

# Description of the icon of “The Mother of the Divine Word”

(Mater Verbi Divini – by Dariusz S. Pielak SVD, 2019)

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## 1. The sources of inspiration for the birth of the icon of “the Mother of the Divine Word”.

The icon of “the Mother of the Divine Word” was painted by a Russian artist – Aleutina Vengzhenovska in close collaboration with the members of the Society of the Divine Word. The inspiration behind the icon was the desire to put together all the SVD Arnoldus family saints and blessed along with the main characteristics of the SVD charism on one canvas.



Two orthodox icons became the foundation for the idea. The first icon named “Graceful heaven” was found by Aleutina on the internet.

The icon touched her heart deeply with its beauty and tragic fate. A long time ago, this icon was part of the Orthodox Church iconostasis but the communist persecution of faith destroyed the iconostasis and this particular icon was used as a plank on the floor of the office of the village council. It seems that the size of the icon was bigger than the required wooden plank, and so the concerned member cut off the upper part of the said icon, cutting off actually the head of the Virgin Mary. After many years have passed, the floor was removed, that led to the discovery of the icon. The photo of the icon, used as part of the wooden floor, was posted on the internet to show the barbaric act that was committed. The artist, convinced that the icon should not be destroyed and forgotten committed herself to give new life to “the Graceful Heaven” icon and turn it as the image of “the Mother of the Divine Word”.



(Photo of the marks of the nails)



The second icon for the inspiration is the icon of “Woman, clothed with the Sun”, which actually corresponds to the Catholic image of Mary as the “Immaculate Conception” presenting Mary as crushing the head of the serpent. The origin of this icon goes back to the book of Genesis 3:15 – “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (New American Standard Bible). The Vulgate interprets this verse in the Marian context, attributing to the Woman the crushing of the serpent’s head. The Hebrew text would say that this work will be the work of the offspring of the Woman, the Messiah. Both these aspects have been merged into one on our icon, just like the one depicted on the orthodox icon. Satan is pictured not just as a serpent, but the apocalyptic dragon (see Rev 12), which is striving to eat the child, as eternal enemy of God and enemy of the salvation of the whole human race.

The work on the icon of “the Mother of the Divine Word” was also inspired by the love and devotion the SVDs have towards one of the titles of the Holy Virgin Mary – the **Mother of the Divine Word**. The litany of Loretto does not have this title. The most famous prayer in which

this title appears is the prayer “Memorare”, where we read: “O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions” (in latin “verba mea” - my words). However, one should not suppose, that this title is quite popular. We find this invocation only thrice in the new prayer book of the SVD.

There was a new development to the title of “the Mother of the Divine Word” thanks to the Synod of Bishops, dedicated to the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, which took place in 2008. In the post synodal exhortation “Verbum Domini” Pope Benedict XVI speaks of Mary, as the “Mater Verbi Dei”, i.e. the Mother of the Word of God. The Pope calls to deepen the theological relation of Mary with the Word.

“In our day the faithful need to be helped to see more clearly the link between Mary of Nazareth and the faith-filled hearing of God’s word. I would encourage scholars as well to study the relationship between *Mariology and the theology of the Word*. This could prove most beneficial both for the spiritual life and for theological and biblical studies. Indeed, what the understanding of the faith has enabled us to know about Mary stands at the heart of Christian truth. The incarnation of the Word cannot be conceived apart from the freedom of this young

woman who by her assent decisively cooperated with the entrance of the eternal into time. Mary is the image of the Church in attentive hearing of the Word of God, which took flesh in her. Mary also symbolizes openness to God and others; an active listening which interiorizes and assimilates, one in which the Word becomes a way of life". (VD 27).

## 2. The symbolical meaning of the icon.

There are two separate plans on the icon. The foreground mimics the carving of marble and symbolizes the history and the main idea of the spirituality of the Society of the Divine Word. Marble is a symbol of matter, our earthly life, as its history, and its ideals and aspirations. The color of the marble is pink. This color is a shade of red, which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and describes both the history of the Society and its main ideals as imbued by the Spirit.



At the bottom of the icon, in the center, is the open Bible. It is inside the pyramid symbolizing the fire of the Spirit. The central position of the Bible indicates that both the source of the order and the center of its life is the Word of God, alive and active.

Arnold Janssen responded to God's call contained in the Revelation and expressed it in the words repeated daily in the Order: "Coram lumine Verbi" - "May the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief vanish before the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace, and may the Heart of Jesus dwell in the hearts of all. Amen".



Thus, the family tree of the Society of the Divine Word was born. It has grown, and our most glorious fruits are our saints and blessed ones. There is no doubt that there will be even more fruits. Now, for example, the processes of the beatification of Bishop Nowak from Argentina and the Polish missionary in India, Fr Marian Zelazek are going on.



Above the head of Our Lady is an arch. In its center is inscribed a tetragrammaton - the Holy Name of God - Yahweh. It was by His will that the Order appeared, it is He who cares for Him. To the right and to the left of the Name of God, there is an inscription written in Latin - the famous motto for us: "His life is our life, His mission is our mission." These words refer to the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. The drawings on both sides of the Virgin reflect the words and deeds of Jesus.

On the image on the left, we see the calling of the disciples. Jesus invites them to become partners in His mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Above the picture is the abbreviation of the Society's name - SVD -, as well as the words that were with us in the SVD jubilee, 2008-2009: "Ut Verbum Domini currat" - "so that the Word of the Lord spread" (2 Thess 3, 1).

