

Mary The Helper In Childbirth



This icon of the Mother of God is called "The Helper in Childbirth". The first prototypes of this icon appeared in Western Russia, in the early 19th century. It was made for a very practical and urgent need - the difficulties in conceiving and giving birth.

A variation of the ancient and famous icon of Our Lady of the Sign, this icon differs by showing the Mother of God folding her hands in prayer over her heart, instead of holding them outstretched to the sides. Under the protective arch of her hands, we can see the newly conceived Christ Child, emanating from inside her womb in an almond shaped-halo of light. To show He is the "Logos", or Word of God incarnate, He holds a small white scroll. She is filled and radiant with light from inside.

Originally, in a time when too many women died in childbirth, midwives carried this icon to help alleviate the pains and dangers of this life-giving process. Because of the practical purpose of this icon, it belonged more to the life of lay people and popular piety than the public, liturgical life of the Church. It would have been unusual to find it

venerated in a church, or depicted on a large panel, since it needed to be small enough to carry among the other urgent, portable tools of a midwife's work.

This icon is a prayer, from one mother to another: "Mother of God, you know my anxiety. Help me in this time of danger and happiness". It is an icon of remarkable empathy, from one Birth-Giver to another birth-giver. Yet an icon cannot be closed in its meaning and use; it must be open to everyone at all times, in all circumstances, as the Mother of God herself is open to us in all our needs. It is not an icon only for women in labor.

Every pregnancy is a miracle that fills us with joy, awe and dread at the same time. Surely the Mother of God will help us in this need.

We can pray for the difficulty in conceiving; she certainly understands miraculous conceptions, as did her own mother, St. Anne.

We can pray to her in the difficulty in carrying a child to term, and to safeguard us in the all the possible complications; imagine how she prayed, pregnant and riding on a donkey, only to give birth in a stable.

We can pray in front of it in joy and thanksgiving for her protection and guidance in helping us bear and raise children.

We can pray in front of it in the pain of the loss of a child, as the Mother of God herself knew the death of her only Child.

But what use is this icon of Divine Maternity to the single person, or the celibate? Despite her miraculous conceiving, she still remains a virgin; one Orthodox hymn calls her the "unwedded bride".

We can all stand in front of her, and pray in thanksgiving for being born; all of us have experienced the mystery of our own conception and birth. We all have parents, and all are children.

Through her prayers, the Mother of God stands beside us as our midwife and model. In all ways, through our own human will and the grace of God, we all are expected to give birth to Christ into the world. St. Teresa of Avila reminds us: now we must be His hands, to bless and heal.

THE HAIL MARY PRAYER

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen

THE SAINT MICHAEL PRAYER

Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of devil. Repress him, O God, we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host - by the Divine Power of God - cast down into hell, satan and all the evil spirits, who prowl throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen

PRAYER FOR THE HELPLESS UNBORN

Heavenly Father, in Your love for us, protect against the wickedness of the devil, those helpless little ones to whom You have given the gift of life.

Touch with pity the hearts of those women pregnant in our world today who are not thinking of motherhood.

Help them to see that the child they carry is made in Your image - as well as theirs - made for eternal life.

Dispel their fear and selfishness and give them courageous hearts to love their babies, birth and take care of them.

Help them to make the decision to either raise the baby themselves or give the baby up for adoption.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your Son, Our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever, Amen.

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