

In 1920 the Soviet army prepared to attack Warsaw from the Vistula River, but withdrew when the image of Our Lady appeared over the city (the “Miracle of the Vistula”).



A reenactment of the Polish defense of Warsaw in 1920. Credit: AFP via Getty Images

The Shining Mountain

Over the centuries, manifold graces have emanated



Inside the basilica of Jasna Gora, the “Shining Mountain”

from the hilltop above Częstochowa, also known as *Jasna Gora*, or “Shining Mountain.” Poland has learned to rely more on its faith in Jesus Christ, and His Holy Mother, than on military or economic power.



Pilgrimages

The Polish people are accustomed to hardship, annealed to suffering both by their shining faith

and by the many foreign occupations they’ve sustained over the centuries. The mother of all pilgrimages in Poland is to Częstochowa. From all over Poland, three million pilgrims walk there every year to celebrate Our Lady’s feast of the Assumption on August 15. While the monks’ first chapel at Częstochowa was to Our Lady of the Assumption, the history of the Polish people itself is an “assumption,” trusting that God will lift them up after defeat. Pilgrims journey from all parts of Poland in a spirit of solidarity, penitence, and joy. Pope John Paul II brought this spirit of youthful pilgrimage to the universal Church in his spectacular “World Youth Days.”



Recommended Reading

A balanced and concise description of this venerated icon is to be found at the Jasna Gora Shrine website, www.jasnagora.pl/en.

Our Lady of Częstochowa Historical Facts and Essential Messages



Welcome to Our Lady’s Shrine here in San Francisco. In this pamphlet, prepared by our pastor, Fr. Joseph Illo, you will learn the basic facts and message of this apparition. You are encouraged to spend some time in quiet prayer and perhaps go to confession. Please keep a reverent silence in the Church, especially when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed.

Star of the Sea Church

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What: Miraculous icon of Jesus and Mary

Where: Częstochowa, Poland

When: 1382

To Whom: Prince Ladislaus of Opole

Squeezed between Russia to the east and Germany to the west, Poland has long suffered from economic exploitation, military invasion, and even political annihilation (from 1795-1918 there was no “Poland” on the map of Europe). Precisely because their cultural identity has suffered such adversity over the centuries, Polish people have developed an extraordinary resiliency. At the heart of this resilience is Poland’s Catholic faith, and at the heart of Poland’s Catholic faith is an icon of Jesus and Mary known as The Black Madonna of Częstochowa. There has never been a supernatural apparition at Częstochowa, but the icon itself imparts a beauty and power that has long strengthened and unified the Polish people.

The Legend of St. Luke

Some piously believe that St. Luke painted the image on a cedar tabletop (made by St. Joseph) in the Holy Family’s house while Our Lady was still living there. According to this tradition, the icon was venerated for many decades in the Holy Land, and then disappeared only to be discovered by St. Helen during her excavations in Palestine around the year 326. She gave it to her son, Constantine, who enshrined it in his capital of Constantinople, where it protected the city for many years. As we used to say in Rome, “all the stories are true, and some of them actually happened.” That is to say, all cultural legends communicate important truths, although not all can be considered

historically factual. According to art historians and forensic analysis, the Częstochowa icon seems to have been painted by a Byzantine artist between the 6th and 9th centuries.

The Icon’s Inner Power

While its historical origins cannot be known exactly, the icon powerfully communicates a faith in God’s abiding presence with us, so important to the Polish people. Christ’s mother appears as *Hodigitria* in the Greek tradition, a “pointer of the Way.” Mary’s right hand points to her Divine Son, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Way, the *only* way to heaven. He is the Truth, holding a book as the Incarnate Word of God. He is the Life of every soul, raising His hand in life-giving blessing. While Christ’s mother looks directly at the viewer (from wherever you are standing—try it!), her Son’s eyes look upward, to His Father in heaven, directing our eyes to heaven as well. A Star above her sea-green cloak reflects her title *Star of the Sea*. But the most striking feature of this image are the two scars marring the Mother’s right cheek. How did these scars get here? Around



the year 1370, Ladislaus, prince of Opole, had been given the icon for safe-keeping at his royal chapel in Belz (on the Polish-Ukrainian border).

In 1382, Tatar hordes attacked the castle at Belz, piercing the icon with an arrow. While transporting the icon to safety, Prince Ladislaus



Father Prior Augustyn Kordecki defending Częstochowa from Swedish invaders, by cross and sword, in the Siege of 1655.

stopped for the night at the village of Częstochowa. The next morning the horses refused to pull his cart any further, and the Prince realized that God wanted the icon to remain in the chapel at Częstochowa.

In 1430 Hussite vandals ransacked the monastery, stripping gold and precious stones from the image. They broke the icon into three pieces, slashed Our Lady’s face, and threw it into a muddy ditch. King Ladislaus Jagiello restored it as best he could, but despite repeated attempts to paint over the slash marks, they have always reappeared. Thus Our Lady bears the scars of her sufferings with noble patience, as Mother of Sorrows and Mother of the Polish people.

In 1655 the Swedish army besieged the monastery but withdrew upon seeing a lady in blue on the ramparts, encouraging the troops and herself reloading the defenders’ canons.

In 1683 Jan Sobieski prayed at Częstochowa before the Battle of Vienna, in which a free Europe hung in the balance. He successfully defended the City from the Muslim Turks, giving the credit to Christ and His Mother.