

Mary's Contemplative Gaze: Icon of Converging Realities

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The 150th Jubilee of the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help offers a unique opportunity for the Redemptorist family to reflect on the significance of Mary for the world. Such reflection should be rooted in the doctrines of the Catholic faith, supportive of traditional Catholic piety and devotion to Our Lady, and relevant for the pressing issues of the world today. If it is true that all mature theological reflection must take into account the concepts of God, the human person, and the world,¹ then one involving Our Mother of Perpetual Help should look at what the icon says about these three realities, explore how they interact, and say something about their relevance for the world today.

One World, Many Worlds

As a historical artifact, the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help belongs both to one world and to many worlds. It is the same world that Mary walked some 2,000 years ago when she carried her infant Son in her tender, loving arms. It is the same world of Luke the Evangelist, who legend says painted the first images of the Virgin and Child and provided believers with a sacred portrait to venerate alongside the sacred words of the holy Gospel. It is the same world of the unknown medieval iconographer, who painted the holy icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help and gave the Church a new window into eternity through which the gaze and ponder upon the divine mysteries. It is the same world of Pius IX, who gave the icon to the Redemptorists and charged them in January of 1866 to, “make her known throughout the

¹ See N. Max Wildiers, *The Theologian and His Universe: Theology and Cosmology from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 1.

world!”² And it is the same world of 21st-century pilgrims, many of whom will travel to Rome and other destinations during the Jubilee Year to kneel before the icon, venerate it, and bring their needs and petitions to Our Blessed Mother. This world is one, yet constantly changing. It is the same, but also very different world, one that each of us walks with quiet, uncertain steps in our perilous journey through time and space.

Down through the ages, the world has seen innumerable changes in language, culture, religion, and outlook, while the annals of recorded history testify to countless civilizations that have come and gone. In the vast configuration of things, the earth is nothing but an insignificant particle of celestial dust in a small, unremarkable galaxy of an unimaginably immense but unambiguously finite (and largely empty) universe. As a result, people can easily lose their bearings and feel lost in a sea of uncertainties and competing relativities. Those who open themselves to the light of faith, however, hear the words of the Psalmist resonating within their hearts: “When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place---What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him? (Ps 8:4-5).³

Icons inhabit both one world and many worlds. They are more than just works of religious art. They are embodied faith, for the iconographer puts his entire being---body, heart, mind, soul, and strength---into this new creation. They have been variously described as

² *The Perpetual Help Story* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1976), 50. See also *The Redemptorists*, <http://www.cssr.com/english/whoarewe/iconstory.shtml> (accessed March 30, 2015).

³ Unless otherwise stated, all Scriptural citations come from *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also, *The Holy See*, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/INDEX.HTM> (accessed March 30, 2015).

“windows to eternity,” “visible theology,” “contemplative lenses,” “sacramental presences of sacred realities.” They are made from the fruits of the earth---wood, lime, tempera, pigments, gold leaf, and other ingredients---and are to be revered as sacred instruments of prayer. They speak in silence to the hearts of those who gaze upon them and who allow themselves to be gazed upon by the presences to which they point. They are rooted in the world yet point beyond it. They expel darkness from the heart and elicit faith; they cast out fear and inspire hope; they dispel hatred and encourage love. They baptize time in the font of eternal silence and extend the promise of fullness of life in a new creation. They unite the one world with the many worlds they inhabit by pointing to a world beyond the one and the many and, in doing so, convey a message to the world and all its inhabitants. The icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help reminds a world lost in false dreams and broken promises that salvation is close at hand and that God will never abandon it, since he has sent his Son into it to draw all men to himself and to make all things new (cf. Jn 12:32; Rev 21:5).

Old Man, New Man

As the moon reflects the light of the sun, so does Mary mirror the radiant grace of her Son. Everything Mary does points to Jesus. She brought him into our broken world, and she carries all who are reborn in him into a world thoroughly healed, elevated, and transformed by virtue of his Incarnation and Paschal mystery. The icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help centers on the most essential truths of the Christian faith: Christ entered our world (in the mystery of the Incarnation), gave himself to us completely (in his Passion and Death), became nourishment for us (in the Eucharist), and a source of hope (in his Resurrection). These four themes lie at the very heart of the Catholic faith and are fundamental elements of Redemptorist spirituality. They are timeless truths born in time, which place time in its proper, ordered relationship to eternity.

They mark the passage of the old world to the new, of the old man to the new man, the First Adam to the Second.

