

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

A REDISCOVERED MOTHER:

NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN DEVOTION TO OUR LADY

OF PERPETUAL HELP

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Up until the late 1860's, it is unlikely that anyone in the United States held a devotion to Mary under the title of "Our Lady of Perpetual Help," or that anyone in the country was familiar with the Marian icon of that same name. Yet before the century was through, this singular image of Mary came to be venerated in cathedrals, churches and chapels throughout the country. Medals of Our Lady of Perpetual Help hung around countless Catholic necks and prints of her image were touched to injuries, consumed as medicine, venerated in homes, and clung to during prayer.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help went from obscurity to prominence in American Catholic culture with such rapidity in the last third of the nineteenth century that the spread of her devotion merits scholarly interest in our own time. How did this devotion spread? What form or forms did the devotion take as it developed? How was it related to the broader Catholic devotional culture of the era, and what groups became particularly associated with the devotion?

Since a truly in depth study of the above questions could yield far more information than one brief paper can hold, there will be this limits to this investigation. While drawing on a number of primary and secondary sources, this paper will depend principally upon two handwritten manuscripts kept within the Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province (RABP) in Brooklyn, NY, the *OLPH Shrine Boston Testimonials I & II*. These works were largely composed by Redemptorist Fr. William O'Connor, a priest stationed at the Redemptorist church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Boston for twenty two years, from 1871-1874 and 1881-1899.

Testimonial II is actually the older of the two documents. The work focuses on events associated with the Redemptorist shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Boston from 1870 to 1896 and from that perspective it provides a contemporary record of events surrounding the growth of the devotion. The manuscript consists of a single record book of 344 pages, with letters, newspaper clippings, and one small group of hand-copied, duplicate pages, bound within the whole. *Testimonial I* largely reproduces the material in its sister volume, with the exception of an additional record of cures recorded during Father O'Connor's time spent in Quebec from 1875-1879. *Testimonial I*'s status as a later copy of *Testimonial II*'s material can be deduced by observing editorial changes that have been introduced to the text, such as the elimination of *Testimonial II*'s note about a confrere of "phlegmatic disposition" who found Fr. O'Connor far too credulous, and determined "not to write a word about all that stuff" (i.e. the cures associated with the Our Lady of Perpetual Help) when he succeeded Fr. O'Connor as chronicler in Boston from 1874 to 1876.¹ The confusion that comes with calling the older work, *Testimonial II*, and the younger, *Testimonial I*, is likely the result of a clerical error made either by the provincial archivist or whoever placed these works in new bindings sometime in the later 20th century.

¹ William O'Connor, C.Ss.R., *OLPH Shrine Testimonial II*. Unpublished Manuscript. House Annals Collection. Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province (RABP), 124. The same episode is in William O'Connor, *OLPH Shrine Testimonial I*, Unpublished Manuscript. House Annals Collection, RABP, at the end of entries for 1874.

There is a danger of developing a skewed picture of the totality of American attitudes and practices around Our Lady of Perpetual Help by focusing primarily upon the *Testimonials*, yet it can be hoped that the portrait of devotion uncovered therein might nevertheless be helpful in an ongoing, broader conversation about the nature of American Catholic devotional life in the nineteenth century and beyond.

To answer questions about the origins of American devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, one must begin with the icon around which this devotion arose. The titles of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Our Mother of Perpetual Help, and Our Lady/Mother of Perpetual Succor/Succour all relate to a single image that currently finds its home in the Redemptorist church of Sant' Alfonso de Liguori in Rome, Italy. The titles of the image are generally interchangeable, all being based upon Italian and Latin titles of the picture, Madonna del Perpetuo Soccorso, or Sancta Maria de Perpetuo Succursu. The icon depicts Mary holding the child Jesus in her arms while two small angels, Michael and Gabriel, hover on either side of the mother and child, carrying the instruments of Jesus' passion. Each figure within the icon is identified by a set of Greek initials and all are presented against a golden background.

Carbon 14 analysis performed upon the icon during a 1994 restoration dates the wood upon which the image is painted to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, while artistic studies locate the painting within the Cretan-Venetian school of iconography and tend to give the work a more recent date, even as late as the eighteenth century.² One theory of the icon's provenance supposes that the current image was copied onto the back of a more ancient one when the original icon's colors began to fade.³

How the icon came to the Redemptorists is a story surrounded by both legend and fact. The legend has to do with the icon making its way from Crete to Rome in the fifteenth century and through a series of miraculous events ending up as an object of veneration in the Roman church of San Matteo, located between the two great basilicas of Saint Mary Major and Saint John Lateran. The more certain facts of the icon's history begin with its disappearance in the wake of the Napoleonic conquest of Rome, and the arrival of the Redemptorists in that city in the 1850's.

In 1855 the Redemptorists bought a Roman piece of land between St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran and proceeded to build there both a general house and a church. This church of the Most Holy Redeemer they consecrated in honor of their founder, Saint Alphonsus Liguori, "Sant' Alfonso," in 1859. Then in 1863 a Jesuit preacher at the Gesu in Rome gave a talk on an ancient image of Mary that had been venerated for many years at the church of San Matteo but which had been forgotten after that church's destruction. Around the same time, the chronicler of the Redemptorist general house discovered that the forgotten church of San Matteo had been on the grounds of what was now the Redemptorist estate, and that the church had contained an ancient image of the mother of God "held in veneration and famous for the miracles it performed."⁴

Conversation about the lost image of Mary spurred the memory of a Roman Redemptorist, Michael Marchi, who recalled from his childhood as an altar server at the church of Santa Maria in Posterula in Rome an old Augustinian friar telling him stories

² Fabriciano Ferrero, *The Story of an Icon: The full history, tradition and spirituality of the popular icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help*, ed. Michael McGreevy, C.Ss.R. (Hampshire, England: Redemptorist Publications, 2001), 102.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 110.

about an image of Mary housed in that community's private chapel. The old friar, Br. Augustine Orsetti, had told the child Marchi that the image of Mary in that Augustinian chapel was in fact the Madonna from San Matteo and that it was miraculous. Hearing about the Madonna of San Matteo again in adulthood, Marchi was able to inform his Redemptorist community about the icon's whereabouts.

