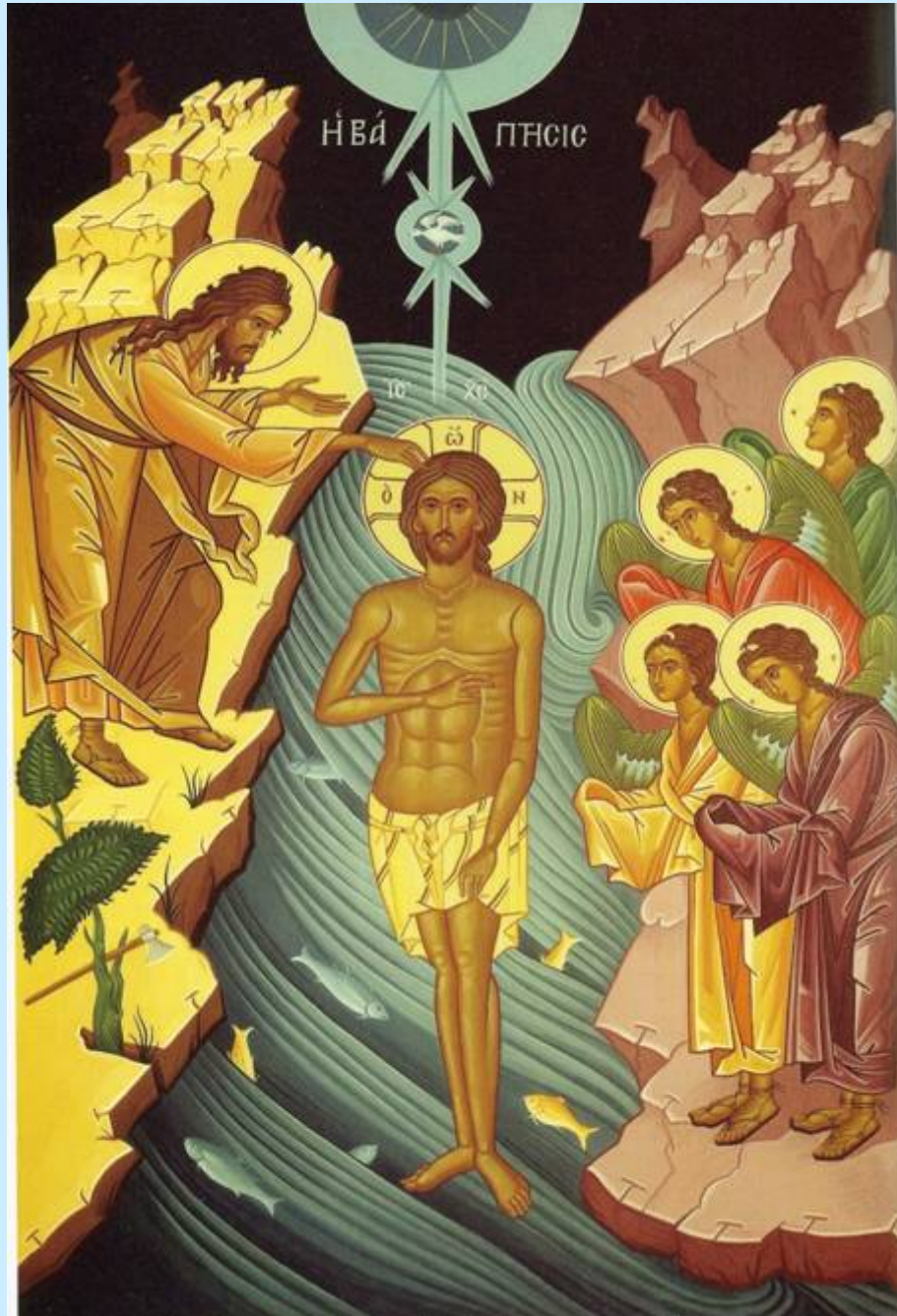
<http://heavenlyart.net/baptism.html>
Egg tempera on wood panel commissioned by St.
Christopher's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
Theophany based on Gospel of Mark



Russian icon
<http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/icons.htm>



Modern Coptic icon depicting baptism of Jesus
<http://st-takla.org/Gallery01-Jesus-Images-Pictures-of-Christ/02-Baptism-of-Jesus-01.html>



Baptism of Christ: Greek variant, Cretan school (1989)
Nes, S (2004). *The mystical language of icons*.

