

## ICONIC RUMINATIONS by Sean Wales CSsR

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### Part 1: FROM PICTURE TO ICON

When I first heard the word 'ruminate' used of prayer, I was not only mildly amused but thought it suited my experience nicely. I was a student at the time and my mind was filled with thoughts, philosophical, theological, scriptural, pastoral and the Lord knows what else. During the formal meditations, in those days often made in a darkened chapel, it was all I could do to chew over one or two words, trying to quieten the riot of thoughts bubbling away within.

In discovering that the desert Christians in the early days used this image of an animal chewing the cud as a metaphor for prayer I made the connection at once. Indeed I have come to think that "praying always" somehow connects with this idea of rumination. Certainly, it can begin as a conscious process occupying the mind but it can continue throughout the day at another level.

In these few pages I want to share some thoughts in the context of our icon of Mary, Mother of Perpetual Help; but they will be more like ruminations, ponderings which may nourish other minds - and maybe even others' hearts.

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Growing up in Belfast in the 40s and 50s last century (!), in the shadow of Clonard Monastery, most of the homes had very similar religious pictures. Every household had either a picture or a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. St Joseph was less popular, I remember, than St Thérèse of Lisieux who was better known as "The Little Flower". In my home, we had a large and somewhat gory picture of St Rock with vivid open sores on his legs.

When it came to the Blessed Virgin, pretty well every house I knew had a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. It was one picture among many and was sometimes in competition with statues of Our Lady of Lourdes or Our Lady

of Sorrows (promoted by the 'rival' Passionists). As a picture, it did not fare too well; it didn't look like Our Lady, at least not the other 'Our Ladies' but we were loyal to it because of the Redemptorist Monastery and the highly popular Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. The language and spirituality of icons and the richness of the icon of Perpetual Help still lay in our future. Yet devotion to Our Lady under the title of Perpetual Succour was intense and sincere.

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The poet T. S. Eliot, in *Burnt Norton* comments on the life of words:

"Words strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,

Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,

Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,

Will not stay still."

This has certainly happened with the word "icon" either in its English form '*image*' or nearer to its Greek '*eikon*'. In our tradition, the word 'icon' is embedded in the Scriptures, Old and New. From the Book of Genesis which speaks of humanity being made in the image of God to the Book of Revelation - we are schooled in the religious use of the word. As Christianity grew and found cultural expression, the word 'icon' took on a very specific meaning. It came to refer to a religious experience mediated through colour: a channel of grace, a prayer, a presence, a theology, a spirituality. In the Eastern tradition of the Church, the Holy Icon paralleled Holy Scripture.

Gradually, the word 'icon' was prised out of its religious context and came to mean everything from a symbol, to a model, to an archetype. We had "iconic buildings" (like the Sydney Opera House); we had living people presented as icons (Mandela, icon of reconciliation). The latest stage of the evolution of the word is its new home in the language of computers. We negotiate our way clicking or double clicking on this or that icon.

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I now see the move from 'picture' to 'icon' as a move from a pious decoration to a spiritual presence. For me, at least, it was a move from a surface acquaintance to a deeper more personal knowledge, from a kind of 'knowing that' to a 'knowing who'.

Another change I have noticed, at least in English, is from 'succour' to 'help'. 'Succour' was a good word to describe the assistance and support to be expected from a loved one. From its Latin root of 'run to' (succurrere) it evoked immediate aid and relief. Among us as children, however, it often got mixed up with 'sucker', which in our playground English meant a gullible or easily deceived child. The use of 'Help', as that which is provided for a person's needs, neatly and clearly captures the intent of the title.

For quite some time after the icon was given to the Congregation, the title "Our *Lady* of Perpetual Succour" was used. This was despite the knowledge that it was known in Greek and Latin as "*Mother* of Perpetual Succour". The current used of "Mother" is therefore a warmer and more relational title than "Lady".

In all these small ways, Mary is brought closer to us in our need.

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It was only when studying theology, during the Second Vatican Council, that I began to see more clearly the difference between the Sacred Liturgy of the Church and Popular Piety. I had experienced both, of course, in my Catholic upbringing. In the wake of the Council, the devotional life and popular piety suffered in the comparison with the official liturgy. At times we were minded to describe our devotional life as "para-liturgical".

