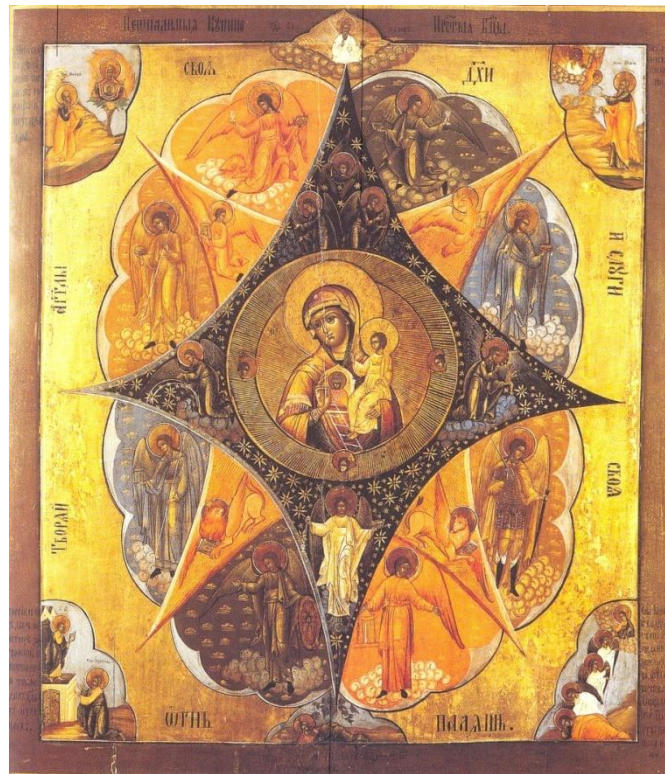


January 2016



Anonymous, Mother of God of the burning bush, end of 18th century, tempered on panel, originated from central Russia, private collection

The icon presents a complicated iconography, which parts from the interpretation that the Fathers of the Church made of the bush that Moses sees burning without perishing when he climbed Mt Horeb (Ex 3, 1- et seq.): this is the image of Mary, who gave birth to Christ, divine fire, preserving her virginity intact.

In the centre of the icon, in a golden circle, appears the figure of the Mother of God from the waist up with the *maphorion*, decorated entirely with gold ornaments, and the Child in her left arm covered in a blanket. In her hands, Mary has the ladder, one of the symbols of the Old Testament. The circle is inscribed in a eight point star (known symbol of Mary) which is made up of two crossed and overlapping diamonds: the first, red, represents the fire, the second, green, represents the shrub.

The *Theotokos* is depicted in the centre of the star. The symbols of the four evangelist are found in the four angles of the red diamond: a man for St. Matthew, a lion for St. Mark, an ox for St. Luke and an eagle for St. John. These symbols are derived from Ezekiel 1.10. In the angles of the green diamond are angelic beings. The star is surrounded by clouds which depict eight angels and spirits of the natural elements that perform different ministries in service of God.

In the corners of the icon, left vacant from the large central rose, appear four prophetic visions from the Old Testament: in the top left Moses on the mountain who sees the bush burning without perishing (the picture is completed by the image of the Mother of God in the flames); in

the lower left corner Ezekiel contemplates the Lord, who is the only one who can pass through the closed door of the sanctuary to the east (Ez. 44, 1-3); in the top right corner the seraphim touching the mouth of Isaiah with a burning coal (Is. 6,7), in the bottom right, lastly, Jacob who is sleeping and sees in his dreams a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending it with the Lord holding it firm (Gen. 28, 12).

*The shadow of the law has dispersed the coming of grace:
As in fact the bush burned but did not perish,
So the virgin gave birth and virgin you remained;
Instead of the pillar of fire, the Sun of Justice rose;
Instead of Moses, Christ, Christ the salvation of our souls.
The bush that Moses contemplated on Sinai,
Depicting you, O Blessed Virgin;
The bush was in fact a symbol of your holy body,
The branches that were not consumed by your virginity;
And the fire of the burning bush, of God that has taken residence in you.
Great is the glory of your virginity,
O Mary, O perfect Virgin.
Thou hast found grace, the Lord is with you.*

(texts from the Liturgy of the Eastern Church)

February 2016



Anonymous, *Mother of God of Jaroslavl*, second half of the 15th century, tempered on panel, Moscow, Trät'jakov Gallery

This icon belongs to the collection of Our Lady of Tenderness, evidenced by the faces of the mother and child and the mutual concern between the two.

