

MAREK KOTYŃSKI, C.SS.R.

A THEOLOGICAL OUTLINE AND THE SPIRITUAL  
MESSAGE OF THE ICON OF OUR MOTHER  
OF PERPETUAL HELP

*The Origins of the Icon; The Conception of the Icon; The Theology of the Icon; The Cult of the Icon; The Painting of the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help; The Identity of the Persons; The Message of the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help; Conclusion.*

The year 2016 marks the 150th anniversary of entrusting the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help to the custody of the Redemptorists by Pope Pius IX. It is an important date both for the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, which has been propagating the cult of that Marian image since 1866, and for the Catholic Church. To the Redemptorists, the worldwide dissemination of copies of the icon, venerated in the Roman Church of the Most Holy Redeemer and St. Alphonsus M. de Liguori, is a symbol of the vitality and development of their religious institute over the past century and a half. To the Church, it is a sign of an extraordinary expansion and deepening of Christian spirituality through the veneration of the Savior's Mother, who guides the faithful on their pilgrimage on the road of redemption through her intercession with God.

Since the famous icon was entrusted to the Redemptorists, the veneration of Our Mother of Perpetual Help has developed mainly, though not exclusively, in Europe and the Americas. It has been assimilated by what may be described as the Western mentality of the preachers and the faithful, characterized by dynamism of action, a pragmatic approach to life and well-developed communication skills. This fact has considerably influenced the perception and interpretation of the message of the sacred

image, understood, generally speaking, in terms of ‘spiritual help’, notably in an individual’s earthly problems.<sup>1</sup>

The painting of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is an icon, a theological painting deriving from Eastern spirituality. Its true value and deepest spiritual message are revealed only in the context of the Byzantine faith and spirituality that produced this icon. Therefore, it is worthwhile acquainting oneself with some elements of the Eastern tradition concerning the icon in order to discover a deeper, theological and spiritual message of the image of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

### *The Origins of the Icon*

An icon (from Greek *eikón* – “picture, image, portrait”) is a concept referring to pictures related to the Eastern Church, intended for Christian worship, both in churches and in private homes.<sup>2</sup> While the icon first appeared in the Byzantine Empire (330-1453), its cultural roots go back much further than that, drawing upon a variety of earlier traditions: the *Hellenistic tradition*, deriving from the Greco-Roman heritage, with ancient Alexandria as one of its most prominent centers, and the *Oriental tradition*, i.e. art forms deriving from Palestine, Asia Minor, Egypt and Syria. Hence, the influences that were instrumental in the emergence of the icon included, for example, the catacomb

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<sup>1</sup> “Western Christianity has tended to emphasise the didactic, rather than any sacramental quality of sacred art. Today there is evidence of renewed interest in the visual arts on the part of Western Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. This can be seen as a by-product of the liturgical movement, which has led to a radical revision of the liturgical rites and a reevaluation of liturgical practice and spirituality. Through the study of the history of liturgy and the role of ritual and symbol, there is increased interest in early Christian and medieval art, as well as in traditional iconography. In addition, there is valid criticism of religious art that is overtly didactic or overtly sentimental. This has led to a new appreciation of icons and the art of Third World countries, which often expresses a primal vision, and thus can challenge historically limited and culture-bound images of the incarnation and saving work of Christ”, Ronald J. ZAWILLA, *Icon(s), Iconography*, in: “The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality”, Collegeville Minnesota 1993, 519-521.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Icons(s), iconography*, in: Michael Downey, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Collegeville, Minnesota 1993, 519.

symbols and paintings from the first centuries of Christianity, but also the Egyptian portrait painting (3<sup>rd</sup> c.), examples of which were discovered in the Fayum cemetery near Cairo. Both the above-mentioned traditions were assimilated by the Christian community, which was slowly making an intelligent selection, rejecting those elements and forms that did not harmonize with the Gospel teachings or with the spiritual experiences of the followers of Christ. The above-mentioned forms were subsequently transformed by the young Church over the course of history, acquiring their own unique features and closely linked with their professed faith.

The first icons were portraits (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.) representing Christ, the Mother of God and the saints. A tradition written down in the 6<sup>th</sup> century says that the first icon of Christ (*Acheiropitos*: not made by human hand) was completed while He was still living on earth (the legend of King Abgar), while the first icons of the Mother of God are traditionally attributed to St. Luke the Evangelist. He is considered to be the author of three types of icons: Eleusa (Russ. *Umilenye*: Virgin of Tenderness), Hodegetria (She Who Shows the Way, Guide) and Deesis (*Deisis*: Supplication). The thesis that the first icons date back to the time of the Apostles is as late as the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century (the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea and Epiphanius) and does not seem very probable. It was not until the 5<sup>th</sup> century that the cult of the icons in the Church began, and the oldest surviving ones are kept today in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai.

