

Throughout the month of May, the [Melbourne Catholic](#) are exploring various Marian devotions around the world, including the famous icons of Our Lady of Czestochowa, Our Lady Queen of Ukraine, and Our Lady of Zarvanytsia. Sr Paula Moroney OCDM also reflects on Mary's spiritual motherhood, and the role she plays as the 'focal point of history, [where the Old Testament is fulfilled and the New Testament begins](#)'.

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is a distinctive feature of Catholic and Orthodox spirituality. The month of May is a particular time in which we give honour to the Mother of God (theotokos) and strive to imitate her humble receptivity to God's grace.

The Church's tradition abounds with sacred images of Mary and the child Jesus, and she is often invoked as a protector and as the Queen of those nations consecrated to her. Much of this emerges from the very first "icon" of Mary the Church was given: St Luke's Gospel. In this Gospel, Luke evokes imagery to suggest that Mary is in some ways the New Testament fulfilment of the Jewish Ark of the Covenant (Luke 1:26-56). Through this association with the Ark, Mary has also been seen as a spiritual warrior. In the Old Testament, where the Ark went, idols fell to ruin (1 Samuel 5:1-5).

In this vein, devotion to the Blessed Virgin has been taken up not only as a source of comfort but a source of strength and as a plea for victory. Many cultures and nations have sought Mary's intercession in times of war and distress, plague and destitution. In a continuing series of articles, we'll take a look at some of the sacred images and devotions from around the world to see how different cultures express their unique devotion to the Mother of God. Let's start with Poland and Ukraine.

Our Lady of Czestochowa, "Queen of Poland"

One of the most famous Polish Marian devotions is to Our Lady of Czestochowa, the Queen and Protector of Poland. The origins of this image are unknown, although the style is distinctly Byzantine and its existence dates back to the fifth century where it resided in Constantinople. This image is often referred to as the "Black Madonna", since she possesses a darkened skin that was originally the result of age and regular acquaintance with smoke: This image was the victim of several sieges and skirmishes, and you can see even today the gashes on the painting from sword and arrow marks. Throughout its restoration, however, Our Lady of Czestochowa was given a deliberately darker hue. She currently resides at a monastery site in Jasna Góra (meaning "Bright Mount"), where she has been kept for six centuries, a site of pilgrimage for people from around the world.



The most common legend associated with our Lady of Częstochowa is that it was painted by St Luke the Evangelist himself on the cedar wood table where Mary ate her meals. It was then reportedly discovered in the Holy Land by St Helena, the Queen-Mother of Emperor Constantine, and brought back to Constantinople. Eventually it made its way to Poland in the hands of Prince Ladislaus in the fifteenth century, who wanted to keep it safe after suffering damage at the hands of the Tartars.

Along the journey, they came to rest at Jasna Góra, where the horses carrying the Madonna refused to move. This was taken as a heavenly sign that Our Lady wanted to reside there.

The image has been associated with many miracles, especially miracles of protection and victory in the face of invaders. In fact, it was due to one particular event that King John Casimir declared Our Lady of Częstochowa “The Queen and Protector of Poland”. In 1655, Swedish invaders had mostly overrun Poland, with the exception of Jasna Góra. After a 40 day siege, where seventy monks and 180 supporters held off 4,000 men, the Swedes were forced to withdraw and Poland was able to reclaim its land. This victory was attributed to Our Lady, and henceforth she became Poland’s protector.

In his 1979 visit to the shrine, Pope John Paul II spoke movingly about the strong bond between the Polish people and the Blessed Virgin:

The Virgin of Jasna Góra has revealed her maternal solicitude for every soul; for every family; for every human being living in this land, working here, fighting and falling on the battlefield, condemned to extermination, fighting against himself, winning or losing; for every human being who must leave the soil of his motherland as an emigrant; for every human being.’

Our Lady Queen of Ukraine, and Our Lady of Zarvanytsia

A few months ago, demonstrations were held outside of Downing Street in England, demanding more military presence on the ground in Ukraine to fend off Russian invaders. Interestingly, some of the demonstrators were Ukrainian clergy, and they held in front of them images of the Blessed Virgin that shows Mary in a posture that has been dear to the Ukrainian people for some time.



Kayla Harris, an archivist working at the University of Dayton, explored the significance of this image [in an essay for *The Conversation*](#). In many Ukrainian sacred depictions of Mary, she is holding out her veil – also known as a “Pokrova” – as a sign of protection.

According to one tradition, in the early tenth century, Mary appeared at a church in Constantinople while the city was under attack. During this apparition, Mary laid her veil across the congregation as a sign of protection and the invading armies withdrew. In 1037, Yaroslav the Wise, the Grand Prince of Kyiv, dedicated Ukraine to Mary and to this day she is known as the “Queen of Ukraine”.

Ukraine is also the home to one of the largest Marian shrines in Europe, in the village of Zarvanytsia. The origins of the image of Our Lady of Zarvanytsia are miraculous, as the story goes that a Kyivan monk was escaping invaders and came one night to some woods, exhausted and hungry, wounded and at the end of his strength. Begging for Our Lady’s intercession, he fell asleep. When he woke up he saw the icon of the Blessed Virgin and the infant Jesus, and a fresh stream bubbling up from the earth. Washing himself in the stream, he found his wounds to be healed and his strength returning.

He called this site of miraculous healing Zarvanytsia, and in a cave there he placed the icon. It became a site of pilgrimage and healing for people from around the world.