The image on the right shows a snake nailed to the cross, which reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus practiced what He preached. The drawing is inspired by the story of the healing of the centurion's servant: "Sed tantum dic verbo" - "But say only the word" (Mt 8, 8). This quotation points to the healing effect of the Word of God. Healing power comes from the cross of Christ's sacrifice. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn 3: 15-16). And here we come to the ultimate goal of the existence of our Society. Preaching the gospel should lead to our salvation expressed in many terms, as reconciliation, liberation, and spiritual healing.

The document of the XVI General Chapter reads: "Our dialogue is aimed at understanding and witnessing to the transcendental dignity in which all people participate, and about the only call of all mankind to reconcile all in Christ who united "all things in heaven and earth"(Eph. 1: 10). The author of the epistle to the Ephesians further adds: "For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has torn down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in His flesh the law of commandments and decrees. He did this to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus

making peace..." (Eph. 2: 14-15). Therefore, we must unite our lives with Jesus in order to achieve this deepest healing.

Above the abbreviation and the symbol of the Society, the pattern of stained-glass windows depicts the colorful fragments connecting the front, i.e. the earth, with the golden background of divine reality, embodying the ideal and man's desire to connect the earth with the heavenly. This divine reality is expressed in gold background. Gold is a precious and noble treasure. On the one hand, it is a symbol of wealth and royal power, and on the other - a symbol of purity and beauty. With its help, the icon painters always conveyed the idea of the Kingdom of God. It is also "The Kingdom of Truth and Life, the Kingdom of Holiness and Grace, the Kingdom of Truth, Love and Peace" (Preface on Christ the King).

The background of the icon resembles a luxurious Byzantine fabric, symbolizing the abundance of God's grace. Styled vines are embroidered on the fabric. Thus, human history, expressed in marble in the foreground, acquires its fullness in the world of God. Christian spirituality does not reject material reality. The Son of God became man in order to heal and transform human nature, and not destroy it. Even the so-called "end of the world" will not be the destruction of the existing world, but its transformation. The apostle Peter says: "We, according to his promise, expect a new heaven and a new earth, where truth abides" (2 Peter 3:13).

From the top of the icon comes light. It is the symbol of the Father, who "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16), as indicated by the tetragrammaton located in the middle of the arch - the sacred name of God revealed to Moses (see Exodus 3:16). At the same time, light is a symbol of grace and abundant gifts coming from the Father.



In the light that comes from God the Father, we see the sign of the Holy Spirit - the dove. It hovers over Mary, the Mother of the Word, as it did when she said her "Fiat" - "Let it be done unto me" - and by the power of the Holy Spirit conceived in her bosom the Son, Jesus. It soars above Jesus, as at the time of His baptism, from which He began His mission. Then the heavens

opened and a voice came from them: "This is My beloved Son" (Mt 3: 17)

Thus, we see that the whole Trinity is present on the icon: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Despite the fact that Saint Arnold Janssen named his Society in honor of the Word of God - the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, his spirituality is clearly trinitarian. In the prayers he has left, he often refers to each of the Persons of the Trinity. His spiritual sons and daughters still repeat the proclamation: "May the Holy Triune God live in our hearts and in the hearts of all people."



The Mother of God holds Her Son in her arms, but Her right hand does not press the feet of the Son to herself, but supports them to serve Him as a stepping stone to descend upon the earth when His time comes. She gives the Son to the world. «The Virgin Mary, (...) at the message of the angel received the Word of God in her heart and in her body and gave Life to the world» (GS 53). This gift is also manifested in the scene of the marriage in Cana of Galilee, when the Mother of Jesus said, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2: 5), and in fact by this she began the counting of "His

hour" (Jn 2: 4), that is, the time of missionary activity which leads to the cross. The fingers of both hands of the Mother of God and one hand of Jesus are folded into a blessing gesture, which speaks of the love and tenderness of God towards man.



The child Jesus holds a cross in his hand, which at the same time is a kind of spear reaching the feet of the Mother of God. There, at the feet of Mary, the drama of the salvation history is played out. A Woman clothed in the sun is standing on the earth, and at her feet is a crescent moon (see Revelation 12). It tramples the ancient dragon, Satan, who, like Leviathan, covers the earth with his carcass, as the embodiment of power, about which he once said to Jesus in the desert: "I will give you authority over all these kingdoms and their glory; for it has been given to me" (Lk 4: 6). It is because of the dominion of Satan that the earth is plunged into darkness (sin, injustices, etc.).

It is to this darkness that God sent his Son to redeem the world, so that, as Mathew said "The people sitting in darkness saw a great light" (4:16).



The red color of the dragon is the color of the temptation of power. His tongue, which took the form of the letter S, similar to the dollar sign, recalls the tempting power of money. His eye which is like a diamond, and the tail scales

in the form of coins also say the same thing. The tail of the dragon ends with a sting like the deadly sting of scorpion, like the apocalyptic locust (see Rev. 9, 10).

The dragon is aggressive, he wants to "devour the child" (see Rev. 12: 4), but he cannot do it - the Son of God strikes him with a fatal blow. The tip of the spear-cross pierces his skull, while the iron crown of the "prince of this world", resembling the form of a trap, is broken (cf. Jn 14: 30). "Our soul has escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare!" (Ps. 124: 7), the psalmist exclaims. The miracle of liberation and salvation is the fruit of God's love. This is indicated by the tip of the spear-shaped cross in the form of a heart.

A certain disadvantage is that the icon is dedicated only to one of the three orders founded by Saint Arnold Janssen. It would be incredibly difficult to place on this icon all the symbols of the spirituality of the two other orders. However, some characteristic details could be reflected. Thus, the color of the Apparel of the Mother of God is associated with the color of the Habit of the Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (blue) and the Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration (pink). These colors can also symbolize Martha and Mary, who are images of an active and contemplative monastic life (see Lk 10: 38-42).

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