

## An Invitation into the New Marianist Icon

by Fr. Ted Ley, SM

Flashback! English knights force King John to sign the Magna Charta; he does, and the preserved codex to this day, symbolizes democracy for the world's English-speaking people. Or, a family memory: A photograph of your great grandparents as children piled into a shiny black Model T, their dad smiling at the wheel while mom waves to neighbors – your family's first automobile. Or if you are lucky, this opportunity: You've saved up, flown to Perú, completed the serpentine road, climbed the final strenuous hike; and are now facing a world-renowned relic of what it is to have created, in a rugged forbidding place, a complete way of life -- Macchu Picchu. No minor symbols, these. So we say, they are "iconic" – of democracy, family transportation, of civilization itself.

Our iconic Christian symbols are *The Book* – The Bible, the Word of God speaking to us; and the Sacraments, whose minister is Christ Himself till the end of time. These in turn have been clothed over two millennia, by Liturgy for their celebration, with theological explanations for our understanding; with great Art, Architecture and Music gathering the People of God, the Church. 'Midst this splendor of Christian culture, there is also a kind of, "symbol of symbolism itself" – a special gift to all Christians, from the Eastern, the Greek, sector of the Christian people: the Sacred Icon.

In today's "global village," icons are no longer "foreign" to Christians in general. Today, to assist worldwide celebration of the Marianist Bicentennial, we can enter into prayer with a wonderful new icon designed by our Italian confrère, Father Salvatore Santacroce.

Icons are not portraits, yet are about real persons and tell a story. And there is a particular way to pray with an icon that gives the icon an effectiveness that is unforgettable, that will make us want to return, again and again, to the icon.

When we stop to gaze into Father Salvatore's icon, it first does what all icons should: It draws our eyes into it. Our eyes go "through" its flat surface; our imagination creates a third dimension.

Then this icon gives what only very great icons provide: an immediate grasp of its full setting and theme. We perceive right away that Father Salvatore's icon is an interaction of three persons; we readily realize the woman is our Blessed

Mother and the man, our Lord Jesus. And Mary is looking at the third figure, a young person, to whom with her hand she is gesturing that the youth look to the Lord Jesus, and listen. We are now not merely observing, but are entering into what we easily recognize is the Wedding Feast at Cana. Our eyes keep circling around. For we see simultaneously three steps essential to the event: Mary gesturing to the youth: “Do whatever he tells you;” Jesus telling the youth what to do; the young servant now pouring water into the containers. We have entered the story right before its culminating moment.

Our imagination is piqued by one so young who, generalized in appearance could be male or female, whom we realize, though, is a young male servant. Yet the characterization of this servant is so well done by Father Salvatore, that young and old, men and women, boys and girls, can insert themselves into the icon, and become the servant – the disciple.

The youth’s ethnicity is also generalized. This icon is for Marianists worldwide. In the Marianist Family, all are no longer Jew nor Greek, bonded nor free, young nor old, but have become equal and alike, in Christ. It is we who have been asked to pour water into the large containers, so our Lord can create a celebration worldwide, continuing, expanding, that ministry which our elder Brothers and Sisters during a previous American Marianist Centenary of 1949, called the Marianist “masterpiece of toil and tears,” ourselves the living continuance of the Marianist Charism.

Every sacred icon is a “little catechism,” instructing in the Christian Life, teaching Faith, uniting mind and heart, drawing the viewer into the event in the icon. This icon now begins to teach, guide, and lead in prayer. But just as we cannot deepen an understanding of Scripture or Liturgy by simply ‘doing’ it, but need instruction along the way, likewise with an icon, for its full impact. To include that instruction, Father Salvatore affixes abbreviations traditional to icons and Marianist life.

The first abbreviation we see is, “Maria,” the Holy Name of Mary. Then nearby, classic Greek initials that say Mary is “God-bearer” – *Theotokos*. She is the way to Jesus, as she is for the pathway of our eyes in this icon.