The Good News of Jesus Christ proclaims that the Old Man has made way for the New. Because of the mystery of the Incarnation, anthropology (what we say about humanity's makeup and action in the world) is now forever intimately linked with theology (what we say about God and the divine action in the world). We look to Jesus, the New Adam, to tell us of God's dream for humanity and what it means to be fully alive. As St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180) puts it, "The glory of God is the man fully alive."⁴ Jesus, "the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6) reveals God's dream for humanity. That dream goes beyond our wildest hopes. It recognizes that we were made for God yet, because of our fallen humanity and propensity toward sin, cannot reach him through our own efforts. In the words of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they can find peace in you."⁵ We were made for God, but have become trapped in a poisonous "unmaking" of ourselves as a result the enticements of our primal sin and the havoc it has wreaked in our minds and hearts.

God entered our world in the mystery of the Incarnation not only to heal humanity of its festering wounds and restore it to its former dignity, but also to transform it and elevate it to new heights. As St. Athanasius of Alexandria (295-373) teaches, "The Son God became man so that we might become God."⁶ God's dream for humanity is humanity's divinization. If the sin of

⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons *Adversus haereses*, 4.20.7. See also *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 294, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P19.HTM (accessed March 25, 2015).

⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1.1, trans. Rex Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963), 17.

⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De incarnatione*, 54.3. See also *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 460, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P19.HTM (accessed

Adam had to do with humanity's misguided attempt to "be like gods" (Gn 3:5), then the cross of Christ planted on Golgotha, "the place of the skull" (Mt 27:33) brings humanity back from the dust from which it came and shapes it into a new humanity, one not merely created in the image and likeness of God, but which participates or shares in divinity itself. In other words, what humanity could not achieve through its own efforts, God has freely bestowed as a gift. He, who is Love itself, empowers humanity to share in his love by becoming human and transforming humanity from the inside out: body (*soma*), soul (*psyche*), spirit (*pneuma*) (1Th 5:17) as members of his body in the community of the faithful (1Cor 12:12). That is to say that Jesus, the God-Man, the Word-made-flesh who was, at one and the same time, both fully human and fully divine, came into the world to rescue humanity from the snares of the Evil One on every level of its anthropological makeup. He did so by emptying himself (*kenosis*) and pouring himself into the womb of the Virgin Mary, the "New Eve,"⁷ the first daughter of the new humanity who, because of her humble and loving *fiat* allowed God's Word to take shape in her womb and thus initiate the process of humanity's sharing in the divine life (*theosis*).

The Crazy God

St. Alphonsus de Liguori once said that God was "Iddio pazzo," a God crazy with love for humanity.⁸ He did not believe that divine love was detached or without passion, but saw it as the convergence of all authentic expressions of love. As Pope Benedict points out in his

March 25, 2015).

⁷ *Adversus haereses*, 5.19.1. See also the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, no. 56, The Holy See, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed March 30, 2015).

⁸ Alphonsus de Liguori, *Selected Writings*. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 268. See also, Idem, *L'amore dell'anime*, 2.11 in *Opere ascetiche*, vol. 5 (Roma: Sant'Alfonso, 1943), 33.

encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, passionate love (*eros*), friendship (*philia*), and natural human affection (*storge*) are healed and ultimately transformed in Christian charity (*agape*).⁹ Authentic love involves both giving and receiving, ascending and descending like the angels in Jacob's ladder (Gn 28:12).¹⁰ It consists of both gift love and need love. God is the source of all authentic love. He is father, friend, lover, and spouse, a jealous God and a giving God. According to St. Alphonsus, God is passionately in love with humanity and is willing to take extreme measures to bring human being back into intimate relationship with him. "God's love is self-diffusive," the theologians like to tell us.¹¹ God refuses to contain his love within himself, but freely pours himself out in the acts of creation, redemption, and sanctification, which, are respectively seen as the work of the one Triune God, the perfect community of love, yet generally and respectively attributed to the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

St. Alphonsus called prayer "the great means of salvation."¹² Prayer was at the center of his spiritual and theological vision. "If you pray, you will be saved," he liked to say.¹³ Without prayer, he held, it would be impossible to find one's way to God. Those who fail to pray, will be

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, nos. 3-8, The Holy See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (accessed March 30, 2015). See also C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1960), 184.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 7, The Holy See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (accessed March 30, 2015).

¹¹ See, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, 4.1.20; *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 4.1 in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 93-94, 156.

¹² Alphonsus de Liguori, *Prayer, The Great Means of Salvation* in *The Complete Works of Saint Alphonsus de Liguori*, ed., Eugene Grimm, vol. 3 (Brooklyn/St. Louis/Toronto: Redemptorist Fathers, 1927), 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49. See also *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2744 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/P19.HTM> (accessed March 30, 2015).

lost. They will end up wandering aimlessly for all eternity in search of something to fill a gaping hole in their hearts, a hole that can only be filled by God. Alphonsus was adamant about the central role of prayer for our salvation: "...I say, and repeat, and will keep on repeating as long as I live, that our whole salvation depends on prayer; and therefore, that all writers in their books, all preachers in their sermons, all confessors in their instructions to their penitents, should not inculcate anything more strongly than continual prayer."¹⁴ He maintained that everyone receives sufficient grace to pray and considered it the key that would unite the mysteries of God with the mysteries of the human heart.

As an instrument of prayer, the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help opens a window to eternity that allows God to probe the heart of the person praying and draws it into intimacy with his own. It places prayer at the center of the human story, one that Christ lived when he walked the earth and continues to live through the members of his body, the Church. Jesus was known in his day not merely as a prophet, teacher, and miracle worker, but also as a man of prayer. He shared a deep, intimate relationship with, "Abba," his Father in heaven, and would often seek out deserted, lonely places where he could spend the night in prayer and commune with the Father in the intimate bond of Spirit they shared. He taught his disciples how to pray and desires all who believe in him to be guided by the same Spirit who guided him and prompted him to sacrifice his life for the life of the world. He encouraged his disciples to address God as "Abba, Father," as he himself addressed him. They were to rely on him for all things, as children rely on their parents for love. One phrase from the Lord's Prayer, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven" (Mt 6:10), resembles very close the inspired words of Mary's humble *fiat*, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38) and suggests that Jesus may very well

¹⁴ Liguori, *Prayer, The Great Means of Salvation*, 240.

learned the intimacies of prayer from his mother's knee. Mary, "the woman wrapped in silence,"¹⁵ teaches all her children how to pray. If God, for us, is "Abba, Father," Mary is, for us, what she was for Jesus, a loving, compassionate mother.

Holy Mary, Mother of God

The icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help depicts Mary, the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) holding and comforting her son Jesus. She holds him in a way that seems also to present to the world. In the icon, all three elements for mature theological reflection---God, humanity, and the world---are visibly manifest and come mysteriously into play. They do so in a way that tells a story about the Mother of God's love for God, the human person, and the world we inhabit.

The Story. The icon engages our imagination by asking us to picture an unrecorded moment in the life of the Madonna and Child. It asks us to picture in our mind the child Jesus being awakened from sleep by a terrible nightmare. His dream of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel hovering about him with the instruments of his passion disturbs him so much that he awakens in fright and flees to his mother's arms for help. The subtle crease in Mary's neck shows that she was looking down at her Son to comfort him, yet is now looking out at the beholder to remind him or her to turn to her in times of need. Her eyes, in fact, follow those of the beholder as he or she gazes upon her image from different vantage points in space and time. In this way, the icon links the narrative of Christ's passion and death to the life of the believer. Those who view the icon with the eyes of faith see not just a beautiful painting of great aesthetic value, but an invitation to unite the stories of their lives to that of Jesus and Mary, the Mother of God, who is also Our Mother, the Mother of the Church, and the Mother of the new humanity.

¹⁵ See John W. Lynch, *A Woman Wrapped in Silence* (New York/Paramus, NJ: Paulist Press, 1941, 1968).

The World. By engaging the imagination, the icon also touches the world, the one external to our minds and the many within our minds created from the nightmares that haunt us in overt (and sometimes very subtle) ways. The world is a beautiful, yet also very dangerous place. War, murder, famine, natural disasters, illness, deadly accidents, random violence---the list goes on and on. The possibility of death hovers around us on the margins of our awareness and may even overwhelm us at times. It would be very easy to give in to the voices of fear that surround us ---those that are real and those that are figments of our imagination--- and allow them to paralyze us. Mary's gaze turns outward, away from her Son and toward us, toward the world, and toward the many worlds that inhabit our minds. It exudes love, comfort, help, and protection. It resonates with the words attributed to the beloved disciple, to whom Jesus entrusted his mother as he hung from the cross (cf. Jn 19:26-27): "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear..." (1Jn 4:18). Mary's contemplative gaze invites us to take a deeper look at the world around us. It bids us to delve beneath appearances and experience life as it is meant to be lived. It asks us to join in this contemplative gaze and to recognize our fears for what they are. Mary's gaze upon the world reminds us of one basic Gospel truth: Love is stronger than Death. The icon depicts Mary reminding her infant Son of this fundamental truth at a time when he was weak and vulnerable. It reminds us that evil is a lack of love and will one day be cast out of the penetrating presence of divine light. In the picture, this light shines through Mary and her son. Our hope is that it will also shine in us and set the world on fire.