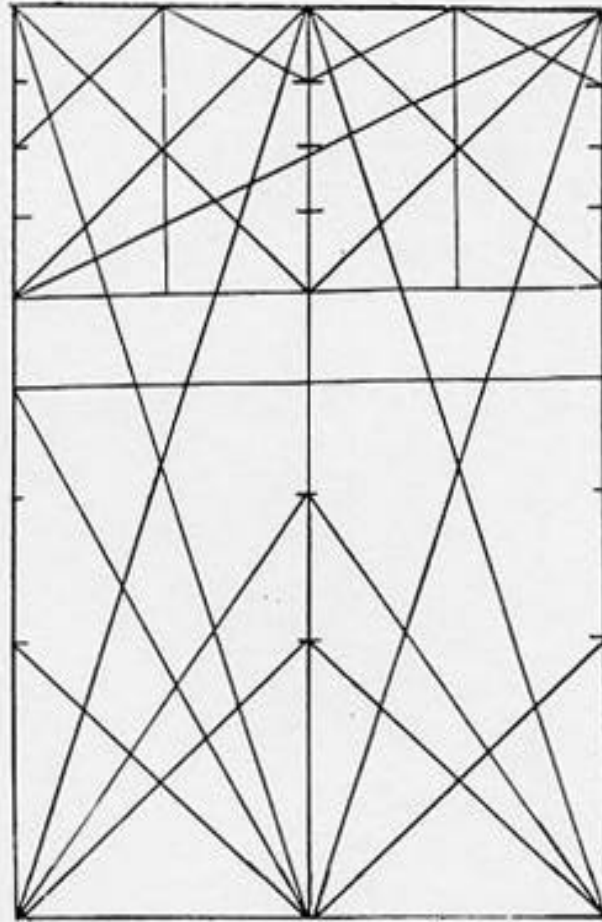


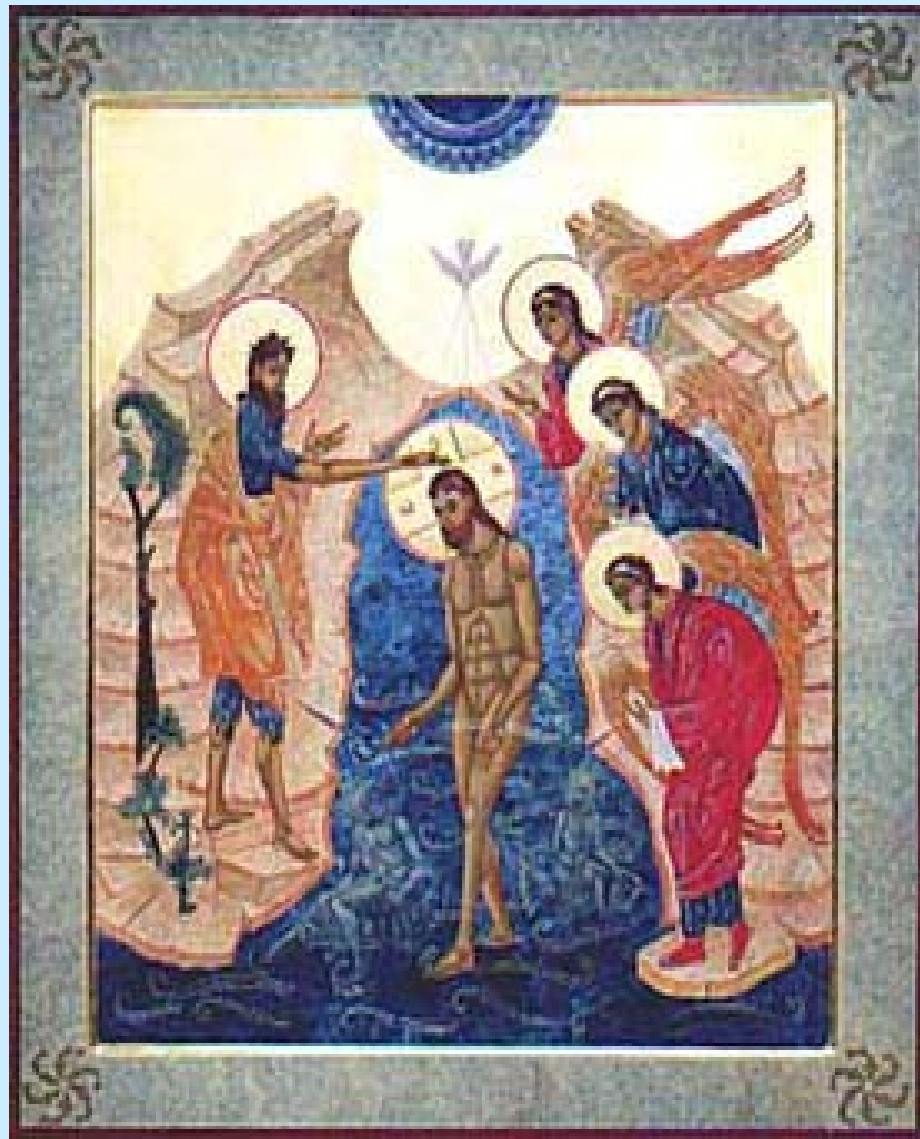
Holy monastery of Stavronikita 1546



http://www.copticmuseum.gov.eg/english/internal/gallery_z2.asp?piece_id=208§ion_ID=1

19th century - Icon showing the Baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist in the waters of Jordan .The Holy Spirit is descending from heaven in the form of a Dove above His head.







