

## **From Ocean to Ocean in Defense of Life, with the Black Madonna**

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In the summer of 2012, a small band of pro-life missionaries began a pilgrimage across Russia and Europe. From a worldly perspective their efforts might seem insignificant. However, seen through the eyes of faith, their journey had the potential of enormous significance for the building of a culture of life and the family in Russia and all of Europe.

The small band left the port city of Vladivostok on the Pacific Coast of Russia on June 14th with a replica of the famous icon of [Our Lady of Czestochowa](#). The revered image of our Blessed Mother, was venerated across eight time zones in Russia, traveling over 30,000 kilometers across Europe to Fatima, Portugal before coming to the United States.

What would motivate a small band of believers to undertake what is being called the “[From Ocean to Ocean](#) International Campaign in Defense of Life” – to go to such extreme measures for what many will perceive as a quaint religious observance? The pilgrimage, or peregrination, of the icon, is intended as a response to nearly a century of legalized abortion first imposed by the Soviet Union, then spread to other nations.

In the Old Testament, the Jews carried the Ark of the Covenant into battle. [Many Fathers of the Church](#) compare Mary to the Ark of the New Covenant. Saint Ambrose wrote “The Ark contained the Tablets of the Law; Mary contained in her womb the heir of the Testament. The Ark bore the Law; Mary bore the Gospel. The Ark made the voice of God heard; Mary gave us the very Word of God. The Ark shone forth with the purest gold; Mary shone forth both inwardly and outwardly with the splendor of her virginity. The gold which adorned the Ark came from the interior of the earth; the gold with which Mary shone forth came from the mines of Heaven.” (*Serm.* xlii. 6)

Though the practice of peregrination with icons of the Blessed Mother has fallen out of favor in much of the Catholic world, its history is worth noting. Even in the West, the faithful have over the centuries venerated the images of the Blessed Virgin Mary and called on her intercession in times of great distress.

Their stories of miracles and intercessions are not often heard in the West, as icons are particularly venerated in the East. An icon, as opposed to paintings, sculptures or other artistic depictions of persons, is considered to be almost a living presence of the person or deity who is venerated. They are seen as a window with a view of a greater truth, rather than simply a fine object of art.

The icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa has a fascinating history of its own, though there is some variation in the accounts. Tradition holds that St. Luke the Evangelist himself “wrote” the icon on a cypress table in the home of the Holy Family. St. Helena is said to have located the icon during her visit to the Holy Land and to have brought it to Constantinople in the fourth century. The

painting was eventually owned by Charlemagne, who presented it as a dowry to Prince Lev of Galicia (present-day Western Ukraine), where it was kept for almost six centuries in the royal palace at Belz. In 1382, after invading Tartars attacked the fortress at Belz, the icon was taken to the Polish town of Czechstochowa for safekeeping, and it has remained there ever since.

The Icon was damaged by Hussite raiders in 1430, who slashed and attempted to burn the icon, changing the visage of what is now referred to as the “Black Madonna.” In a sense, she is a symbol of Poland herself, scarred but persevering in faith.

The Black Madonna is credited with numerous miracles among those that she visited, and on behalf of those who prayed for her protection and intercession. The icon is credited with saving Constantinople in a critical battle with the Saracens, after its display from the walls of the city. After its transfer to Galicia, the kingdom was threatened by an invasion in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The king prayed to Our Lady to aid his small army and, as a result of this prayer, a darkness overcame the enemy troops who, in their confusion, began attacking one another.

Since the icon was brought to Poland, Our Lady has interceded a number of times for the Polish people. Just one modern example: In May 1979 many faithful held what became known as the “[Siege of Jericho](#)” at the shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa. They prayed continuous rosaries for the intention that the Communist Polish government would relax its restrictions on the visit of Pope John Paul II to his native land. On May 7, the Polish government unexpectedly relented and dropped the major obstacles that were preventing the Pope’s visit. We know now the fire that Blessed Pope John Paul lit with his bold proclamation of the Gospel “behind enemy lines,” and how large a role he played in the most remarkable peaceful revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, eventually even bringing down Communism in Poland and the Soviet Union.

These and similar historic events testify to the all-too-often forgotten power of prayer—particularly in asking for the intercession of the Blessed Mother to deliver the faithful from problems that seem too overwhelming for any practical human solution. And this is precisely the situation in which much the world finds itself.

In 1920, Russia was the first country to legalize abortion for any reason. Josef Stalin again outlawed abortion in 1936, not because he respected human life, but he saw that it was weakening the Soviet Union, decimating its population along with war, the various purges, and the starvation of millions. Shortly after his death in 1954, abortion was again legalized, and the number of babies lost again skyrocketed. Abortion remains the primary means of birth control in the newly independent states although the rate is falling. In Russia, for example, there are still 13 abortions for every 10 live births.

In 1917, Our Lady of Fatima predicted that Russia would spread her errors throughout the world. Although several volumes are filled with the depth and breadth of these errors, the greatest is undoubtedly the state endorsement of the killing of children in the womb.

But now, not only Russia but Europe as a whole, together with other developed and developing countries know they have a problem. Their populations [continue to decline at an alarming rate](#).

The total fertility rate of Russian women hit a historic low in 1999 of 1.16. By 2012, it had risen slightly to 1.61, exceeding even that of the European Union's 1.58, while Poland's and most of the other East European nation's range between an even lower range of 1.27 and 1.45.

Against this backdrop of demographic collapse, widespread abortion and an apparent inability for Russia and other dying European countries to marshal a return to openness to life, a faithful few are looking for more dramatic, and more traditional, solutions. Pope John Paul's monumental encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, which he called "[central to the whole Magisterium of my Pontificate](#)", closes with a [prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary](#) for victory over the culture of death.

So the faithful again turn to Our Lady under her title of Our Lady of Czestochowa, who is venerated both in the East and the West. In January 2012, pro-life leaders from 19 nations travelled to the Shrine of Jasna Gora in Czestochowa to plan the project. The Archbishop of Cracow celebrated a special Mass on [January 28th](#) to make a special [act of entrustment](#) to the cause of the defense of life and family to Our Lady of Czestochowa and pray for the success of the "From Ocean to Ocean International Campaign in Defense of Life."

The icon arrived in Vladivostok on June 11th and was venerated in several churches including the main Cathedral of St. Nicholas. Large crowds have accompanied the Blessed Virgin asking for her prayers, and have attended pro-life conferences which will be part of the pilgrim mission all along the way.

This also is no small feat – Russian Orthodox leaders have worked with Roman Catholics to coordinate this historic pilgrimage. We pray that our shared devotion to the Blessed Mother may be an occasion for building mutual respect, and collaboration in other such efforts for the promotion of faith, life and the family in the future.

Our Lady of Czestochowa, who has resided in both Orthodox and Catholic lands, has come to the aid and protection of both her Orthodox and Catholic children.

Please pray with us that the Blessed Virgin Mary will use this extraordinary campaign to inspire the people of the entire world, to return to faith in God and respect for life and family.

*Visit the campaign web site at [www.hli.org/oceantoocean](http://www.hli.org/oceantoocean) for more information and updates.*