



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

The Importance of the Testimony of the Mother Church of Jerusalem in the Liturgy of the Universal Church



Maria Ruiz is from Spain, a member of the *Ordo Virginum*, and an iconographer for the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Maria works alongside the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, on various projects, and with whom she has created the magnificent illustrations of the Arabic-language Missal. Presently, she is working on an Evangeliary that could be made available to all the Churches throughout the world. Your mission, which combines fidelity to Byzantine tradition with contemporary artistic exploration, is supported by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre through the institutional assistance it provides to the Liturgical Office of the Latin Patriarchate

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(Maria Ruiz, iconographer in Jerusalem)

What does your mission as an iconographer in Jerusalem consist of?

I have been joyfully working for the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem for nearly five years now. I try to serve the proclamation of the Gospel with my brushes. I collaborate concretely with the liturgical office in the creation of images that illustrate liturgical texts, for example, the Missal, the Lectionary, the Rituals. At times, I also provide other services, such as for Cardinal Pizzaballa’s coat of arms,

or the jubilee crosses offered as symbols of the Year of Hope in the vast diocese of the Holy Land, which stretches from Jordan to Cyprus

You recently exhibited a series of images created to illustrate the Arabic-language Missal at the Armenian Museum in Jerusalem. With what spirit were these works created, and where did you draw your inspiration?

It is a series of twenty-two images created specifically for the new Arabic-language Missal, which were approved and published at the end of 2022. The theme was assigned to me by the liturgical commission of the Latin Patriarchate. The images were selected together with the Patriarch to illustrate and celebrate the various liturgical seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter) and the great solemnities of the Lord and his Mother (Transfiguration, Presentation, All Saints). The originals, later reproduced in the Missal, were displayed in the exhibition. These images are not simply meant to illustrate or decorate the liturgical texts, but in a certain sense, to celebrate the mystery through lines, strokes, and colors. They are like windows or open doors that help the faithful enter into the mystery of the liturgy. This work was carried out with our Christians in mind, as they are the primary recipients of the project. As we know very well, they are facing major challenges, suffering, and immense hardship. For this reason, the color palette is vibrant, the compositions simple yet intuitive, full of vitality and emotion, so they can see with their own eyes that their faith is life, it is joy. It is a source of strength and hope. The technique used is inspired by ancient medieval miniatures: natural pigment with an acrylic binder, Indian ink, and 24-carat gold leaf on parchment paper

The Patriarch gave me a very clear assignment: to find a new style, one that was neither strictly Byzantine nor exclusively medieval Latin, but rich in all the Christian artistic expressions that have passed through the Holy Land since the birth of Christianity. This great challenge required in-depth research...

Where do you draw your inspiration?

I want to emphasize that one of my main sources of inspiration was the Holy Places themselves. Before creating each work, I went to the place where the event is still remembered and celebrated today. These are the first witnesses who still speak in silence. While there, I prayed, read and meditated on the biblical passages related to the scene I was about to depict. The way of working that the Holy Land offers me is unique. In one way or another, we wanted the Holy Places, as we know them, to be identifiable in the images while always keeping in mind, first and foremost, our Christians, who live and pray in those places.



In a few words, and with some examples, could you lead us along the path traced by these icons, from Genesis to Revelation?

The icons follow the entire cycle of the liturgical year with its main solemnities. All of the depicted scenes are from the New Testament, primarily from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. From the Annunciation to the Assumption of Maria, including the Nativity, the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, the Ascension, to name a few. It is true that Adam and Eve -the patriarchs and ancestors- appear in works such as All Saints, the Easter Vigil, or the Resurrection, which connects us to the fulfillment of salvation history. This sacred history is God's work for all humanity, and thus includes all those who came before Christ, who were later saved by the blood of the Lamb.

That very Lamb, which appears in the image of the Easter Vigil is an icon par excellence of Old Testament sacrifice that speaks of the Apocalypse, where the New Jerusalem, descending from Heaven, "has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb". (cf. Rev 21:23). The Paschal Lamb, which has been slain and then risen, stands upright on Golgotha, the altar of sacrifice where Christ offered himself on the cross. It shines in the Easter night, when the acclamation "*Lumen Christi!*" resounds. Adam and Eve are depicted at the foot of the mountain of Golgotha. We know that an ancient tradition places Adam's tomb at the foot of Calvary. They are the first to receive the outpouring of blood and water gushing from the Lamb's side. They immerse themselves in the salvation accomplished by Christ that they had been waiting for from the beginning, from the evening of the first sin. This image of the Easter Vigil, which is an entirely original work, perhaps sums up the entire path of creation and recreation of humanity that is fully accomplished in Christ, the Lamb of God.



One of the icons depicts Mary Immaculate as the Virgin of the Apocalypse, symbolizing the Church and thus, so to speak, encompassing all the other themes addressed in her works. How did you choose to illustrate this Marian presence in the Missal? This image required more research and work, much like the one of the Paschal Lamb. It was a challenge because I had to find a way to illustrate the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, a Western and modern dogma, which approaches a truth of faith differently from the Eastern tradition. Therefore, I chose to paint the Immaculate not alone, dressed in white with hands folded on her chest, but more like how she is venerated in the East, with her holding the Child and facing us with an attitude of solicitude that precedes and announces her intercession. It took three layers of paint, and in the end, it was the Franciscan *Immaculate Conception* that inspired me.

