



Mother of Perpetual Help,
Pray for us!



*A Short Historical Sketch
Of The Famous*
BYZANTINE ICON
OF
OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP

THE MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP AND BYZANTINE CATHOLICS

One of the world's best known icons of the Blessed Mother is the miraculous 5th century icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help. Surrounded by a nimbus of great antiquity and painted in genuine Byzantine style, this icon was instrumental in the many miracles. Being transported from the East to the West, it has become popular throughout the world and the source of perpetual blessing and consolation for many peoples.

The original icon is tenaciously guarded in the Church of St. Alphonsus in Rome by the Redemptorist Fathers whose dedication to the Mother of God has caused devotion to her to be spread all over the world under the title of Mother of Perpetual Help. Copies of the icon were first brought to the United States in 1868. One copy was placed in the Redemptorist chapel in Annapolis, Maryland and the other in the St. James Church in Baltimore. It is estimated that at the present time over 2,000 Catholic parishes in the United States alone conduct special devotions to the Mother of Perpetual Help.

Among Byzantine Catholics in America, devotion to the Mother of God under the title of Perpetual Help received a great impetus when Pope Pius XI presented the Sisters of St. Basil the Great in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, with an icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help with the expressed desire that they foster devotion to her under that title. In 1934, the venerable Sisters dedicated a shrine on Mount Saint Macrina to Our Mother of Perpetual Help and in the same year inaugurated the widely-known Labor Day weekend Pilgrimage to the shrine. Since then, the Shrine draws thousands upon thousands of devoted pilgrims to the hal lowed grounds of Mount Saint Macrina in Uniontown every year.

The first icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary was allegedly painted by St. Luke the Evangelist which later, in the middle of the V century, was enshrined by the Empress St. Pulcheria in the Church of Hodegetria in Constantinople. This was the parish church of the guides (Gr. hodegosguide) who, in those days, would lead pilgrimages to the Holy Land and other holy places. Thus the Blessed Mother of Hodegetria became the patron of travelers and they would carry her icon with them on their journeys. The original icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help is a "Hodegetria" type. Among our people, this type of icon was called the "Soputnicja," i.e. a travel companion. And indeed, the Blessed Mother is our "Soputnicja," our constant travel companion, as we journey toward Eternity.

The icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help first emerged in history in 1480 when it was brought to Rome from the Island of Crete by a certain Greek merchant. When he escaped from the invading Turks, this merchant took with him a treasured icon which was to protect him and his family while they were in exile. It was a portable icon, small in size (20" x 16") and was painted on a panel of nut wood. Later the merchant became separated from the rest of his family and arrived in Rome where he became seriously sick. Fearing his end, he entrusted his richly decorated icon "Hodegetria" to his Roman friend and asked him to donate it to some Roman church where it could be publicly venerated. Having done this, the merchant died.

But the family of his Roman friend became attached to the icon and failed to fulfill this last wish. Therefore the Blessed Mother appeared in a dream several times to the members of the family and insisted that they fulfill the last wish of the Greek merchant. Finally, she appeared to their small daughter, saying: "Tell your mother, 'Holy Mary of Perpetual Help orders you to take her icon out of your house or otherwise you will all die!'" With this, the girl's mother became frightened and brought the icon to St. Matthew's Church in the care of the Augustinian Fathers. There it was solemnly enshrined in 1499 as The Mother of Perpetual Help. The Blessed Mother seemed to approve of this gesture by a miracle which is registered as the first in the history of the miraculous icon.

The miraculous icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help remained in St. Matthews Church for almost 300 years. In 1798, Napoleon's army occupied the Eternal City and demolished the church. But the Augustinian monks carried their treasured "Madonna" of Perpetual Help into their new quarters across the city, known as St. Mary of Pasterula. Since there was another picture of the Madonna already enshrined in the church, the Friars placed the miraculous icon of Perpetual Help in their chapel where the Blessed Mother remained hidden, "in exile," for almost seventy years.