The Constantinian era, when Christianity enjoyed freedom (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.), saw a development of the icon. New subjects and new icon types appear at that time, namely those of Christ the Ruler of All (*Pantocrator*) and the Virgin enthroned. Icons then become a reflection of the spirit of prayer, they begin to be used to successfully propagate the Christian faith and to combat heresy (Aryanism). It is also at that time that the proper conception of the holy picture begins to take shape in Byzantium. Its conception was influenced, among other things, by the Roman belief in the effectiveness of the emperor's image and his power inherent in the image representing him, as well as the beautiful legend about Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge (312),

with the famous: *In hoc signo vinces*. There were often stormy debates and disputes over the conception of the holy picture in the course of history, but it was thanks to them, and thanks to the ideas and actions of saints, the Fathers of the Church, as well as synods and councils (the Synod in Trullo, 692; the Second Council of Nicaea, 787) that the theological and pictorial conception of the icon was worked out. It combines the classical beauty of harmony, balance, proportions and concreteness, guaranteed by the painting discipline (the so-called canon of the icon), with the spiritual element, prayer and liturgical cult.

### *The Conception of the Icon*

To Eastern Christians, an icon is not intended as a decoration of the church or a home, it is not meant to grace religious services, but is, rather, a cult object, created for liturgy and private prayer. It is a sacramental sign of the presence of the Triune God, a place of the presence of Divine grace. Made according to the iconographic canon, it reveals through pictorial means (painting) and language (inscriptions) a spiritual world, deified, transformed by the resurrection. It is a window open to eternity, in which Christ, the Blessed Virgin, angels and saints live.

The theology of the icon was developed under the impact of the iconoclastic disputes (Byzantium 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c.), which forced Christian thinkers to provide a philosophical and theological justification for the cult of the icon in the Church. The iconoclasts, invoking the proscription against making a likeness of God, sanctioned in the Old Testament (Exodus 20: 4; Deut. 5: 8 ff), fought against icons, seeking to prevent the ecclesiastical cult from dangerously approaching the idolatrous practices followed in pagan religions. However, in their zeal they seriously impoverished Christian spirituality, which found its integral expression in the contemplation and veneration of the icon, in the spirit of the Gospels and in line with the doctrinal tradition of the Church.

The Synod in Trullo, the first one to define the essence of the icon and to point to the connection between the icon and the dogma of the incarnation, was one of the factors that helped shape the Christian conception of the icon. The Synod broke

with the existing practice of depicting Christ exclusively as a Lamb, with the justification that this Old Testament symbol had become reality in the New Testament. For in the incarnation the Logos, i.e. Jesus Christ, took flesh and made Its dwelling among the people; thus, one could see it and paint it, representing the Savior's human form. Iconoclasts protested, however, invoking the arguments of the Council of Chalcedon (451) that the two natures: the divine and the human, exist indivisibly and inseparably in Christ, hence one cannot venerate an icon representing solely His human nature without falling into a heresy. By contrast, the defenders of the icon, distinguished clearly between the natures and the person and rightly explained that an icon, rather than representing Christ's Divine or human nature, represents His person. The person of Christ mysteriously unites both His natures: the Divine and the human one, without separating or mixing them. Following up on this idea, the Second Council of Nicaea proclaimed that the veneration shown to the icon passes over to its archetype (Christ, the Mother of God or saints) according to the principle of "likeness". What the icon represents through the painting is not the nature of its archetype, but exclusively the person of its archetype; that is why it bears his name. Obviously, the icon, though resembling its archetype, is different from it in terms of substance; otherwise, it would be identical with its own archetype.

#### *The Theology of the Icon*

The Biblical conception of the image and the dogma of the incarnation are the basic foundation of the theological vision of the icon. Already the Old Testament says that man was created in the image and in the likeness of God (Genesis 1: 27; 5:1). Man is, therefore, an image of God, His living icon. This icon had, admittedly, been deformed by the fall of the first parents, the original sin (Genesis 3: 1-24), but in the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, it was restored to its original state. For when the set time had fully come, God revealed Himself to man definitively and completely in Jesus of Nazareth, who was not only the promised Messiah, but also the Son of God Himself.

Christ the Savior “is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1: 15)<sup>3</sup>, a true icon of God. That is why He could say about Himself: “ Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14: 9). The Old Testament proscription against making material images of God and venerating them, motivated by the risk of idolatry, was thereby abolished and was basically no longer observed in the Church.

Theodore the Studite (759–826), a monk and theologian, argues that in the icon there is no other person except the person of Christ: it is precisely that person, impressed as a character through the similarity of form, that is viewed and venerated in the icon. The archetype is actually present in the image, but this is a purely personal-relational, spiritual kind of presence and it is in this presence that the dignity of the icon consists. That is why we can say that by praying before an icon, we are praying directly to Christ. By kissing an icon, we kiss Christ. By bowing before an icon, we are bowing before Christ.

