

We hope you enjoy these sample pages. For ordering information, visit Liguori.org.

Embracing the Icon *of* Love



Br. Daniel Korn, CSsR



Dedication

*I dedicate this book to the School Sisters of Notre Dame,
who instilled in me a great love for the Mother of God, and
in gratitude to those sisters who formed me in my Catholic faith
and introduced me to the Redemptorist brotherhood.*



Imprimi Potest:

Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial
Denver Province, the Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications, Liguori, Missouri 63057

To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

Copyright © 2015 Daniel Korn

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of Liguori Publications.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Korn, Daniel.

Embracing the Icon of Love / Daniel Korn, CSsR. — First edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-7648-2565-1 (paperback) — ISBN 978-0-7648-7017-0 (eISBN)

1. Mary, Blessed Virgin, Saint—Meditations. 2. Catholic Church—Doctrines. 3. Love.

I. Title.

BT608.5.K67 2015

232.91—dc23

2015005801

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Excerpts from Vatican documents used with permission. Copyright © *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*.

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists.
To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 / 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Contents

Preface	5
PART I Introduction	7
Chapter 1–What Is an Icon?	9
Chapter 2–How to Read and Pray With Icons	11
PART II Praying With the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help	
Chapter 3–Before You Begin	15
Chapter 4–The Face	17
Chapter 5–The Hands of Mary	23
Chapter 6–The Child (<i>Logos</i>)	28
Chapter 7–The Angels	34
Chapter 8–The Golden Background	39
Chapter 9–The Mystical Consciousness of the Icon	43
ICON IMAGES	49
Chapter 10–Mary in the Life of the Church Today	65
PART III Prayers and Exercises	67
Experiencing the Icon’s Energy	68
The Prayer of Gazing	69
Chapter 11–Prayers and Exercises	71
PART IV	
The History of the Icon and Its Restoration	91
CONCLUSION	96



Chapter 1

What Is an Icon?

The word *icon*, which means “to describe an image,” has a long history. It originated in ancient Greece and is still used today, often to describe people or symbols. An internet search of *icon* grants access to a world of possibilities. But in its religious and spiritual context, *icon* is still comparable to its meaning in the modern context.

Iconography, the process of writing and painting icons, involves symbols that reveal messages hidden within a particular image. By gazing on an icon when we're in a contemplative state of prayer, we can read the mystery found within the image. Although people are attracted to the beauty of these images, they often miss the deeper meaning because they're unfamiliar with the practice of reading and praying icons.

Most icons are painted in a style that engages the viewer. The direction of eyes and placement of hands, as well as the colors and symbols around the icon, are fashioned with purpose.

Icons are windows into mystery. When we look into an icon with faith and devotion, we can feel a sense of being drawn into a living presence. Subjects seem to be looking at us through a window frame. We're summoned into the presence of the active spiritual energy in the image.

Icons are not static objects of sacred imagery that remind us of the holy. Rather, they're energy-filled realities that draw us into a relationship with what the image represents.

Iconography exposes us to the world of the sacred. Gazing with faith upon an icon of Christ, the Virgin, saints, or angels, we experience a sense of presence. Icons are not static objects of sacred imagery that remind us of the holy. They're energy-filled realities that draw us into a relationship with what the image represents.

When we pray and gaze on icons, we're invited to go inward. This engagement with the world of the sacred can change us and form in us a surprising and unexpected response to the world.

Encounters with icons often bring us into a world of active spiritual experiences. They can cause us to experience God in a very different way. Just as modern social and athletic icons inspire us with their accomplishments, sacred icons stir us to recognize the Divine in our midst. But sacred icons are more than inspirational and artful enhancements that uplift our spirits. They are also a gift of a living sacred presence experienced through our sense of sight.

When we focus on sacred images within iconography, we see the mystery of salvation with new eyes of awareness as we're called into a deeper experience of the holy.

In this book, which includes color images, I will explore with you the best-known Marian icon in the world—the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help—to help us grow closer to Jesus.



Questions for Reflection

1. Reflect on your experience of Mary. Do you have a special devotion to Mary? How did you acquire the practice of Marian Prayer?
2. What drew you to pray before Mary? Why do you continue?
3. Gaze a few moments into the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, then ask yourself what thoughts or feelings arose.



Chapter 2

How to Read and Pray With Icons

When we speak of reading and praying with an icon, what do we mean?