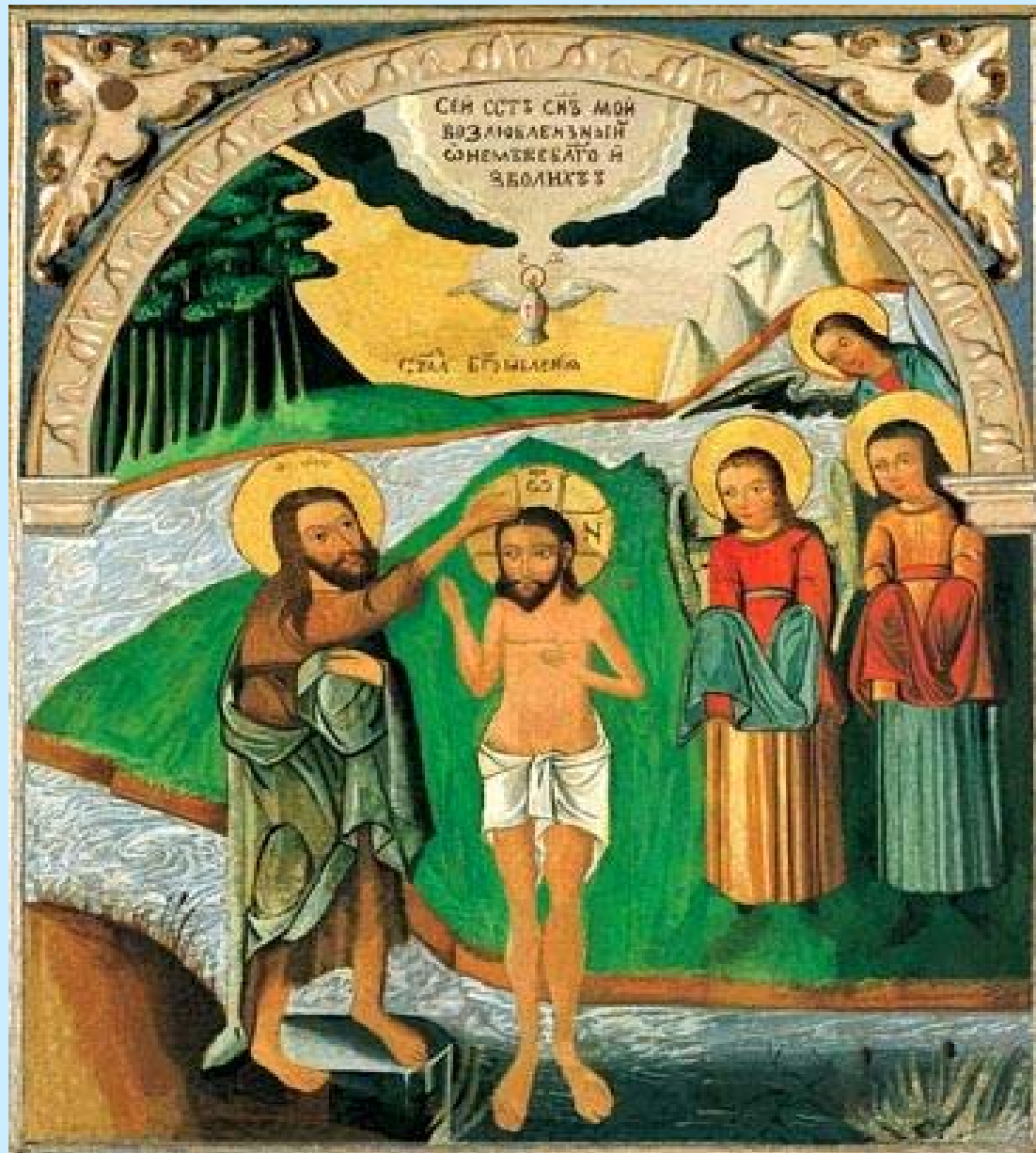
Ancient Phoenicia Lebanon



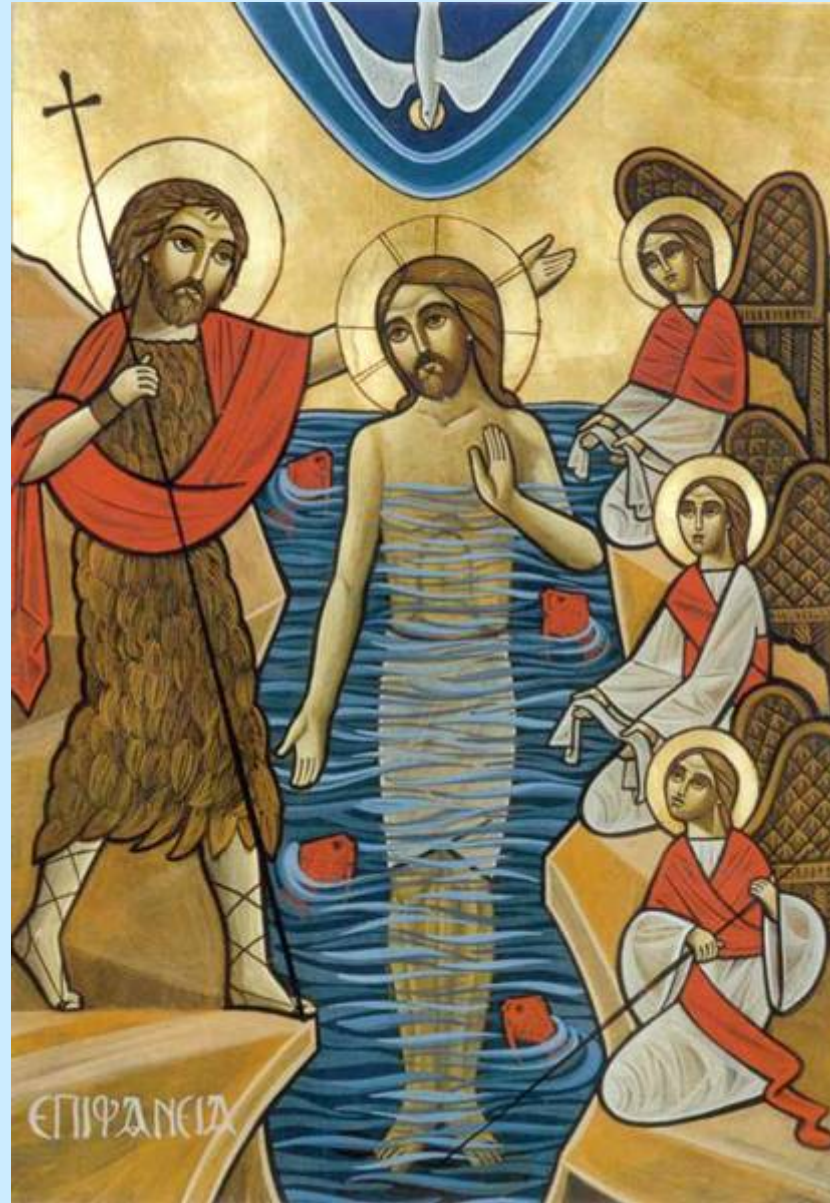