Finally, among the Redemptorists interest in the image grew to such a point that the general superior of the congregation, Nicolaus Mauron, approached Pope Pius IX with a request that the image be given to the Redemptorists so that they might place it in their church of Sant' Alfonso. As the Redemptorists had rediscovered the legend of the icon, they had learned the old story that Mary had willed for her image to be placed in a church between the two great basilicas of Saint Mary Major and Saint John Lateran, and the Redemptorists suggested to the pope that their church of Sant' Alfonso, which fit this description, would now make a fine home for the miraculous image that had lost its place. Pope Pius IX, who would in 1871 show his great esteem for the founder of the Redemptorists, St. Alphonsus, by proclaiming him a doctor of the church, agreed to the community's request. On December 11, 1865, he issued the order for the icon to be given to the Redemptorists and for the Redemptorists to give the Augustinians a suitable painting in its place.⁵ Redemptorist tradition holds that at the same time, the pope told the Redemptorist superior general that his congregation must now make Our Lady of Perpetual Help known. Evidence of how seriously the Redemptorists took this charge will be found through the remainder of this paper.

After doing some slight renovation work on the original image and making copies of the icon for both the Augustinians and Pope Pius IX, the Redemptorists exposed the icon for public veneration on April 26, 1866. After a procession through the local streets, the icon was placed above the main altar in the church of Sant' Alfonso. In June the image was moved to a side altar, where it remained for a few years. Then in 1871 a new, larger main altar was erected upon which the icon was enthroned, and after more than a hundred years and further renovation, the icon remains in the same place today.⁶

The Redemptorist community promoted the return of the icon to public view with the celebration of a triduum in April and again in June of 1866, and from the first days of the events, there were reports of miracles. The Roman daily, *Giornale di Roma*, reported on two children who experienced sudden cures of serious illness and paralysis during the first triduum.⁷ Pilgrims stopped by the church to visit the image and its popularity grew quickly in and around the city of Rome.

Regard for the icon developed at such a pace that by May of 1867, just over a year after the icon had been returned to public view, the Vatican Chapter decided to honor the image with a coronation. Crowns were made and with great ceremony placed upon the heads of both Mary and the child Jesus within the picture. This coronation was an honor reserved for Marian images that at were considered miraculous, and whose veneration was both ancient and approved by the local ordinary.⁸

⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁶ Clement M. Henze, *Mother of Perpetual Help or Succor: A Scientific Monograph of the Origin, History, Symbolism, Propagation, and Devotion of a Miraculous Icon of Mary by that Name*. Unpublished Translation. Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province, Brooklyn, New York. 93-97.

⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁸ Ibid., 97.

As has already been noted, the Redemptorists began producing copies of the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help almost as soon as they received the icon. The Augustinians and the pope were among the first to receive such copies, but they were by no means the last. Hand painted copies were made, touched to the original icon, given a certificate of authenticity, and sent out around the world. Meanwhile, printed copies of the icon flowed freely as well. One historian of the image, Henze, notes that in the first ten years of the icon's exposition, from Rome alone more than 30,000 photographic copies "of the larger kind" were distributed, along with 70,000 of a smaller kind with prayers attached, and 130,000 pictures printed "in a threefold style of type made from iron and steel."⁹ Medals of the icon were made and distributed on a wide scale. In Rome 100,000 were produced by 1876. However, this number was eclipsed by production elsewhere, as in Paris by 1877 more than 5,000,000 medals had been produced.¹⁰

It is impossible to know if any of the many smaller versions of the icon made it to the shores of the United States in 1866 or 1867, but we do know that the first recorded "authentic" copies of the icon, hand-painted and touched to the original, were sent to the United States on February 29, 1868.¹¹ There were three images sent in this first shipment, and they were destined for the Redemptorist novitiate in Annapolis, MD, the parish of St. James in Baltimore, MD, and the newly constructed Redemptorist seminary, St. Clement, at Ilchester, MD.

The first image to find its home was that of the novitiate. The provincial superior presented the icon to the community in Annapolis during a ceremony on the feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1868.¹² However, the first image to be publicly venerated in the U.S. was that of St. James Church in Baltimore. The icon was exposed there with much fanfare and neighborhood excitement on December 6, 1868 during the triduum of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.¹³ The image destined for St. Clement's seminary in Ilchester found its home on February 15, 1869. Each of these early icons was placed either within or nearby a Redemptorist house of formation. In 1868 the juvenate of the American province was housed at St. Alphonsus church in Baltimore, but by early 1869, it had moved to St. James, thereby connecting all American Redemptorist students and novices with the new image of Mary and laying the foundations of a relationship for coming generations of American Redemptorist missionaries.

More authentic copies of the icon followed the 1868 shipment, with a total of twenty-eight being sent from Rome to the U.S. up to the year 1875. The great majority of these images were intended for Redemptorist houses and churches, but a few went to private individuals, convents, and non-Redemptorist communities and churches, including the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Benedictines of Chaska, MN, and the sisters of St. Agnes in Milwaukee, WI.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ List of icons distributed from Rome. Document compiled by Archivist from Redemptorist General Archives. Perpetual Help Collection. RABP.