The Second Council of Nicaea defined the ultimate teaching on icons, stating:

We, following the divinely inspired teaching of the Holy Fathers and the tradition of the Catholic Church, for we know that this is of the Holy Spirit who certainly dwells in it, define in all certitude that as the figure of the honored and life-giving Cross, so the venerable and holy images, the ones from painted materials, from marble as well as those from other materials, must be suitably placed in the holy churches of God, on sacred vessels and vestments, and on the walls and on the altars, at home and on the streets, images of our Lord Jesus Christ, God and Savior, and of our undefiled lady, the holy Mother of God, and of the honorable angels and of all the saints. For, the more frequently they are seen with the help of the imagination, so much more quickly are those who view them raised to contemplate the original figures which inspired them, to kiss and to render honorable adoration to them, not however, to grant true Latria according to our faith, which is proper to divine nature alone; but just as to the figure of the revered and life-giving Cross and to the holy gospels, and to the other sacred monu-

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<sup>3</sup> Biblical quotation from: *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (NIV Bible), 2011.

ments, let an oblation of incense and lights be made to give honor to these as was the pious custom with the ancients. „For the honor of the image passes to the original”; and he who shows reverence to the image, shows reverence to the substance of Him depicted in it.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to the achievements of theologians such as Leonid Uspienski, Paul Evdokimov and Sergius Bulgakov, modern Christian Orthodox thought has expanded the fundamental Church doctrine and made it more easily comprehensible, using contemporary theological concepts. The above-mentioned authors have stressed the fact that the basic and most important value of any icon lies precisely in its likeness to the represented Archetype, to whom the faithful individual piously prays.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The Cult of the Icon*

An icon of Christ completed according to the iconographic canon and provided with a special blessing carries within itself a visible image of the Redeemer, but without His actual presence. It is only in the Eucharist that, mysteriously, Christ is actually present, but without His image; in an icon, conversely, we have a visible image but without the substantial being. The power of the sacred icon consists precisely in the identity of the mental picture, expressed by means of a painting in an icon, with its Archetype, but only as an image and not as reality. That is why the decisions of the above-mentioned council spoke about a “likeness”.<sup>6</sup>

For Christ’s image in an icon to come into being, matter is needed: paints, a panel, stones for making a mosaic, etc. These elements are, however, a mere material means for creating a place for an image to appear, but in themselves are not the im-

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<sup>4</sup> Council of Nicea II, Ecumenical VII, action VII, *Definition of the Sacred Images and Tradition*, dz. 302, in: H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 601-602, English translation: <http://www.clerus.org/bibliaclerusonline/en/dp4.htm>

<sup>5</sup> While preparing these deliberations, I have extensively drawn upon: *The Veneration of Icons*, in: Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, translated by Boris Jakim, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Aidan NICHOLS, *Redeeming beauty. Soundings of Sacral Aesthetics*, Ashgate Publishing Company 2007, 80-84.

age which is ideally present in an icon, a material object (when the paint peels off, the image becomes invisible and the icon ceases to exist). That is why an icon serves for contemplation and prayer; when we meditate on an icon, we ascend with our thought, inspired by faith, to Christ Himself; whereas coming into contact with the Eucharist we have before us Christ Himself and we need not ascend to Him in our mind, as we do not face His image.<sup>7</sup>

Christians believe in the presence of Christ both in His icon and in the Eucharist, but in different ways: in the icon, it is recognizable through prayer, when the Savior approaches a faithful individual praying before His icon, while in the holy gift of the Eucharist His presence becomes actually perceptible in the unification with Him through holy communion. In the former case, we have to do with a *sacramental*, and in the latter with a sacrament. One needs to bear in mind that when we bless an icon no transformation takes place in it, nor does any change in its substance occur; it is only that by virtue of the power vested in the Church, the painting becomes identified with the Archetype and becomes an icon. Thanks to a blessing, a picture made by human hand becomes similar to the image of the Savior and then virtually every icon becomes miraculous by its very nature, as the power of God's presence is inherent in it (even though it is not always perceptible).<sup>8</sup>

Because the icon refers to the Archetypes (Christ, the Holy Virgin or saints) represented in it, and brings them to mind, it inspires the believer to love them. Thus it strengthens the spiritual relationship between the praying individual and the person of the Savior or saints who become accessible in it. Nonetheless, in order to prevent idolatry, the Fathers of the Second Council of Nicaea pointed out the fundamental difference between worshipping God and venerating icons. True adoration and cult is owed to God alone and is denoted by the term *λατρεία* (*latreia*); it is expressed through the *προσκύνησις λατρευτική* (*proskynesis*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *The Veneration of Icons*, Chap. 7, p. 83 ff., in: Sergius BULGAKOV, *Icons and the Name of God*, translated by Boris Jakim, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*



