



Mariupol: City of Mary

Mariupol has become well-known to us since the invasion of Ukraine. **Fr John Cullen**, a priest of Elphin diocese working in London, traces the history of its name.

A Ukrainian explained to me the origin of the name of the city of Mariupol. The name 'Mariu', the first part of the city's name, refers to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. 'Pol' means 'city' as in metropolis. Mariupol attributes its name from a neighbourhood town, Bakhisar-aray in Crimea, where an icon of Mary was revered. An ancient monastery cut into sheer rock in the town there was restored by Ukrainians in 1993.

The Mariupol Greeks belonged to the communities of Pontic Greeks, who lived around the Black Sea area since before Christ. They have known persecution since then. In 1937 the then Soviet interior ministry, instigated by Stalin, began a systematic persecution of the Pontic Greeks, with many deportations and thousands of deaths.

The icon of Mary and her Child to which the people of Mariupol were devoted has a long history. Its kind is called *Hodegetria*, meaning 'she who points the way', as Mary gestures to the child she holds.

Constantinople was the place where

City of Mariupol



devotion to this icon originated. Tradition has it that it was painted by St Luke. A panel of the icon was revered in Smolensk and subsequently destroyed in the Nazi occupation in 1941. In Athos, at the Iviron monastery, an icon is also revered. It is called *Portaitissa*, which means, 'Opener of the Gates of Paradise'. Invoking the intercession of Mary is not political, but is an expression of trust in one of the oldest prayers to the Mother of Jesus.

A maternity hospital was bombed in Mariupol. This was a dire act to massacre a future generation. It has echoes of a desperate Herod in the gospel (Mt 2:16), a feast marked three days after the feast of the birth of Christ.

Mariana Vishegirskaia escaped from the bombed maternity hospital.



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She was photographed as she desperately clutched her stomach and unborn child. Two days later she gave birth to her baby daughter, with her husband Yuri beside her. Childhood is what nourishes life. Here was hope in the face of horror. Here, before the eyes of the world is God, who is like a mother. We hardly even noticed. God, the nurturer of the infinite, has taken on the heart of a war baby. Here is 'Hosanna in the lowest'.

I often visit the Church of St Martin in the Fields in Trafalgar Square, here in London. Its patron is St Martin of Tours. When Martin gave half his cloak to a beggar outside the gates of Amiens in 337, he broke with the assumption of the time that you had no responsibility for anyone outside your kinship group. He created the convic-

tion taken for granted today, the basis of charitable work, that we do care for those who are unknown to us, whose circumstances we may be able to see, but don't fully understand. Today, it is a simple step of compassion to say, 'that could be me'. St Martin discovered in a dream that the beggar was Christ.

We too easily forget that Jesus' body came to life and entered the world, 'dwelt among us' through Mary. Jesus even leaps in Mary's womb when she visits her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. It is Mary who is Christianity's first preacher! Mary heralds a Messiah who will restore her people's dignity, which has been demeaned through persecution and occupation. Here is a prophetic mother struggling to survive in a world bent on the brutal oppression of her people. She knows too well the everyday suffering of her people.

Mary's voice is so authentic for Mariupol. Her life story is too relevant to events in Ukraine to be muzzled by pious projections and fake news management. Mary knew that being overshadowed by the Most High had profound implications for the corruption, greed and violent power that characterised her world and ours. She echoes and embodies 'Hosanna in the lowest'. 

Erratum

The article, 'Stay At Home', in the July *Messenger* was attributed to Fr Alan Hilliard in error. The author was Fr John Cullen. The editor apologises to both valued and regular authors for his mistake.