¹² *Annals Annapolis, 1865-1888*. House Annals Collection. RABP.

¹³ *Katholische Volkszeitung*, Baltimore, MD, 12 Dec, 1868. Cited in John F. Byrne, C.Ss.R., *The Redemptorist Centenaries*, (Philadelphia: The Dolphin Press, 1932), 325.

¹⁴ List of icons distributed from Rome.

Along with the arrival of the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the U.S., a desire arose among the Redemptorists to dedicate a church in her honor. The Redemptorists helped the LaSalle Christian Brothers to dedicate their chapel in Westchester, NY, to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in 1870, and they knew that “a young priest in a Western state had built a church to our Lady of P.S. and procured a picture of her from Rome to ornament it,”¹⁵ but the American Redemptorists did not manage to dedicate a church of their own to Our Lady of Perpetual until January 29, 1871, when Fr. Joseph Wissel, the superior of the congregation’s new community in Boston, MA, dedicated that community’s first wooden, mission church to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

The dedication of the new Redemptorist church in Boston brings us to the records of that shrine’s *Testimonials* and to the devotion that took such firm root in that locale. However, before digging into the particular records kept at Boston, it would be good to have a sense of why the Redemptorists, who had not known Our Lady of Perpetual Help before 1863 at the earliest, embraced her so rapidly for themselves. Much regard needs to be given here to the founder of the Redemptorists, St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787).

Alphonsus Liguori visited Rome in the eighteenth century while the image of Perpetual Help still hung undisturbed in the Augustinian church of San Matteo, but there is no record of Alphonsus’ ever adverting to this icon’s existence. Alphonsus had other images of Mary of which he was fond. He kept an image of Our Lady of Good Counsel with him while he was a bishop.¹⁶ Throughout his life he treasured an image of Mary based upon a work of Francesco Solimena that he, Alphonsus, had painted during his youth.¹⁷ He recommended to the novices of his congregation an image of Our Lady of Sorrows,¹⁸ and on his parish missions as a Redemptorist he sometimes carried as a visual aid for his sermons a statue nicknamed “The Virgin del Patrocinio” (the Virgin of Protection).¹⁹ Alphonsus had deep affective ties with multiple Marian images, but there was no single icon or visual representation that he recommended to his congregation as “the” Redemptorist Madonna. This is certainly not to say, however, that Alphonsus did not leave his community a distinct Marian legacy.

Alphonsus made sure that his religious congregation would have a strong Marian flavor. Having vowed in his youth to defend the as yet debated doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, he placed his congregation under her patronage.²⁰ He insisted that his confreres preach about Mary during their parish missions and he set an example by doing so himself. In fact, Alphonsus was known to be so devoted to Mary that on at least one occasion he slipped into ecstasy while preaching a sermon upon her motherhood.²¹

Aside from painting pictures, composing songs, leading prayers, and preaching sermons about Mary throughout his ministerial life, in 1750 Alphonsus forever sealed his identity as a promoter of all things Marian by publishing his massive treatise,

¹⁵ William O’Connor, *Testimonials II*, 29

¹⁶ Theodule Rey-Mermet, C.Ss.R., *St. Alphonsus Liguori: Tireless Worker for the Most Abandoned*, trans. Jehanne-Marie Marchesi, (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1989), 80.

¹⁷ Francesco Chiovaro, C.Ss.R., *The History of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer: The Origins 1732-1739*, Vol. I, Book II, (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2010), 288.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

²⁰ Rey-Mermet, 450.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 480.

The Glories of Mary. Since its initial publication this work has gone through an untold number of editions and translations and it remains in print up to the present time. The book influenced the preaching of his confreres and set forth Alphonsus' own understanding of the role of Mary in the life of the Church and in the history of salvation. The book was the fruit of Alphonsus' years of prayer, study, and pastoral experience, and in it he chose to dwell first and foremost upon the themes of Mary's mercy and her powerful intercession. Alphonsus argued in his introduction to the work that these particular qualities of Mary were the most likely to enflame people's love for her and so draw them toward salvation.²²

Alphonsus believed that all graces given by God are distributed through Mary, and therefore he believed it was necessary for the salvation of all that Mary be preached and people come to trust in her intercession. His missionary experience with the poor in the kingdom of Naples had taught him that "in most cases no sermon is more profitable, or produces so much compunction in the hearts of the people, as the one on the mercy of Mary."²³ So, ever the pastoral strategist, Alphonsus insisted that a sermon on Mary be included in all of the missions preached by his Redemptorist confreres. This insistence was picked up by the Redemptorist rule, which stated that a sermon on the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary was to be preached toward the end of every mission, that missionaries should look for opportunities to include Mary in every talk, at the very least by a simple invocation, and that at the end of the mission sermon on Mary, there might be a solemn consecration of the people to the Blessed Virgin.²⁴

Marian piety was by no means the dominant force within St. Alphonsus' spirituality. In fact, in a recent collection of Alphonsian writings, the editor of the section on Alphonsus' Marian material points out that Alphonsus' attention to Mary is dwarfed by the focus he places in his writings upon the person of Jesus. While the *Glories of Mary* is indeed a highly significant work, it is the single purely Marian treatise Alphonsus produced out of more than a hundred publications throughout his lifetime.²⁵ Nevertheless, Alphonsus' Marian legacy was profound and it deeply marked the Redemptorists who would follow in his footsteps. Indeed, when Jay Dolan wrote his 1978 work, *Catholic Revivalism*, and decided to pick out just one characteristic that would set apart each group of nineteenth century religious involved in the preaching of parish missions, he chose a special emphasis on Mary as the primary distinguishing mark of the Redemptorist mission.²⁶

In the 1860's, when the Redemptorists first learned about the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, it is likely that they read their new Roman church's connection with that of San Matteo and its miraculous Marian image as a work of providence. A group that had long labored under the patronage of Mary, defending her Immaculate Conception and promoting her status as the mother of mercy and the dispenser of all grace now found dropped into its lap an image of Mary with a miraculous pedigree and a

²² Alphonsus Liguori, *The Glories of Mary*. Vol 7/8. *The Complete Works of Saint Alphonsus De Liguori; The Ascetical Works*. ed. Eugene Grimm, C.Ss.R. (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1931), 32.

