

# Baltimore parish celebrates 150th anniversary of precious icon's arrival

The installation of North America's first publicly venerated icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help was cause for great celebration when it was enthroned at St. James the Less Church in Baltimore on the Feast of St. Nicholas, Dec. 6, 1868.

A 500-person procession accompanied the image to the Redemptorist church, according to the religious community's archival records.

Boys held tapers while girls clutched lilies as they marched the streets of East Baltimore. Thousands attended three days of celebrations honoring the arrival of a Marian image Pope Pius IX had asked Redemptorists to make known throughout the world two years earlier.

To commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic arrival, Redemptorist Father Michael Brehl, worldwide leader of the Rome-based Redemptorist priests and brothers, celebrated a Mass in English and Spanish Nov. 3 at Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown.

The icon, a copy of the original image that is located at St. Alphonsus Liguori Church in Rome, has been housed at Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús since 1986, following the closure of Ss. James and John Church (St. James the Less having merged with St. John the Evangelist in Baltimore in the 1960s). During the 1970s, the icon had also been displayed for a few years at St. Wenceslaus in East Baltimore.

Father Brehl called the anniversary a "momentous occasion."

"This icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help came to accompany her sons and daughters - all of us migrants here, all of us new to this country," the superior general said.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is known as Our Mother of Perpetual Help because "she

understands us and knows each of us by name," he said.

"We still come before her to ask her help, to pray for her intercession and to seek her accompaniment today," he said.

Father Brehl, a Canadian, noted that his homeland received an image of Our Mother of Perpetual Help a few years after the religious artwork crossed the Atlantic from Europe to Maryland.

"The faith and the love the people of Baltimore had for Our Mother of Perpetual Help could not be contained here," he said, "and the devotion spread right across the continent."

The Redemptorists are responsible for the care of the original image of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, which shows the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the child Jesus. Scholars believe the Byzantine icon dates to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was created by an unknown artist on Crete. According to legend, it may be a copy of an image crafted by St. Luke. It was in the possession of a private family in the 1400s before being enshrined at St. Matthew Church in Rome in 1499.

After French troops invaded Rome in 1798, the icon was hidden for decades before being moved to St. Alphonsus Liguori Church, which was built on the site of the icon's previous home at St. Matthew.

After Pope Pius IX asked Redemptorists to promote devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the religious order commissioned copies of the icons to be sent across the globe.

The icon housed at Sacred Heart of Jesus was accompanied by two others when it landed in August 1868. One was installed at the novitiate chapel at St. Mary in Annapolis that same year and the other at St. Clement's College in Ilchester in 1869, both used in private devotions.

Redemptorist Father Bruce Lewandowski, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, said devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help runs deep at his parish. Novenas are offered in her name every Wednesday at 8 a.m. and 7:30

p.m., he said.

“She’s important to us and goes along very well with our charism, which is to preach the Good News to the poor and most abandoned – people who need tremendous help,” Father Lewandowski said in an interview with the Catholic Review.

Melissa Pelaez, a parishioner of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, said she is inspired by the way the icon shows the Child Jesus finding refuge in his mother’s arms, a sandal dangling from his foot.

“I love the way that Jesus throws himself to her to seek that protection from her,” she said.

The image at Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús includes gold crowns on Jesus and Mary, bedecked with diamonds, rubies and amethysts. They were added in 1899. According to the Redemptorist archives, Anna Helldorfer, the aunt of Redemptorist Father Nicholas Helldorfer, made the anonymous donation then valued at \$2,000, the equivalent of \$61,000 in today’s dollars.

During the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary liturgy, Rita Hubbel helped carry the offertory gifts during the procession. The 100-year-old parishioner was born in the year of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the arrival of the icon, Father Brehl said.

Mirroring the pomp and circumstance of the icon’s original welcome, the anniversary Mass featured joyous Marian hymns and a Knights of Columbus honor guard whose members wore brightly colored feathered hats. Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, was present during the celebration, as were numerous Redemptorist priests and brothers.

At the conclusion of the liturgy, the pastor led loud shouts of “Viva Nuestra Madre de Perpetual Ayuda!”

*Listen to the congregation sing the Hymn to Our Mother of Perpetual Help below.*

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