

Liturgical Living: Our Lady of Czestochowa



On August 26, we celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Czestochowa (also known as the Black Madonna), which is a famous painted icon of Mary with an interesting history.

Traditionally, we are told that the icon was painted by St. Luke on the top of a cypress-wood table that came from the home of the Holy Family. Some suggest that it was done on a piece of wood cut from the table of the Last Supper.

Legend says that when St. Helen came to Jerusalem in 326AD to look for the true Cross, she also happened to find this image of Our Lady. She gave it as a gift to her son Constantine, who built a chapel for the portrait.

There have been many miracles attributed to the intercession of Mary by persons praying before the portrait. During one attack on Constantinople, the chapel caught fire. Everything was destroyed except a small section of wall upon which hung the painting of Mary and Jesus. The intense heat and soot from the fire had darkened the already dark olive features of the Madonna and Child.

Eventually, the painting was taken to Kiev and installed in the royal palace. In 1382, it was damaged by invading Tartars. An arrow pierced the Miraculous Image, leaving a scar that is still visible on the neck of Mary.

In the 15th century, a Polish prince decided to move the icon to his home town in order to keep it safe. Since it was a long journey, he decided to stop for the night at Czestochowa. The next morning, the horses pulling the wagon refused to move forward. He understood this as a sign from God that the painting was to remain in Czestochowa. The icon was placed in the care of the Pauline Fathers, who still guard and care for it today.

Understanding the image:

The Virgin Mary is the “One Who Shows the Way”. Mary always guides her beloved children to her Son. In this icon, we see Mary’s right hand gesturing toward Jesus. She is directing the attention away from herself and pointing us to Jesus. In turn, we see Jesus extending his right hand toward us in a blessing. In his left hand, He is holding the book of the Gospels. As in many icons, Jesus resembles a small man to remind us that Jesus, even as a little child, was fully mature in his Divinity.

Our Lady of Czestochowa, pray for us!