The Novena devotions to Our Mother of Perpetual Help continued to provide a space where anyone's needs could be aired through the public reading of petitions. The petitions (and thanksgivings) read out during the Novena touched many hearts and fostered a sense of solidarity in prayer. Such moments are now recognised as sources of genuine theology. Pope Francis stresses the evangelizing power of popular piety. Seeing the Holy Spirit at work in the outpourings of popular devotion, the pope writes: "Underlying popular piety, as a fruit of the inculturated Gospel, is an active evangelizing power which must not be underestimated: to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit.....Expressions of popular piety...are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization" (Evangelii Gaudium 126).

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*November 8th 1896*

*We arrived in Rome. First we went to St Mary Major and then to the Church of St Alphonsus where there is a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, a title that suits the Blessed Virgin so well.*

*Three years ago I had many difficulties regarding my interior life, fears, anxieties, periods of darkness.....I couldn't see things straight, I suffered*

*so; I placed myself with all my heart under the protection of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. I implored her to guide my footsteps as she had guided those of the Infant Jesus, and to lead me in all things in Jesus Christ in such a way as to console as much as I could the Heart of Jesus that sees and loves us.*

*So it was very sweet for me to stand beneath the picture of our so dear and good mother on my very first day, in my very first hour, in a time of great sorrow, not knowing where to take refuge, fearing to be misled by the evil one; I remembered the heart of the Mother of Perpetual Help and I placed myself in her care, like her child, like her property.*

*I begged her to carry me, as she carried Jesus when he was a child and to make me become, not what I would like to become, but what she herself would like for the greater glory of her son, according to his will, according to what she read in his heart.*

*Since that time I consider myself as yours, O Mother of Perpetual Help.*

*Charles de Foucauld.*

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## Part 2: FROM WORDS TO SILENCE

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Memories of the Clonard Novena and of other Novenas I have since experienced fit rather more with the "picture" than with the "icon" template. When the Redemptorists were given the "picture" they received it as such - a picture. In the second half of the 19th century, icons were something exotic from the East and few in the Latin church had much insight into the rich spirituality of icons. The Redemptorists set about making Our Lady of

Perpetual Succour known. To foster devotion to Mary under that title, they devised various devotions which nearly a hundred years later took the form of the Novena Devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

The particular form I encountered involved a good deal of vocal prayer, hymns, petitions and thanksgivings, both statistical and personal, and included a Eucharist dimension, at first Benediction and later Holy Mass. The Novena Devotions fitted comfortably into the popular piety of the day summed up in the phrase: "To Jesus through Mary".

As the understanding of icons developed in the Latin church, one would expect the shift from "picture" to "icon" to be reflected in the devotional expressions of Novena goers. Certainly we have learned a great deal more about the holy icon we have inherited; I am less sure that we have found appropriate expression of these new insights in our prayer.

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I have on my desk a postcard from the Cathedral of St Denis in Paris showing a statue of Our Lady which the notes tell us is known as "Our Lady of Silence". Attention is drawn to Mary's small delicate mouth, as in our icon, suggesting that she is a woman of few words but of rapt attentive silence. Mary is the woman who ponders the mysteries of God silently in her heart.

We will never appreciate the words in Scripture attributed to Mary if we do not appreciate her silence. The icon of Perpetual Help is a silent icon: it has to do with sight and insight, not with speaking and hearing. The silence of the icon invites us into silence: the silence of Mary pondering the marvels of the Annunciation, the joys of the Nativity, the perplexities of exile, the long years of quiet in Nazareth. Mary's silence is experienced as a shadow in the loss and

finding of the boy Jesus, in the incomprehension of Jesus' public ministry, in the silent sword piercing her spirit in the darkness of Calvary.

Silence is a subtle thing: it can be an escape, it can be a relief; the geography of silence has no fixed boundaries. Being in the presence of our icon of the Passion which we know as "Mother of Perpetual Help", we are drawn into her silence. In her silence we will hear the words of her Son.

If this aspect of our icon is to mould our spirits it needs to find expression in our devotion. Devotional life is not meant to drown out the silence of God, the silence of mystery, even the silence of love.

A prayerful revision of our Novena prayers in the light of the silence of our icon may reveal a style which our word-choked world will find compelling.

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Our icon introduces us to the silence of the Son. The lips of the child Jesus are, like his mother's, sealed. This Child is the Word of God Incarnate. Yet in our icon he remains a silent Word. It has been pointed out (by Max Picard) that "It is a sign of the love of God that a mystery is always separated from man by a layer of silence" (The World of Silence p.227).

