

Icon of Mercy

TOMORROW, JUNE 27th, millions of Catholics throughout the world who know and love this image, celebrate the Feast of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. It is exactly 150 years since this icon was entrusted to the Redemptorists by Pope Pius IX with the instruction: Make her known through the world.

In the broad family of iconography, this image of Mary is known as an 'Eleusa' icon, or, an icon of mercy. Its multiple symbols speak powerfully of the mercy of God, not least the beautiful eyes of Mary, Mother of Mercy. Concluding his *Misericordiae Vultus – The Face of Mercy*, Pope Francis writes: 'My thoughts turn now to the Mother of Mercy.' He says that no one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Visiting her cousin Elizabeth, Mary sings a 'hymn of mercy' which we call the Magnificat. It remembers the mercy of God which extends from 'generation to generation' (Lk 1:50). Then, 'at the foot of the cross', says Pope Francis, 'Mary, together with John, the disciple of love, witnessed the words of forgiveness spoken by Jesus' (MV 24). These words are powerful expressions of mercy towards those who crucified him. Indeed, they show the extent to which the mercy of God can reach. To this, Mary is the primary witness. She teaches us – even as 'a sword pierced her own soul' at that moment – that the mercy of God knows no bounds. That is why in the *Salve, Regina* (the *Hail, Holy Queen*),

we call Mary, 'Mother of Mercy', and we beg her: 'Turn then your eyes of mercy towards us.'

These words are not merely comforting. They enable us, through Mary's intercession, to

exercise a key ingredient of mercy: to forgive others – to love even our enemies – if we ourselves are to benefit from the mercy of God. Mercy received has to become mercy shared. Jesus says to us: 'I do not say forgive seven times, but seventy times seven times' (Mt. 18:22). He then goes on to present the parable of the 'ruthless servant' (Mt. 18:23-35) who, called by his master to pay back a huge amount, begs him on his knees for mercy, yet fails to show the same kind of mercy which he has just received when he encounters a fellow

servant who owes him a mere pittance. The challenge of mercy behind this incident is summed up in the beatitude of Jesus: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Mt. 5:7). It is also found in Jesus' own commentary on the Our Father which he had just taught his disciples: 'Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either' (Mt. 6:14-15).

'To err is human, to forgive is divine', as the saying goes. Pope Francis advises us, when we find forgiving others to be difficult, to turn to Mary and ask her intercession and to learn from her perfect example what forgiveness really entails.

