

An icon for the distressed

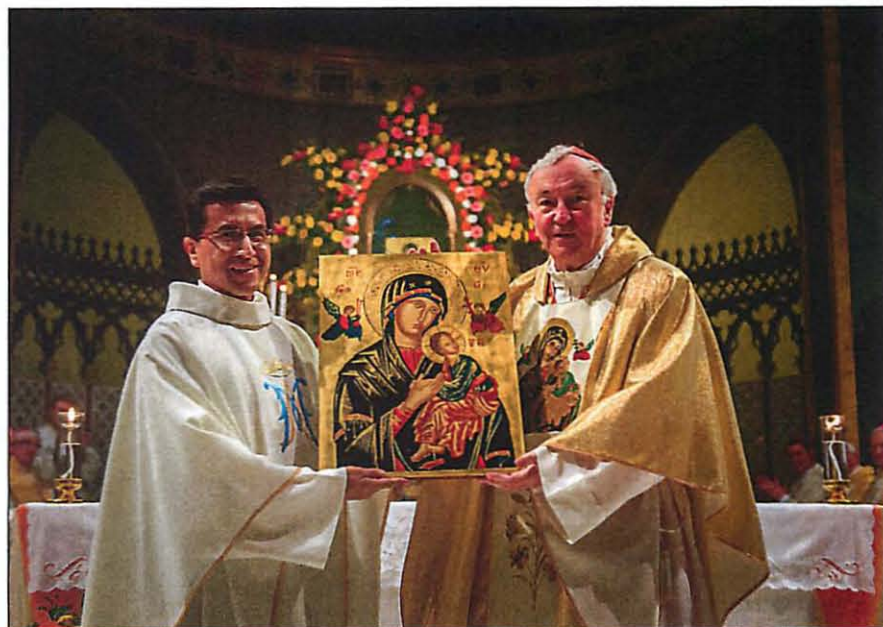
One of the most moving events of the Year of Mercy thus far was the recent Vigil for the Wiping away of Tears, a vigil of consolation. Pope Francis invited to St Peter's all whose hearts were full of tears for the great sadness of life. As he said, the tears shed every day in our world form "an ocean of desolation". I will echo this vigil in five parishes in north London in the coming weeks as we turn to the Lord who alone can dry our tears for ever.

To these vigils I will bring an icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. I received this beautiful replica as a gift from the Redemptorist community at Sant'Alfonso Church in Rome, which is my titular church. I was there just a few weeks ago to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the public veneration of the icon, which is for so many a profound expression of the depth of the mercy of God. So many bring their tears to Mary and in her embrace find such consolation.

At this anniversary celebration there was a wonderful procession, in which the icon was carried from the Basilica of St Mary Major to Sant'Alfonso along the Via Merulana. This was a repeat of the first procession of the icon to Sant'Alfonso, 150 years ago.

The history is fascinating. From the end of the 15th century onwards, the icon was the great treasure of the simple church of St Matthew that used to be on the same site. We can only guess at the saints and martyrs, and countless others, who might have prayed before this image of Our Lady. The Church of St Matthew was destroyed in 1798 as war raged in Rome, but the icon was saved by some of the last Augustinians to leave. She ended up in a private chapel of the convent of St Maria in Posterula by the Tiber, to which the Augustinians moved.

And there the story of the icon might have faded into dusty history, if it had not been for Brother Augustine Orsetti, who was determined to keep the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour alive, and passed on that enthusiasm to a boy called Michele Marchi. Michele became a Redemptorist. In 1855, when the Redemptorists bought land for their new Church of the Most Holy Redeemer and St Alphonsus, they discovered that, apparently by chance, they were building on the site of the old Church of St Matthew. Brother Michele remembered the icon and knew where to find it.



Cardinal Nichols receives the replica icon at Sant'Alfonso Church in Rome

And so it was that Pope Pius IX approved the request that the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour be placed in the new church, so that public devotion to her might be resumed after a gap of nearly 70 years.

Half-way along the route of our procession we stopped, seemingly outside a bar. In fact, we were stopping at the spot of the first recorded miracle attributed to the icon in Rome. On that day, in April 1866, a young mother brought her baby to the

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window of her room. Her child was sick and she was distraught. She cried out to Our Lady as the icon of Mary as our Perpetual Succour passed by. At that instant her child was cured and her broken heart was healed. Mary is indeed our Perpetual Succour. She wipes away our tears.

When we think about Our Blessed Lady as Mother of Sorrows we imagine her standing at the foot of the cross of Jesus. The icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour captures that moment in a special

way, for not only does it depict Mary holding the child Jesus, who seems to be distressed and clinging to her, but also behind these figures are two angels holding the instruments of Jesus's future Passion and death. They are proclaiming: "Look, it is for this that you are coming into the world, to destroy the hold that suffering and death has over all people. You will overcome them through your death and Resurrection."

In this way the icon teaches us to turn to Mary whenever we are distressed or frightened, caught up in suffering and feeling broken in spirit.

We thank God for the 150 years that the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour has been venerated in the Church of Sant'Alfonso. We give thanks for the encouragement that she has given to many people in their own journeys of faith wherever this image of Our Lady is to be found.

It is my hope that we may continue to take the words of Pope Pius IX to heart, that this devotion be made known to the whole world. In this way so many may come to know the limitless mercy of God for us all, His little one, a mercy made so present in the face of Jesus.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols is the Archbishop of Westminster