

Divine Providence and the Icon of Love

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On the 26 April 1866 a providential fountain of grace was opened for the universal Church when the miraculous Icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour was solemnly enshrined in the Redemptorist church of St. Alphonsus in Rome. Ever since then the cleansing, sanctifying and fortifying flow of grace from Our Lady's shrine has washed over the whole Church, bringing conversion to hardened sinners, health and wholeness to the suffering and the broken hearted, inspiration and holiness to great saints like St. Therese of Lisieux and St Pope John Paul II, and comfort and consolation to all the faithful who invoke her powerful intercession. The miraculous Icon has truly been the Icon of Love, beaming the love of God, the love of Jesus and Our Lady's own love into the hearts that are open to receive.

The Icon of Love, this fountain of grace, came to be enshrined in the church of St. Alphonsus, not through a series of historical coincidences, but through the will of God. The first theological observation, therefore, that we must make about the miraculous Icon is that it was clearly God's will that the Icon would be enshrined in the church of St. Alphonsus in Rome. We see God's providence at work in each historical event and in each person who was responsible for ensuring that Our Lady's wish, that the Icon be venerated in the church that stood between St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran, be fulfilled.

Our Lady's presence in the Church

Our Lady is not absent from the Church nor from the experience of the faithful. As St. Pope John Paul II said:

“Mary is present in the Church as the Mother of Christ, and at the same time as the Mother whom Christ, in the mystery of Redemption, gave to humanity in the person of the Apostle John. Thus, in her new motherhood in the Spirit, Mary embraces each and every one in Christ, and embraces each and every one *through* the Church”.¹

Many millions of Catholics and members of other Churches and indeed of other world religions have experienced in a deep and personal way this embrace of the Mother of Christ as they contemplated the Icon of Love and as they brought all their joys and sorrows to Our Mother of Perpetual Succour. The Perpetual Novena in Singapore and India appeals to many Buddhists and Hindus. Devout Muslims too venerate the Mother of Jesus. In 2014, Pope Francis sent a greeting to the 8th Islamic-Christian Prayer Meeting held on the feast of the Annunciation in Beirut on the theme, *Together around Mary, Our Lady*. The feast of the Annunciation is marked by both Christians and Muslims and was declared a national holiday by the Lebanese Government in 2010. The Pope's message was conveyed by the

¹ St. John Paul II, *Mother of the Redeemer*, 47

Secretary of State who said that the Holy Father was full of joy at seeing *Christians and Muslims united in their devotion to the Virgin Mary.* ²

The history of how the Icon came into the guardianship of the Redemptorists was guided, step by step, by the Holy Spirit. In God's Providence, nothing happens by accident. When the church of St. Matthew, in which the Icon had been venerated for 300 years was demolished, by the Napoleonic forces in 1799, the Icon disappeared from public veneration. In 1801, Pope Pius VII wrote "The Church of San Matteo was so utterly uprooted from its very foundations that not only was worship in it discontinued but hardly the slightest vestige of it could be found".³ After sixty years the Catholic community in Rome had forgotten about their miraculous Icon and about Our Lady's wish that it should be venerated in the church that stood between St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran⁴. But the Holy Spirit hadn't forgotten.

The Lord had chosen the man through whom He would restore the Icon to where our Blessed Lady said that it had to be. That man was a Scottish Protestant by the name of Edward Douglas. He was the son of a Scottish nobleman and born into a very wealthy family. While he was a student at Oxford University, he became a friend of Blessed John Henry Newman and joined the Oxford Movement. Like Newman, he became a Catholic. Some years later he was ordained a priest in Rome.

² Zenit.org 26 March 2014

³ R.J. Spitzer, *The Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour*, Liguori Press, 1954, p, 31

⁴ Adelino M Garcia Paz, *Holy Mary of Perpetual Help: History and interpretation of the Icon*, Redemptorist Community, Singapore, 1991, vol. 1, p.14

Fr. Douglas became a Redemptorist in London in 1849. In 1853, Blessed Pope Pius IX, told the Redemptorist Vicar General, Fr. Von Smetana who, at the time, resided at Alt-Oetting in Bavaria, to establish a General House in Rome and call a General Chapter so that the governance of the expanding Congregation could be centralised. Fr. Von Smetana, a saintly man, now had a big problem. He had no money for such a major development. When Fr. Douglas heard of the command of Blessed Pius IX, he wrote to the Vicar General and offered to pay for the development from his family inheritance. Fr. Von Smetana invited him to come to Alt-Oetting to discuss plans for the General House and then sent him to Rome with full authority to purchase a suitable property. But where would Douglas find a suitable property for the establishment of a Collegio for the General Government and the church to St. Alphonsus that he was determined to build?