²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁴ *Codex Regularum et Constitutionum C.Ss.R. Annis 1764-1855-1894*, (Rome: Typographi Pacis Philippi Cuggiani, 1896), paragraph 129 for the 1764 rule and paragraph 1465 for 1855 rule. The suggestion of the solemn consecration was an added in the 1855 rule.

²⁵ Frederick M. Jones, C.Ss.R., *Alphonsus de Liguori: Selected Writings*. In *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 239.

²⁶ Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience 1830-1900*. (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 64.

title that fit neatly with the emphases of the community's well-established Marian preaching. It was as if the Mary preached by the Redemptorists had been "Our Lady of Perpetual Help" all along, and now the congregation had a central image upon which it could focus its themes of Marian motherhood, mercy, and powerful intercession. Where the sons of Alphonsus had long been content to borrow whatever Marian images were at hand, now they had a single, attractive, and papally approved image that they could call their own, an image that they could hang in their churches, carry on their missions, and offer to the faithful as a focal point for future Marian devotion.

Now having stepped back to examine the roots of the Redemptorist discovery of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in 1863, having seen how this image found a happy fit within the Alphonsian/Marian heritage of the Redemptorists, and having noted how the first images of the icon made their way into select American churches through 1868-1871, we have at last arrived at a point where we can begin addressing more directly the material contained in the *OLPH Shrine Testimonials* of Boston and answering the questions asked of nineteenth century American devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help at the beginning of this paper.

Again, "How did this devotion spread?" We have already seen the American Redemptorists receiving their first copies of the icon and placing those copies within or near their novitiate, seminary and juvenate, thereby introducing their young men and future missionaries to a relationship with Mary as their Mother of Perpetual Help. We have seen how the Redemptorists started introducing authentic copies of the image to their churches, often accompanying this initial exposure of the image before the people with great fanfare and choosing important feast days such as the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption as the moment for a triduum in which the icon would be introduced. And we have seen the American Redemptorist desire to have churches and convents dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Help begin coming to fruition with the dedication of the congregation's new foundation in Boston.

If we turn next to look at *The Redemptorist on the American Missions*, the manual Joseph Wissel composed in the 1870's to instruct young Redemptorists who were making their second novitiate and preparing for the ministry of the missions, we can also see that the Redemptorist tradition of mission preaching on "The Patronage of Mary," her mercy, powerful intercession, and motherhood, continued within this era of the congregation, but also began now to include specific mention of Mary as "Mother of Perpetual Help." In his second outline for a possible sermon on the patronage of Mary, Wissel suggests that mission preachers could note in their sermons that Mary is a Mother of Perpetual Help "at all times, under all circumstances, in all cases—no exception, otherwise this title would be false."²⁷

Efforts at spreading devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help were not always as formal as those associated with mission preaching or installing icons in churches. It appears that some Redemptorist confreres simply caught fire with a passion for the new title and image of Mary, and they spread her devotion wherever they went in the course of their ordinary ministry. A prime example is Fr. Rhabanus Preis, a German immigrant to the U.S. and a delayed vocation to the Redemptorists in Baltimore. Preis

²⁷ Joseph Wissel, C.Ss.R., *The Redemptorist on the American Missions*. Vol. 1 *Containing the Directions and Sketches for the Various Exercises given by the Redemptorist Fathers in the Country on Missions*, (West Chester, NY: The Catholic Protectory, 1886), 258.

was stationed at the church of the Most Holy Redeemer in New York City for all but three years between 1865 and 1894.²⁸ Due to the difficulty he had in learning Latin and completing his philosophical and theological studies, Preis had been ordained under the condition that he never hear confessions. Yet once Preis got into ministry among the people of New York, he flourished and the restriction placed upon his ministry was eventually relaxed.

After the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was exposed for public veneration at Most Holy Redeemer on May 1st of 1870, Preis became one of the devotion's great apostles. He traveled around the New York area taking along pictures of Our Lady of Perpetual Help on his journeys to convents, schools, and churches. He distributed the image and preached the new devotion everywhere he went. Then he encouraged those who heard him to spread the news even further.²⁹ His contemporary, William O'Connor, summarized Preis' message as, "Go to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. She will hear you, she will help you, she will get for you all good."³⁰

Preis found receptive audiences. Early on in American devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Preis' community at Most Holy Redeemer became a rich resource for folks who wanted material associated with Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Upon request the Redemptorists there sent books, medals, pictures and prayers to individuals and communities around the country, as well as in Europe and Canada.³¹ In November of 1870, the superior of an academy and novitiate of sisters of the Sacred Heart near Albany, NY, wrote to the Redemptorists in New York informing them of her efforts to spread the new devotion. She told how she had sent pictures of Our Lady of Perpetual Help to the community novitiate in Chicago, as well as to "St. Louis, St. Charles, St. Joseph, and even to Louisiana."³²

To grow this devotion, the Redemptorists did not always have to be the ones taking action. Once the icon was exposed, reports of healings would often arise among the people and carry on their own. After the May 1870 installation of the icon at Most Holy Redeemer and the subsequent spread of reports that healings had occurred there, such a steady stream of the needy came to that church looking for both physical and spiritual help, that the Redemptorist community designated Wednesday as the special day of the week for receiving the sick. People sought out Father Preis in particular, and beginning in 1872:

"Every Wednesday, immediately after dinner he would betake himself to the church, where a large crowd of afflicted men, women and children was already assembled to receive the blessing and be cured from their infirmities. The father would first make a suitable short address, then go to the communion rail to give the blessing, say prayers, (and) touch with holy relics the single individuals. After this, he went to the confessional to cure the souls as well as the bodies."³³

²⁸ Joseph Wuest, C.Ss.R. "Notice About the Departed Father Rhabanus Preis, C.Ss.R." Rahabanus Preis, 1829-1894. Personnel Files. RABP.