*latreutike*), i.e. a bow of adoration. By contrast, the saints and holy pictures deserve a *προσκύνησις τιμητική* (*proskynesis timetike*), which may be translated as a “bow of reverence”.<sup>9</sup> Hence icons must not indeed be rendered that true worship of faith which pertains to the divine nature alone. They need to be contemplated and one needs to pray before them, since “those who contemplate these with faith, raised to the memory and desire of the originals of these, as to the figure of the revered and life-giving Cross and to the holy gospels, and to the other sacred monuments, let an oblation of incense and lights be made to give honor to these as was the pious custom with the ancients”.<sup>10</sup> Because, as St. Basil says, “The honor of the image passes to the original; and he who shows reverence to the image, shows reverence to the substance of Him depicted in it”.<sup>11</sup>

By contemplating an icon, i.e. by communing in faith with the Savior accessible in an image, a Christian enters into a prayerful dialogue of faith with Him.<sup>12</sup> He thus fulfils his eternal destiny as well as his vocation, which St. Paul describes as follows: ‘For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters’ (Romans 8: 29). Thus uniting with Christ, he builds the brotherly communion of the Mystical Body, i.e. the Church, and develops true spirituality: “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col. 3: 9-10). Build-

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Council of Nicea II, Ecumenical VII, action VII, *Definition of the Sacred Images and Tradition*, dz. 302, in: H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 601-602, English translation: <http://www.clerus.org/bibliaclerusonline/en/dp4.htm>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> This is also borne out by testimonies of Western mystics, e.g. St. Teresa of Jesus, who encouraged her nuns to make use of images so as to deepen their communion with Christ: “You will find it very helpful if you can get an image or a picture of this Lord – one that you like – not to wear round your neck and never look at but to use regularly whenever you talk to Him, and He will tell you what to say” (*The Way of Perfection*, Ch. 26). Cf: <http://www.ourladyswarriors.org/saints/wayperf2.htm#chap26>

ing a spiritual bond with God and His Church basically consists in becoming like the Savior, in becoming His image: “And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man” (1 Cor. 15: 49). Thus, communing deeply with an icon reveals the most profound sense of Christian prayer: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3: 18).

#### *The Painting of the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help*

Even though the deepest and most fundamental value of an icon in a Christian’s spiritual life arises from its theological qualities discussed above, the semantic (content) and the didactic dimensions of the holy picture are not without significance, either. In an icon an important Biblical message is cast into an aesthetic form defined by the canon. An icon may be said to be a painted Gospel, and the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is also an icon of that kind.

The Roman original of the painting of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is a portable icon that has been publicly venerated by being carried in liturgical processions and which has had the faithful bowing (*proskynesis*) toward it in private prayer. Hence its modest dimensions (54 x 41.5 cm), commensurate with human proportions, create a sense of intimacy with the persons represented in the picture. It is an encaustic painting on a walnut panel; its origins and author are unknown. In order to read its message, one needs to realize what kind of icon we have to deal with.

#### *The Identity of the Persons*

While discussing the symbolism of the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, one should note at the very beginning that we have to do with a picture of the passion, known as the Virgin of the Passion, and that the composition and formal features of the painting (particularly the Mother’s hand held straight and gestur-

ing towards the Son) are characteristic of the type of iconography known as Hodegetria (Greek: She Who Shows the Way, Guide). One can say immediately that our icon clearly shows both the influences of Byzantine-Cretan painting, and in particular considerable similarity to some of the icons by Andreas Ritzos (1422–1492), and Occidental influences, mainly in the face, which has lost the characteristic Byzantine-Cretan severity. This could suggest that the icon had its origin in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian-Cretan painting.

The title of our icon contains letters (placed over the heads of the depicted persons) that are abbreviations of Greek names. They say that the icon depicts the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God (MP ΘΥ – *Μητηρ θεού, Meter Theou*), Jesus Christ (IC XC – *Ιησούς Χριστός, Iesus Christos*), as well as *Michael the Archangel* (OAM – *Ὁ Ἀρχάγγελος Μιχαήλ*, on the left-hand side of the viewer) and *Gabriel the Archangel* (OAG – *Ὁ Ἀρχάγγελος Γαβριήλ*).

It is worth noting that the title of the icon is important for prayerful meditation, as it identifies the persons depicted in it and refers them to their Archetypes. Writing the names on the icon is always connected with an act of the blessing of the picture, which act makes it possible for the faithful to establish an intimate dialogue of faith with Christ and the saints.

