

### **The Black Madonna of Montserrat**

The Black Madonna of Montserrat was (and still is) known for performing great miracles for the people who visit her. She is known as a Virgin in Majesty and the statue is of a genre of statues that were carved from a single piece of dark wood.

One explanation for why the sculpture's black is because black represents the *fertility of the earth*. There are also many others.

Her origin is steeped in mystery. The Cathedral home of this Black Madonna sits on the top of the mountain where she was discovered in a cave by shepherds who saw light and heard music that they followed until they found her.

I first came in contact with Our Lady of Montserrat about ten years ago on a pilgrimage following the footsteps of St. Ignatius Loyola's life through Spain and Rome. As many of you know, St. Ignatius, as a young Spanish soldier, was quarantined with a severe leg injury from battle and had a powerful conversion experience in isolation.

Grace visited him in his forced stillness and he had a new path before him.

He was going to be a pilgrim for God rather than a soldier. Once recovered enough, he traveled 300 miles to arrive before the Black Madonna sculpture of Montserrat because of her reputation of performing great miracles for the people who visit her.

As a ceremonial gesture of his new identity and commitment, Ignatius placed his sword before the altar of the Black Madonna and made a general confession of the sins of his past life at the monastery. The inscription in the painting is Latin for "Here, is where he laid his sword."

I found Montserrat to be a particularly powerful place where nature and divinity are indeed one. I wanted to suggest the power of this particular Madonna and Child, hence, Mary is holding a glowing world and Jesus is blessing it.

If you will bear with me, I'd like to backtrack and share a personal testimony.

Having returned from the pilgrimage, I continued to ponder in my heart the image of Ignatius Loyola's committed gesture of laying his sword upon the altar. I realized that my sword has been negative thinking - cutting me down in size. My battles were interior. I had tremendous self doubt as I stood in my studio, surrounded by half finished and unresolved canvases. My comparison of my own works to the great masters in Europe or even local male artists made me want to give it all up.

Who am I to add anything to the holy visual conversation? What little talent I had could not be enough. Every mistake confirmed my weaknesses, unworthiness, and failure.

I shared this struggle with my spiritual director and he asked me where I was placing my focus.

"Well.....me." I replied. He said, "exactly. "

***"Why not become a co creator with God on completing these works?"***

I used my theological imagination and kneeled before the Black Madonna and offered up my own sword of negative thinking. Those thoughts reduced about ninety percent and the last ten percent of negative thinking passed without hooking me into despair because I didn't believe them anymore.

With Mary's help, I could rebuke them out loud and affirm the power of the Holy Spirit instead.

Consequently, I became much more interested in the little things of my creative process and less concerned about the results. As St Mother Teresa would say,

I began doing little things with great love.

I felt like the space in the intersection of the cross, supported by the vertical axis of the Holy Spirit and the horizontal axis of the artists and humans before me giving me support. I became witness rather than creator. The burden of responsibility for completing a task beyond my abilities..... lifted from me.

The sword. Our weapon in battle.

In prayer, during these final days before Christmas, we can ask for words of knowledge that will help us see what we are carrying in our hearts. We grieve losses, at this particular time, which are too many to list.

Yet, to the Christian, our suffering is not meaningless. It can become

*fertile ground.*

Let us take 45 seconds and ask,

*“What is my sword and my battles during this strange time?”*

When we are holding onto too much, we have no space to receive. Like carrying boxes, we must hand them over in order to make room for the new gifts that God wants to give. Many saints, including St. Ignatius, revere Mary as the *perfect path* to Christ. We can give our sword and battles over to Mary who will present them to Jesus, the Great Alchemist who turns metal into gold.

God is able to use all suffering *offered up* to chisel off the excess wood and allow the sculpted being that we are meant to be, come to life and bring greater good.

Mary, of course, is no stranger to the sword. Simeon’s earth shaking prophecy rings true in our own lives as well. “A sword will pierce your heart.”

And yet, we all know, the suffering of the Passion was *an absolute necessary* bridge to the joy that no suffering can drive away. What is that joy? Closeness to God. The experience of God’s presence in our lives. *Immanuel.*

Our Blessed Mother feels each cut in every one of her children's lives. Her support carries us further than we could ever know. If you look closely at the painting, you may notice that the Mary figure is just a bit off center. This was not intentional but as I looked at it with curiosity, I wondered what lesson it has to teach me as a Christian.

Doesn't our lives feel off center much of the time? Perhaps even more so than ever this past year and current days. We have been knocked off our life's.... 'normal' path.

Maybe this is the best opportunity many of us have in our lifetime to witness our own life..... relying on God's grace;

knowing in a profound way our vulnerability, feeling like we could fall and crash at any minute.

It is disconcerting, and yet we know to *re-center* and rely on God who is perfectly balanced. We may see these times as Mary's challenge for us to stay off our *own* - center throughout our entire lives. Her life example shows us how to be the humble handmaiden who focuses her eyes on God and then becomes made alive in Christ. In fact, you may notice that she is indeed, centered with Christ.

*Gabriel said to her, "Rejoice, most highly favored daughter, the Lord is with you." Luke 1:28*

Just as the angel commanded Mary, she commands the same from us. "Rejoice! You are favored. The Lord is with you!"

"How can I rejoice?" You may ask. Many of us feel ruined by the disruptions in our lives, the threat of death being so prominent, worrying for our loved ones or getting sick ourselves, fear for the country, the world, injustice, violence, financial concerns and family needs being unmet, loneliness, even just loss of sleep. It's not always easy to accept the gift and...**command** of joy.

We are told that we have been saved but some days really don't feel like it, particularly when our weaknesses are so glaring.

Mary knows THIS from experience ..... *real joy can exist side by side with sorrows and setbacks.*

Airing my gripes puts the focus on me again. *Why not become a co creator with God?* Overcoming these burdens takes a power beyond our own human abilities. It is true that they are too big for us to handle on our own accord. The Good News is that we do not need to earn or convince God to help us out. He's already at the door knocking, waiting for an invitation to come in and get busy with our lives.

Mary assures us that God is a God of love and wants happiness for the world. He is a safe place to hand over our burdens. She is supported by countless scriptural passages in both actions and words such as;

Ephesians 2:4-5

*4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved*

As mentioned, Joy is witnessing God's active participation in our lives which is already happening and yet, we can ask for more, *especially* at this time. Prayer and gratitude lists help us gain *eyes to see* such amazing grace.

There are also thousands of other ways of relating with God. Whatever makes love grow and gives us peace is confirmation that you are on the right path. Telling others how God is working in your life *through them*, isn't a bad idea either. We are all made *alive with Christ* because of who He is regardless of our merits.

Let us notice that the angel called Mary, “daughter.”

A wise friend told me that there are only two roles in the world of the Christian. *God* and *child of God*. We are all just little girls and boys who are invited to climb onto Mary's lap, as Jesus did, and feel her loving embrace.

**Let us hand over our swords.  
The TRUE battle has already been won.  
It is time to rejoice!**