Fr. Douglas searched all over the city of Rome to find the right property for the needs of the Congregation. A number of convents and monasteries were available, but Douglas, providentially as it turned out, did not accept any of them and kept looking. Eventually he found what he was looking for. A large property, quite close to St. Mary Major, on the Via Merulana, known as the Villa Caserta, came on the market. This was an extensive property of 14 acres of garden and vegetable gardens with a large manor house at the centre. The large house was in fairly good condition and there was plenty of space for the new church in honour of St. Alphonsus. Douglas

bought the whole site in 1855 at a cost of £10,000. (In today's money that would be 5 million pounds). Without being aware of the historic significance of the purchase, he had actually bought the site on which the demolished church of St. Matthew stood for hundreds of years. As one researcher writes, "The church would have occupied a position in what was now assigned as a vegetable garden on the property of the Villa Caserta".⁵ It was surely the Holy Spirit who was inspiring Douglas to wait for the right property. Had he bought a different property we would have a beautiful church of St. Alphonsus, in a different part of Rome, but it would not be the shrine of the Icon of Love.

The fact that Fr. Douglas had purchased of the Villa Caserta meant that, the very site on which the church of St. Matthew had stood and in which the Icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour had been venerated for 300 years, now belonged to the Redemptorists. But what had happened to the miraculous Icon? Was it destroyed when the church of St. Matthew was demolished?

Once again divine providence was at work. A young man by the name of Michael Marchi was the first novice to join the Redemptorists in Rome in 1855, the very same year in which Fr. Douglas bought the Villa Caserta. He was ordained a priest in 1859. As a boy he had served Mass in the private chapel of St. Mary's in Posterula near the river Tiber, where the Irish Augustinians had taken refuge, after the

⁵ Adelino M Garcia Paz, *Holy Mary of Perpetual Help: History and interpretation of the Icon*, Redemptorist Community, Singapore, 1991, vol. 1, p.39

destruction of their monastery and church of St. Matthew. An old Augustinian lay Brother, Brother Augustine Orsetti, who had lived in the community of St. Matthew and knew its history well, frequently pointed to a picture of Our Lady in the private chapel and impressed on the young Michael that it was the miraculous Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Succour and that it should be in a church for public veneration.

Writing about his conversations with Brother Augustine, Fr. Marchi recalled:

“This good Brother always repeated to me in a certain mysterious way and with some anxiety, specially in 1850 and 1852, these precise words: ‘You should know, my Little Michael, that the Virgin of St. Matthew is the one which is in the chapel up there, do not forget it.. It is certain, certain, dear Michael. Have you understood? It was a miraculous picture’. At that time, this Brother was nearly completely blind.”⁶

Fr. Marchi was now able to tell the community where the Icon was. But, at the time, he didn't know where Our Lady wanted it to be. Again divine providence was at work. In 1863, a Jesuit preacher, Fr. Francis Blosi, speaking to a vast audience about famous pictures of Our Lady in Rome, mentioned Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. He appealed for information about the whereabouts of this miraculous Icon. He said that if anyone knew where the Icon was, he or she had a duty to make it known,

⁶ Adelino M Garcia Paz, *Holy Mary of Perpetual Help: History and interpretation of the Icon*, Redemptorist Community, Singapore, 1991, vol. 1, p.34

because that picture had to be venerated, at Our Lady's own request, in the church that "stood between the two great basilicas of St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran".

The new church of St Alphonsus, built on the site of the destroyed church of St. Matthew, was now the church "between the two great basilicas" and Fr. Marchi knew where the Icon was. The Redemptorist community told the Superior General, Fr. Nicholas Mauron, about Fr. Blosi's appeal and about Fr. Michael Marchi's knowledge of where the picture was. Fr. Mauron requested Fr. Blosi for further information. The Jesuit kindly sent him a copy of his talk and informed him that he read about the picture in a book published in 1729.

Fr. Mauron now knew the history of the miraculous Icon. He knew that it should be in the new church of St. Alphonsus, but he didn't rush to claim it for his church. Instead, he asked the community to begin a period of special prayer for guidance. They kept this intention in their prayers for three years. He then sought a private audience with Blessed Pope Pius IX which resulted in the Pope writing the following instruction:

11 December 1865

The Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda will summon the Superior of the community of Santa Maria in Posterula and will tell him that it is our wish that the image of the Most Holy Mary, to which this report relates, should return to its position between St. John

*Lateran and St. Mary Major; and the Liguorians (the Redemptorists) should provide the community with another suitable painting in its place.*⁷

Fr. O'Brien, the Prior of the Augustinians met with Fr. Mauron, Superior General, and arranged the transfer of the Icon. Fr. Mauron gave his community a gift of 50 Escudos. After extensive, artistic restoration work, the Icon was solemnly enshrined in the new church of St. Alphonsus on 26 April 1866 amidst scenes of great joy. A Roman newspaper, *Giornale di Roma*, described the event: "The solemnities announced for the restoration to public veneration of the image of Most Holy Mary under the title of Perpetual Succour, took place at the days mentioned. The enthusiasm and the manifestation of solid and deep fervour surpassed all expectations".⁸

Blessed Pope Pius IX himself visited the new shrine on 5 May 1866, just ten days after the Icon was enshrined in the church of St. Alphonsus. The Redemptorist chronicler relates: "He knelt in the middle of the sanctuary and prayed for a while with great fervour visible to all, to the Virgin of Perpetual Succour, as before he had prayed when a child, in the Church of St. Matthew, as he related to Most Reverend Father General".⁹ This was the first time that the Pope had revealed his childhood connections with the miraculous Icon in the old church of St. Matthew. It was on this occasion that the Pope gave the Redemptorists the mandate "to make her known to

⁷ Fabriciano Ferrero, *The Story of An Icon*, Redemptorist Publications, Chawton, 2006, p.110

⁸ *Ibid* p. 53

⁹ *Ibid* p. 58

the world". How could the Redemptorists make the Icon that was unknown in the Church until that day known to the world?