One should bear in mind all of the time that icons do not represent saints in the same manner as they once lived on earth and the details of their clothing or special insignia in their images are meant exclusively to make a given person recognizable and distinguishable from others. An icon does not reproduce the sensual world, but rather the world transformed by the resurrection. The humanity of the saints is deified and they are persons already living in eternity, in the dimension of the resurrection, they are filled with a light which is not of this world.<sup>13</sup>

The Blessed Virgin, depicted frontally, half-length, in a hieratic pose, is the most prominent person in the icon and the one

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<sup>13</sup> Passion icons, for example, depict Christ on the cross, with signs of the passion, but also frequently with His eyes open, not suffering, but already living in glory, and do not attempt to show what He looked like during His lifetime.

that most draws the observer's attention.<sup>14</sup> There is no haughtiness in Mary's appearance, however, for it expresses simplicity and humility. This is how the painter wants to make the beholder aware that he is standing in front of someone extremely important, in front of the Mother of God Himself. This is not meant to provoke fear in the viewer, however, but to serve as an even clearer invitation to enter into a personal dialogue with the depicted person. This device, strengthened by the effect of Mary's large wide open eyes turned towards the viewer, is meant to make him aware of the extraordinary dignity and grace bestowed upon him: the Mother of God Himself goes out to meet him so as to begin a conversation of the heart with him. The desire of the christian praying before the icon to humble oneself and to bow derives precisely from the recognition of the dignity which has been bestowed upon him.<sup>15</sup>

The Virgin of Perpetual Help is dressed in a mantle, ultramarine in color, which, covering her head, falls in folds onto her arms and ends in a kind of cape with ornamental golden tassels. Under the mantle a red tunic can be seen. We know that while the drawing appeals more to reason, color 'signifies' and its value in an icon is highly symbolic. In the past, the colors of the garments worn by saints in icons were determined by special canons defining also their meanings, but they, too, changed over time.<sup>16</sup> Our icon is probably marked by influences of the Vene-

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<sup>14</sup> The frontal depiction fills the image with her presence; it is meant to intensify the strength with which the figure affects the beholder and to call on him to engage in a dialogue of glances, and subsequently in deep prayer. In icons, only those figures that did not reach sanctity are depicted in profile; that is why we do not have much personal contact with them.

<sup>15</sup> The Virgin of Perpetual Help looks not so much at the person watching her image, but deep into his soul, delicately piercing him with her gaze. She lives in the world of spirit and turns her attention to that which is profound, spiritual. Thus, the eyes of the Virgin of Perpetual Help not only penetrate the beholder's inner life, but at the same time open the way to the Mother's heart for him.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in ancient Cretan icons, Mary was clothed in a red mantle, signifying Her humanity, and a blue tunic, a symbol of deification, because she had carried the Son of God within Herself and had become His Mother. In ancient icons, Jesus was wearing a blue mantle, because He was God, and a red tunic signifying His humanity. It can be seen, therefore, that in antiquity

tian-Cretan painting school, combining the inspirations of the Oriental and Occidental traditions, and that is why the meanings of the colors of the garments worn by the Virgin of Perpetual Help are different.

At the sensual level, navy blue has a passive character, because it weakly reflects light, but it becomes particularly active at the spiritual level. It refers one towards the supra terrestrial, the transcendent. Thus the navy blue mantle of the Mother of God makes the mystery of her being chosen more easily understandable: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1: 28). It is, most importantly, the symbol of her faith; the faith which made it possible for God to become man within her and to come to this world so as to perform the work of salvation: this is precisely what the icon represents. The ultramarine mantle also emphasizes her universal motherhood, with which she covers and protects all of her children, as if with a mantle.

The red color has an "unlimited" character, i.e. one close to the light. Its strong radiation and its close connection with fire and blood, elements of life, make it rank as the first among all colors. It has an earthly character; it stands for youth, beauty, wealth, health, joy and love, but also for war, passion and wrath. At the religious level, it symbolizes spiritual love, the Holy Spirit. It is also a symbol of love, sacrifice, altruism and martyrdom, as well as a symbol of elevation and honor. Hence Mary's red tunic indicates her great love and sacrifice: it is a reminder of the participation of the Blessed Virgin in the life and passion of Jesus: "near the cross of Jesus stood his mother" (John 19: 25). It is also a symbol of her openness to the Spirit, manifested in particular at the moment of the Annunciation: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1: 35), and of her complete dedication to God's plans for salvation: "'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled'" (Luke 1: 38). In combination with blue, red suggests her great dignity, for grace exalts human love and leads towards the deification of man.

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the distribution of colors was different from that in the icon of Perpetual Help, which was painted later.

According to tradition Mary is also a symbol of the Church, that is why the colors of the Virgin's garments also refer to the community of the faithful. Navy blue shows that they are the chosen people and that they are justified by their faith in Christ the Savior (cf. Romans 8: 33), and is also a symbol of the spirituality of the Church, its fidelity and its universal motherhood in imitation of the Mother of God. Red signifies that, thanks to being chosen by God, the greatest strength of the Church is love, or the power of the Holy Spirit, burning like fire in the hearts of its members.

