

An Icon for the Corona Virus Pandemic
March 24, 2020 by The Rev. Dr. Randall R. Warren

The icon below is from the arch of one of the chapels at Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos in Greece. It seems an appropriate icon for our situation today. After the icon there is an explication of it.



This icon contains all of the traditional iconographic components. We know, for example, that the woman with a halo (a.k.a. nimbus) in the red *himation* (outer cape) and blue *chiton* (tunic) is Mary. We know this because red over blue signifies her human outer nature (red) and her inner spiritual nature (blue). We also see, as is traditional, the initials MP ΘΥ, for “Mary the God-Bearer,” just above her head. Her hands are in a gesture of intercession for the patient.

The objects in the icon, such as the walls, the bed, and the table are drawn wider at the back and more narrow at the front. This is backwards from the way artists are taught to represent perspective. In most art forms, the front of objects would be wider than the back. However, iconographers use this “reverse perspective” as a way of reminding the viewer that she or he is included in the spiritual reality being portrayed.

The scene is clearly a hospital, but the walls represent more than just the boundaries of that clinic. Walls and buildings in icons say to us that the event being portrayed involves or impacts upon the human community. The message is that health care and healing happens in community. Indeed, the physical distancing we practice today may feel isolating, but it is nevertheless a work we are doing as communities to advance the public health.

The hills behind the hospital walls are important too. The presence of landscape and nature in icons remind us that the event being portrayed has to do with our created nature. One of the ways we experience our creatureliness-our created nature-is through our bodies and, unfortunately, through illnesses. Thankfully, God our creator is interested in our physical natures and not merely our spiritual selves. Mary understands this, hence her intercessions on the physically ill patient’s behalf.

The red cloth tied and draped over the hospital walls is a traditional indicator of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work. This is, in fact, the most theologically significant image in the entire icon. Here we have a patient being attended to by both medical staff and Mary the God-Bearer. All the work in the icon, both the medical science and the prayer, is energized by the Holy Spirit. Both types of work, the medical and the intercessory, are spiritual in nature. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate healer, whether that healing work is mediated by medical staff or spiritual companions.

We are a part of this icon. Our prayers for each other and for healing in particular, are bound to Mary’s prayers and the medical staff’s work on behalf of all their patients. At a profoundly mystical level it is all one work precisely because it is all work that is energized and called forth from us by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:17-22, Romans 8:26-27, Jude 1:20). Even this pandemic cannot really separate us from one another because it is the person and work of the Holy Spirit who binds us together and makes us the Church.