

The Story of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

In 1498, the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was in a church on the island of Crete, in Greece. The picture had been there for some time and was known to be miraculous. One day a merchant from Crete stole the picture of Our Lady. He hid the picture among his things, boarded a ship and set out to sea. When a great storm arose the terrified sailors begged God and Our Lady to save them. Their prayers were heard and they were saved from shipwreck.

A year later, the merchant went to Rome with the picture. There he got a disease and became terribly sick. He asked his Roman friend to take care of him. The merchant grew worse and realized that he would soon die. He called on his friend and with tears in his eyes, begged his friend to do him one last favour. When the Roman promised to do so, the weeping merchant continued, "*Some time ago I stole a beautiful, miraculous picture of Our Lady from a church in Crete! You will find it with my belongings. I beg you, please place it in some church where the people will give it much honour.*" In time the merchant died. The Roman found the picture

and showed it to his wife. She wanted to keep the picture, so she put it in her bedroom.

One day, the Blessed Virgin appeared to the Roman saying, "*Do not keep this picture, but put it*



in some more honourable place." But the Roman did not do as Our Lady asked him and kept the picture. Some time later Our Lady begged him a second time not to keep the picture, but to place it in a more honourable place. Again, he did not do as Our Lady asked him to do.

Then the Blessed Virgin appeared to the Roman's six year old daughter, and told her to warn her mother and her grandfather saying, "*Our Lady of Perpetual Help*

commands you to take her out of the house!"

Finally, after many delays, the Virgin Mary appeared to the little girl a second time, "*Our Lady of Perpetual Help commands you to tell your mother, to place my picture between St. Mary Major and St.*

John Lateran, in the church dedicated to St. Matthew

the Apostle!" The mother did as she was told and sent for the Augustinian Fathers who were in charge of that church. Then on that very day, March 27, 1499, the picture was taken to the church of St. Matthew the Apostle on the Esquiline Hill, one of the seven hills in Rome. It was placed between two beautifully carved columns of black Carra marble above a splendid white-marble altar.

For three centuries from 1499 until 1798, the church of St. Matthew in Rome was one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in Rome, because of the miraculous picture. Many pilgrims who came to the shrine: saints and sinners,

Cardinals, Bishops and priests, kings and princes, rich and poor. They came to see the miraculous picture of Our Lady and pray before it.

But this was not to last. The French armies led by Napoleon Bonaparte, invaded the Papal States in 1796. Rome was in danger of being attacked and taken over by the enemies. By February 17, 1797, the Pope was forced to sign the Peace Treaty of Tolentino. The Holy Father did not want to do this but he had to, in order to protect the Papal States from the enemy.

A year after signing the Treaty, the French General Berthier marched into Rome and proclaimed the "*Free Roman Republic.*"

He lied, there was no freedom. Then shortly after, Berthier was replaced by the French General Massena. On June 3, 1798, General Massena commanded that thirty churches be destroyed! One of them was St. Matthew's! He cried out, "*There are too many churches in Rome. The church land can be used for better things!*" He wanted to make the people realize that worse things would happen if they did not obey his every command. The terrified Romans prayed to Our Lady and she helped them in all their troubles.

Because the Augustinian Monastery was destroyed, the monks were allowed to return to Ireland, their homeland. A few returned but most of them stayed in

Rome. Some went to St. Augustine's, the main church and monastery of the Augustinian Fathers. The rest of the monks took the miraculous picture of Mary and moved to St. Eusebio's, a poor old church with a huge monastery. St. Eusebio's was in terrible condition and needed much cleaning and repairing.

The picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help stayed at St. Eusebio's for twenty years. Since the place was too large for the few monks who lived there, in 1819, the Pope asked the Jesuits to take over St. Eusebio's. The Holy Father gave the Augustinian's the small church and monastery of Santa Maria, in Posterula, on the other side of the city. The monks took the miraculous picture of Mary with them, and gave it a place of honour in the monastery chapel.