Picard argues that when the layer of silence is missing it is so much more difficult to be open to mystery: we are filled up with words. This can happen even with "holy" words. Silence is necessary to appreciate words. Sacred Silence is necessary to encounter the Word made flesh.

What does the silence of the Divine Child in our icon mean? It is only by being drawn into the silence of the Son that we can appreciate both the Silence and the Word of God. Word and Silence need each other. We need both word

and silence, but we need, not a dead word or a dead silence, we need a living Word and a Living Silence, full of God.

Are we afraid of silence in our prayer and devotional life? Does our icon nudge us nearer to that love expressed in the concelebration of Word and Silence?

Some criticisms of our contemporary liturgy are expressed in the succinct phrase "too many words". Do we reflect this flaw in our devotions to our Mother of Perpetual Help?

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By definition an angel is one who brings news. The New Testament word "to tell" (aggello) gives us also the noun "messenger/angel". In the long tradition of icons, various kinds of angels play significant roles. The Seraphim appear in Isaiah (6: 1-3) singing "Holy , Holy , Holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory". The many-eyed Cherubim guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden (Gen 3: 24). The role of angels and archangels in Scripture and in iconography is to bear tidings to humans, to bring them nearer to God, to alert them to the diversity and beauty of God's creation. We are reminded every Christmas of the words of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest".

Gabriel ("Strength of God") appeared to the prophet Daniel to help him understand his visions (Dan 8:15 and 9:21). Gabriel is also involved in the tidings of the birth of John the Baptist and most famously in the Annunciation (Luke 1:11-20 and 26-38). In our icon Gabriel is silent. He is clothed in red (on fire for God) and carries the cross and the nails in his veiled hands. Is he helping the child Jesus understand his destiny? Is he interpreting the symbolism of Cross and Nails? Is he holding aloft the instruments of the Passion as trophies in the light of the Resurrection?

Michael (Who is like God?) is recognised in the Hebrew tradition as the guardian and protector of Israel (Dan 10:13 and 12;1). In the Book of Revelation he is the leader in the cosmic battle between good and evil. In our icon, Michael too is silent. In his veiled hands, he reverently carries a vase containing a stick with a sponge and a lance. In their silence and smallness (in relation to the other figures in the icon), both archangels suggest an attitude of reverence, adoration and awe.

The role of the silent archangels is surely also to help us enter that silence of wonder and awe and to share the joy of the victory of the Passion in the blazing glory of the Resurrection.

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An icon is a visible hint of the invisible. Every aspect of the icon draws attention to the divine; we have been schooled to interpret the colours of the icon as hints of what lies beyond all colour. There is a more subtle level of meaning than simply apportioning specific meanings to individual colours. The overriding issue in iconography is the Johannine distinction between light and darkness. Icons do not have shadows; they do not identify sources of natural light; rather each icon reveals its own light coming from within.

In our icon, the golden background is a constant reminder of the eternal Light from Light which enlightens every one. The gold leaf in itself is silent but its sheen proclaims the Glory of God. The colours of the clothes of Mary and her Divine Child quietly underscore both their identity and their role. Every book on Our Mother of Perpetual Help elucidates these silent symbols. What is always to be achieved is letting the icon -and all its elements- draw us into the mystery.

Paul Evdokimov in 'The Art of the Icon: a Theology of Beauty' writes: "*The icon is prayer; it purifies and transfigures in its image those who contemplate it. It is*

*mystery and teaches us to see in it the inhabited silence, heavenly joy on earth, and the brilliant shining of the beyond"* (page 188). The icon of Perpetual Help purifies and transforms us, making us perpetually helpful not only in our words and deeds but in our sacred silence.

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*"Mary's silence is not only moderation in speech, but it is essentially a wise capacity for remembering and embracing in a single gaze of faith the mystery of the word made man and the events of his daily life. It is this silence as acceptance of the Word, this ability to meditate on the mystery of Christ, that Mary passes on to believers. In a noisy world filled with messages of all kinds, her witness enables us to appreciate a spiritually rich silence and fosters a contemplative spirit."*

( St John Paul II, Wednesday audience 22 November 1995)

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### Part III: INTO CONTEMPLATION

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The silence of the icon does not impose itself. Rather it reveals itself to the one for whom silence is a presence. It is relatively easy to impose silence; we can shout "Quiet please!" and the silence which follows is like a cloak thrown over the noise. A wise Carthusian calls such silence a mere camouflage; it hides the noise which will break out again. Sacred silence does not come from outside; it comes from within.