Η ΒΑΠΤΙΣΙΣ ΤΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ

www.religiousicons.com









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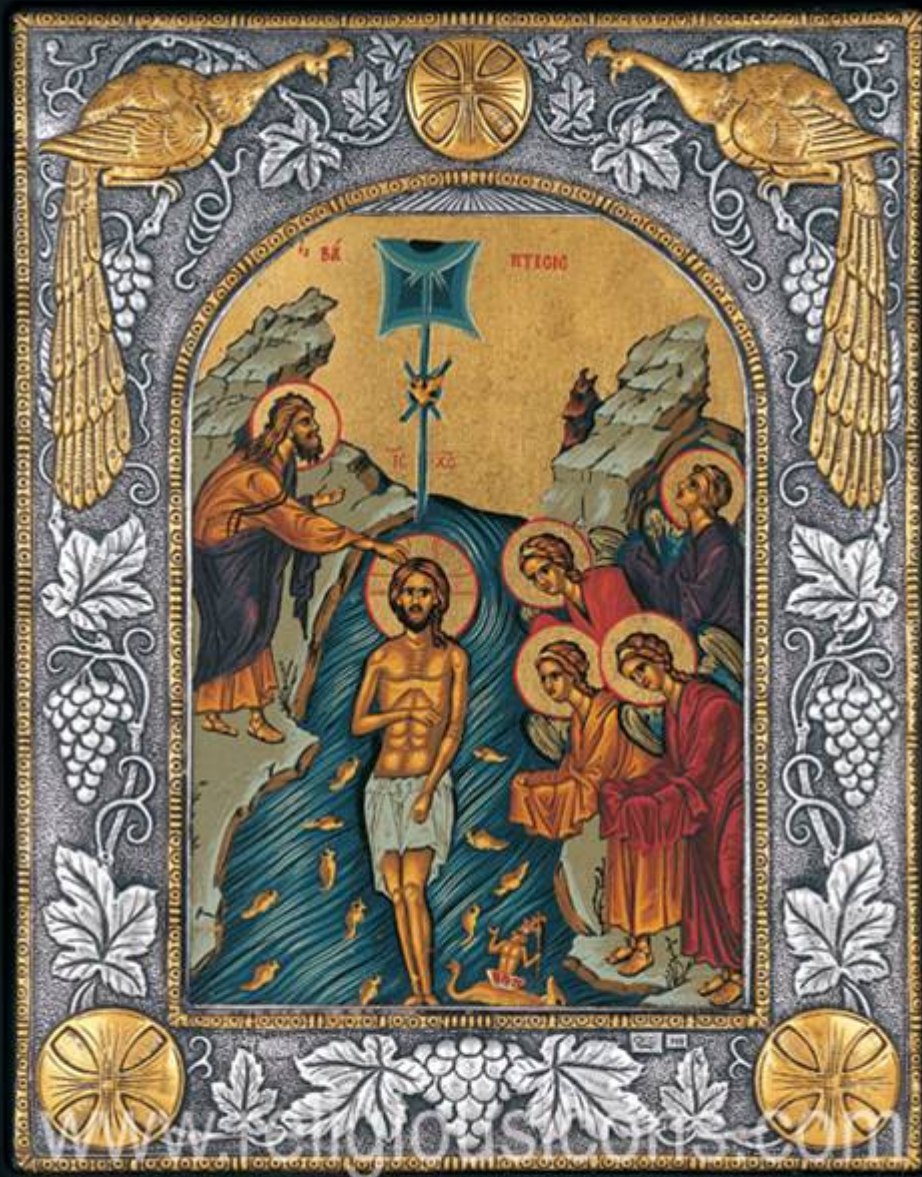