In 1788, Augustine Orsetti joined the Augustinian Order at St. Matthew's and became Br. Augustine. As a young religious, he used to spend much of his free time praying before the miraculous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. He studied and memorized the history of the picture.

When St. Matthew's was destroyed, Br. Augustine was transferred to St. Augustine's. Then in 1840, he was transferred to the Monastery of Santa Maria in Posterula. When he arrived at Santa Maria he went to the community chapel. There he saw the beautiful miraculous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. It was just as he remembered it, when

he had been at St. Matthew's.

Br. Augustine looked after the sacristy at Santa Maria. He cleaned the chapel and its holy images. He also trained altar boys and taught them how to serve Mass. Michael Marchi, one of the Altar boys, became a good friend of Br. Augustine. The Brother often spoke to him about the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help saying, "Do you see that picture Michael? It is a very old picture. Know Michael, the Madonna from St. Matthew's is the one that hangs here in the chapel. I am not trying to deceive you. It certainly is. Have you understood, Michael? It was miraculously saved from destruction. Many people used to come and pray before this miraculous picture. Always remember what I am telling you."

In 1854, the Redemptorists, founded by St Alphonsus Liguori, bought a piece of land in Rome, called the Villa Caserta, on the Esquiline Hill. Also included with their property, was the old site of the church of St. Matthew, where the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help had been given great honour.

In 1855, Michael Marchi joined the Redemptorist Monastery. On March 25, 1857, he made the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He continued his studies and was ordained on October 2, 1859.

One day when the community was at recreation, one priest mentioned that he had read

some ancient books about a miraculous image of Our Lady and that it had been venerated in the old church of St. Matthew. Fr. Michael Marchi spoke up, "I know about the miraculous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Its name is Our Mother of Perpetual Help and it can be found in the chapel of the Augustinian Fathers, at their monastery of Santa Maria in Posterula. I saw it often during the years of 1850 and 1851 when I was a young college student and served Mass in their chapel."

On February 7, 1863, Fr. Francis Blosi, a Jesuit priest gave a sermon about the famous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. He described the picture of Our Lady, and said, "I hope that someone in this crowd of faithful listening to me today, knows where this picture is! If so, please tell that person who has kept the picture hidden for seventy years, that the Mother of God has commanded that this picture be placed between the Basilicas of St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran. Hopefully the person will repent of his thoughtless act and will have the picture placed on the Esquiline Hill once again, so that all the faithful may honour it."

Soon the Redemptorists at St. Alphonsus heard about Fr. Blosi's sermon. Knowing that their church was located close to the site of the old St. Matthew's Church they hurried to bring the news to Fr. Mauron, Superior General of the Redemptorists. Fr. Mauron was in no hurry.

He prayed for almost three years to know the Holy Will of God, in this important matter.

Then on December 11, 1865, Fr. Mauron and Fr. Michael Marchi, obtained an audience with Blessed Pope Pius IX. Eagerly, the two priests gave the Pope a detailed story of the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. They pointed out that Our Lady had asked that the picture be placed in a church between the Basilicas of St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran. After listening to the story, the Pope asked if they had put this into writing. Fr. Mauron at once produced a document, which Fr. Marchi had written and signed under oath.

The Holy Father had a great love for the Virgin Mary. He immediately took the piece of paper on which Fr. Marchi had written his account. With his own hand, Pope Pius IX wrote a statement on the backside of the document:

December 11, 1865

The Cardinal prefect will call the Superior of the little community of Santa Maria in Posterula and will tell him it is Our will that the Image of the most holy Mary, of which this petition treats, be returned between St. John's and St. Mary Major's. However, the Superior of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer is obliged to substitute another suitable picture.

Pope Pius IX

The Pope had spoken and the case was closed. The Mother of Perpetual Help would soon be home after nearly seventy-five years in

exile. In the early morning of January 19, 1866 Fr Michael Marchi and Ernest Bresciani, hurried across the city of Rome to Santa Maria in Posterula, to get the holy picture.