Silence is already present in nature; it is present in the human heart; it is presence in the sacred; it is present in our icon. Psalm 65 opens with a phrase which neatly gathers these insights: *"To you silence is praise"*. This translation,

rather than the one with which we are familiar ("*To you our praise is due...*"), is common in the Rabbinical tradition and touches on the difference between external silence and that inner stillness and self-forgetfulness of one absorbed in God.

Even, and perhaps especially, as apostolic workers, our icon connects with the ministry of silence. As our icon refers to Our Mother of Perpetual *Help*, so in our pastoral interactions our *help* can often be the gift of silence. Schooled in silent contemplation, we are sensitive to the moments when we must decrease, when we realize that our silence is more helpful than our words, when we let our silence merge with the silence in the heart of the afflicted and with the silence of God.

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Our icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help draws our attention to the Help of God, incarnate in Mary's son, Jesus. Jesus draws our attention to his -and our- Father. However our attention is only caught if we see with the eyes of faith and love: otherwise we only see only an artefact. This seeing with the eyes of faith we can call the beginning of contemplation. Our icon opens a door to contemplation: to "seeing with Jesus". As Jesus was ever attentive to the Father, so "seeing with Jesus" is alertness to the Father.

To be given an icon of the Passion -Mother of Perpetual Help- is to be offered a life-long way of seeing into the Cross of Christ , indeed of seeing through the Passion to what lies beyond. Such a spiritual habit lies at the heart of Christian prayer. My simple word for this is "gazing"

To contemplate our icon is to gaze on the Passion. In the beautiful words of the Cistercian martyr, Fr Christian de Chergé, contemplation is to "immerse my gaze in that of the Father". In Fr Christian's case it was a question of contemplating with the Father all the children of Islam, including those who would execute him.

For the Anglican Archbishop Williams (addressing the Synod on the Word of God) it is through self-forgetting gazing towards the light of God in Christ that we learn how to look at one another and at the whole of God's creation. This is why Williams concludes that "contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world" around us.

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One of the attractive features of the spirituality of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880-1906) was her piercing insight into the role of self-forgetfulness: "We shall not be purified by looking at our miseries". She did not dwell on herself, either on her miseries or on her virtues, but spent her short life "gazing on Him who is all purity and holiness". Her spiritual journey was an experience of opening herself to God, more and more, allowing God to establish himself more and more in her. Contemplation, for Elizabeth, is so gazing on God that she lets God be God in her, she lets God take his place fully in her life.

On our spiritual journey most of us afford God some place, some space in our lives; we fix certain times and places -our "quiet time", our "holy space" but reserve the rest of the time and space for ourselves, our projects, our concerns. A test of true contemplation is when we are taken over completely by God: when we become, in Elizabeth's words "a praise of his glory".

It is good to remember as we ponder Elizabeth's prayer, "O my God, Trinity whom I adore", the epitome of her spiritual life, that she had earlier attributed her mother's change of heart about her entering Carmel to the intercession of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. This took place during a Redemptorist Mission which made a profound impression on the young woman. She confided to her diary "The evening sermon was magnificent. I am sorry not to be able to write more on this today. How well these Redemptorists are doing this! They talk with so much love of God! How I envy them when they evangelize this way".

This young woman so connected with that love of God that in a few years she reached a level of contemplation and holiness expressed in her emblematic prayer: "Immerse Yourself in me, that I may be immersed in You until I depart to contemplate in Your light the abyss of Your greatness".

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*O my God, Trinity whom I adore!  
Help me to become utterly forgetful of self,  
that I may establish myself in You, as changeless and as calm  
as though my soul were already in eternity.  
May nothing disturb my peace,  
nor draw me away from You, O my immutable Lord,  
may I penetrate more deeply every moment  
into the depth of Your Mystery.  
Give peace to my soul,  
make it your heaven, Your cherished dwelling place,  
your home of rest.  
Let me never leave you there alone,  
but keep me there all absorbed in You in living faith,  
in total adoration  
and wholly yielded up to Your creative action.*

[extract from the prayer of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity]

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