Through their rich symbolism, the garments of the Child in the icon of Perpetual Help even more strongly highlight the nature of Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Mary. He is attired in a green tunic girded with a red girdle across the hips and in a golden-brown outer garment. Green, the color complementary to red, like water is complementary to fire, is a symbol of vegetative life, of spring and regeneration. Green is deeply connected with life, hence also with the beauty of nascent life, youth and health. Brown is, on the other hand, the color of the sun, of clay and soil. It brings to mind fallen leaves, autumn, fruit lying on the black earth. Brown may also symbolize poverty and humility.

In the icon of Perpetual Help, the green color of Christ's tunic signifies life having its source in God: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (Ps 36: 9). It is the eternal life given to us in Christ, about whom St. John says in the prologue to his Gospel: "In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1: 4–5). Christ is therefore the Eternal Word, the Life which gave us a new life. It became human life at the moment of the Incarnation: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1: 14). The Eternal Word became a human being, a little child, Mary's Son. It shared human flesh, destructible and subject to the consequences of sin, human nature and human history with us. The brown color stresses this extraordinary gesture of humility and humbleness, this extreme gesture of poverty: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by

taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself" (Phil. 2: 6–8).

Like a warrior's belt, the girdle on the tunic of Jesus plays an important role, holding it together in order to allow action. The red girdle with which the Child's gown is girded thus emphasizes that the Incarnation was done out of love taken as far as the shedding of blood on the cross for the redemption of man. It is a symbol of martyrdom out of love, a sacrifice of one's life made to give someone a gift of new life. The combination of green and brown with red is a sign of Christ's divine and human natures. God became man out of the greatest love that led Him all the way to the cross: "greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15: 13).

*The Message of the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help*

Our Mother of Perpetual Help is holding Her Son, represented as a child, on her left arm, but her right hand, resting on her chest, is straight, because she not so much holds up the Child's hands as points to Him. This gesture is the geometrical center of the picture and is the key to understanding the principal message of the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. The fact that the Mother and Christ do not look at each other and do not reveal virtually any emotional relationship at all slightly surprises the viewer accustomed to the Western representations of Madonna and Child.<sup>17</sup> The gaze of Jesus is directed upwards to the left, to the painting's golden background (not to the Archangel), and the eyes of His Mother are directed not to the Son but towards the person praying before the icon. Actually, Mary in the icon draws the beholder's gaze towards herself so as to invite him to sink into prayer and contemplation, and subsequently she draws his attention to the Son with her pointing hand. She thus introduces the viewer to the mystery of God Incarnate, shows Jesus as the Savior of all people, the Redeemer of the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Icons do not show any specific situations from the earthly lives of Jesus and the saints, but demonstrate the reality of our redemption; they usher the beholder into the dimension of adoration and eternal glory.

The majesty of the sacred gestures, the significance of glances and the solemnity in the Infant's face, as well as the careful arrangement of the gilded garments first show the truth about the Incarnation of Almighty God. After studying the face of Jesus more carefully, we realize, however, that the icon depicts, rather, a person with a mature face, a grown-up youth (which is inconsistent with His childlike body shape). Thus, through the manner of painting, the icon shows that Christ depicted in it is truly the Logos<sup>18</sup>, the *Pantocrator* (Greek: Ruler of All), who had mysteriously become Emmanuel, a little child in Mary's womb, making her the Mother of God, the *Theotókos*.

The cruciform nimbus into which the face of Christ is inscribed points not only to His sanctity, but also to the sacrificial character of that sanctity, to the Son's limitless obedience to the will of the Father, up to the death on the cross. Thus, it also opens up the praying person to the mystery of the Atonement, achieved through the sacrifice of the cross. Our Lady's reserve in the picture is alleviated by the figure of Christ being turned towards Mary and by His hands resting on His Mother's hand. This arrangement emphasizes Her participation in the redeeming mission of the Son: completely obedient to God's will, Mary becomes the Mother of His Son, actively accompanying Him in the work of Salvation, as she decided at the Annunciation: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1: 38).

The manner in which the Savior is represented by the painter is an important gesture that introduces the viewer to the depth of the mystery of Atonement and at the same time develops the theological theme of Hodegetria. Looking at the golden background of the painting, Christ is looking into Heaven<sup>19</sup>, in-

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<sup>18</sup> In our icon, Jesus does not hold a scroll of the Sacred Scripture in His hands, which is a symbol of the Eternal Word, the Logos, but that gesture is often shown in Hodegetria icons, for example in *Our Mother of Smolensk*.