There are two peculiarities, typical of the icons produced in the outskirts of the Byzantine Empire (Italy, the Balkans, Russia) that accentuates the human characters rather than the solemnity of the icons made in Constantinople, which is evidenced by the hands of the protagonists: the right hand of the child caresses the face of Mary, whilst the left hand of the mother clings to him almost as if she wants to protect him. These two hands that seem to 'say' tenderness, complement the other two which relay more or less "support and refuge": the left hand of Jesus that grips the edge of Mary's mantle as if to stop from falling and the right hand of Mary that supports and gives security to the child.

The trust and familiarity between the two is emphasised and thus the icon is aptly known as the "Our Lady of Caresses".

Mary has her hair in a blue pleated cap, typical of married Syrian women, which can be seen under the elegant *maphorion*, the cape that seems to cover Jesus, whose brightness is amplified by the contrasting dark fabric. And the white of the *chitone*, the boy's tunic, together with the golden *himation*, the cloak fastened securely, connects the figure of Jesus to the gold background of the icon, an obvious symbol of the divinity.

The positioning of the feet of Jesus is rather peculiar: the right foot resting on top of the left. This is a clear reference to his death: in fact, on the cross Jesus is portrayed with his right foot over the left. Furthermore, according to tradition derived from the Shroud, the right foot of the Saviour stood out because the right leg was slightly longer than the left.

Once again, therefore, we see a series of elements that give testimony to the wealth of symbolism found in the icons and, in observing them, lead us to Mary and, through her, to Jesus.

The Archangel was sent from Heaven to cry 'Rejoice!' to the Theotokos. And beholding You, O Lord, taking bodily form, he stood in awe, and with his bodiless voice he cried aloud to her such things as these:

*Rejoice, you through whom joy shall shine forth. Rejoice, you whom the curse will vanish.
Rejoice, the Restoration of fallen Adam. Rejoice, the Redemption of the tears of Eve.
Rejoice, O Height beyond human logic. Rejoice, O depth invisible even to the eyes of Angels.
Rejoice, for you are the King's throne. Rejoice, you bear Him, Who bears the universe.
Rejoice, O Star revealing the Sun. Rejoice, O Womb of divine Incarnation.
Rejoice, you through whom creation is renewed. Rejoice, you through whom the Creator is born a Babe.*

(Akathist Hymn)

May 2016 - Holy Year of Mercy



Piero della Francesca (Borgo Sansepolcro 1416/17 – 1492), *Our Lady of Mercy*, 1445-1462, oil and tempera on wood, cm 168x91, Sansepolcro, Museo Civico

The table is in the middle of a great altarpiece, that is made up of five large panels, a dais and eleven boards distributed across the molding and sides, Piero was asked by the Brothers of Mercy in 1445 to adorn the main altar of the church next to the Hospital. The piece, due to various other commitments taken on throughout Italy, was finished 15 years later.

The altarpiece was taken down around 1630 and the original frame was lost forever. Subsequently, with the suppression of the Religious Companies, the painting, now dismantled, was moved firstly to the St. Rocco Church and then became municipal property in the Art Gallery of the town.