The Human Person. The icon speaks about the relationship of a mother to her son. It is not just any mother and any son, but the Mother of God and the Savior of the World. Jesus reveals to us what it means to be truly human. Mary shows us that the divine life that penetrates her Son also penetrates her and can shine in us as well. The icon has been called a "window to

eternity.” Windows are transparent conduits of light. They let in light to darkened rooms, and enable people to look out at the surrounding world. The gold backdrop of the picture penetrates the persons of Jesus and Mary and promises to penetrate us as it shines through the window of the icon and enters our soul through the windows of our eyes. This divine light is another name for grace. Mary, the Mother of God and Mother of the Church, is full of grace. She wants us to be full of grace as well, for grace opens up for us a pathway to heaven. The icon reminds us that the old world is fading away and slowly passing into the new. The old humanity, burdened by sin and death, is in the process of being reborn and, in the process, transformed into a new humanity, one led Spirit and free to live out its inheritance as sons and daughters of God. It helps us recall that the mystery of redemption involves more than just the healing of our primal self-inflicted wound, but an elevation and transformation of our very being. The icon reminds us that Christ became human to lift our humanity into his divinity and, in doing so, effect a change in us that exceeds our wildest dreams. The icon keeps alive in us the promise of our present and future glory. It reminds us of our fundamental human dignity that is rooted in this world and yet somehow mysteriously transcends it.

The God of Jesus Christ. Every story has an author, as does every icon a maker. An unknown iconographer stands behind the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Making the icon was, for him, a spiritual exercise, one that involved a set regimen of fasting and prayer and followed concrete guidelines for its making. The artist produces an instrument of prayer that juxtaposes symbols and images to convey the sense of another dimension, one that goes beyond those of time and space to a world beyond. In a similar, but much more profound way, God the Father stands behind the story the icon tells. As the author of the new creation, the narrative of Christ’s incarnation, passion, death and resurrection comes from his hand. It is told by the God

of Jesus Christ and conveys his deepest dreams and hopes for humanity. It is a story of infinite love that is both able and willing to do seemingly impossible things. As the Gospel remind us, “For God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26). The icon reminds us that, because God is love, his dream for humanity is intimately related to his dream for himself. Because of Christ, the human and divine are now intimately united. The humanization of God in Christ ends in the divinization of humanity in Mary and in all who turn to her and her Son for the transformative grace wrought by the Son’s enactment of the Father’s will through his incarnation and paschal mystery. St. Alphonsus puts it best, “The paradise of God...is the human heart.”¹⁶ The story captured by the icon is a story of Christ and his mother Mary; it is a story about humanity, and a story about the world. It is also a story about God and the power of his love to cast out the darkness from our souls so that he might rest in the manger of our hearts and allow his Spirit dwell within us and ultimately lead us home.

Conclusion

The icon of Our Mother of Perpetual unites our story with that of Mary and her son. It engages our imagination and invites us to envision a divinized humanity living in a new creation founded on the love of God and life in the Spirit. It is a work of sacred art that unveils our innermost hopes and desires, one that encourages us to view the world and our place in it as the handiwork of a loving and compassionate God. Mary’s contemplative gaze touches the hearts of those who ponder it in faith, receive it with hope, and accept its invitation with compassion and love. It tells a story of a mother and child, who happens also to be the Mother of God and the

¹⁶ Alphonsus de Liguori, *The Way to Converse Always and Familiarly with God in The Complete Works of Saint Alphonsus de Liguori*, ed., Eugene Grimm, vol. 2 (Brooklyn/St. Louis/Toronto: Redemptorist Fathers, 1927), 395.

Savior of the World.

That story is also our story, for Mary is not only the Mother of God, but also the Mother of the Church and we, the community of the faithful, are members of her Son's risen and glorified body. The icon challenges us to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2Cor 5:7) and helps us to delve beneath appearances and view the world around us with a quiet, contemplative gaze. With such a gaze, we are able to see deep down truth of things and sense everything around us as touched by the gracious hand of a loving God. In 1866, Pope Pius IX gave the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help to the Redemptorists, asking them to make her known throughout the world. He did so, because he understood one very simple truth: the story of Mary is intimately tied to that of the Gospel and must accompany it as those who serve it carry its message to the ends of the earth.

The role of the icon in today's world is not to provide concrete solutions to difficult and complex problems, but to remind people that their story is intimately connected to that of Mary and her Son. The icon tells us that the transformation of the world must begin with the transformation of the human heart. Such a change will come about only when people let down their defenses, open their hearts, and make themselves vulnerable to the gentle, compassionate, and merciful love of the "Emmanuel, God with us" (Mt 1:23). In the end, the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help offers an invitation to prayer of all types: vocal, meditative, contemplative, liturgical, devotional, communal, personal---anything on our part that invites God into our lives and asks him to play an active role in our world. St. Alphonsus called prayer "the great means of salvation," because he understood that it held the key the transformation of the human heart. Once that is accomplished, the solutions to the problems that weigh down our

hearts and in which the world seems so inextricably mired will be seen in a very different light.

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