

May 12, 2009 Edmonton Catholic School Board

Madame Chairperson Debbie Engel, Board of Trustees, Superintendent Joan Carr,
Assistant Superintendents, Ladies & Gentlemen;

There is a tradition that states that this icon of Our Lady was painted by St. Luke who not only is an evangelist and a physician, but also the first iconographer. In the 12th century the original icon of which this is the prototype was brought from Constantinople to Kiev at the request of St. Vladimir and his grandmother St. Olha who were equal to the apostles because they brought Christianity to Ukraine in 988 upon introducing this very icon to the people of their country. Renowned for its miracles we find the icon is held as a national treasure and is considered among the most beautiful icons of the Mother of God with its display of velvety eyes that are quite remarkable describing a deep humanity. She is not simply the mother of a child, but rather the Mother of God whom she brings into the world through a divine mystery.

This icon shows two people in order of their importance and dignity. The Child is shown in front and then the Mother of God. The Child wears a garment that radiates lines of pure gold. The Mother of God wears a deep burgundy garment which was typical of a Byzantine Empress showing her to be very distinguished. The three stars on the dress, one on the head and the other two on the shoulders, indicate the triple perpetual virginity of Mary before, during and after the birth of Christ. They symbolize the light of God that shines on the Virgin giving us a Saviour. Our Lady of Vladimir is a version of tenderness which expresses the relationship found between the Mother and Child, as their embrace and delicate touch of their cheeks show. This in fact stresses the human attitude of tenderness which exists between a mother and child. She embraces Him and the two persons are united in a profound expression of love. The icon offers a shift in the perspective to those who look at it. It is not a mother embracing and consoling her child. Rather, it is a child who supports and consoles his mother which is really the key to understanding this icon. Jesus looks upon his Mother while Mary gazes upon the faithful and through him upon all humanity. She bends over Jesus looking for consolation and meets the child who lights her up with joy. The principle that the meek shall support the strong is presented here too. The Child is actually supporting Mary. And Mary in turn is able to support the whole human race through her intercessory prayer.

The following excerpt is taken from the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom called the antiphon which is used at every celebration of the Divine Liturgy according to the Eastern rite. Immediately following the Consecration and the Commemoration of the Church Triumphant we commemorate "our all-

holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady, the Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary."

In response to this commemoration, the congregation sings the beautiful Megalynarion Hymn:

It is truly right to bless you, O God-bearing One, as the ever-blessed and immaculate Mother of our God. More honourable than the cherubim and by far more glorious than the seraphim; ever a virgin, you gave birth to God the Word, O true Mother of God, we magnify you.

We honour Mary in many ways, but we do it with the understanding that Mary's role in salvation history in no way hinders our relationship with Jesus but, on the contrary, fosters it. To God and to God alone, we direct our worship. As the Church teaches, Mary, the masterpiece of God's creation, we honour above all other saints."

Mary is not in competition with her son Jesus for our attention. She hears our prayers and, like a good Mother, she responds by praying for us, her children. She never ceases to intercede for us.

We honour Mary because God first honoured her by choosing her to be the Mother of Jesus!

We honour Mary for her YES to God's invitation to become the Mother of our Saviour.

We honour Mary for accepting the great sufferings fore-told by Simeon at the Presentation at the Temple: "and a sword will pierce through your own soul also...."

We honour Mary because her womb became the first tabernacle in which the Father enclosed His Word. What greater honour could God give to any of His creatures than to allow the fullness of His Divinity to take on human form within her?

We honour Mary for bearing, mothering, and preparing Jesus for His role as our Redeemer.

We honour Mary for being the model of discipleship for us, showing us what it means and what it costs to follow Jesus.

There are countless other reasons why we honour Mary, but perhaps the greatest and most compelling of them all is Jesus' gift to us of His own Mother. We recall the scene at the foot of the cross (John 19:26).

Jesus said to His Mother, "Woman, there is your son." Then He said to John, "There is your Mother."

The last words of a dying person are always regarded by friends and dear ones as a precious heritage.

The Church has always held these words of Jesus to mean His giving of Mary as a mother to all His faithful followers represented by John, the Beloved Disciple. He was giving us to Mary to be her sons and daughters in Him.

What does Jesus tell us? He calls for us to repent of our sins, to pray always and take up our cross daily.

These are precisely the messages which Mary is communicating to us.

In conclusion, I salute the leadership of this district for having the courage to use iconography as a means of expressing our deep connection to the Mother of God and knowing that she is the patron saint of the district makes it even more special to present to you at this time the icon called, 'Tenderness' blessed just a week ago by His Excellency Bishop David Motiuk making it a sacred object to commemorate the 120th anniversary of this district. May you all continue being stewards carrying the light of Christ and the love of God which she brings forward to us well into the next 120 years. God Bless