

Our Mother of Perpetual Help: Our Life, Our Sweetness, and Our Hope

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-17; Psalm 71:1-41; Revelation 12:1-6; John 19:25-27

June 27, 2023 IHM Chapter

In the art world, there is a piece of art known as a triptych,
which is a type of Christian art,
whose primary function was to serve
as an aid to devotion or prayer.

The picture consisted of three panels hinged together side by side –
each one adding to the story being portrayed.

Our three Scripture readings today form such a triptych.
All three panels speak to us of Mary, the Mother of God,
whom we honor today
under the title of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

Let's begin by looking at the first panel that flanks the Gospel -
the Scripture passage from Isaiah.

Ahaz, the king of Israel, is deeply afraid of two allied forces
that are about to attack his city of Jerusalem.

So God sends Isaiah the prophet to offer Ahaz a sign –
any sign he chooses, it can go as high or as low as he wishes.

The sign offered is meant to convince Ahaz to trust in God,
but Ahaz refuses the sign, saying he will **not test** the Lord.

Actually, he's already decided to put his trust in the King of Assyria.

But God brushes aside his objection
and gives a sign, nonetheless,
as a way of showing his faithfulness and love for his people.

The sign is a promise that will be fulfilled in time -
of God becoming "Emmanuel" to his people –
of God becoming present and living among his people.

Naturally, our Catholic tradition interpreted this promise by God
as being fulfilled by Mary at the Annunciation.

She is the virgin who trusted that what God was promising
through an angel would be realized.

This is what her cousin Elizabeth joyfully announces to her:

*“...blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”*

With her “yes,” Christ is born
and becomes known as “Emmanuel” – God with us.
And this woman of faith invites us to trust, as she trusted,
that *“what the Lord has promised [you and I] will be fulfilled,”*
will come to pass, will be realized.

What, then, has God promised us in Christ?
That Jesus will never abandon us, will always be there for us,
no matter how absent he seems, how far away,
no matter how far we stray, how faithless we become...
GOD IS ALWAYS WITH US.

Now let’s look at the second panel that flanks the gospel,
the passage from Revelation.
Here in the first verse of our reading,
we find the Ark of the Covenant back in its proper place.

It’s now in the heavenly temple.
But here’s the difference.
It’s no longer associated with Israel
but with a woman who is about to give birth.

How come?
The early Church saw Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as the new Ark.
Why? Because she carried within her, in the most vivid way,
not just the remnants of the Ten Commandments;
she carried within her the very personal presence of God.

Notice something too!
This new Ark, Mary, like the old Ark, is associated with battle.
As she is about to give birth, a dragon confronts the woman.
This is not a sentimental image at all.
This is a pretty hard-edged image.
Here’s a woman associated with the Ark,
she’s the bearer of the divine presence,
but from the moment she’s about to give birth

she's confronted by a terrible enemy.
It's a fearsome dragon
with seven heads and horns and crowns and so on.
But this dragon is powerless against the woman and child.
This baby and its mother are stronger than any forces of evil,
more powerful than any horrible problems
which distress us and imprison us.
What's the message? Mary, the new Ark, is more effective in battle
than the Old Ark was for ancient Israel.
She has become a refuge for all who are seeking strength
in the face of evil, in the face of fear,
in the face of any trial or tribulation.

Finally, we come to the central panel, the gospel of John,
with Mary, the Mother of God, standing beneath the cross
witnessing the cruel death of her Son, Jesus.
Just before he dies, Jesus gives his mother to us,
symbolized by "the beloved disciple" whom Jesus loves.
He entrusts her to us in order to help us
when we are overcome by the trials of life.
Through Mary's compassionate presence at the cross,
the suffering that continues to play itself out in our life
becomes more deeply human.
We are encouraged by this loving gesture
to allow Mary's compassionate heart to embrace us
for she promises us serenity, security, surrender, confidence,
newness, another chance, and life.
And how do we do this?
By taking Mary into our "homes"!
Spiritually, this means taking Mary into our lives,
to take her as a companion and counselor,
aware that she knows better than we do God's wishes for us.
If we learn to converse with Mary and listen to her in all things,
she will become our 'teacher' in God's ways,
guiding our inner lives without the din of words.

Her quiet maternal warmth is the easiest
and the most non-threatening road back
to the spirituality people are seeking.
In this modern spiritual wasteland, she is an oasis of fresh water
that offers healing and liberation, filling us with life and peace.
In this flattened landscape that tries to shut out all vestiges of heaven,
she is the “gate” that is always open to receiving
anyone searching for the way, the truth, and the life.
Her only calling is to point us toward Jesus.
She points to Jesus, never to herself.

At the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC,
on the front of the altar,
underneath the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help
the following words are inscribed:

“Our life, our sweetness, and our hope.”

It refers to what Mary, Our Mother of Perpetual Help
is for all believers who come to know her and love her.

How beautifully this statement captures
the message of three readings proclaimed today.

She is *our life* - a sign given to us
to make her known throughout the world,
in order that the world might come to know
that living presence of God among us.

Regardless of the signs of the times, she invites us to trust
that no matter God is always with us.

She is *our hope* – in honoring her as our Perpetual Help
we assert, against all odds, that in the out hearts and in our lives
there beats a strong sense of hope, notwithstanding the conditions
the conditions of life that seem to overshadow all hope.

She is *our sweetness*, whose compassionate gaze gives us
the courage to face life’s sufferings,
certain in her secure embrace of divine providence.

Let us not be afraid to go out and look upon others

with the same gaze.

A gaze that makes us brothers and sisters.

We do so because we know that our mother is here,

we know that we are beneath her shadow and under her protection,

which is the source of our joy,

that we are within her perpetual embrace.