Iconography is not understood well in the Latin Church. But the spiritual and theological development of iconography has a long history in the Eastern Churches. We can learn how to read and pray with icons by listening to the words of theologians from the Eastern traditions. For example, the Russian Orthodox theologian Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944)—in his book *Icons and the Name of God*—describes the icon as “a mode in which Divine Energy radiates into us.”

When praying before an icon in faith and devotion, we experience an exchange of energy, a divine presence. This divine energy should be understood in a mystically physical sense: The countenance on the icon shines forth and this radiation enters and illuminates our spiritual center, our heart.

When praying before an icon in faith and devotion, we experience an exchange of energy, a divine presence.

In simple terms, our intention to pray and our baptismal life allow us access to the divine presence. This privileged access makes it possible for us to experience what some spiritual writers call the “space of God”—a concept describing God’s movement in creation and in our lives.

The concept of God “making a space” is described through the act of his creation:

- God made a space in creating Adam and Eve.
- God made a space in Abraham.
- God made a space in his Chosen People, in Moses, in the camp of Israel, and in the ark.
- God made a space in Mary’s womb.
- God makes a space in you, in me, and in all who are baptized.
- We can say that God makes a space in the creation of an icon, too.

In the divine presence spoken of by iconographers, we can say we are in the space of Mary when we gaze upon an icon of Mary. We are also in the space of God that resides within Mary. Those who engage the icon with the full strength of their understanding will find in the icon a means to contemplate the mysteries of Christ.

As we will see in our further reading of the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the icon is filled with teachings on how to develop interior strength and how to give ourselves to Jesus ever anew, every day.



Questions for Reflection

1. What have you experienced while praying before the icon?
2. Reflect on the quality of your prayer.
3. What are your feelings when you pray?
4. Why do you practice devotion to the Mother of God?



Chapter 4



The Face

Images on pages 50-53

The Eight-pointed Star

The first thing many notice in the icon is the eight-pointed star on the top of Mary's veil. This most ancient symbol of Mary comes to us from the catacombs. Ancient artists used the eight-pointed star to identify images of Mary.

The star of the Magi in the infancy narratives comes to mind as the symbol that captured the imagination of the Roman Christians.



Mary is the star that leads us
to redeeming love.

It became a statement connecting Mary with the revelation of the Incarnation as well as a way to identify her image.

Mary, according to St. Bonaventure, is the aurora, the early-morning star that precedes the rising Sun of Justice—Jesus. Mary is the rising star who drives away the night of sin and prepares the way for the mercy and love of God to be manifested in the flesh, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.

As St. Luke writes in his Gospel, quoting the angel Gabriel “... you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High” (1:31–32).

We sing in hymns and antiphons, “*Ave Maris Stella*,” that star of the sea that guides the ships to the shore of safety. Mary is the portal of the sky, the one announcing the coming of the Son of God. She is the star that leads us to redeeming love.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) Pope Francis states: “She constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history and in our daily lives. She is the woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town ‘with haste’ (Luke 1:39) to be of service to others. This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelization.”

The Eyes of the Virgin



Mary's eyes are often the second element that attracts our attention. They draw you into the icon. Her look is one of great tenderness but also one of intensity.

Her eyes are not directed toward Jesus or toward the activity of the angels, but always facing toward the one who is looking at her.

This is a special effect of Marian icons. Usually when the icon is pictured with Mary and the Child, we are to understand that Jesus is blessing anyone at whom his Mother is gazing upon.

In iconography, the Child Jesus is usually featured with his hand in the form of a blessing while looking at his Mother and holding either a scroll or a Scripture book in his other hand. This is the case in Our Lady of Czestochowa and the well-known icon *Salus Populi Romani*, which is located in St. Mary's Major in Rome. The message of these two icons tells us that whoever Mary gazes upon, Christ the Word incarnate will bless.

In the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, however, the Child is not holding the scroll, nor is he looking at his Mother or those before the icon. His energy is trained toward the angel with the cross. His expression reflects the same intensity as his Mother's.

Both the looks of Mary and of Jesus portray a sense of pondering and contemplation at the events surrounding them. Both faces convey they are listening reflectively. The iconographers show us the ear of Mary and the ear of the child, exposed, inviting us to notice this detail. These exposed ears teach us an attitude of contemplative listening to the movement of God in our lives and the importance of cultivating it.

The Virgin, who listens to the word of the angel, and the Child *Logos* are always attuned to the will of the Father. The Virgin's eyes look out to us, and the eyes of the Child look to the cross.



The Icon of Love



The Eight-pointed Star

See page 17



The Eyes of the Virgin

See page 19