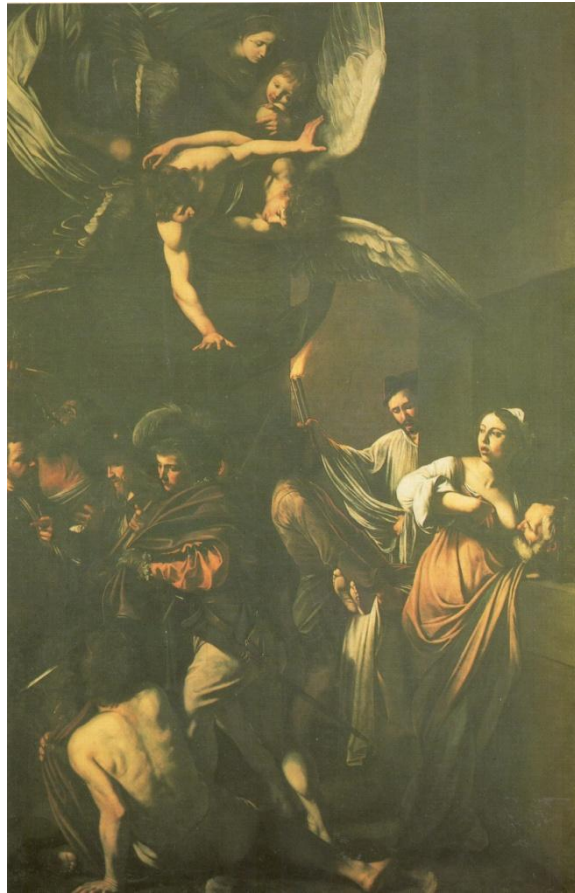
In the centre we see Our Lady of Mercy, a representation of the Virgin Mary who opens her cloak to offer shelter and protection to the people who venerate her, derived from the medieval custom of the “protection of the cloak”, that noblewomen of powerful families could offer to the persecuted and those in need. The faithful are much smaller than the Virgin and form a semi-circle, four men to the left and four women to the right. Among the men there is a hooded broche, a notably rich man dressed in red, and according to an old legend, the man beside the Mary’s cloak is a self-portrait of the painter.

The figure of Our Lady, who stands on a dark base, demonstrates and confirms Piero’s great interest for geometry: the cylindrical form of the cloak, the cone of the Virgin’s halo and crown, the perfect oval of her face. Mary’s belt is knotted in a way to form a cross.

It is the precise figure of Mary that catches our attention: her huge cloak, that she unfolds effortlessly, resembles the apse or a section of the chapel of a church, instilling security in those who have come to her seeking grace and protection. And it seems almost as if one can hear the echoes of the ancient prayer *Sub tuum praesidium*, dating back to the 3rd century, still used in Christian liturgy today:

*Beneath your compassion,
We take refuge, O Mother of God:
do not despise our petitions in time of trouble:
but rescue us from dangers,
only pure, only blessed one.*

June 2016 - Jubilee of Mercy



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, (Milan 1571- Port' Ercole 1610). The Seven Works of Mercy, 1607, oil on canvass, 390 x 350 cm, Naples, Fraternity of Mercy Church.

In a busy ancient Neapolitan town, where Caravaggio fled from Rome after Ranuccio Tammasoni's death on 29 May 1606, is perhaps the first painted representation of the seven corporal works of mercy, inspired by Matthew 25: 31-46.

From right to left we can see old Cimon, condemned to die of starvation in jail, being suckled by his daughter, who is thus both *visiting the imprisoned* and *feeding the hungry*. At the centre, a deacon with a torch is carrying what looks like a corpse, *burying the dead*. A nobleman that reminds us of St Martin of Tours has just torn his cloak in two to cover the bare shoulders of the lame man below to the left, thereby *clothing the naked* and *visiting the sick*. To the left there is a man wearing a shell on his hat, which clearly indicates he is on his way to St James' shrine at Compostela. The innkeeper provides him with accommodation, *sheltering the homeless*. Between them another man, Samson, is drinking from the jawbone of an ass: the *thirsty* are being *refreshed*.

The nocturnal scene is partly lit by the powerful light of the torch, but chiefly by the radiance from above, the divine making its entrance through the top left corner, where the artist has depicted two angels and the Madonna with Child. The painting portrays a perfect world where relationships are marked by fellowship, sharing, charity, and compassion, but where there is also room for everything that in the harsh daily lives of human beings runs contrary to the Gospel.