²⁹ O'Connor, *Testimonials II*, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

³³ Wuest, 2.

In Boston, Fr. O'Connor eventually took on a role similar to that of Fr. Preis. There the Wednesday blessing of the sick began in 1874,³⁴ and Fr. O'Connor oversaw the ceremony from 1881-1899.³⁵

The burgeoning newspaper press, both Catholic and secular, helped spread the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Reporters described the ceremonies within Redemptorist churches and they picked up on stories of healings that occurred in relation to the new Marian sites. The most famous example of this came in 1883, when Boston's *Globe* and *Republican* ran articles about the spectacular healing on August 18th of a teenage girl, Grace Hanley.³⁶ As a result of a carriage accident, Hanley received a serious spinal injury when she was just four years old and for eleven years, despite close medical attention and repeated attempts at treatment, she remained in terrific pain and unable to walk without a brace or crutches. Hanley and her family had long prayed for healing, but apparently to no avail. Finally, things changed for Grace when she completed yet another novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help at the Redemptorist church in Boston and received Holy Communion on the 18th of August. According to her own testimony, she felt faint for a moment and then a new strength came over her. She stood up from her pew and without her crutches walked to the altar of Our Lady of Perpetual Help where she knelt down and offered a prayer of thanksgiving. She then stood again and walked home from the church under her own strength. She never needed her crutches or brace again. The Hanley story captured the imagination of newspaper readers far and wide, and it was followed quickly by more stories of healings at the shrine. Within a month there were in the *Globe* alone three more accounts of miraculous cures worked for women at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and the crowds of people seeking contact with this image of Mary increased dramatically.³⁷

Newspaper coverage of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and healings worked through her intercession was not limited to English speaking Americans. German speakers too were treated to stories of miraculous cures through the intercession of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. An October 1st, 1884 article from Baltimore's *Katholische Volkzeitung*, reported a cure from consumption obtained for a sister in Macon, GA, through prayers to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.³⁸

When newspapers were not telling the story of their Madonna's powerful intercession, the Redemptorists could be counted on to do it for themselves. Thus in 1871 Fr. Michael Müller, the same author who would eventually tangle with the Paulists over the possibility of salvation outside of the Church, composed his aptly named work, *Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the Work of Redemption and Sanctification with a Historical Account of the Origins and Effects of the Miraculous Picture to Which is Added a Novena and Triduo in Honor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help*. If one could not figure out enough of the book's contents from its title, the work also contained a whole section devoted to recounting healings that had occurred through the

³⁴ John F. Byrne, C.Ss.R., *The Glories of Mary in Boston: A Memorial History of the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help (the Mission Church) Roxbury, Mass. 1871-1921*, (Boston: Mission Church Press, 1921), 297.

³⁵ William O'Connor, 1899. Personnel Files. RABP.

³⁶ O'Connor, *Testimonials II*. The text of the stories are cut from the newspapers and glued into the Testimonials, with notes about which papers they came from, but not the exact dates.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

intercession of Our Lady of Perpetual Help since the devotion's introduction to America, as well as a chapter on how the devotion might continue to be encouraged in the present.

For those who believed they had encountered Mary's perpetual help, encouragement like that of Fr. Müller to go out and spread the devotion was hardly necessary. The pages of Boston's *Shrine Testimonials* are full of stories of neighbors, friends, and family members recommending Our Lady of Perpetual Help to others. Their votive offerings of crutches, braces, eyeshades and spectacles which were hung on either side of the Blessed Mother's shrine as testimony to cures worked and favors received were intended to bear witness and encourage others to hope that the mother who had heard the prayers of many would hear the prayers of more. There were also those among the devout women of Boston who became mini-apostles and faith healers themselves. Armed with images, prayers, and medals of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, as well as holy water and the water of Lourdes, these devotees of Our Lady invoked her healing power upon the needy with whom they came in contact, and reported back to the priests of the shrine the results they witnessed.³⁹

As a final note on how the devotion spread, it is important to include the more general witness that is the *Boston Testimonials* as a whole. The *Testimonials* show that people who experienced the power of devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help between 1870 and 1896 took the time to record or share their experience so that it could be known. They wrote to the Redemptorists or to stopped in at the rectory and bore witness to what they knew. As the devout scheduled Masses of thanksgiving, picked up images of Our Lady, requested scapulars, and began or ended their latest novena or triduum, they told their stories and sometimes they asked that these stories be repeated from the pulpit or written in the annals.⁴⁰ One can only imagine how the devout told their stories at home, at work, or in their neighborhoods, and thus spread the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in regions where the more institutional words of the Redemptorists were never heard or read.

