

## Icons

The Eastern Christian Church uses Icons to portray saints and the mysteries of faith. Icons are more than pictures or paintings. They are presences; and their purpose is to teach a truth, either about the saint portrayed, or about the faith. For this reason, the painting of Icons is surrounded by strict rules and principles of style. For example, the Icons that portray the Blessed Virgin are all grouped in five broad but easily distinguishable categories, even though there may be many variations of details within those categories. Three of these categories are significant.

*The Virgin pointing the Way.* This Icon is known in Greek christian spirituality as the "Hodighitria" or the Blessed Mother teaching, indicating, or showing the way. Mary is seated, and looks out at the believer from a position of dignity, holding the Infant Jesus on her left arm. The Child himself, already a miniature adult, is also depicted in majesty. He is the "Ancient of days", the Lord of the Universe. Mary's right hand indicates or points to the child, so that one's attention is drawn from the mother to the child.

*The Virgin of Tenderness.* This form of Icon is in contrast to the Hodighitria Icon, which emphasises the divinity of Jesus. In this Icon, it is the human aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation which is uppermost. The principal theme of this style of Icon is the compassion which Mary feels for Jesus in his coming suffering, a compassion which is extended to all humanity and to all creation.

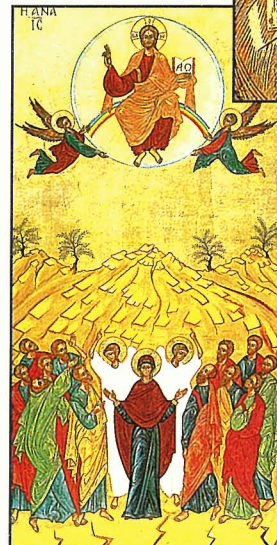
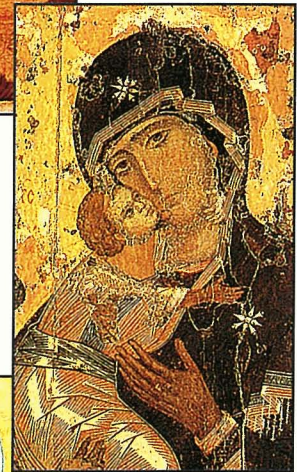
*The Virgin in the Mysteries.* Another form of Icon which features Mary is the Icon depicting the mysteries of faith where Mary appears in the scene: the Crucifixion, the Ascension, and Pentecost, for example. Here Mary is among the believers.

What is telling for us in the Western Church is that in Eastern christian spirituality Mary is never depicted alone. Either she is pointing to Jesus, or she is holding Jesus in compassion, or she is among the believers. But always she is in *relationship*: to Jesus, to the disciples, to the Church, and especially to the one who is looking at the Icon. These three forms of Icon vividly portray the way Marists look at Mary, and the way they understand their place in the Church. Rather than *talk about* Mary, they prefer to *be like* her, especially in those attitudes so clearly portrayed in the Icons of Mary. They prefer to find their place submerged among the believers, looking on the world with compassion, and always indicating Jesus as the way to the Father.

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Father Colin said: "Look at our mother after the Ascension of the divine Master. She is the support, the director, of the new-born church. She is called 'Regina Apostolorum', yet she seemed to be doing nothing, although she did more by her prayers than the apostles did by their preaching."

*The Mayet Memoirs*



## Icon: Mary

A good illustration of something of the mystery of Mary's place in the church and the Marist's relationship with her can be seen in a piece of sculpture which was in fact never intended to convey that mystery. The work is by an Australian artist, and is entitled: "Icon: Mary, mother of the priest".

It depicts the relationship of Mary with the priest in the Church. The priest is shown as the intercessor on behalf of the world, his arms raised in the praying position. Mary is with him, supporting his arms, in a gesture which reminds us of the story of Moses' prayer in the battle against the Amalekites. (Ex. 17: 1-16) The priest is not on his knees in front of Our Lady, but is standing with her. Both are facing in the same direction, though the tilt of the priest's head is sufficient to indicate his special relationship with Mary and the way he will draw strength and inspiration from her. The two figures blend into one form and become identified with each other.

Much of this could be applied to the Marist's relationship with Mary. Mary's concern is for the Church. She looks out towards the Church and the world. The relationship of the Marist is not simply the relationship of child to mother. It is a relationship of two people who identify with each other. The Marist looks *to* Mary, but also *with* Mary; together they are looking towards the world and the Church. And yet, like the priest's head in the Icon, the Marist's mind and heart will be turned towards Mary in a gesture of trusting personal relationship, attentive to whatever Mary may have to teach or say.

One could say that the Marist does not so much ask Mary, "How would *you* act in this or that situation?" but rather, "How do you want *me* to act in this or that situation?"



*Mary, though the Mother of Christ and the perfect image of the Church, nevertheless remained in the new-born Church among the Apostles as a simple believer. A life so hidden and yet so fruitful for the Church seemed to Father Colin the model of what the life of the whole Society of Mary should be in every age.*

*Marist Sisters' Constitutions n.3*