July 2016 - Holy Year of Mercy



Master of Alkmaar (active in Utrecht and Alkmaar between 1490 and 1510), *Works of Mercy*, 1504, oil on panel, 118x470cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

This artwork was ordered by the regents of the brotherhood of the Holy Spirit in Alkmaar (who may be the three characters at the forefront on the right, in the scene *Heal the sick*) for Saint-Laurent church. In the centre of the upper frame, we can see the date of execution (1504) and in the lower frame of each scene, there are scriptures reminding the faithful that they will receive great rewards in the world to come if they help others with the work of mercy.

The composition of the panel of this anonymous Dutch master is very simple. He created some kind of altarpiece: there are 7 panels side by side – with the same dimensions – in each of which he represented one of the seven corporal works of mercy.

It is worth noting that the central scene (which represents *Bury the Dead with Dignity*) doesn't respect the usual order (it is generally the last one since it has been added by the Church in the Middle Ages to the list of the six artworks mentioned in the Gospel) and the reason for that is obvious. Indeed, we have on the top the representation of Jesus on the globe, with the Virgin and St. John the Baptist at his side, in the typical scene of the Last Judgment. In this way, there is a reference to the excerpt of the Gospel of Matthew (25, 31-46) where Jesus teaches that, at the end of our lives, we will be judged on our ability to recognize in those who are in need: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." The panel therefore gathers two themes: the last judgment and the work of mercy.

The explicit reference to the Gospel of Matthew is also confirmed by another particularity. In each of the six scenes at the left side and right side of the central scene, we can, if we look closely, see Jesus who becomes a spectator in different parts of a city. This city is more recent than the Master of Alkmaar, since we are, at this time, in 1504. The various works of mercy were practiced by many concrete characters.

A final say on this artwork. If we look at the painting, different parts (in particular the central scene) are damaged. After the Reform, in Netherlands, there were fights between Protestants and Catholics on the legitimacy of the sacred images in the worship places. It seems that, in 1556 or 1572, the Protestants irrupted in the Saint-Laurent church and damaged the panel with a knife, particularly the faces. We like thinking that, after this difficult time and the improvement of the relations between different faiths, this artwork, preserved in the most important Dutch museum of ancient art and not in a Church, continues, as of today, 500 years later, to speak to our heart, inviting mercy to the life of each watcher.

August 2016



Antonio da Fabriano (active between 1451 and 1489), *Virgin of Mercy*, approximately 1470, oil on wood, 97x75 cm, Milan, Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo di studi superiori

We do not know much of this work by the painter from the Marche region in Italy, except for the fact that it was done by the person of the banner of procession painted on both sides, a widespread technique in the fifteenth century, especially in the Apennine Area. On the lower board of the frame two wooden extensions which were used for transportation of the artefact with two metal poles are still visible.

On the side of the mighty picture of the Virgin there are two saints, certainly dear to who commissioned the painting: Saint Sebastian on the left and a saintly bishop on the right. But Mary is the absolute protagonist, in the centre of the painting, with her rich brocade, pale red dress with bejewelled crowns. The gesture of her opening arms creates an effect of coverage and niche of the cloak. The representatives of all the people of God find refuge under it, as for a consolidated iconographic tradition.

The men are on the left, among which we recognize six: two members of a confraternity, dressed in white with hoods, a very elegant laity of a certain age, a pope with a tiara, a cardinal with a hat and a bishop with a miter. The women are on the right, among which a young woman dressed in red stands out – she is, most likely, the wife of the laity man on the left – also surrounded by other four women.

The prevailing behaviour among all characters is devotion, which represent humanity. It is not by chance that they are all painted with their hands together and looking upwards. The variety of the present people as well as the clear reference both to the two donors who commissioned and paid for the painting, and to the confraternity in which the banner be used tells us the will of all of them to set their lives under the loving protection of the Virgin Mary.

Meaningful is also the fact that the scene takes place in a garden, as testified by the numerous wildflowers and grass where the small kneeling pictures, the Virgin and the two saints are based. The reference to the *hortus conclusus* is immediate. That “fenced garden” was a symbol of the Earthly Paradise and of Mary’s virginity in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, in both cases synonym of perfection and bliss.