Now we can ask about the forms that the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help took in America and how it related to the broader Catholic devotional culture of the nineteenth century. It can be said first of all that there was nothing exclusive about the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. By embracing a relationship with Mary as "Our Lady of Perpetual Help" the devout were by no means shutting the door on other channels of Catholic piety, especially piety of the Marian variety. Scapulars, rosaries, Lourdes water, and May devotions were all easily linked to a devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and in fact they became expressions of that same devotion, as can be seen throughout the shrine *Testimonials*. If a vision, a shrine, a prayer, or a practice was understood to honor Mary or draw one more deeply into a relationship with her and thereby the saving grace she offered from her Son, that vision, shrine, prayer, or practice was understood to be a part of the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. A great majority of the records in the *Testimonials* include mention of novenas, medals, images or prayers explicitly connected to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, but there are also plenty of stories in the collection that do not use the title of Our Lady of Perpetual Help for Mary at all, and record simply events that occurred in relation to Lourdes water, scapulars, or some other Marian piety or practice.

³⁹ Ibid., 42-46 and 249-252.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 307 and 341.

The stories recorded in the *Testimonials* reveal that the devout prayed novenas. They participated in tridua. They celebrated feasts of the church, Marian and otherwise. They prayed the rosary. They venerated the saints. They looked at holy pictures and hung them in their homes. They visited churches. They wore medals. They touched images and had these same images touched to them. They ate and drank items that they considered holy, not just Communion, but holy water, the water of Lourdes, and small, tissue paper like images of Our Lady of Perpetual Help that they called “Pills of the Blessed Virgin.”⁴¹ The devout sought blessings from priests. They went to Confession. They were anointed on their deathbeds. They prayed individually and with communities of family, friends, and fellow Catholics. In all of this, those Catholics who were devoted to Our Lady of Perpetual Help were very much typical Catholics of their age.

Intriguingly, we do not have much, if any evidence of a great engagement on the part of Our Lady of Perpetual Help’s devotees with the iconographic language of the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help itself. In two hundred pages of Fr. Müller’s work on the subject of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, he spends less than two and a half pages describing the image itself. When he does so, he speaks of the icon as a “very pretty” work and does little more for his readers than identify the individuals painted therein.⁴² Neither do the stories related within the *Testimonials* make much reference to the painted details of the picture itself. The experience of this Marian image as an “icon” in the developed sense of eastern Christian spirituality appears to have been wholly absent from Our Lady’s American devotees in the nineteenth century. Far more important to them than the work’s inherent theological symbolism as composed by the prayerful encounter of the writer of the icon with the mystery he depicted, were the simple facts that this was a picture of Mary and that good things seemed to happen for folks who drew near to the picture and called Mary by the name she had given herself in association with the it. Many of the devotees of Our Lady of Perpetual Help were obviously drawn to her by a sense that she and her picture were miraculously powerful.

The focus on the miraculous is one of the many connections this devotion has with the larger trends of nineteenth century Catholic spirituality. In Europe this was the era of Marx and Darwin and a rising tide of secular intellectuals who embraced skepticism toward religious matters while preaching the truths of positive science. During the decades in which this devotion developed, the pope was threatened and then “imprisoned” in the Vatican as a result of Italian revolution and unification. The Catholic Church struggled in its relationship with a new political reality of more modern, secular, industrialized nation states.⁴³ Then, if there was not enough of a sense of dislocation for them already in their homelands, when Catholic immigrants from the conflicted countries of Europe came to the U.S., they discovered further challenges to their identity as Protestant America often treated them with fear and suspicion. Whether its practitioners ever considered the fact or not, devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help with its attendant characteristics of ultramontanist, familial consciousness, and an embrace of the miraculous, helped its devotees find a home, a community, and an identity in a strange and challenging world.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 250. See also, Henze, 113-114.

⁴² Müller, 102-105.

⁴³ For background on the European scene, see Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett, “Catholicism Retuned: 1850 to 1914” in *Priests, Prelates & People: A History of European Catholicism since 1750*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Historians of nineteenth century Catholic spirituality have often commented on the ultramontane flavor of the era's devotions.⁴⁴ In his classic work on the "devotional revolution" in Ireland, Emmett Larkin posits the mid-nineteenth century Irish turn toward Rome as at least partly the product of an identity crisis over what it meant to be Irish once the Irish language started to disappear.⁴⁵ According to Larkin's theory, the Irish of the nineteenth century turned toward a more active practice of "Roman" Catholicism and a related devotional spirituality so that they might maintain an independent, Irish sense of self when so much around them was being anglicized. The Irish were not the only ones looking to Rome in the mid to late nineteenth century, however. In German lands, the Kulturkampf brought many Catholics there to a new understanding of their "Roman" Catholic identity. Even as Roman connections caused German Catholics political and social difficulty in the era of Bismarck, those connections helped shore up the persecuted group's identity and gave the German Catholics a sense that they were part of something larger than the secular government or Protestant society that had turned against them.

When Irish and German Catholic immigrants came to the U.S. in the 1860's and 70's as the devotion to our Lady of Perpetual Help was being introduced by the Redemptorists, these Catholics were ripe for an ultramontane devotional spirituality; a spirituality that could connect them to a sense of something bigger than themselves, something ancient, deep, and strong.

In some ways, the papacy hardly looked its strongest in the second half of the nineteenth century as the Papal States were taken away and old secular powers were denied to the bishop of Rome. Yet it was at precisely this time that a sense of the pope's importance was growing in the imagination of the Catholic world, as witnessed by the proclamation of papal infallibility during the First Vatican Council in 1870. This rising imaginative pull of the papacy was important to the experience of many European Catholic immigrants to the United States as it provided a reference point for a group of people struggling to place themselves in a new world. For the new Catholic immigrant, the act of connecting a sense of home and family in America with the papacy, Roman Catholic identity, and an ultramontane Marian devotion allowed home and family to be simultaneously "here" and "there;" a home and family experienced immediately in the newness of the American scene, yet also a home and family tied to realities back in Europe that were ancient and secure.

The devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help was a "here" and "there," "something old" and "something new" devotion, a devotion with both stability and mobility, capable of bonding a group together, creating a family, and offering security and assistance in a dangerous and confusing world. This is what the Redemptorists offered their primarily German and Irish congregations in the United States.

The Redemptorists were not shy about promoting papal ties to their devotion. They loudly announced the fact that Pope Pius IX had given them the original icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and told them to make her known. The papal pedigree of the devotion lent it prestige. Fr. Müller made sure that his book recorded not only the text written by Pius IX granting the Redemptorists custody of the icon, but also the facts that during the pope's childhood, Pius prayed "often" with his parents before

⁴⁴ See such works as Ann Taves, *Prayers of the Faithful: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, (South Bend: Notre Dame, 1986), and James P. McCartin, "Praying in the Immigrant Church," in *Prayers of the Faithful*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010), 28-29.

⁴⁵ Larkin, 649.

the icon at San Matteo and when he was given a copy of the icon by the Redemptorists, Pius placed it in his bedroom.⁴⁶ Again, after the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was organized and granted papal approbation in 1876, the *Manual of the Archconfraternity* noted that Pius IX requested that his name be listed first among those enrolled in the society.⁴⁷ Furthermore, both Fr. Müller's book and the *Manual* noted the list of indulgences attached to the prayers and practices of the devotion.⁴⁸ As Ann Taves has pointed out, such notes in prayer books rose sharply in connection with Pius IX and his promotion of indulgenced prayers.⁴⁹ These indulgences were one more sign for readers that the Pope was on board with what the Redemptorists and all that the devotees of Our Lady of Perpetual Help were doing.

Through all their various nods toward the papacy, the Redemptorists sent their immigrant audiences the message that devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help was safe, solid, Catholic and approved. The icon and the devotion might not have been something folks were familiar with before discovering it in their American parishes and missions, but it was something that transcended old national divisions and local allegiances. It was the Pope's, and therefore something for all Catholics. The people could learn about this new devotion, just as they were learning so many other new things in America, but they could rest secure in knowing that the devotion was in fact old and would not take them away from home. It would provide its devotees with a living link to the Pope, a fellow devotee who, even as he carried out his exalted mission as Christ's vicar on earth, was also a humble child of Mary, came with his family to pray for her intercession, and kept her image in his bedroom, just like any Irish day laborer or German worker in a brewery.

American devotees of Our Lady of Perpetual Help were taught that the original icon bearing this title was in Rome, but they also learned that they could find the image in their local church, hang it in their homes, wear it around their necks, and carry it in their pockets. The icon in Rome was understood to be miraculous, but its power was not limited by its location. Our Lady of Perpetual Help's mercy and powerful intercession were available wherever copies of the icon were brought or Our Lady of Perpetual Help was called upon. This combination of fixedness and mobility allowed the devotion to Our Lady to pick up some of the spiritual resonance a pilgrimage, and yet remain eminently portable. Just as a faithful devotee of Christ's passion could travel the Via Crucis in Jerusalem by walking around the parish church and kneeling before the painted or carved Stations of the Cross, the child of Our Lady of Perpetual Help could visit Mary's many shrines throughout the world by turning toward an authentic copy of her icon and offering the prayers of a pilgrim. Despite geographical distance, devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help promised its nineteenth century American practitioners connection with the same Madonna who appeared at La Sallette (1846), Lourdes (1854), Marpingen (1876), and Knock (1879).

To be devoted to Our Lady of Perpetual Help was to become Mary's child and thereby enter a network of relationship that ran through both the physical and spiritual world. It was network in which spiritual benefits could be shared and one person

⁴⁶ Müller, 118, 134.

⁴⁷ M.H.R. Lenoir, *Manual of the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and of Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori* (New York: FR. Pustet & Co., 1885), 30.

⁴⁸ Müller, 43. Lenoir, 40-41.

⁴⁹ Taves, 27.

could help another not just immediately, through physical connections, but across time and space, even after death. Again following the insight of Ann Taves into the general pattern of nineteenth century devotional life, it can be said that with a devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, one entered into a “household of faith.”⁵⁰ Mary connected the devotee to her Son, to His Father and to all believers, living and dead.

The *Shrine Testimonials* from Boston show that the connections made or strengthened by the practice of the devotion were not mere imaginary constructs. One story after another tells of how mothers and fathers brought their children to the shrine to pray for Mary’s intercession on their behalf. Friends gathered for novenas and tridua. Women visited the homes of their sick neighbors to bring them Lourdes water, a blessed medal, or “pills of the Blessed Mother.” Devotees requested Masses for the souls in purgatory, they received Communion for the intentions of folks who could not make it to Church, and they prayed for grown children who had wandered far from home to return. The practice of the devotion forged a spiritual community, and often a physical one as well. This community was likely a godsend for many immigrants who felt disconnected in their new environment.

While on the subject of familial connection and the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, it is interesting to note that among the stories of healing at the shrine in Boston, there are a few wherein a whole family is encouraged by a Redemptorist to pray to Our Lady of Perpetual Help for a specific intention, usually for the healing of one of the family members. The family is told to pray a novena or that each one needs to go to Communion or Confession. Then it is noted that some member of the family did not follow through on the prescribed practice. In these stories, healing only occurs for the suffering member of the family when the recalcitrant member is reminded of his or her duty and follows through on the prayer or reception of the sacrament, whereupon the suffering family member is healed.⁵¹ These stories illustrate the very real sense in which the members of the household of faith were understood to be connected with one another, and how the good of one might depend upon the help of his or her brothers and sisters.