The Augustinians were sad to see their beloved Madonna go but they rejoiced that Our Lady would once again be honoured at the place where she desired. The Augustinian monks wanted an exact copy made from the original. This was given to them shortly afterward. The Redemptorists at St. Alphonsus waited for Our Lady of Perpetual Help to arrive. They were so happy when the picture arrived. But they found that although the colours were still bright, there were many big nail holes in the picture. These were made when the picture was hung and for other reasons.

A talented Polish artist, who lived in Rome, was asked to restore the picture. The picture was finished toward the close of April. Plans were made for a solemn procession. The people of the neighbourhood decorated their houses for the feast. Loads of flowers and vines hung from windows. Banners and flags draped the walls and the roofs of the houses.

On April 26, 1866, the Feast of Our Lady of Good Counsel, a great procession set out from the monastery of St. Alphonsus. During the procession many miraculous events were reported. A poor mother sat by the bed of her four-year-old boy, who was at the point of death from a brain illness. He had suffered

from a constant fever for the last three weeks.

The mother heard the procession coming closer. Suddenly she took the boy in her arms and held him at the open window. When the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help passed by she cried out, "*O good Mother, either cure my child or take him with you to Paradise!*" Within a few days the boy was totally cured. He went with his mother to the church of St. Alphonsus to light a candle of thanksgiving at the shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

In another house a little eight year old girl, lay crippled and helpless. She had been this way since the age of four. As the procession passed and the miraculous picture of Our Lady came near, the child's mother offered her little daughter to the Blessed Virgin. Suddenly the child felt a great change coming over her. She partly recovered the use of her arms and legs. On seeing this, the mother became very confident that Our Lady was helping her little girl. The next day she took the child to the Church of St. Alphonsus and placed her in front of the miraculous picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Looking up at the picture she prayed, "*Now, O Mary, finish the work which you have begun.*" She had just finished the words and suddenly the little girl stood up on her feet. She was perfectly cured!

When the picture at last reached the Church of St. Alphonsus, it was placed on the high altar. The church was decorated and

the altar was loaded with candles and huge amounts of flowers. A solemn prayer of thanksgiving was then sung and the Bishop had Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Then Mary's homecoming was celebrated for three days. Each morning Mass was celebrated before the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help by a Cardinal. After the praying the Litany of Our Lady, a beautiful sermon, and Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament was given by a Bishop. Similar services were held each evening. The Holy Father granted many special indulgences to all who attended these devotions.

Father Bernard Bernie, one of the greatest Redemptorist preachers in Italy, preached the sermons for three days. His words of wisdom pierced the hearts of his listeners. At least twelve hundred persons received Communion during this time, at the shrine of Our Lady.

On May 5, 1866, the Pope made a personal visit to the shrine to see the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help with his own eyes. After he had prayed for a time before the Blessed Sacrament and at the shrine of Our Lady, he entered the sanctuary and climbed the steps of the high altar to study the picture more closely. Later, Blessed Pope Pius IX questioned Fr. Mauron about the history and devotion given to this picture.

Soon afterward, a new gothic styled, marble altar was set up at St. Alphonsus. A space in the

upper center of the altar was decorated with brilliant, golden trim. When all was completed, Mary's picture was lovingly put in place. The first Mass was celebrated at the new shrine altar on March 19, 1871, the Feast of St. Joseph. The picture has remained there until this day.

Devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help spread rapidly. Hardly a year had passed when on May 12, 1867; the Vatican gave the order for the picture to be crowned. The coronation date was fixed. On Sunday, June 23, 1867, the Church of St. Alphonsus was filled up for the solemn Mass and coronation ceremony. After the Mass, while hymns were being sung, the Archbishop blessed two golden crowns with precious jewels. He placed one crown upon Mary's head, the other upon the head of the Child Jesus and the picture was put back in its place and everyone sang a joyful hymn of praise.

The next day, the picture was carried through the streets in procession. Each evening fireworks and thunderous cannons were set off to echo the praises of Mary. At the close of the week's celebration the name of Mary was spelled in brilliant light against the blue background of the sky. The people who had taken part in the ceremonies prayed with one voice, "**Long live Mary. Long live devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help.**"

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Pray for Us