

Our Lady of St. James – An icon at St. James Episcopal Church, Florence, Italy

Our Lady of St. James is an icon of Mary, mother of Jesus. It is a triptych (three panels) depicting scenes of Mary's life and of women saints. This icon was commissioned by St. James Episcopal Church, Florence, Italy and is to be known as "Our Lady of St. James". Like many renaissance paintings of scenes of the Bible, the Tuscan landscape is used as a backdrop.

Icons, meaning "likeness" or "image" in Greek, are devotional depictions of Christ or the saints. They are not paintings. They have been described as "windows into heaven". Worshippers look into them or gaze upon them. Icons look at the viewer, into the heart and soul of the viewer. When candles are placed before icons, it is a sign of veneration, thanksgiving or intercession. Christ and the Saints pray for us and encourage us to persevere in our journey in faith.

When the icon of Our Lady of St. James is closed during penitential seasons, except for Sundays, the Gate of Paradise is depicted using as an image one of the great gates of St. James Church. Behind the gate in gold leaf are subtle shells, the symbol of St. James.

The opened icon uses the front façade of St. James Church, Florence as a backdrop. First, look at the entrance of the Church. There one sees the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and bear the Savior of the world. Mary's response was "yes". When worshippers enter into St. James Church, they are saying "yes" to God, and "yes" to the possibility of hearing the Word of God.

The left panel is of the Nativity of Jesus in Bethlehem. Mary is holding the Babe surrounded by the traditional ox, ass and sheep. In this Nativity are added a lion, a reference to the lion and the lamb lying together in the Kingdom of God from the Book of the prophet Isaiah, and also the lion represents Jesus, the Lion of Judah. There is a dog and in the far left bottom corner is a butterfly, symbol of the resurrection. All the animals have halos, not just Mary and Jesus, highlighting the sacred quality of all God's creation.

On the lower left bottom corner of the central panel is a depiction of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Mary is travelling on a typical Tuscan winding road, and the Temple is a side view of St. James Church, Florence.

In the lower right hand corner is Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, surrounded by Mary Magdalene and the other women at the crucifixion of Jesus. Mary's life and the life of faith is not always an easy path. Mary endured suffering and the agony of her son's unjust death. She understands our sorrows.

The right panel shows Mary, protector of the Church and of the Saints. Her cape enfolds and embraces twenty Saints, examples and representatives of faithful women. From the top left side of the figure of Mary going down are: one of the Innocenti, orphans of Florence, Mary and Martha, Elizabeth, Florence Nightingale, Helen Keller, Julian of Norwich, Mary Magdalene, Harriet Tubman. At the bottom from left to right are Rosa Parks, Clair of Assisi, and Catherine of Siena. On the right side of Mary from the bottom up are Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Katherine Jefferts-Schori, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joan of Arc, Mother of the iconographer representing all mothers, Miriam, Sarah and Eve.

In the center of the central panel is a large figure of Mary. Here Mary reigns in Glory, radiant and rewarded after having lived a faithful life dedicated to God. Mary stands before the outline of the stained glass window at St. James Church of Jesus entering into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Here Mary has entered into the Heavenly Jerusalem. Mary's cape is clasped by a shell, symbol of St. James and her robe is dotted with the giglio, symbol of the city of Florence, Italy. She stands with hands of blessing in radiance in waves of water, which represent the waters of birth and creation. Mary, Theotokos – God bearer, the Divine Feminine gazes into your eyes with deep knowing and understanding, compassion and mercy, encouraging all to continue the Journey.

Iconographer: Teresa Harrison

Concept and Design: Teresa Harrison and The Rev. Canon T. Mark Dunnam

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