As a last note about how the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual fits within the broader pattern of Catholic spirituality in the nineteenth century, we need to mention again the embrace of the miraculous shown by devotees of Our Lady and the way in which the devotees’ openness to faith cures and unexpected reversals ran counter to the rationalistic, scientific positivism that had gained ground in some parts of the broader culture.

The people who came to pray before Our Lady’s icon in Boston went to their doctors. In story after story of their *Testimonials* we hear diagnoses given by health professionals. The doctors give names to the problems that the devout present; cancer, scrofula, consumption, hip disease, blindness, St. Vitus dance, tumors, dropsy, lunacy, and on and on. Then these scientific professionals do the best they can. Sometimes their efforts are helpful, and sometimes they are not. The devout turn to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, usually not because they have no faith in doctors, but because they believe that Mary has more power than any doctor. They believe that the mercy of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and her powerful intercession can work wonders,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ O’Connor, *Testimonials II*, 77-78, 427

even after a doctor has pronounced a case hopeless, prescribed an amputation, or simply given the word that healing is going to take a long, long time. These believers are open to the benefits that advances in science and medicine might be able to bring them, but they refuse to be limited to a simply materialistic view of the world. One can pick up a note of joyful triumph in the records of cures at the Boston shrine, as doctors' predictions are subverted and folks who were given no hope by medicine suddenly become well through faith.

Again, here we can see the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help allowing Catholics to claim and protect their identity and the dignity of their heritage. Turning to Our Lady of Perpetual Help enabled folks who felt vulnerable to feel powerful again. In the ever more modern world, the devout were vulnerable not only in the face of their physical weaknesses, diseases and injuries, things that people had always suffered, but now they could also feel vulnerable in the face of ever more foreign and "expert" medical professionals who dealt in languages and theories that the common person might not understand and who might not share the devoted person's belief that prayer to Our Lady or the Saints would be of any benefit to anyone. The supposedly common faith of Christendom was long gone in the late nineteenth century, and who knew if a doctor would think you a fool for lighting your candles and saying your prayers?

In his study of twentieth century devotion to St. Jude, Robert Orsi writes about American women's experiences of powerlessness before medical professionals as birth was taken out of the home in the twentieth century⁵². Yet it could be argued that the sense of alienation in the face of modern science started long before the twentieth century experience, and it is evident in the sense of satisfaction that one can pick up in the *Testimonials* of the devout in Boston, as Fr. O'Connor records one after another playing a variation on how the doctor said their case was hopeless, but here they are now, fully cured. In the perception of the devout, the cures and "miraculous" events that they recorded vindicated and affirmed their identity as children of Mary and members of the household of God. When cures and wonders happened for any member of family, they gave hope to all.

The introduction to this paper suggested that the body of the text would attempt to answer the questions, "How did the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help spread in the nineteenth century U.S.? What form or forms did the devotion take as it developed? How was it related to the broader Catholic devotional culture of the era, and what groups became particularly associated with the devotion?" We have now come to the last of these questions, that of the groups. The question has been somewhat addressed already as we have looked at the challenges faced by Irish and German immigrant Catholics of the nineteenth century. These were the folks who to whom the Redemptorists first preached the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in their parishes and their missions, and it was primarily from among these groups that the devotion would spread to others in ensuing years.

In the course of the paper we have also identified at least one official group associated with the devotion, the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, known more properly by its full title, "The Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and of St. Alphonsus Maria De Liguori," approved by Pope Pius IX in 1876. However, of more interest to the

⁵² Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Lost Causes*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 58.

reader might be details of age and sex related to the practice of this devotion. Who was attracted to Our Lady of Perpetual Help as she was presented by the Redemptorists and took on a life of her own independent of their preaching? Were her devotees men or women, young or old?

It might be good to listen here to Fr. O'Connor, describing the experience of the Redemptorists at the newly founded Our Lady of Perpetual Help at Boston in 1871:

“Since that time (the blessing of the Redemptorist convent) the devotion has been spreading far and wide, attracting hundreds to our church, ladies as well as the simple coming for relief, women bringing their children, wives their husbands, sisters their brothers—and all go away comforted...many cured.”

In O'Connor's description we note that women are the driving force in and among the crowd coming to the church. It is likely that this is how things stayed throughout the nineteenth century, at least in terms of the folks who regularly prayed at Our Lady's altar on Wednesday afternoons when the blessings were held. An examination of the 1871 and '72 records of the *Testimonials* at Boston reveals fifty reports of females who sought Our Lady's intercession at the shrine and twenty five reports of males doing the same (entries described as “families” have not been included). As the years moved ahead for the devotion, the dominance of women's stories in the *Testimonials* continues, however men remain solidly represented. Both sexes come to Our Lady with worries about work, health, and the well-being of their families. The number of children brought to the shrine trends upward after the first few years of the testimonials. There are more and more stories especially of mothers bringing their children to the shrine for this or that illness or difficulty.

As for the economic status of the devotees, it appears they were largely people who had to work for a living. Fr. O'Connor will periodically mention that a shrine visitor is among the more well known figures in the city, but the general impression one gets from the *Testimonials* is that devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help was a reality of the working class, to which most Catholics in this era belonged.

In 2010, when one finds images of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in churches and homes all over the United States, even rising over the nativity scene each Christmas in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, it is easy to forget that the icon was unknown in the country less than one hundred and fifty years ago. The image and title of Our Lady of Perpetual Help worked their way so quickly into the fabric of American Catholic life that they are often taken for granted. It is my hope that this paper has done at least a small bit to raise an awareness of how the icon entered into American Catholic life and shed light on how it fit into the experience of the immigrant Church in the nineteenth century.

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