In an Eastern church edifice, Mary’s icon is at the doorway, first icon seen when entering the church. Mary is the living Gate to the Holy of Holies, to life in the Trinity. Jesus her Son, is then seen inside the church, in an open-armed hovering mosaic – *Pantocrator* – Redemptive Leader, watching over from the ceiling, the People gathered in His Name. Mary invites. Christ leads. In our

Marianist culture, this initial role of Mary is summarized in Father Chaminade's Trinitarian Doxology: "May the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit be glorified in all places through the Immaculate Virgin Mary." Appropriate then, that the object of our first glance in the icon is Mary, whose visage and gesture gives us the sense that we have entered the sacred, been welcomed into the icon. This is analogous to what the Marian icon does in a Greek church.

New icons almost always contain a newer symbol. In ours, the symbol above the young servant – the Marianist Cross, the Body of Christ in Marian trace pointing at once vertically toward Resurrection, horizontally toward Mission. "Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother."

The initials near Jesus are an ancient abbreviation also found on vestments, proclaiming, "Jesus Christ is Savior." This conjures Jesus' entire life – His fulfilling all foretold by Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Prophets. Our icon hearkens the Salvation History that culminates in Jesus' first miracle, at Cana, in which we, via the icon, are participant.

We re-examine the facial features: Mary's nurturing face, the assured countenance of Jesus; the alert look of the young man. Though a youth, Everyman, Everywoman. The Calling, first to the youth, now includes us. The Lord himself is telling us to help fill the jars.

But now also, a surfeit of questionings, the mark of a great icon: Is the water Baptismal, Faith-seeking? The banquet a foretaste of the Eucharist? Will the youth become a disciple? What happens to this young man is not told in Scripture, but in the icon it is intimated by the youth's countenance. He clearly realizes this is no ordinary wedding guest. Will he want to learn more? To follow Jesus? Could he prove to be the young John that Mark told of in Scripture – or one of Mark's colleagues? We don't know. But symbolically, he is definitely now also us.

Because Cana is a great story, we identify first with one key character, probably the youth; then in turn, Mary and Jesus. We want to imitate the presence and Faith of Mary, feel closer to her. We then identify with the Lord by wanting to follow Him, to tell the Good News.

We live in a new golden age of Liturgy, a new era of "Bringing the Sacraments to the People." No surprise that right after Vatican II, attention focused on Liturgy itself, with less attention to even the classic supportive devotions of the

Western Christian Church. Eucharistic Adoration, Family Rosary, Litanies, were experienced less. Not so anymore. There is even a new international devotion indirectly of Marianist origin – the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, by Saint Faustina of the Polish branch of the Sisters of the Misericorde, the congregation founded by Mother de Lamourous with the help of Father Chaminade.

Devotions meet the needs of the times, as personal, family and group prayer drawing everyone to the Sacraments and to full participation in the Faith Community. It is this same assistance to Christian spiritual and Community life that is the value of prayer with a sacred icon. In our secularized world, prayer with an icon opens us to a greater ‘sense of the sacred.’ Praying with this Marianist icon will recall Father Chaminade’s teaching that “the essential is the interior.” To paraphrase a great Marianist leader of the past, Father Joseph Simler, prayer with the new Marianist icon will “nourish mental prayer.”

Our Bicentennial Icon is now going around the world, Community to Marianist Community, to all Marianist Sisters, Brothers and Laity, in a unifying pilgrimage. Our having all prayed before the icon will epitomize solidarity in Vocation, sharing of the Marianist Charism today and for years to come –*ad multos annos*.

Those who “enter” the icon will discern their commonality and uniqueness. Commonality: the worldwide Marianist Vocation. Uniqueness: what Father Chaminade called a “union without confusion,” in meeting the needs of the times. In the icon, the roles of Mary, of Jesus, of the Servant, are specific while absolutely interdependent. Those who pray with the icon can grow in Marianist understanding.

We will want copies for our chapels, schools, centers, parishes, lay and religious communities. We will ever be grateful to Father Salvatore whose talent, by prayerful discernment, has brought forth a no less than iconic Bicentennial gift to the Marianist Family.

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Marianist Community of West Hills, California

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*Transferred Memorial of Blessed Brothers Carlos Erana, Fidel Fuidio and Jesus Hita, Martyrs*