



Our Lady of Perpetual Help

The Meaning of the Icon

Since many Byzantine icons of this type were painted as aids to teaching certain religious truths, every detail in the picture has a very specific meaning: the colors, the figures represented, the letters.

Mary's tunic is red, the color worn by queens in the time of Our Lord. Her mantle is dark blue, the color worn by mothers in the time of Christ. Right away, the picture teaches us that Mary is both Queen and Mother.

The star on the veil covering Our Lady's head is the symbol of perpetual virginity. The picture teaches us that Mary was also a Virgin. It also recalls her ancient title, "Star of the Sea." Mary is the star that leads us to the safe port of Heaven.

The greek letters on either side of Mary's head are abbreviations for the title, "Mother of God" Beside the head of Jesus are the Greek letters for "Jesus Christ."

The entire background of the picture is golden, symbolic of Heaven, where Jesus and Mary are now enthroned. The gold also shines through their clothing, showing the heavenly joy they bring to tired human hearts. The golden, jewel-studded crowns on the heads of Jesus and Mary are a later addition. They were placed there in 1867 in a solemn ceremony at the order of the Holy See.

The archangels Michael and Gabriel are depicted in the upper part of the picture holding the instruments of Our Lord's passion and death in their hands. Michael holds the sponge and the spear, Gabriel, the cross and the nails.

The child Jesus is shown looking at the angels as he seeks refuge from this frightening vision in his Mother's arms. One of his sandals is falling off -- perhaps symbolic of a soul clinging to Christ by one last thread -- devotion to Mary.

The hands of Jesus are turned palms down into the right hand of Mary, symbolizing the graces and favors that he distributes through her intercession.

Mary is looking outward toward us, her eyes filled with kindness, mercy and compassion.

History of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

The picture of Our Lady (Mother) of Perpetual Help dates back at least to the fifteenth century, but no one knows exactly when it was painted or who was the artist. Some scholars think that the picture may be modeled after an ancient icon called the Hodegetria, which means "The Guide" or "Leader of the Way."

While we may not know the exact origins of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, we do know the next part of the story -- from the original picture itself. A parchment attached to the painting tells the story of how it got to Rome.

According to this record, a merchant from the island of Crete heard stories of many miracles that occurred around a fabulous painting on the island. Wanting this power for himself, he stole the painting and packed it away with his other wares. His travels led him, and the stolen icon, to Rome, where he suddenly fell ill. As he lay dying, he told the whole story of the stolen picture to his friend, a Roman, who was caring for him during his illness. His last request was that the Roman take the picture and have it placed in a church where it would help many people.

The Roman's wife, however, put the picture in her bedroom. Mary made her opinion of this situation known by appearing to the Roman in a series of visions. Each time, she asked him to stop hoarding the picture and start sharing it with others. And each time, the Roman ignored her. After being rejected by the adults, Mary visited their six-year-old daughter. The daughter announced that Mary had commanded that the picture be placed in a church between St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran -- a church called St. Matthew's. At last, the Roman obeyed, and the picture was placed in the care of the Augustinians on March 27, 1499.

It's hard to understand why Mary would choose such a place to be honored. St. Matthew's was a small church in a barren place far from the center of the city. Yet the rich and the poor, the powerful and the lowly alike, traveled the rough stone path to the church to seek comfort from Our Mother of Perpetual Help -- and to learn from her humility.

One man, however, was not impressed. In 1798, Napoleon's general ordered the destruction of thirty churches when the French invaded Rome. St. Matthew's was one of them. After the soldiers left, those who loved Mary searched the ruins but could find no trace of the picture. There seemed to be no doubt that their beloved picture had perished with the church.

Almost half a century later and miles away, an altar boy named Michael Marchi listened to a sacristan's tales of the past. The sacristan, named Augustine Orsetti, pointed to a picture of Mary in the chapel and said, "See that picture, Michael? It is old -- very old. It used to hang in St. Matthew's Church, where many people came to pray to the Mother of God." The painting, he said, had been rescued at the last minute, hidden from the

marauding general in a humble cart, and transported secretly to this chapel. "Remember that," the sacristan told him. Michael Marchi remembered.

Years later, Father Michael Marchi, by then a Redemptorist, was in Rome. In 1853, Pope Pius IX commanded the Redemptorists to establish their world headquarters in Rome.

