Salus Populi Romani (Protectress, or more literally health or salvation, of the Roman People) is a Roman Catholic title associated with the venerated image of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Rome. This Byzantine icon of the Madonna and Christ Child holding a Gospel book and is enshrined within the Borghese (Pauline) Chapel of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major.

The image arrived in Rome in the year 590 AD during the reign of Pope Gregory I. Pope Gregory XVI granted the image a Canonical Coronation on 15 August 1838 through the Papal bull Cælestis Regina. The venerated image regained its longstanding devotion and status by being crowned again for the second time by Pope Pius XII on the Feast of the Queenship of Mary on 11 October 1954 accompanied by his Papal bull Ad Reginam Caeli. Recent papal devotion includes Pope John Paul II who highlighted its iconography during the World Youth Day for the Jubilee Year of 2000. Pope Benedict XVI also venerated the image on various occasions with that specific Marian title. Pope Francis also made this icon one of his first places of pilgrimage the day after his election to the Papacy.

The phrase Salus Populi Romani goes back to the legal system and pagan rituals of the ancient Roman Republic. After the legalization of Christianity by Emperor Constantine the Great through the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the phrase was sanctioned as a Marian title for the Blessed Virgin Mary.

History

The image is held to have arrived from Crete in the year 590 AD during the Pontificate of Pope Gregory the Great, who welcomed the image in person on its arrival borne with a floral boat from the Tiber river. For centuries it was placed above the door to the basilica's baptistery chapel, wherein the year 1240 it began to be called Regina Caeli (“Queen of Heaven”) in an official document. Later it was moved to the nave, and from the 13th century it was preserved in a marble tabernacle. Since 1613, it has been located in the altar tabernacle of the Cappella Paolina that was built specifically for it, later known to English-speaking pilgrims as the Lady Chapel. The church, Saint Maria Maggiore, is considered the third of the Roman patriarchal basilicas. The church and its Marian shrine are under the special patronage of the popes.

From at least the 15th century, it was honored as a miraculous image, and it was later used by the Jesuit Order in particular to foster devotion to the Mother of God through the Sodality of Our Lady movement.

The Roman Breviary states, "After the Council of Ephesus (431) in which the Mother of Jesus was acclaimed as Mother of God, Pope Sixtus III erected at Rome on the Esquiline Hill, a basilica dedicated to the honor of the Holy Mother of God. It was afterward called Saint Mary Major and it is the oldest church in the West dedicated to the honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

The Roman Pontifical gives the following account:

"The Liberian basilica, today called Saint Mary Major, was founded by Pope Liberius (352-366) and was restored and enlarged by Sixtus III. ... Pope Liberius selected a venerated picture that hung in the pontifical oratory. It had allegedly been brought to Rome by Saint Helena..."

Description

The image is five feet high by three and a quarter feet wide (117 x 79 cm) - very large for an icon, especially one with an early date. It is painted on a thick cedar panel. Mary wears a gold-trimmed dark blue mantle over a purple/red tunic. The letters in Greek at the top identify Mary as "Mother of God" (Μήτηρ Θεοῦ in lower case and ΜΗΤΗΡ ΘΕΟΥ in upper case), as is usual in Byzantine art (Christ may originally have had an inscription under later re-painting). Christ is holding a book in his left hand, presumably a Gospel Book. His right hand is raised in a blessing, and it is Mary not he who looks directly out at the viewer; he folded together position of Mary’s hands distinguishes this image as a version of the earlier type from before the development of the iconography of the Hodegetria image in the 10th century, where she points to Christ with her right hand. "Rather than offering the Child, she keeps his body closer to hers and seeks physical and tactile contact with him." However the few other examples of this type do not have the Virgin’s hands folded together - the right hand holds Christ’s knee.

Although neither wear crowns, the holding by Mary in her right hand of a mappa (or mappula, a sort of embroidered ceremonial handkerchief), originally a consular symbol, later an imperial one, means this image is probably one of the type showing Mary as Regina coeli or "Queen of Heaven".
THEOTOKOS: The Bearer of God

The Council of Ephesus decreed in 431 that Mary is the Theotokos because her son Jesus is both God and man: one divine person with two natures (divine and human) intimately and hypostatically united.

Similar to this is the title of Mother of God (Greek Μήτηρ του Θεού; abbreviated MP ΘΥ, Latin Mater Dei). "Mother of God" (and equivalents) is most often used in English (and other modern western languages), largely due to the lack of a satisfactory equivalent of Greek Θόκος / Latin genetrix.

