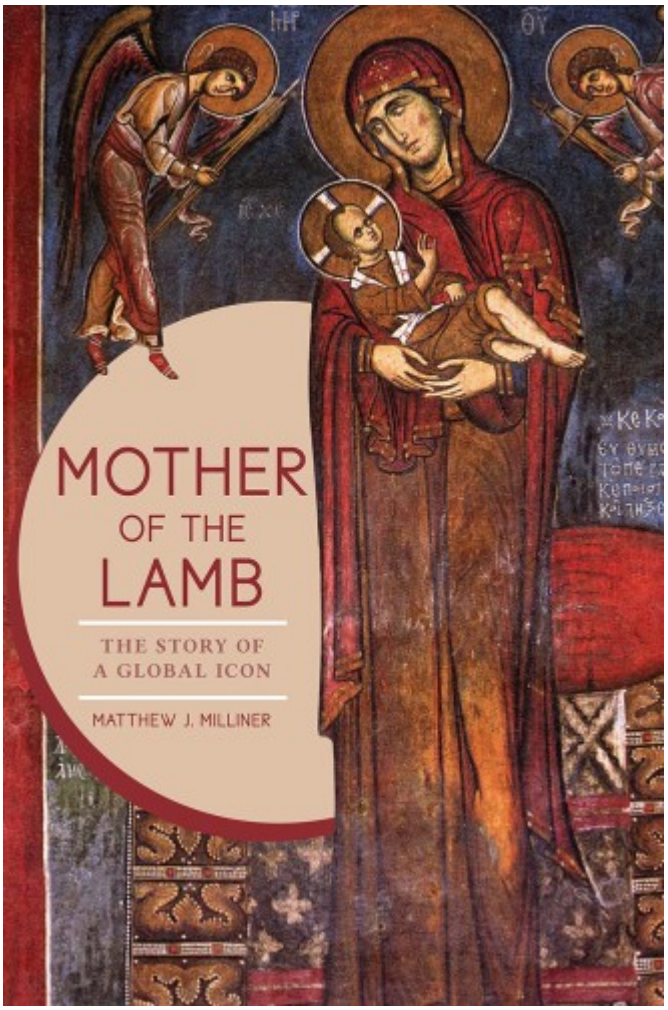
Grace without conquest

Art historian Matthew Milliner has written a groundbreaking history of a beloved icon’s role in imperial Christianity’s collapse.

by Jason Byassee in the October 2023 issue

In Review



Mother of the Lamb

The Story of a Global Icon

By Matthew J. Milliner

Fortress
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Academics might dream of writing a field-changing book once in a career. Most of us don't manage it. Art historian Matthew Milliner has done it twice—with books published less than a year apart.

In *The Everlasting People* (excerpted as "Christ and the Thunderbird" in the December 15, 2021, issue), Milliner takes up G. K. Chesterton's suggestion that Native Americans have more stories and practices that serve as *Praeparatio evangelica* than ancient Greeks or Romans ever did. Milliner's fellow evangelicals have long plunged into Greco-Roman antiquity but not Indigenous studies. *The Everlasting People* might very well change that.

His other field changer is *Mother of the Lamb*, a book about the Byzantine icon known as the Virgin of the Passion. Art historians often give limp descriptions of icons as projections of imperial power. That's true enough, often enough. But Milliner reads the theological depths of iconography better than that. This particular icon—with the infant Christ in his mother's arms and two angels presenting signs of his coming Passion—might better be read as an icon of imperial collapse.

The Virgin of the Passion was first written (not drawn) in the hills of Cyprus as the island was being conquered by Western crusading invaders, with inhabitants slaughtered on Easter morning. The image is of sorrow and then unimagined new life, not of conquest by force of arms. Mary here is the mother not only of a lion but of the Lamb. Milliner compares the icon's theological depths to those of St. Augustine's *City of God*, since both reflect on crushed dreams of imperial Christianity and offer instead a glimpse of grace without conquest.

So far so good. But Milliner goes a step further. He speaks of the icon as having a sort of agency. We would do better to call the Virgin of the Passion "her" rather than "it," Milliner writes, for through icons, God and the saints act. If the Crusaders were wrong in their genocidal efforts to capture "the true cross," she offers a truer cross—one borne by the infant in her arms, after which resurrection can only be a surprise. Milliner is not Orthodox. He was trained at Princeton Theological Seminary and teaches at Wheaton College. But he speaks in appropriately Orthodox terms of Mary acting through the icon to birth a new world: "It is almost as if she was preparing the empire for its ultimate defeat and consequent resurrection in the form

of the multinational Orthodox tradition that thrives today."

As the Crusades died out, iconographers produced images of the Virgin of the Passion at "industrial scale." You may know the icon as Our Lady of Perpetual Help (its Westernized title), as it has, indeed, peacefully taken over the world. It now shows up in advertising, in graphic comics, and in the hands of victorious athletes. If you haven't seen Meseret Defar's display of the icon after her 2012 Olympic gold medal run, please go and ponder it now.

Unusually for iconography, we can identify some of the key artists who promulgated this image. Milliner goes into depth on these artists' lives—and the theological controversies they engaged—with a level of detail that I find a little numbing. For a book on visual theology, this one's small, black-and-white photos serve somewhat poorly. But these deficiencies are more than made up for by Milliner's own narrative voice. He visits places of the icon's appearance from Ground Zero to Mount Athos, meets the custodians of these traditions, and introduces readers to their power.

If Milliner's deeply theological engagement with icons feels innovative, it may be because we have lost the ability to speak the language of Christian art. We are increasingly sensitive to the need to listen to non-Western and non-Christian art in as close to its own terms as we can, yet we often neglect to offer this same courtesy to Christian art. Our museums have more whiz-bang capacity than our forebears could have imagined (Leonardo originally positioned the Virgin's arm *here*!) but are worse than ever at explaining why artists would depict the themes they did the way they did, aside from the cynical suggestion that it was for reasons of money or power alone. If Byzantine iconography shows up in the story of art at all, it's as a caricature: the awkward and pitiful *preparatio* that the Renaissance sweeps away. If Milliner's work can help redress that injustice, then the Virgin's prayer for her Son, and so for all of us, might be answered.