Again, divine providence had matters in hand. The solemn enshrinement of the Icon took place on the 26 April. The following year, the Icon was solemnly crowned. The Cardinal Vicar of Rome decreed seven days of religious feasts: three days in preparation, the day of the solemn crowning and three days of thanksgiving. The central event of the crowning would take place on Sunday 23 June 1867.¹⁰ Providentially, the time of the celebrations for the crowning of the Icon coincided with the 18th centenary of the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul. An estimated 500 bishops from around the world, with hundreds of priests and many thousands of faithful were in Rome for this great centenary. Many of them attended the ceremony of the solemn crowning of the Icon. With the attendance of so many bishops, the Redemptorist chronicler could record, "The feast of the crowning surpassed all those which till that moment had been celebrated in honour of Perpetual Succour".¹¹ Remarkably, within the space of a year from the enshrining of the Icon, hundreds of bishops, priests and faithful from all over the world had their own personal experience of the power of devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. When those bishops and priests returned to their dioceses and parishes they were eager to promote this devotion. As the Redemptorists had already established missions in many countries, bishops and priests, who had experienced the crowning of the Icon,

¹⁰ Ibid 62

¹¹ Ibid 65

were very happy to invite them to preach parish missions and promote devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

Three years later all the bishops of the world came to Rome for the First Vatican Council in 1870. And they all returned to their dioceses all over the world with knowledge of the miraculous Icon. The German bishop, William Emmanuel Kettler, the great social reformer of the 19th Century, returned to his diocese after the Council with a copy of the Icon. He had personally experienced the great devotion of the people who visited the church of St. Alphonsus and heard reports from others of the many graces that people in different parts of the world were receiving through their devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Succour. He wrote to the people of his diocese:

“An extraordinary devotion and a marvellous confidence in the powerful intercession of the Mother of God towards all our needs has been aroused in the faithful everywhere. Graces similar to those obtained in Rome are obtained everywhere. It may be stated that soon there will be no place where the venerable image of the Virgin of Perpetual Succour is not exposed. What better gift than an image of the Virgin of Perpetual Succour could I have brought for you, who love the most Holy Mother of God so much”.¹²

Within the space of four years the Icon of Our Lady, that was unknown in the Church before it was enshrined in the church of St. Alphonsus, became the most widely known Icon in the history of the Church.

¹² Ibid 66

Throughout this whole history of the Icon of Love, we see the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of key players. Edward Douglas became a Catholic and a Redemptorist; Blessed Pope Pius IX insisted that the Redemptorists establish a General House in Rome; Fr. Douglas bought the ancient site of the church of St. Matthew; the young altar server Michael Marchi, to whom Brother Augustine had pointed out the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Succour on many occasions, became a Redemptorist; Fr. Blosi SJ made it known that it was Our Lady's wish that the Icon be placed in "the church between St Mary Major and St John Lateran"; the church of St. Alphonsus now stood where the old St. Matthew's stood; Fr. Michael Marchi could now tell the community where the miraculous Icon was; Blessed Pope Pius IX decreed that it should be placed in the new church of St. Alphonsus according to the wishes of Our Lady; the crowning of the Icon took place during the celebration of the 18th Centenary of the martyrdom of St. Pater and St. Paul; three years later all the bishops of the world were in Rome for the First Vatican Council. In those years, the miraculous Icon was being made known to the universal Church. This greatly facilitated the Redemptorists in spreading devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Succour. Blessed Pope Paul VI, speaking at the first centenary of the Icon in St. Alphonsus church said:

"The very expressive title of Perpetual Succour with which the Virgin is invoked summarises the teaching of the Second Vatican Council about Mary, Mother of the Church, and urges the faithful to have confidence in her. Mary

was the succour of the Church when she gave us Christ and when she accompanied him in the work of Redemption, She continues to be our succour now, after her Assumption body and soul into heaven”.¹³

As we look at this history we know that it was not by pure chance or a series of historical coincidences that the miraculous Icon was entrusted to the guardianship of the Redemptorists with the mandate to “make her known to the world”. It was God’s will for the promotion of devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Succour. And it surely is no coincidence that our celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Icon of Love takes place in the very year when the Church is called by Pope Francis to celebrate a Jubilee Year of Divine Mercy. The Icon of Love invites us to pray with ever deeper devotion, in the words of the Salve Regina, *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy*.

¹³ Adelino M Garcia Paz, *Holy Mary of Perpetual Help, Person and Practices*, Redemptorist Community, Singapore, 1991, vol. 3, p. 26