

PRAISING WITH ICONS CONTEMPLATING THE ICON OF OUR MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP

BY BROTHER DANIEL KORN, CSSR

Though we may be attracted to the beauty of religious icons, we may also miss their deeper meaning if we're unfamiliar with the practice of reading and praying icons. *Iconography*, the process of writing and painting religious icons, involves symbols that reveal hidden messages. By gazing on an icon during contemplative prayer, we can read the mystery within the image.

Most icons are painted in a style that engages the viewer. The direction of eyes and placement of hands as well as the colors and symbols around the icon are each fashioned with purpose.

Icons are windows into mystery. When we look into an icon with faith and devotion, we can feel drawn into a living presence. Subjects seem to look at us through a window frame. We're summoned into the presence of the active spiritual energy in the image.

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Reading the Icon of OMPH

The prophet Isaiah (7:14) proclaimed: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” This is the Scripture that surrounds the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Mary is a sign, she is cradling a child—and his name is “God

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with us!” As we look at the icon, we encounter this prophecy straight on.

In the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, we read five “chapters” or elements of the gospel story of Jesus:

Chapter 1: Face of the Blessed Mother

The eight-pointed star on her veil is an ancient symbol of Mary from the catacombs. Likely tied to the star of the Magi, it connects Mary with the revelation of the Incarnation. Mary announces the coming of the Son of God; she is the star that leads us to redeeming love.



Mary’s eyes show tenderness and intensity. Her eyes face the one who is looking at her. When a Marian icon pictures Mary and the Child, Jesus is

understood to be blessing anyone on whom his Mother gazes.

The Child’s energy and focus is on the angel with the cross. His expression is also intense. Their looks portray pondering and contemplation at the events surrounding them. Both faces convey reflective listening. The exposed ears of Mary and the Child teach us an attitude of contemplative listening to the movement of God.

The **ear and mouth of the Virgin** are small, teaching us we must be silent and listen to hear the voice of God.

