

OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP

How to Read this Icon

Why don't saints in icons smile? Saints do not smile because they have attained the peace of Christ and are in a transcended state, therefore they no longer have need to express human emotion.

Bright Sadness. Notice Mary's eyes as she gazes beyond us. This is the look of "bright sadness" demonstrating a spiritual state in which both sadness and joy are held in the heart simultaneously. She seems to implore us to avoid sin as she points to her son, because sin is what caused His suffering. At the same time, just as she comforts her Son, she comforts us in our times of affliction as our spiritual mother. We may turn to her in times of need for help as her goal is to lead us to her Son.

Large eyes/small mouth. Large eyes mean all-knowingness. They have seen all, good and bad. A small mouth indicates a life of prayer and silence that does not require words.

Why is the infant Jesus depicted as a small adult? While He came as a child, He is God who has infinite wisdom, which is why He is shown in philosopher's robes representing His **divine nature**.

His **human nature** is reflected in the look of a child's fearfulness as He runs to His mother for help, clinging to her to escape the instruments of His passion held by archangels Michael (the gall, lance & reed) and Gabriel (the cross & nails). He runs so fast that His sandal comes loose, which is why it dangles below His foot. Another version is that He removes one sandal because Mary is holy, just as Moses removed his shoes on Mount Sinai at the burning bush. Mary is compared to burning bush, unconsumed by fire.

The Language of Gesture (Chironomia). Christ's hands appear to be seeking comfort from His mother, but His palms-down to Mary's palm is a gesture that represents transference of authority to redeem, that He has invested in His Mother.

Central Theme. The underlying geometry that informs this composition directs our attention to the center of the icon, which is not Mary or Christ, but the joining of their hands in which Mary directs our gaze to Christ, as the way to salvation. Her right hand is open, "showing us the way" to the truth and light, inviting us to ask her for her intercession as she guides us to the Redeemer.

Gold. The gold background in icons represents the divine light of the heavenly realm. Gold on garments shows us the divine light emanating from within the Holy body, signifying God's grace revealed to us.



Nostra Mater de Perpetuo Succursu (Latin) ~1325-1480 (Crete)

June 27 is the Feast Day

Miracle Working Icon

This icon is known for being miraculous; over the centuries countless healings and special graces have been attributed to it, so much so that the image has been honored and venerated by many Popes.

Halos. Saints are depicted with round halos (there are other shapes for other reasons), but only Christ is shown with the cruciform halo, signifying His position in the Holy Trinity with the cross of salvation.

Inscriptions. Mary's inscription (MP ΘΥ) is an abbreviation for Μητέρα Θεού (Meter Theou) which means Mother of God in Greek, a title bestowed on Mary at the First Council of Ephesus in 431.

IC XC is a Christogram for Jesus Christ using the first and last letters of His name in Greek. The sigma at the end is translated as a lunate sigma, or "C".

ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ

The diacritical mark (˘) above inscriptions in icons denotes the absence of letters, meaning the full name is abbreviated. The same is true for the archangels' inscriptions which are reduced to their title (archangel) and the first letter of each of their names.

Archangels. Saints Michael and Gabriel do not hold the instruments of the passion as weapons that caused His death, but reverently display them as a priest would hold a monstrance, to show them as the means of His glory and victory over death.

Mary's Garments. In the West, Mary is shown in a blue maphorion (head covering) and himation (outergarment) and red chiton (inner tunic). This color combination is reversed in the East.

Blue signifies purity and royalty, as this was the color worn by nobility. It was painted with ultramarine, a pigment costlier than gold, reserving the finest materials for Mary and Christ. Red reminds us of Mary's human nature, love, passion and martyrs, as she walked in the blood of the first martyr at the crucifixion. This is why Mary always wears red shoes in icons.

History of this Icon

According to tradition, this icon was stolen from a church in Crete by a merchant who ended up in Rome. When the merchant became ill, he told a friend the truth about the icon and begged him to return it to a church. Though the friend promised to do so, he reneged. Eventually he died without returning the icon to a church. The Blessed Mother appeared to the young daughter of this family and told her to tell her mother that the picture of Holy Mary of Perpetual Help should be placed in the Church of St. Matthew the Apostle, located between the basilicas of St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran in Rome. This happened on March 27, 1499. The icon remained there and was venerated for the next 300 years before it was moved several times for safekeeping. It is now in the Church of Saint Alphonsus of Ligouri in Rome.