

Behold Thy Mother

by [Kathleen O'Toole](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue

*Madre della Consolazione by Nikolaos Tzafouris
Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens*

In a dim-lit gallery hung with icons,
Glykophilousa—prototypes of
Mother of Tenderness abound.
The eyes of the *Madre della Consolazione*
stop me. In her direct gaze,
I behold a kindness emanating
from behind the glass. I linger
musing on the confluence of art
and devotion that brought this Mary
to life five centuries ago on Crete—
an icon artist's practice tuned
in strokes and colors learned
from Venetian masters.

It is her regard, not the odd
adult-featured infant on her lap,
that holds me rapt, for it unseals
the grief of the last weeks with my own
mother—the miraculous appearance
of a beatific gaze I had yearned for
but never seen. Once the demons
of pain, and the bindings of all
the remedies she had suffered
fell away, an unveiling: she turned
to face me with a look I imagine
first appearing when she greeted
her firstborn seven decades before.

On that day, the Mother of Tenderness
must have first appeared to me. Again,
days before she died. Now the gaze of *this*
>Madre of mixed descent—such icons much
replicated, rewritten with the brush
of Orthodox iconographers—whose
protection was sought for cities (Moscow,
Kyiv) at times of siege and famine . . .
Beseech her now to penetrate the hearts
of all those in peril, all who seek
her Mercy, all of us roaming
restless, just beyond her gaze.