After much searching and prayer, the Redemptorists bought a huge estate. When they inspected their new property, they found a house, barns, stables, gardens -- and the ruins of an old church. Inquiring into the history of the church, the Redemptorists learned that its name was St. Matthew's, and that it once had housed a miraculous painting, a painting that had been lost.

Even as they ruefully shook their heads at the loss of such a treasure, Father Michael stunned his associates by telling them that not only did the picture still exist, but he knew where it was.

After three years of prayer, the Redemptorists decided to ask that the picture be brought back to Rome. When they told Pope Pius that it was Mary's own wish that she be enshrined between St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran -- where the Church of St. Alphonsus now stood -- the Pope immediately commanded the return of the painting. Flowers and banners greeted Our Mother of Perpetual Help on April 26, 1886, and miracles attended her procession -- including the cure of a four-year-old boy suffering from a brain illness. After 75 years, Our Mother of Perpetual Help had finally returned home.

But Pius IX didn't give the picture to the Redemptorists as a gift. He gave it to them as a mission. He told them, "Make Our Mother of Perpetual Help known throughout the world." The Redemptorists embraced this command wholeheartedly by distributing reproductions of her picture and talking about her in missions and homilies around the world.

A lovely reproduction of this beautiful icon, in mosaic tiles, resides on the left side of the Shrine of the True Cross Church.

Novenas to Our Lady of Perpetual Help

First Novena Payer to Our Lady of Perpetual Help

Behold at thy feet, O Mother of Perpetual Help, a wretched sinner who has recourse to thee and confides in thee. O Mother of mercy, have pity on me.

I hear thee called by all the refuge and the hope of sinners: be then, my refuge and my hope. Assist me, for the love of Jesus Christ; stretch forth thy hand to a miserable fallen creature who recommends himself to thee, and who devotes himself to thy service for ever.

I bless and thank Almighty God, who in His mercy has given me this confidence in thee, which I hold to be a pledge of my eternal salvation.

It is true that in the past I have miserably fallen into sin, because I had not recourse to thee. I know that, with thy help, I shall conquer.

I know, too, that thou wilt assist me, if I recommend myself to thee; but I fear that, in time of danger, I may neglect to call on thee, and thus lose my soul.

The grace, then, I ask of thee, and this I beg, with all the fervor of my soul, that in all the attacks of hell I may ever have recourse to thee. O Mary, help me. O Mother of Perpetual Help, never suffer me to lose my God.

3 Hail Marys.

Second Novena Payer to Our Lady of Perpetual Help

O Mother of Perpetual Help, grant that I may ever invoke thy most powerful name, which is the safeguard of the living and the salvation of the dying. O purest Mary, O sweetest Mary, let thy name henceforth be ever on my lips. Delay not, O Blessed Lady, to help me, whenever I call on thee; for, in all my temptations, in all my needs, I shall never cease to call on thee, ever repeating thy sacred name, Mary, Mary.

O what consolation, what sweetness, what confidence, what emotion, fill my soul when I utter thy sacred name, or even only think of thee. I thank the Lord for having given thee, for my good so sweet, so powerful, so lovely a name. But I will not be content with merely uttering thy name. Let my love for thee prompt me ever to hail thee, Mother of Perpetual Help.

3 Hail Marys.

Third Novena Payer to Our Lady of Perpetual Help

O Mother of Perpetual Help, thou art the dispenser of all the gifts which God grants to us miserable sinners; and for this end He has made thee so powerful, so rich, and so

bountiful, in order that thou mayest help us in our misery. Thou art the advocate of the most wretched and abandoned sinners who have recourse to thee: come to my aid, for I recommend myself to thee.

In thy hands I place my eternal salvation, and to thee I entrust my soul. Count me among thy most devoted servants; take me under thy protection, and it is enough for me. For, if thou protect me, I fear nothing; not from my sins, because thou wilt obtain for me the pardon of them; nor from the devils, because thou art more powerful than all hell together; nor even from Jesus, my judge, because by one prayer from thee He will be appeased.

But one thing I fear: that in the hour of temptation I may through negligence fail to have recourse to thee and thus perish miserably. Obtain for me, therefore, the pardon of my sins, love for Jesus, final perseverance, and the grace ever to have recourse to thee, O Mother of Perpetual Help.

3 Hail Marys.