



1997.014

*Our Lady of Mercy*

Unidentified artist

Peru, Cuzco

Eighteenth century

Oil on canvas, 62 x 46 inches

Early chronicles relate that on 2 August 1218 the Virgin Mary appeared to a Catalan nobleman named Pedro Nolasco asking him to create a holy order dedicated to the liberation of Christians taken captive in North Africa. He reported the apparition to his confessor, Raymond of Peñafort, then a canon of the Cathedral of Barcelona and confessor of King Jaime I. The two of them, with the support of Jaime I, founded the Order of “Our Lady of Mercy for the Redemption of Captives” on 10 August 1218. Pedro Nolasco served as the first Master General of the order, which began with thirteen young gentlemen from distinguished Catalan and Aragonese families taking the habit. The members of this quasi-monastic, quasi-military order traded themselves for the captives of the Moors, and many died. The quintessential image of the selfless Mercedarian is the *Death of Saint Serapion* by Francisco de Zurbarán (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford).

Following the reconquest (Reconquista) of Spain from the Moors, the Mercedarian order turned its attention to a different kind of liberation, that of the souls of indigenous Americans: “the truth shall set you free.” Many Mercedarian convents and monasteries were established throughout the Spanish colonies and many images of the Virgen de la Merced, or Virgen de las Mercedes were created. She is generally shown dressed in white, as she requested that the habit of the order be white; she bears a scepter; and wears the scapular of the order, a red cross surmounting the royal escutcheon of the House of Aragon.

However, in the Thoma Collection painting, the Virgin Mary is depicted as a “dressed statue.” We can identify her by her attributes – scepter and scapular – and her attendance by St. Peter Nolasco and St. Raymond Nonnatus. St. Peter Nolasco, on the left, is always shown with a white beard. St. Raymond Nonnatus got his name from the fact that he was removed from his mother’s womb after her death, so was “not born” (*non natus*). As an active member of the Mercedarian order he voluntarily entered slavery in Algiers. He was tortured and his lips sealed shut with a padlock, as pictured here, to prevent him from preaching.

The niche in which Our Lady of Mercy appears seems to be lined with mirrors set in gilded frames, a style typical of altarpieces in Peru and Bolivia. The mirrors, like the vast amount of silver used on the altars, reflected and enhanced the candlelight. Her gown is densely brocaded with deep colors and gold, and the lace of her cuffs and around her mantle is picked out with minute care. Both the Virgin and the Christ Child, supported by her left arm, bear regal gold crowns and their heads are outlined by star-shaped golden haloes. Four little angels, one plucking at a guitar and another bowing a violin, are delightful additions to the composition.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt