

# The Incarnation in Poetry and Song

## A Study Unit for Teens or Adults

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**Goals:** The goals of this short 3-5 week study unit are to convey the meaning of the Incarnation—God taking on flesh and becoming man—and to discover how the poets and hymnographers of the Church tried to teach the meaning of the Incarnation of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, through the hymns of the Church. It is not necessary to cover every item that is provided for each individual lesson. The lessons offer several objectives as well as various approaches to the theme. Each lesson may be extended over two or more sessions, depending upon the interests of the class.



### Lesson 1—Incarnation: The Way to the Knowledge of God

**A. Objectives:** By the end of this session, the students should be able to:

1. Define or explain the word “incarnation” and tell how it describes Jesus Christ.
2. Locate references to the Incarnation in the Prologue of the Gospel of St. John.
3. Locate the articles in the Creed that speak of the Incarnation

**B. Materials needed:** Several dictionaries (including a college dictionary), Bibles, Divine Liturgy books, and Book 9—**Saints for All Ages: Poets and Hymnographers of the Church** (each student should have a copy: cf. *DRE-OCA*)

#### C. Lesson:

1. Write the word **INCARNATE** on the chalkboard or in large letters on a large sheet of paper. Have the students look up the word in the dictionaries and write what they believe are the key meanings on the chalkboard or paper.
2. Discuss the following: What does it mean when someone says: “She personifies love itself.” “He is the spitting image of his father.” “I really see a lot of her mother in her.” “He’s the incarnation of the devil himself.” Explain what they might be trying to say. Are any of these statements related to our understanding of the word “incarnate”? How?
3. Have the students turn to the Gospel of St. John and read the Prologue (John 1:1-18) Ask them to find passages that can be related to one, or more, definitions of “incarnate.”
4. Distribute copies of the Nicene Creed (or have them find it in the Divine Liturgy book published by the OCA). Have the students examine the Creed to find the references to the incarnation. Compare the Creed to the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel. Have them make a chart with two vertical columns; title one column “Gospel of St. John” and the other column “The Creed.” In the parallel columns, write the passages that express similar ideas.
5. Read together Genesis 1:1-5 and 1:26-31. Have one part of the class compare the first five verses to John 1:1-13; have the rest of the class compare the last five verses of Genesis 1

to John 1:10-18. At the end of the class period, let the students summarize what they believe is meant by “the incarnation of the Son of God.”

#### D. Assignment:

Read pages 3-4 and 18-30 in *Poets and Hymnographers of the Church*. If there is class time remaining, you can introduce the readings and let them begin.

### Lesson 2—St. Auxentius and the Troparion

**A. Objectives:** By the end of this session, the students should be able to:

1. Describe or define the word “troparia.”
2. Locate the troparia on Psalm 141-142 (“Lord I Call” verses) and the Aposticha, from Vespers and the troparia on the “Praises” from Matins. (see Liturgy Resource Bin for verses).
3. Identify in the troparia of the Christmas services the phrases referring to the Incarnation of Christ.

**B. Materials needed:** *The Services of Christmas, Poets & Hymnographers of the Church*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary recording: *“Orthodox Hymns of Christmas”*

#### C. Lesson:

1. Review the story of St. Auxentius, discussing his concern about how to teach the doctrine of the incarnation and how he came to write troparia. (Note: the second line of the verse on p. 20 should read “assuming the substance of our flesh...”)
2. Ask the class to define “troparion” in their own words. (If needed, they may use the text in the story or the glossary at the end of the book for help.) Explain that troparia occur in many places in the services: in the liturgy after the Entrance hymn “Come, let us worship”; in the Vespers service, on Psalms 141-142 “Lord I Call,” and the Aposticha (the verses immediately preceding St. Simeon’s Prayer); and in Matins following Psalm 148 (The Praises). Using the *Divine Liturgy* book and *The Services of Christmas* book, have the students try to locate the troparia in the sections noted above. (For the Christmas Vigil of Compline and Matins, the troparia of the *Litya* and *Aposticha* are found at the end of Compline. Other troparia may be found after the reading of the Psalms and before the reading of the Prokeimenon during each of the Hours. (Cf. pp. 6-8, 15-17, 24-26, 34-36 for the Hours; 41-44, 72-76, 100-103, 112 and 113-114).
3. Divide the troparia among the members of the class or divide into small groups for the activity. Have each person or group find in their set of troparia any phrases referring to the incarnation of Christ.
4. Learn to sing one of the troparia. The verse at the bottom of page 15 (of the Christmas services) “He is our God...” is sung to the melody of “O Heavenly King” [Tone 6]. If you need help, ask the choir director to assist in this part of the class. If the class members are members of the choir, use this time to practice the troparia that they will sing in church.
5. If time permits, listen to the recording “Orthodox Hymns of Christmas” (SVS Press), focusing on the “Lord I Call” troparia. Follow along with the music using the texts from the service book (page 44)

#### D. Assignment:

Read pages 24-30, plus the insert on page 29 in *Poets and Hymnographers*.

### Lesson 3—St. Romanos and the Kontakion

**A. Objectives:** By the end of this session, the students should be able to:

1. Identify, with the aid of a sample text, the basic structure or the key elements (Prologue, stanzas and refrain) of a kontakion in its original form [Cf. *Poets and Hymnographers of the Church*, p. 24-30]
2. Locate the kontakion and ikos in the Matins service and the Divine Liturgy cf. *The Services of Christmas*, and describe their purpose and structure in relation to the original form of the kontakion.
3. Summarize the meaning of selected kontakia (and their stanzas—in the longer form).

**B. Materials Needed:** Bibles, *The Kontakia of Romanos* by Marjorie Carpenter [Check a good university or music library and make copies of the kontakion “*On the Nativity*—in Volume I: *Mary and the Magi*]; SVS recording: “Orthodox Hymns of Christmas”; and the book *Poets and Hymnographers of the Church* [DRE-OCA]

### C. Lesson:

1. Review the story of St. Romanos the Melodist. Discuss the meaning of the story of how he began to sing in church and compose hymns for the services.
2. Distribute copies of the kontakion “On the Nativity—Vol. I (Mary and the Magi) from Carpenter’s book. Referring to the description on pages 26 and 29 of the story in *Poets and Hymnographers*, have the class find the *prooimion* or prologue, the stanzas or *ikoi* (strophes), and the refrain. Have them also check to see how many stanzas are in this kontakion. During a break, have them look also through Carpenter’s book to see some of the other kontakia of Romanos.
3. Have the class read the account of the Nativity of Christ in the Gospel of St. Matthew 1:1 to 2:23. Compare the account in Matthew 2 to the passages in Romanos’ kontakion, noting parallel passages. Then have them look in the kontakion for passages referring to the incarnation of Christ.
4. Teach the kontakion as it is sung today in your parish. Have one person read the *Ikos*—the first stanza (cf. p.95 in the Christmas services), and then have the class sing the refrain from the last line. They may also listen to the arrangements of the kontakion sung on the Christmas record.
5. If the students wish to rewrite the long kontakion of Romanos as a *Play* to be presented to the parish, you can extend the study unit further by one or two weeks. (Note: The speakers in the dialogue are named in the margins of the kontakion.) If they do not present their own paraphrase in a *Play*-form, have them begin it by singing the kontakion and ikos and add refrains for everyone to sing where appropriate. It would not be necessary to include every stanza in the production if they find some that are too difficult.