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## OUR MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP

# Her Intriguing Past & Comforting Presence



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*Imprimi Potest:*

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## Contents

|                                                         |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Preface</b> .....                                    | 7  |
| <b>The Traditional Story</b> .....                      | 11 |
| The Merchant Who Stole Our Lady.....                    | 11 |
| Three Centuries in the Church<br>of St. Matthew .....   | 14 |
| The Old Religious and the Young Altar Boy               | 16 |
| The Rediscovery of the Icon .....                       | 18 |
| The Reception of the Icon<br>by the Redemptorists ..... | 21 |
| The Latest Restoration of the Icon .....                | 23 |
| <b>The Spiritual Story:</b>                             |    |
| <b>The Message of the Icon</b> .....                    | 25 |
| An Icon, Not a Portrait .....                           | 25 |
| The Full Icon .....                                     | 27 |
| Mary's Features.....                                    | 28 |
| The Child Jesus .....                                   | 29 |
| The Archangels .....                                    | 30 |

|                                                |           |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| The Vibrant Colors . . . . .                   | 32        |
| The Stars on Mary's Brow . . . . .             | 35        |
| The Hands of Mary. . . . .                     | 36        |
| Mary's Eyes and Posture . . . . .              | 37        |
| The Story and the Message . . . . .            | 39        |
| <b>A Personal Story . . . . .</b>              | <b>43</b> |
| <b>The Rest of the Story:</b>                  |           |
| <b>Making Her Known Through</b>                |           |
| <b>the Mission of Evangelization . . . . .</b> | <b>54</b> |
| <b>Bibliography . . . . .</b>                  | <b>63</b> |

## The Spiritual Story: The Message of the Icon

### *An Icon, Not a Portrait*

When you first glance at the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, you see a rather lifeless, dull portrait. She does not speak to your senses. She does not stir your emotions like the Italian masterpieces that hang in the Vatican in Rome or like the beautiful mosaics of Mary that gently gaze down at you from the ceilings of the National Shrine in Washington, D.C.

Our Mother of Perpetual Help is not a life-like portrait that reveals herself to you. This is a “strange portrait” in a plain and ancient style of calm restraint. It is an icon, which in

Greek means “image.” This image has been painted according to the rules of tradition that have governed religious painters of the Eastern world for centuries. An icon is like a window—a window looking out upon eternity. It is not meant to represent Mary in a natural way as the Mother of God as she lived on earth. The iconographer (the artist who painted this image) did not see his work merely as a piece of art to be displayed in a museum; he saw it primarily as a prayer, which he began to paint only after he had spent months in fasting and prayer. He believed that once his brush touched the wood, God would use his creation as a channel of grace.

Therefore, if our Lady’s features do not seem to have the natural proportions of a woman, it makes little difference, because the artist seeks to represent the spirituality of Mary. The person who gazes at her image is gradually moved by the spirituality that is expressed and rises to her real presence.

## The Full Icon

The icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help belongs to a type of icon known as *Hodegetria* icons (*Hodegetria* means “she who shows the way”), or the Virgin of the Passion. Each icon in this tradition tells a story about the passion of Jesus. Mary is holding her Child on her left arm. Angels carry the instruments of Christ’s passion. Mary is not looking at her Child but with a sad tenderness and pleading eyes appears to be in dialogue with whoever looks at her. The original picture is painted on wood, in colors of the composition designated by artists as tempera. Its proportions are twenty-one inches high by seventeen inches wide. It is considered to be a most beautiful example of Byzantine art.

In the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help, Mary is represented in half-figure on a background of gold. It is evident that the artist intended to depict her in a standing posture.

She wears a red tunic, a dark-blue hooded cape with a green lining, a cobalt-blue mantle that covers her hair and forehead. The tunic fits tightly around the neck and wrist and is bordered with broad bands of gold. The mantle also is interwoven and hemmed with gold, and the part that covers Mary's brow is adorned with two golden stars.

### **Mary's Features**

The complexion of the Blessed Virgin is dark; the face oval-shaped, the eyes olive-hued, the nose delicate, the mouth small, the fingers long and slender. Her gaze is sacred and profound. Her large eyes with their pronounced eyebrows and delicate features along with the dark color of her garments give her whole figure a sacred grandeur that penetrates to the very heart of the viewer and the mystery she herself appears to contemplate as she gazes out. In a word, our Lady is portrayed as the ideal type of oriental beauty.