September 2016 - Jubilee of Mercy



Pieter Brueghel the Younger (Brussels, 1564 – Antwerp, 1638), *The works of mercy*, around 1630, oil on oak wood, 41.5x56 cm, Lisbon, National Museum of Ancient Art

What strikes about this small painting by the Flemish painter is the lack of a main character.

A crowded town is represented, and everyone is apparently dealing with some business. On a first look, it could resemble one of the many similar scenes depicted in Flanders in the first half of the 17th century.

But if we carefully look at the characters and at the different groups of people in the painting, we realise that all the seven corporal works of mercy are represented.

So, not only a single person, but the whole village is engaged in applying what Jesus asked: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and the prisoners, bury the dead.

In this way, the works of mercy are part of daily life. As a matter of fact, what is represented is not something exemplary or unique, but the very same scene could have been observed by Brueghel's contemporaries in many parts of 17th century Flanders. There are so many tiny details that make the subject concrete and specific: the houses rooftops, the patches on the shabby clothes of many people, the rosary hanging from the belt of the man dressed in black in the foreground...

What is also surprising is that there are no rich people in this scene. There are many poor and sick, but the other people engaged in helping them are humble people themselves, apart from

someone that could belong to the petty bourgeoisie at the most. We are looking at poor people helping out poor people, sharing the little they have with those who have even less.

Let's think about those who are poorer than us today: am I able to share the little or much I have? Am I able to provide them with the help they need?

October 2016 - Jubilee of Mercy



Benedetto Antelami (Val d'Intelvi, c. 1150 – c. 1230), *The works of mercy*, between 1196 and 1216, marble, Baptistery of Parma (left-hand jamb of the west portal)

The representation of the works of mercy by Benedetto Antelami is a very peculiar one. He carved them in a sequence of six panels placed one above the other in the left-hand jamb of the main portal, the west-facing one, of the Baptistery of Parma. The order in which they are represented, starting from the bottom, is not exactly the one described in Matthew 25:35-36, but we have them all: shelter the homeless, visit the sick, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the imprisoned, and clothe the naked (bury the dead, the seventh work of mercy, is in fact a late Middle Age addition to the Gospel parable).

In addition to observing the simplicity with which the individual scenes are represented, we can notice that the character performing the works of mercy is always the same person, as if to emphasise that the Christian, in order to have part in the Kingdom of God, is invited to show mercy towards his neighbour in all the forms in which it can be expressed.

We said that this jamb can be found in the west portal of the Baptistery, that is the main one: therefore, also the octagonal building is "oriented", as evidenced by the absence of the portal in the east side and the fact that inside there's the altar on which the Eucharist is celebrated. The west portal is also called "the Redeemer portal", because Jesus is represented in the lunette, frontally seated on a throne, while showing us his wounded hands and flanked by angels handing the instruments of the Passion: the crown of thorns, the cross, the sponge, the spear. This Jesus is the one who will judge humanity: under the lunette, there is indeed a lintel on which the dead are represented; to the sound of trumpets by two angels, they are arising from their graves and going towards their judgement.

Let's finally talk about the two jambs: the one on the left, that we have already examined, features the works of mercy, while on the one on the right the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, applied to the stages of life and not to the hours of the day, is represented (cf. Mt 20:1-16).

We invite you to take vision of the whole sculptural decoration (cf. for example the website <http://www.medioevo.org/artemedievale/Pages/EmiliaRomagna/BattisteroParmaPortali.html>) and to think about the lesson that this portal intends to convey: the Lord Jesus, showing us the signs of His love "to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8), calls every Christian - at any stage of their life - and invites them to perform the works of mercy. That's because He is not a terrible God, but he is the one who says: "Come, ye blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Mt 25:34).

November 2016 - Jubilee of Mercy



Giovanni Della Robbia (Florence, 19 May 1469-1529) and Santi Buglioni (Florence, 1494-1576), *Works of Mercy*, 1526-1528, polychrome glazed terracotta, Pistoia, Hospital “del Ceppo” (external decoration).

