



The Story of the Icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

The origin of the icon that is at the centre of devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help is unknown. There has been a persistent story that it was painted by St. Luke, but the fact is that we cannot confirm its existence before the late Middle Ages, the 1400's. It is most likely of Eastern origin, given its Byzantine style and Greek lettering.

The icon shows the child Jesus fleeing into his Mother's protective arms as the Archangels Michael and Gabriel show Him the instruments of crucifixion. The Greek letters on either side of the figures spell out the first letters of Mary and Jesus' names. He has run to her in such haste and distress that one of his sandals hangs off his foot.

The icon arrived in Rome in the 15th century. A merchant who had heard about a miraculous picture on the island of Crete went to the island and stole it. When he arrived in Rome with the icon, he fell very ill. As he lay dying, he ordered a friend to place the icon in a church. It would seem that he hoped that this would bring about a cure. However, instead of taking the icon to a church, as requested, the friend took the icon to his own home, where his wife hung it in their bedroom.

The Virgin evidently was not pleased with this arrangement, and appeared several times to the man, telling him that she wished for her image to be placed in a church. The man, despite the miraculous visitations, would not give up the icon. The Blessed Virgin next appeared to the man's six-year-old daughter and asked that the icon be enshrined in St. Matthew's Church, a smaller church between the two very large churches of St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran in Rome. The daughter told this to her father and his heart was softened, and so in 1499 the icon was enshrined in St. Matthew's Church.

For 300 years, pilgrims flocked to the small church to pray before the miraculous image, but in 1798 Napoleon's invading army destroyed the church. Once the soldiers had left the area, people searched the ruins, looking for the icon, but they could not find it anywhere. They assumed that the icon had been stolen or destroyed, and for the next 60 years there was no mention of it.

In 1855, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists) came to Rome, and were granted possession of the land where St. Matthew's Church had once stood. On that site, they hoped to build a church in honour of their founder, St. Alphonsus Liguori. It happened that a young Redemptorist priest, Fr. Michael Marti, remembered that, as a young boy, he had been told by an elderly caretaker of a miraculous icon of Mary that had once been enshrined in the previous church, the Church of St. Matthew.

He told the young Michael that the image had been safely transferred to an Augustinian monastery near Rome.

When the Redemptorists heard of this, they petitioned the pope to allow the image to be returned to the spot that the Blessed Virgin had requested so long ago. The pope granted their request and further commissioned the Redemptorists to spread devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help throughout the world. On April 26, 1866, the image was transferred in a solemn procession to the Church of St. Alphonsus, where it has hung ever since, once again venerated by many pilgrims.

In 1996, the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was restored, which meant a thorough cleaning and restoration project that included removal of the crowns which were much later additions to the original. That icon now hangs in the Redemptorist Church of St. Alphonsus, on the Via Merulana in Rome.

Today, replicas of the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help grace countless churches throughout the world. The Redemptorists still take very seriously their commission to “make her known throughout the world.” In most Redemptorist churches, there are weekly devotions in honour of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and often novenas leading up to her feast on June 27. In Canada, the Redemptorists of the Edmonton-Toronto Province televise Devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Help each Wednesday on Vision TV.

Sources: Michael Dubruiel is a book-acquisitions editor at Our Sunday Visitor. This article was based on his book, "The Church's Most Powerful Novenas," released spring 2000 by Our Sunday Visitor.

Reflection Questions:

1. Where did you first encounter the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help?
2. What strikes you as you read this account of the history of the icon?
3. The prayers of the Novena in honour of Our Lady of Perpetual Help are beautiful in their simplicity. Do you experience Mary as “perpetual help” in your own life? If so, how?
4. What do you think is the source of the enduring popularity of the icon and devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help? Why are people, through the ages, so drawn to this image of the Mother of God?