

## A short history of the image of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn

- Early in the fifteenth century, the new city walls of Vilnius were built. Above each of the gates the people of the town placed an image of the Blessed Virgin. About a century later, Carmelites took over one of the parish churches in the vicinity of the southeastern gate of the town. This gate is called the Gate of Dawn.

- The Carmelites took special care of the image that was placed above the gate near their church. When the army of Moscow set fire to the city of Vilnius in 1655, most of the town was destroyed in a fire that lasted 17 days. However, the image above the Gate of Dawn survived without any damage. This strongly encouraged the people's devotion toward it and attracted many pilgrims from outside.

- Early in the eighteenth century there was yet another fire in Vilnius. When the image survived once again, the Carmelite fathers built a special shrine for it in a chapel above the gate in 1706. Since that year, people have come to this chapel daily to recite the litany of Loreto before the image.

- In 1773 Pope Clement XIV granted an indulgence for the faithful at the Gate of Dawn.

- By the Pope's decree of 1927, the painting of the Madonna in the Gate of Dawn chapel was given the name of the Icon of the Mother of Mercy and was crowned with papal crowns.



## Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn portrays the Mother of Mercy

There are great shrines in the world consecrated to *Mater Misericordiae* (Mother of Mercy), among which one should mention the most famous Catholic Marian shrine in Eastern Europe with the image of "the Mother of Mercy" on the Gate of Dawn in Vilnius.



*The Gate of Dawn in Vilnius; the painting can be seen through the glass window*

## Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn



I shall never forget the impression of happiness that such a universal greeting to Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn made on me.

*St. Maximilian Kolbe*



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## Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn in the writings of **St. Maximilian**

- Blessed and dear Vilnius, lucky are all those who shall pass under this blessed gate, in which can be found an image of the one who is able to reciprocate even the slightest manifestation of love! How many souls will owe their conversion and salvation only to having gone through that Gate and having taken off their cap, maybe unwillingly...

- Vilnius. I stepped down onto the platform in the company of a soldier that I had met during the trip, and left the station quickly and started walking down the street. After a few minutes' walk we reached the area of the Gate of Dawn. It was the first time in my life that I had seen it. Yet I could not see the miraculous gate. My travel companion took off his cap, and I after him. A carriage with officers passed along: all of them took off their caps, as though ordered to do so. We passed the wall gate. I would have liked to put my hat back on, but I noticed that my guide showed no sign of covering his head.

I turned my eyes to passers-by: everyone was holding their caps in their hands. I turned around to see the miraculous picture, which aroused such respect. Yet I could not see it, because it was already shrouded in the darkness of the night and covered with a veil, but this time I noticed something unusual.

A middle-aged man was walking behind me. His face was typically Jewish: he was bareheaded and held his cap in his hand. We walked along like that for quite a while. To my expressions of wonder, my companion replied that here they all pay homage to the Most Blessed Virgin, without regard to differences of religion.



Maximilian Kolbe, Hrodna, 1923

## About the **Miraculous Image**

- The icon of the Gate of Dawn Madonna was painted probably in Vilnius in the period 1620–1630. The painting, sized 163 x 200, cm is oil on oak boards.

- The painting is an unusual portrayal of Mary since she is depicted without the infant Jesus. Her head is gently leaning to her right, her eyes are half closed, her hands are crossed in devotion. This reminds us that she is a virgin, humble servant of the Lord, merciful mother and patron of the people.

- One of the most unusual aspects of the image are the crossed hands. In similar icons where Mary is depicted without the Child Jesus, she is normally in an orans position, the attitude of prayer, with arms and hands extended upward or towards Christ. The painting also reminds one of *Tota pulchra es* (You are all beautiful), an old Catholic prayer.

- Unusual too are the relatively large robe and veil. Since early Byzantine times, the Virgin has been depicted covered by a flowing floor length robe with a veil showing her hands, face,



neck, and sometimes a small part of one ear. In the Gate of Dawn icon though, the robe is unusually large.

- The double crowns and the gilded silver dress were placed on the painting at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. A distinctive feature of the picture is a votive offering in the form of a crescent moon, placed at the bottom of the painting in 1849.

- In 1761, the monk Hilarion published a book enumerating 17 miracles attributed to the painting and the Virgin Mary. The first miracle he recorded occurred in 1671. A two-year-old child fell from the second floor onto a stone pavement and was badly injured. The parents then prayed to Our Lady and the next day the child was healthy once again.

- The painting is also credited with other miracles: subduing a city fire in 1706, punishing a Swedish Protestant soldiers who mocked the painting in 1702. One soldier even shot at the painting (the bullet hole can be seen on the right sleeve). The heavy iron gates fell and crushed 4 Swedish soldiers.

- Other stories of various miracles (even numerous miraculous healings) were kept by the Carmelite monks, but those books have not survived.

- From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, bishops of Vilnius and Popes alike acknowledged the painting's miraculous character.



- This unique icon attracts people by the wondrous concentration on Mary's countenance. Here one can see her love both directed to all people and completely concentrated on her own interior, where God dwells and gives her everything. Behold a living image of the secret of mercy.