

OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP



History of the Picture

There was a time when preachers confidently claimed that St. Luke himself painted the image from his remembrances of our lady. But written records of the painting extend back as far as the 1490's, when the painting was venerated on the island of Crete. The people called it the "Miraculous Picture of the Mother of God."

The style of painting goes back much farther. Like the many icons the Greeks venerated, it is Byzantine. The lettering on the painting is Greek: It says, "Mother of God" next to Mary; by Jesus is the abbreviation ICXC meaning "Jesus Christ." The angel on the left as we face the picture is designated as the Archangel Michael; the Archangel Gabriel is on the other side.

Mary's long slender nose, thin lips, and smoothly arched eyebrows also show that a Greek artist had painted her. The halo and the crown in the picture were added later. In those days, a halo was not commonly painted around the head. Instead, as in this painting of Mary, the veil and her face itself were rounded, practically circular, to indicate her holiness.

The size of the mother seems out of proportion to her son; this is deliberate. The artist wished to emphasize Mary in this story, so he painted her larger than life. A sandal dangles from one foot of the child; he is looking at one of the angels. Each angel carries instruments of the torture of Jesus. Michael has the spear and lance, and Gabriel the Cross.

This beautiful portrait of Our Lady, we know, was removed from public veneration in Crete and mysteriously turned up in the home of a private citizen of Rome in 1495. It remained there, one man's possession, for a few years until an equally mysterious event brought it to public view again.

A child claimed to have seen a vision of Mary while kneeling before the icon. The Lady in the vision was displeased that the picture was hidden away in private. She said she wished to be known as "Perpetual Help." Just as Jesus ran to His mother for consolation, she said so the other little children of Mary should run to her for help, a help which would know no conditions: Perpetual Help.

The picture was placed for public veneration in the Augustinian Church of St. Matthew's Church in Rome. It remained there from 1499 until 1798. One year short of its 300th anniversary at that spot, history intervened.

The troops of the French Revolution broke into Rome. As part of their "improvement" plan for the eternal city, they decided to tear down some 30 churches. St. Matthews was one of them. So the Augustinian Monks removed the picture to their private chapel for safekeeping.

As time went on, most of the people who knew the history of the painting died. The portrait was largely forgotten. Finally an old Augustinian Brother, who had been a sacristan in St. Matthew's as a young man, decided to pass on the heritage of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. He pulled aside one of the young altar boys and told him the story.

Michael Marchi was too young to appreciate entirely what was being told to him at the time. It was many years later before the phrase "Perpetual Help" came to mean anything to him. He was a Redemptorist priest when Pope Pius IX called the Redemptorists to Rome to set up their headquarters. They had bought land over the site of old St. Matthew's and were building the church of St. Alphonsus.

A Jesuit priest was preaching a novena there in honor of Our Lady, and in one of the talks he mentioned the legend about the lost picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Suddenly Father Marchi began to remember the story the old Brother had told him 25 years before. Returning to the Augustinian chapel where he had been a server, he found the painting where it had been all along. He told the news to the Superior General of the Redemptorists.

In 1865, Pope Pius IX met with Father Mauron, Redemptorist Superior General, and with Father Marchi to discuss the Perpetual Help story. The Pope wished the picture to be brought back to the site where it had earlier enjoyed public veneration, now the church of St. Alphonsus, and he commissioned the Redemptorists to preach Our Lady of Perpetual Help to "the whole world." On April 16, 1866, the feast of Our Lady of Good Council, Our Lady of Perpetual Help was restored to public veneration.

Fr. Gordon, our first Pastor, established this devotion here at St. Bridget Church when he first opened the Church in 1946. For 67 years Our Lady has listened to our petitions and granted us many favors. **Please help us to continue this beautiful novena by joining us at St. Bridget's Church every Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. to participate in the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.**