In 1854, the Redemptorist Fathers acquired the beautiful estate of Duke Gaetano, known as the Villa Caserata, along the Via Merulana, for their General House in Rome. Having the land, they also decided to build a church and dedicate it to their Holy Founder, St. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori. During the excavations for the edifice, they discovered the ruins of the old St. Matthews church, the site of Mary's former shrine. This coincidence persuaded the Superior General to restore the icon of Perpetual Help to public veneration in their new church. With the approval of Pope Pius IX the icon was solemnly enshrined in the St. Alphonsus Church in 1866 where it remains even to this day. The Latin inscription printed in golden letters attests to the historical facts:

"Brought from Crete to Rome in 1480" "Restored to veneration by Pope Pius IX in 1866"

The Redemptorist Fathers promoted the devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help with great dedication and zeal. Perpetual novenas and various devotions were approved and instituted in her honor. Miracles through her intercession multiplied. Soon the icon became the center of devotion for thousands and thousands of devoted pilgrims, who requested that it be crowned.

The custom of crowning certain icons with rich diadems was introduced in 1636. In order to have an icon crowned, it had to meet certain prescribed conditions. a) The veneration of the icon had to be approved by the Church Authorities; b) The veneration of the icon had to be ancient; i.e., lasting for a considerably long period of time; and c) The icon had to have a reputation of being miraculous. All three of these conditions were satisfied by the icon of Perpetual help and the approval of the request was granted.

The solemn crowning of the icon took place on Sunday, June 23, 1867. After the Divine Liturgy, two precious golden diadems, each set with twenty-six stones, were fastened to the icon, one on Mary's head and the other on the head of the Saviour. Then, amidst the acclamation, jubilation and prayers of the faithful, the newly-crowned icon was carried in solemn procession through the streets of the Eternal City-the Queen of Heaven and earth, the Blessed Mother of God, being honored by her devoted children.

In placing the icon under the care of the Redemptorist Fathers Pope Pius IX charged them to "make our Mother of Perpetual Help known throughout the entire world!" This the Redemptorist Fathers did. Today, the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is known and venerated on every continent of the globe and in the entire Catholic Church. The Byzantine-Ruthenian branch of the Redemptorist Fathers was established by the Bohemian Redemptorists, Father Dominic Trchka and Father Stanislaus Nekula, in Stropkovo in 1922, and later, in 1930, they expanded to Michajlovtsi. While giving parish missions in our Eparchies of Mukachevo and Prjashev, these two missionaries propagated devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help and enshrined her icon in the churches they visited. During this time, they also enrolled the faithful into the Confraternity of Our Mother of Perpetual Help which, prior to World War II, reached almost 20,000 members.

In the United States, the Sisters of St. Basil the Great, Mount Saint Macrina, Uniontown, Pennsylvania, have been very instrumental in fostering devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help. Since the dedication of the Shrine in her honor in 1934, and the inauguration of the Labor Day weekend Pilgrimage, enriched with indulgences and devotions to the Mother of God, Mount Saint Macrina has consistently drawn thousands of pilgrims from every section of the United States. To witness this annual event is to witness the manifestation of the love and devotion that the Byzantine faithful have for the Mother of God.

In 1937, the Basilian Sisters established the "Palomnicheskij Sojuz," i.e. the Society of Pilgrims of the Mother of Perpetual Help. Membership in this society numbers thousands which is renewed annually. The members benefit by various indulgences, numerous novenas, Divine Liturgies, and other prayers and devotions, together with the spiritual good works of the Sisters. Thus Our Mother of Perpetual Help is made more known, venerated and loved by our Byzantine Catholics.

The icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help is painted in a typical Byzantine style which intends to portray, not so much an exact likeness but, rather, an ideal and to teach the viewer. The ideal which the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help presents to us is the exalted Divine Motherhood of Mary for which "all generations shall call me blessed." (Luke 1 :48)

Our response to her invitation is best expressed by the artist who wrote the following words in golden letters on her icon in Michajlovtsi:

"Blessed are we, having you as our help, for day and night you do not cease to intercede for us!"