The Patriarch of Jerusalem, himself a Franciscan friar, showed me this image, which is found in all the convents of the Order founded by Saint Francis. It depicts the Woman crushing the serpent, as prefigured in Genesis, anticipating Christ's victory over evil and sin. She is the Woman clothed with the sun, evoked in the Book of Revelation, crowned with twelve stars, with the moon beneath her feet and the sun as her mantle. The Holy Spirit appears at the top right, covering Mary, just as the Gospel describes.

The peculiarity of the Franciscan Marian image is that the offspring of the Woman is represented in the Child, who holds a long cross-shaped staff with which he kills the serpent, the ancient dragon. In this way, the biblical stories underlying the dogma are also the references for this icon, which is very dear to me because, against a sky-blue background, it brings together the whole mystery of salvation concerning creation redeemed by Christ.

The iconographic composition reminds us that it is by the merits of her Son's cross that Mary was made immaculate ahead of time, and received in advance the fruits of Redemption, while indicating that we are all destined to be "holy and blameless in love," according to Saint Paul's words to the Ephesians.



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Who were your teachers in the art of iconography, and what was the most important thing they taught you?

If I have to speak about this project I am currently involved in, I consider T'oros Roslin, the 13th-century Armenian miniaturist, a master, an elder brother, and a friend. Because when, as an artist, you set out to follow in the footsteps of another artist, in one way or another, they become very close to you, you enter their gaze and share their vision, and they accompany us along the way.

T'oros Roslin, about whom we know very little biographically, served the proclamation of the Gospel through his art in a way I would dare call genius. Through his brush and palette of colors, he makes us “see” the Word of God in a tangible way, with a fresh and lively expression, while remaining completely faithful to Revelation and Tradition. His extraordinary ability to synthesize East and Latin West makes him, for me, a “prophet of unity”.

Returning to my formation, when I began taking my first steps into the world of iconography, 24 years ago, I trained in a monastic context, following the Russian Byzantine school, which had been greatly influenced by the masters who, at the end of the 20th century, renewed iconography, such as Ouspensky, the monk Gregor Krug, the iconologist Paul Evdokimov and his son Michel, and shortly after, the Orthodox archimandrite Zinon. They were “the masters of my masters”. Because the path of icons is not learned from books, but is passed down, like life according to the Gospel, from master to disciple. Among the great masters, I especially admire Andrei Rublev, whom I believe reached the pinnacle of iconographic expression, and he did so as a monk, living with humility, obedience, and asceticism in a life of prayer.

The same applies to Theophanes the Greek, whose genius and energetic, essential strokes make him for me a master and a continually new source of inspiration. As for contemporary iconographers, I follow with particular interest the ongoing revival in Romania, with masters such as Grigore Popescu, Ioan Popa, Mihai Coman, Elena Murariu, Gabriel Toma Chicut, to name just a few! These artists have revived a school that combines fidelity to the Byzantine tradition with a very creative contemporary artistic exploration, while maintaining a deep spirituality rooted in theology. Besides stimulating me artistically, these masters have helped me explore iconography as a true vocation and mission.



You work in close collaboration with Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who presided over your consecration in the *Ordo Virginum* November 1, 2023 in Jerusalem. With regard to these icons and the Arabic-language Missal, what do you believe is his long-term pastoral vision?

Yes, I have the grace and privilege of working with Cardinal Pizzaballa, and have done so for five years. He follows this work with constant and active interest. It's not uncommon for him to correct one of my drawings or suggest changes that offer a deeper vision of the mystery, one that is realistically rooted in the Word of God. As a biblical scholar and lover of Christ, he is truly a man of the Word.

Regarding the Missal, shortly after his appointment as Patriarch, he pushed forward this new edition, which we had been working on for over ten years. This is the second to be published in Arabic after the Second Vatican Council. The previous edition dated back to the 1980s and was very incomplete and wanting as far as the translations were carried out. Exceptional work was done with a team of translators and reviewers who worked to include all the prayers, translating them from the original Latin.

It was the Cardinal himself who approved the proposal of the Liturgical Commission, which suggested the series of twenty-two images to be included in the edition. I know from direct experience that his vision is very present in this choice, which includes: the Pantocrator and a cosmic Crucifixion for the Tridentine Mass, three images for the Proper of Saints, four for the Solemnities of the Mother of God, as well as twelve images accompanying the liturgical seasons and the Lord's Supper, which always opens the Missal according to the directives of the Congregation for Divine Worship. From the beginning, it was a heartfelt desire to see this work through to completion.

As for his vision, I would say he expressed it very well in the preface to the new Missal, where he emphasizes the importance of the testimony of the Mother Church of Jerusalem in the liturgy of the universal Church. He hoped that this work, which is enriched with beauty reflecting the incarnation of the mysteries of salvation would be celebrated by the people of God. He states, "may it be a precious contribution that helps the Arab-Christian people to rediscover, value, and celebrate ever more the beauty of the treasure received in the Holy Eucharist: the beauty of Christ, of the Christian

community, of the liturgy. Only the beauty of Christ will save the world, only a new aesthetic will save the Church, only a Eucharistic liturgy lived in all its radiant beauty and in *actuosa participatio*, the active participation of the Christian assembly, will save our generation from incomprehension and division". In this time of great political and social crisis, we need to put the Word of God back at the center of the life of the Church in a prophetic way. It is for this reason that, starting from Jerusalem, where the Word of God became flesh, we are now also working on an illustrated Gospel Book, intended first for the entire Arab world and then, God willing, through careful translations, for the rest of the world.

The small Church of Jerusalem, in her current poverty and her state of intercultural "sacred chaos," has something to give, a treasure to transmit; she is a living testimony of the mystery of the New Jerusalem, a source of spiritual renewal for the whole Church!

Interview by François Vayne

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