<sup>19</sup> In fact all the figures in the icon lean out as if from a different dimension, they emerge "for a moment" out of the glory of heaven, in which they now live, contemplating God. Thus they reveal before the faithful a piece of the Mystery hidden behind the golden glow of the background of the icon and announce something that the praying faithful deeply believes, what he is longing for and what he experiences in faith by contemplating an icon.



side the Mystery in which the Father lives. Even though He is shown in the arms of the Mother of God, He is wholly turned towards the Father. It is in this gesture that the painting expresses the fundamental relationship between Christ and the Heavenly Father<sup>20</sup>, by whom he was entrusted with the mission of redeeming mankind and the world. The Son fulfilled the redeeming will of the Father first by becoming a man in Mary's womb, and then by dying on the cross for our salvation. For Jesus assured people: "By myself I can do nothing... for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5: 30). Thus He defeated death and now lives in the glory of the resurrection.

The Mother of God, She Who Shows the Way, depicted in the painting, perpetually shows the way to God. It is Christ who is the way, as He said about Himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14: 6). By means of *pictorial signs* the icon of Perpetual Help faithfully renders the truth of the Gospel, expressed by the *sign of the word* in the Sacred Scripture. Christ is for us the Way to God, because: "everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15: 15); hence in the icon He is wholly turned towards the Father. It is precisely by the will of the Father, out of obedience, that he reveals the truth about God: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world" (John 17: 6). He thus fills us, sinners deserving to die, with life that is the Life of God Himself, with limitless love: "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17: 26). It is through this Love, through the Holy Spirit, that Christ Himself lives in us, dwells and acts. That is why the Mother of Perpetual Help in the icon constantly shows the right Way of our earthly pilgrimage; filled with the Holy Spirit, She guides us towards learning the whole Truth, leads us towards discovering the true Life in Christ, Her Son. At the same time, these elements determine the right direction of meditating on the icon: the inviting gaze of the Mother of God does not focus our atten-

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<sup>20</sup> God the Father is never depicted in icons; occasionally, He is merely symbolized by a blessing hand emerging out of heaven.

tion on her, but humbly directs it towards the Son, listening and perpetually fulfilling the redeeming will of the Father through the sacrifice of the cross.

The archangels, represented half-length, leaning out of Heaven as if from behind the golden curtain of the Mystery of eternity, by no means announce to Christ the passion awaiting Him, as it used to be interpreted in the past. With solemn dignity (in ornamental jugs and through ceremonial veils) they hold in their hands the instruments of the passion (a three-bar cross, nails, a spear and a pole with a sponge), shown as signs of redemption, trophies of the victory over sin and death through the Savior's resurrection.

The presence of the archangels outlines the divine sphere of the icon, the dimension in which they represent the presence of the invisible God and His message. In the Old Testament the angels make up God's court, as well as His army, but are mostly depicted as man's protectors or guides; they announce God's will and carry it out. In the New Testament the activities of angels mainly focus on Christ and the work of Redemption, even though they also defend man and support him in the complementation of the Atonement by Christ. In iconography, on the other hand, they are chiefly a symbol of Divine presence and are most often depicted adoring Christ. In the icon of Perpetual Help the Archangels appear as a guard of honor of the Savior and the Blessed Virgin. They are depicted in a bow full of solemnity and worship, inclined towards the Savior and His Mother; they pay homage to her as the Queen of Angels. Thus they encourage the praying individual to adopt a similar attitude, inviting him to sink in contemplation and unceasing reverence for the saintly persons in the icon.

Michael the Archangel, the Prince of angels, whose name means "Who [is] like God" in Hebrew, is considered to be a protector and defender of the chosen people in the Old Testament. In the New Testament he announces the time of the Last Judgment and the resurrection (1 Thess. 4: 16), fights against Satan (Revelation 12: 7) and participates in heavenly liturgy. That is why artists of icons like to paint Him, so that He may support the people praying before the painting in the cult given to God.

Gabriel the Archangel, whose name signifies “man in whom God has trust”, announces the coming of the Messiah and explains prophetic visions at God’s command in the Old Covenant (Daniel 8: 16). In the New Testament He is chiefly a messenger and announces the birth of John the Baptist, at the same time revealing his rank: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God” (Luke 1: 19). Most importantly, however, He is connected with the Gospel scene of the Annunciation: in the name of God, He announces the birth of His Son, talking to the Blessed Virgin (Luke 1: 26–38).

The icon of Perpetual Help depicts Gabriel holding a tri-bar Byzantine cross. The vertical axis of the cross traditionally represents the *descensus* and *ascensus*, descent and ascent, of the Word of God. This is about the mission of the Word, which, in the act of the incarnation, descended from Heaven (*descensus*) so as to redeem us, and, having fulfilled its mission, ascended back to the glory of Heaven (*ascensus*). In the Bible and in iconography, the cross is also the heavenly ladder (the horizontal arms of the cross), on the rungs of which God descended to earth so as to become man (the incarnation ladder), and on which he ascended to Heaven (the ascension ladder), because the Word ascended to the glory of the Father through martyrdom, death and resurrection. Christ’s cross is a ladder on which the faithful, too, may ascend from earth to Heaven; that is why the angels invite those praying before the icon to embark on this spiritual road. Like outstretched arms, the horizontal arms of the cross express the universal nature of salvation, embracing everyone and everything, encouraging one even more intensely to embark on the road of conversion and inner transformation, leading through the cross to glory.