The title has been in use since the 3rd century, in the Syriac tradition (as Syriac: ܝܳܠܕܰܬ ܐܰܠܳܗܳܐ translit. Yoldath Alloho) in the Liturgy of Mari and Addai (3rd century) and the Liturgy of St James (4th century).[7]

Theologically, the term "Mother of God" should not be taken to imply that Mary is the source of the existence of the divine person of Jesus, who existed with the Father from all eternity, or of her Son's divinity. Within the Orthodox and Catholic tradition, Mother of God has not been understood, nor been intended to be understood, as referring to Mary as Mother of God from eternity — that is, as Mother of God the Father — but only with reference to the birth of Jesus, that is, the Incarnation. To make it explicit, it is sometimes translated Mother of God Incarnate.

The status of Mary as Theotokos was a topic of theological dispute in the 4th and 5th centuries, and was the subject of the decree of the Council of Ephesus of 431, to the effect that, in opposition to those who denied Mary the title Theotokos ("the one who gives birth to God") but called her Christotokos ("the one who gives birth to Christ"), that Mary is Theotokos because her son Jesus is one person who is both God and man, divine and human.

Cyril of Alexandria wrote, "I am amazed that there are some who are entirely in doubt as to whether the holy Virgin should be called Theotokos or not. For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God, how is the holy Virgin who gave [Him] birth, not [Theotokos]?" (Epistle 1, to the monks of Egypt; PG 77:13B).

But the argument of Nestorius was that divine and human natures of Christ were distinct, and while Mary is evidently the Christotokos (bearer of Christ), it could be misleading to describe her as the "bearer of God". At issue is the interpretation of the Incarnation, and the nature of the hypostatic union of Christ's human and divine natures between Christ's conception and birth.

Within the Orthodox doctrinal teaching on the economy of salvation, Mary's identity, role, and status as Theotokos is acknowledged as indispensable. For this reason, it is formally defined as official dogma. The only other Mariological teaching so defined is that of her virginity. Both of these teachings have a bearing on the identity of Jesus Christ. By contrast, certain other Marian beliefs which do not bear directly on the doctrine concerning the person of Jesus (for example, her sinlessness, the circumstances surrounding her conception and birth, her Presentation in the Temple, her continuing virginity following the birth of Jesus, and her death), which are taught and believed by the Orthodox Church (being expressed in the Church's liturgy and patristic writings), are not formally defined by the Church.

Early Church

The term was certainly in use by the 3rd century. Athanasius of Alexandria in 330, Gregory the Theologian in 370, John Chrysostom in 400, and Augustine all used theotokos.

Origen (d. 254) is often cited as the earliest author to use theotokos for Mary (Socrates, Ecclesiastical History 7.32 (PG 67, 812 B) citing Origen's Commentary on Romans). Although this testimony is uncertain, the term was used c. 250 by Dionysius of Alexandria, in an epistle to Paul of Samosata.

The Greek version of the hymn Sub tuum praesidium contains the term, in the vocative, as ΘΕΟΤΟΚΕ. The oldest record of this hymn is a papyrus found in Egypt, mostly dated to after 450, [19] but according to a suggestion by de Villiers (2011) possibly older, dating to the mid-3rd century.

The use of Theotokos was formally affirmed at the Third Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431. The competing view, advocated by Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople, was that Mary should be called Christotokos, meaning "Birth-giver of Christ," to restrict her role to the mother of Christ's humanity only and not his divine nature.

Nestorius' opponents, led by Cyril of Alexandria, viewed this as dividing Jesus into two distinct persons, the human who was Son of Mary, and the divine who was not. To them, this was unacceptable since by destroying the perfect union of the divine and human natures in Christ, it sabotaged the fullness of the Incarnation and, by extension, the salvation of humanity. The council accepted Cyril's reasoning, affirmed the title Theotokos for Mary, and anathematized Nestorius' view as heresy.

In letters to Nestorius which were afterwards included among the council documents, Cyril explained his doctrine. He noted that "the holy fathers... have ventured to call the holy Virgin Theotokos, not as though the nature of the Word or his divinity received the beginning of their existence from the holy Virgin, but because from her was born his holy body, rationally endowed with a soul, with which [body] the Word was united according to the hypostasis, and is said to have been begotten according to the flesh" (Cyril's second letter to Nestorius).