Now that we have reached the end of the Holy Year of Mercy we wish to propose a majestic and monumental piece of art, created at the beginning of the year 1500 to beautify the outside of the Hospital “del Ceppo” in Pistoia, founded around the end of the 13th century and active until 2013, when the new Hospital “San Jacopo” was opened.

Therefore, in 1522 the “spedalingo” (name given to the hospital’s manager) Leonardo Buonafede, Carthusian monk from Florence, commissioned and financed the well-known decoration on the facade of the building to the famous workshop Della Robbia.

The Seven Works of Mercy represented on the decoration in other panels (the first on the side, the other six on the facade), not only recall the canonical list of the Church, but also recount the charity activities carried out by the Hospital with realism and concreteness; what the Hospital did was dress the undressed (and linked to this, assist widows and orphans), host pilgrims, visit the ill, visit prisoners, bury the dead, feed the hungry and quench their thirst. Moreover one can notice that in each of the seven scenes there is one recurring character: we are referring to Leonardo Buonafede who was not only the financier but also the inventor of the piece of art. This is how one can see with their own eyes how the works of Mercy were interpreted and lived during the Renaissance. They were not abstract principles of rhetoric information, but an effective charity that turned into concrete interventions what the Gospel of Matthew simply lists.

The panel that illustrates the “to feed the hungry” – reproduced here together with the six panels that are located on the facade of the hospital – represents a twofold scene: the left side is set inside where we see a dining hall where monk Buonafede is accompanying a poor person to the soup kitchen of the community; the right side is set outside a home. The master has gone to the

streets with two servants who are carrying a lot of bread that is being given to different poor people who lean their arms out and look at their benefactor.

The composition as a whole also offers to today's observer a lesson of vigorous realism and expressive freedom, suggesting the image of a Christian spirituality based on the concreteness of the common good and on the good work of peoples who are traditionally attached to the values of work and social justice. All of this is enhanced by the brightness and richness of colours, and by the freedom and mobility of the figures.



December 2016 - Christmas Celebration



Robert Campin, known as the Artist of Flémalle (1378/79 – Tournai 1444), *Nativity*, around 1430, oil on wood, 86x72 cm, Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts (museum of fine arts)

This nice scene of the Flemish master presents three different episodes linked to the birth of Jesus coming from two different traditions: under a ruined building, a shed where we see an ox and a donkey, there is Mary, dressed in white and with loose hair, who loves the young Jesus, laid on the dirt floor, while Joseph is on the side holding a small candle in his hand. Behind them, looking out of a window of the shed, three shepherds have arrived, who look at the child almost with fear; despite being in the background, their presence is important, as testified by the fact that they are represented exactly at the point where the two diagonals cut the painting. Both these episodes are narrated at the beginning of the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke (vv. 1-20).

On the rights there are two very elegant women that we identify by the names written on the cartouches: it is Azel and Solomon, the first who believed that Mary remained a virgin even after giving birth to Jesus, while the second did not believe it and due to her disbelief her hand went paralyzed. She will be cured because she obeys the angel who invites her to touch the child with her paralysed hand. This episode is narrated in the apocryphal Gospels.

The beautiful and accurate landscape is proof of the fact that it is certainly winter, as understood from the bare trees, but the absence of snow, the sun that emerges on the left, the water that flows in the stream along the paths, remind us that the solstice has passed, the light starts to recuperate darkness. And the fact that light is an important element is also confirmed by the presence of its three known representations in the painting: natural light (the sun), artificial light (the lit candle in Saint Joseph's hand), supernatural light (coming from the young Jesus).

Attention for all details – the landscape that almost seems a miniature, the richness and variety of the clothes, the faces of the various characters that show feelings of joy, astonishment, contemplation – testifies the great quality of the painting and the artist's commitment to best portray this solemn representation of the mystery of Incarnation. We know little or nothing regarding the story of this painting. It certainly had to be for the devotion of some important character, probably of the Duchy of Burgundy.

We will now contemplate the painting and allow ourselves to be captured by it. This will be a way to prepare ourselves for Christmas.

*“O Morning Star,
splendour of light eternal
and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten
those who dwell in darkness
and the shadow of death.*

(Magnificat Antiphon used at Vespers on 21 December)