Mary is carrying her Child in her left hand while he clings to her right hand. The long fingers of this hand do not close on the hand of her Child but point toward him as the way of salvation. One can almost hear her saying what she said to the servants at the wedding at Cana: “Listen to him, do whatever he tells you”; he is the way.

### **The Child Jesus**

Jesus is represented with brown hair and childlike features. His figure is fully proportioned. His face is mature, showing sadness and compassion like his Mother’s. He is dressed in a green tunic, a red cincture, and a brown cloak. His garments, like those of his Mother, are ornamented with gold. He also wears sandals, but the one on his right foot is loose so that it allows us to see the sole of his foot, perhaps a sign that although he is God, he is also human. His look is not directed at

the archangel Gabriel but to a point outside the picture. His face and entire figure seem to express a great serenity.

## **The Archangels**

In the upper corners of the icon are the two archangels, Michael and Gabriel. On the right is Gabriel, whose name means “God is strong.” He was the angel who announced the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah (Luke 1:11–20) and the birth and mission of Jesus to Mary (Luke 1:26–38). He is dressed in a tunic and mantle of purple with white shading. His hands are covered with a veil of the same color, and he is holding a cross with four black nails at its foot. His face is young, his head is uncovered, and his dark brown hair falls behind his neck and down his back. He has flaming wings of green and gold and a circular halo, with stippling around its edges. He is looking at the Child Jesus with an attitude of adoration and offering.

On the left is Michael, whose name means, “who is like God.” In the Book of the Apocalypse (12:7) he is the leader of the angelic hosts in the battle between the dragon (Satan) and his angels. He has a red tunic with a blue mantle that covers his hands and nearly all of his body. He is holding the other instruments of the passion: a pot in which stands a stick with a sponge and a soldier’s lance. He is holding them with the same reverence as Gabriel, for they are the symbols of Christ’s victory and our salvation.

To further appreciate the beauty and power of this picture, you must look more closely at the symbolism that lies hidden in the icon, for it speaks a powerful message to us. First, there are the awkward red letters painted on the picture. It almost looks like graffiti and certainly isn’t something you are accustomed to seeing on masterpieces or portraits. It seems so unnatural, almost like a child took red lipstick and scribbled a code over the heads

of a family portrait in the hallway, but the artist has a definite purpose. It is for the sake of the viewer: the one who looks at the icon. He doesn't want you to make any mistake in identifying whom it is that he has painted. Above our Lady's head he writes in Greek letters, this is Mary, the "*Mother of God.*" Above the Archangels he writes, this is "*the Archangel Michael*" (on the left), this is "*the Archangel Gabriel*" (on the right). They are both carrying the instruments of his passion. On the right side of child he writes: this is "*Jesus Christ.*"

## The Vibrant Colors

The colors in the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help are strong and vibrant, but the colors are not used just to catch your eye; they also speak about Mary.

First, look at all the gold in the picture, particularly in the background. Why the gold? In the Roman world, gold was a symbol for

divinity. So the artist is clearly saying here that this woman you look upon, Mary the Mother of God, is “full of grace.” She is surrounded by the divinity of God. This divine grace is not simply surrounding her like a halo, it permeates her whole being, highlighted by the threads of gold we see woven into her garments. Finally, much more than highlighting the figures in the icon and the folds of the garments, the gold represents the light of God coming through the icon, radiating out to those who pray before it.

Next there are the colors of Mary’s garments. She is wearing a red tunic and a dark-blue mantle. We are told that red was the color worn by virgins in the time of Christ, and the mantle’s dark blue was the color worn by mothers. The dark blue is quite different from the customary soft powdery blue you will often see in portraits of Mary. On a spiritual level, it symbolizes her faith, the faith that made it possible for God to become man. It also emphasizes her universal motherhood,

with which she covers and protects all of her children. Her red tunic is very striking to the eye. It speaks of her great love and sacrifice; it is a reminder of her participation in the life and passion of Jesus. It is also a symbol of Mary's openness to the Holy Spirit.

The garments of the Child in the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help even more strongly highlight the nature of Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Mary. Jesus' tunic is green, signifying life having its source in God. The red cincture that binds his waist symbolizes the blood Jesus shed for our redemption. The brown color of the cloak the Child wears over his tunic stresses the extraordinary gesture of humility and humbleness, an extreme gesture of humility. The combination of green and brown with red is a sign of Christ's divine and human natures. God loved us so much that he sent his Son to become one of us who gave his life for us in order that we might live.