Egyptian 19th century



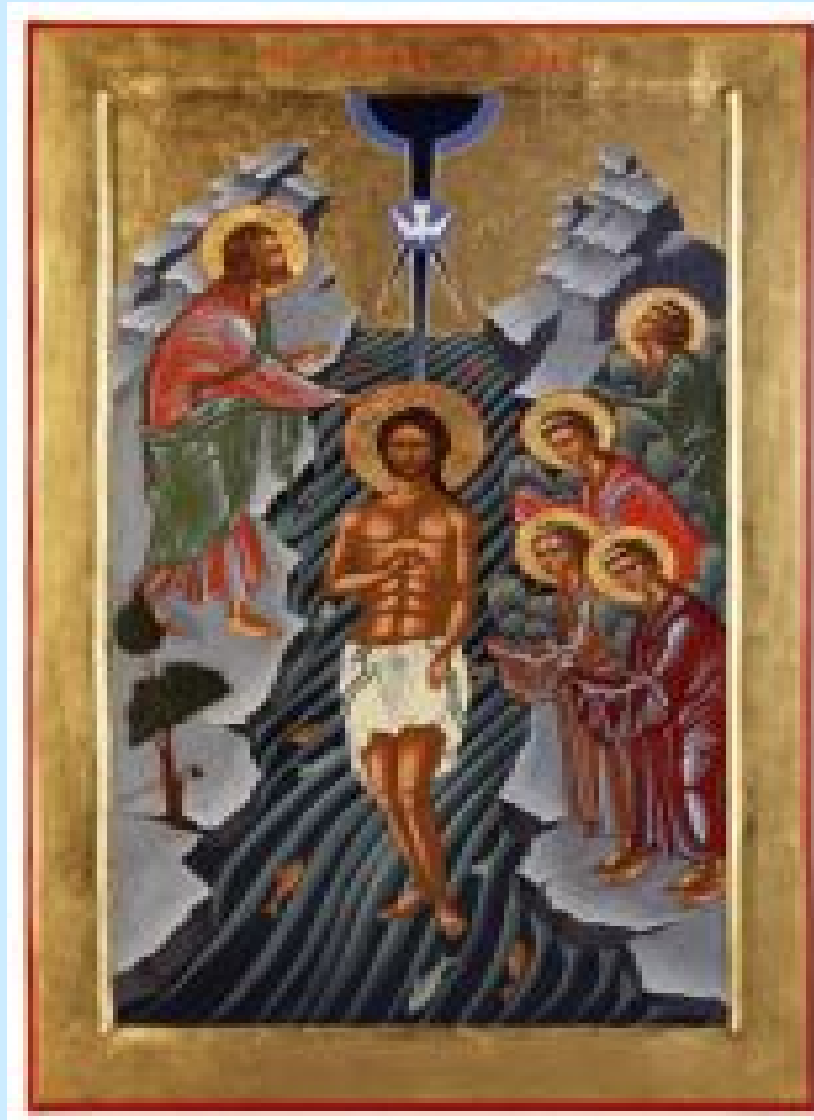
Ethiopian





Icon Coptic Egypt





Theophany of Jesus Mustard Bush faith



Baptism of Our Lord

From Orthodox marketplace

Blessed are you, O God,
and blessed is the eternal Word,
at whose appearing in the body
the earth was sanctified,
the water blessed,
the heaven illumined,
and humankind delivered
from the bitter tyranny of the enemy.