Summing up the gestures of the angels we may conclude that Gabriel appearing at the Annunciation and the victorious Michael depicted in the Book of Revelation show the individual praying before the painting the temporal framework of salvation, the redeeming *kairos* (Greek *καιρός*: the right time, moment), from the Incarnation of the Son of God up to the Apocalyptic renewal and recapitulation of everything in Christ. In the icon of Perpetual Help, Jesus is the New Adam, who has per-

formed a new act of creation: Redemption. With the cooperation of Mary, the New Eve, He contracted a New Covenant on behalf of the human race. As His Mother, Mary plays a crucial role in the Divine plan for salvation: under the cross, she gives Him her life to the end, and becomes the Mother of all the faithful.

In icons, the veil of the Blessed Virgin (Greek *maphóron*) is decorated with three stars (one over the forehead and two on the arms, as a sign of her virginity before, during and after the birth of Christ), so as to highlight the truth about Mary's universal motherhood. In the icon of Perpetual Help, only one of those stars has been retained: the eight-pointed star placed over the forehead of the Mother of God. Not only does it refer to the gift of virginity; it also refers us to the symbol of the star of Bethlehem, guiding the Magi to the Savior. This confirms the truth that the Blessed Virgin is the Morning Star in our icon, the Guide in a life of faith, the Perpetual Help on the ways of struggles with faith and spiritual development (a reference to the title of the icon). A second small, cross-shaped star over the Virgin's forehead emphasizes her participation in her Son's redeeming mission.

A variety of interpretations have also been proposed for the sandal falling off Christ's foot. Contrary to the 19th-century commentaries of folk missionaries, seeing it as an expression of fear on the part of Jesus, seeking refuge in His Mother's embrace in the face of the passion announced by the angels, it refers, rather, to the Bible, to the Protoevangelium (Genesis 3: 15), speaking about the offspring of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent Satan with his foot. The depiction of the Child's bare heel in the icon of Perpetual Help points to Christ as the New Adam, the Messiah, who destroyed sin. According to this interpretation, the Virgin in the painting is the New Eve, who gave the Savior to the world.

Another interpretation, drawing on ancient customs observed at the conclusion of contracts (in evidence of which the contractors exchanged a piece of clothing between themselves the way that the contracting parties exchange their signatures today), sees the falling sandal as a sign of the New Covenant. According to this interpretation, the New Adam, having contracted the New Covenant, entrusts its sign: his sandal, to Virgin Mary and to us.

However, the falling sandal may also signify the humbling of Christ (*kathabasis*) in the Incarnation, and in particular in the destruction wrought by the cross (cf. Phil. 2: 6-7), and emphasizes His love of man, with which Christ “loved us to the end” (cf. John 13: 1).

### *Conclusion*

An icon is a painted Gospel, which through shapes and colors, through figures and symbols gets through to our senses, to our minds and our hearts. It is a place where God goes out to meet man and allows Himself be watched in faith. The Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is inextricably linked with the word of God and without it we are unable to understand its deepest message. To those contemplating her icon, the Virgin Mary turns out to be their perpetual help, as she leads them towards the Redeemer. He alone has life in Him, He alone is Life itself, He alone is the Way towards the Father, in which peace can be found. The Virgin Mary is in it also an exemplar of what we will become once we experience the glory of the resurrection. She is a luminous example of the embracing of the word of God so that it can dwell in human heart and radiate out to the whole of creation.

### SUMMARY

The article provides a general introduction to the theology of a holy picture as represented by the icon. It first outlines its historical origins as a Christian cult object, and subsequently elucidates the philosophical and theological conception of the icon, developed in particular in the first millennium. It highlights the spiritual dimension of the icon and the sense of its religious veneration. Next, the author proceeds to discuss the icon as exemplified by the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, venerated in Rome’s Church of St. Alphonsus M. de Liguori, which is one of the most widespread religious paintings in the Christian world. By analyzing the pictorial elements of the icon, the author reveals its theological and spiritual message.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se veut une introduction générale à la théologie contenue dans une image sainte, représentée par l'icône. Il souligne d'abord ses origines historiques en tant qu'objet de culte chrétien, ensuite il dégage la conception philosophique et théologique de l'icône, développée surtout au premier millénaire. L'auteur met en lumière la dimension spirituelle de l'icône et le sens de sa vénération religieuse. Puis il parle de l'icône, prenant l'exemple de l'image de Notre-Dame du Perpétuel Secours vénérée à Rome en l'église de St Alphonse sur l'Esquilin, icône qui est la plus répandue dans le monde chrétien. En analysant les éléments picturaux de l'icône, l'auteur révèle son message théologique et spirituel.