



RSHM GENERALATE CHAPEL
Our Lady of the Sign
Painted by Bernadette Crook, RSHM

The icon of Our Lady of the Sign is an icon of the Most Holy Virgin. In Greek, the Mother of God is called *Theotokos*. This term appeared in the region of Alexandria, Egypt, in the first half of the third century. In 431, at the Council of Ephesus (in Turkey), the council Fathers formally declared Mary, the Mother of God.

This type of image of the *Theotokos* was already evident in the catacombs of the first Christians. She is depicted on these icons with her hands lifted up to the level of her head, with elbows bent. Historically, this gesture has signified a prayerful appeal to God.

The icon of the Virgin Mary referred to the "Icon of the Sign" is taken from the Prophet Isaiah's message, "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel" [meaning, God with us.] (Is 7:14)

Elements present in the icon of Our Lady of the Sign

The icon of Virgin Mary is facing the viewer directly with her hands raised in the *orans* (prayerful) position, and with the image of the Christ depicted within a round aureole representing the womb.

The colors have a special meaning: red and purple are signs of the divine while blue often represents the earth. Her aureole signifies that She is Holy and the Queen. The gold cuffs on her sleeves are fit for a Queen, and indicate her intercession for the people.

Mary is sometimes called *Platitera*, i.e. "Greater than Heaven", since the Virgin has conceived in her womb Him whom the heavens can not contain.

The three stars on the Virgin (forehead, right shoulder, left shoulder) signify that She was a Virgin before, during and after the birth of Christ. She is dedicated to the coming of the Kingdom of the Son of God.

In the Icon of the Our Lady of the Sign, the Christ is presented at the moment of his conception in the womb of the Virgin. He is depicted not as a fetus, but rather as a child with adult face in the potential of the humanity. He is the Son of God, divine and human. The *mandorla* is an ancient symbol of two circles coming together, overlapping one another, symbolizing the interactions and interdependence of opposing worlds and forces. The early Christians used the symbol as a method to describe the coming together of heaven and earth, between the divine and human.

Inside the *mandorla*, appears the King of the Universe. The letters IC XC (abbreviation of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ"). He appears vested in divine robes of gold that symbolize his divine glory. His halo proclaims his divinity: "I am who I am". His right hand is raised in blessing. His left hand is holding a scroll, the new law, the new teachings, the Gospel symbolic of his role as teacher.

This icon is from the Early Church when there were no divisions between East and West. It invites for openness in relations among Christians of various confessions. The icon presupposes respect for one another and knowledge of a common history as well as a sensitivity in carrying out any actions in places where other Christian traditions have existed. Our Lady of the Sign presents Jesus as the new Sun who rises on the horizon of humanity. He comforts the poor, the afflicted, the fearful and the anxious by becoming their treasure, their joy and their hope.