

# NATIVITY

Although **Mary** is the largest figure in this icon, she does not seem to be its most important feature. The entire composition of the icon reveals that it is what Mary represents – the power, mercy, and fulfillment of God’s will – that is given the most emphasis, not the woman herself.

**Joseph** is shown in the left bottom corner, conversing with Satan, disguised as an old shepherd. The posture of Saint Joseph is one of doubt and inner trouble, for he wondered if it might be possible that the conception and birth were not by some secret human union; how blessed he was to serve the Mother of God and her divine Son, in spite of these thoughts and temptations, and to protect her from the evil gossip of the people who could not yet possibly understand so great a mystery.

**Our Lord** (center) is shown in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, “for there was no room for them in the inn.” (cf. Luke 2) The back-drop for the manger is a dark cave, which immediately reminds us of the cave in which our Lord was buried 33 years later, wrapped in a shroud. In the cave are an ox and ass, details not mentioned by the Gospels, but which are an invariable feature of every icon of the Nativity; the scene is included to show the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “the ox knows his Owner, and the ass his Master’s crib, but Israel does not know Me, and the people has not regarded Me” (Isaiah 1:3).

Above this central composition, in the very center of the icon is the wondrous star coming from heaven.

The star led the **magi** (upper left) to the place where our Savior lay bearing gifts. The fact that Jewish shepherds and heathen magi were among the first to worship our Lord shows us the universality of this great event, meant for the salvation of all mankind.

The holy **angels** (upper right) are seen both glorifying God and bringing the good tidings of the Lord’s birth to the shepherds.

The final detail of this icon, the scene of the **washing of the Lord** (lower right) by the midwife Salome who was a daughter of Saint Joseph by his previous marriage along with another servant woman.

The colors are warm and, by their complimentary nature, contribute to the unity of the whole. Touches of white are used to highlight both the cliffs and the clothing of almost all the figures – a notable exception would be that Mary’s clothes lack any such highlighting and, in consequence, appear very flat depicting Mary in an especially immaterial, “spiritual” way. Perhaps this was done to ensure that her presence, her very physical state of having just given birth, are both portrayed with fidelity to the spiritual reality of what has just occurred as opposed to the portrayals of the other figures.