

HOPEFUL from page 10

where you need to be. Are you afraid up on that scaffolding?

M.K.: No! (laughing) I was so thrilled to get my own scaffolding! I went to a mountaineering store to get a climbing harness, which is harnessed to the ceiling of the church. Here were all these young women and men, hard bodies — and me. I tried on a harness, in their fitting room right in the middle of the store. It has pink flowers on it. They were pretty sure no one else would want it!

J.S.: *Maybe it isn't right to say you have a favorite icon to write, but is there one that you return to regularly? A theme that you love in particular?*

M.K.: Yes, the Mother of God. There are so many variations.

(Mary takes me to a table in the house, where a candle burns, and the Bible lies open. Our Lady of the Sign, an icon she wrote years ago and which came to her in a dream, hangs over the table. In this traditional depiction, Mary is shown with open hands, the Christ Child in her womb, shown not as a baby, but as the fully-formed young Christ.)

I had a dream which showed me this image, and that was it. Later, when I began my training as an iconographer, I was startled to discover this very image in Byzantine iconography.

J.S.: *Are you really free within the art of iconography to take on new subjects, such as your icon of St. Kateri Tekawitha, when she was canonized?*

M.K.: It is very free! I knew a Jesuit priest who worked with Native people in La Conner, and he wanted me to do an icon for them. I did not want to dishonor their tradition, I did not want to appropriate images. I was concerned about it. But I had a dream: I was inside a house, brightly lit. A beautiful Native woman came to the door, all in ochre and browns. With a tear on her cheek, and a child in her arms, she wanted to know if I

had any canned goods. I took all the canned goods in the house and gave them to her.

When I told this dream to the priest, he told me that the significance of all those canned goods was survival, that canned goods were what had kept people alive in difficult times. He got me going. He said "Come up to Mass in La Conner and meet the elders and see if they want you to do something." He asked me speak to the elders, which I had not planned on! I showed them a mockup of a figure of the Mother of God of Lasting Things, which was an idea that emerged from my dream. The "lasting things" are those things which sustain us and which will last: canned goods, the lasting spirituality of Native people, the Native people themselves and the world itself. I had depicted the Mother of God of Lasting Things in dress of cedar bark and a cloak of dog hair, surrounded by leaping salmon and curling waves of water. She is framed in an almond shape, representing the connection between heaven and earth.

I told the elders my dream, and I also told them I have a hide as thick as a rhinoceros, to quote Flannery O'Connor, so they did not have to like my idea. So the grandmothers circled around me, and blessed my hands. I wrote that icon for them, and later an icon of the newly-canonized St. Kateri Tekawitha, whom I depicted in the tunic and leggings of her Algonquin people, surrounded by elements of earth, plants and water. The National Native American Council and the Seattle Archdiocese and Idaho Diocese all funded part of it, and so did the Nez Perce Tribe. And both of those icons are now in the church at the St. Paul Mission in La Conner, Wash., on the Swinomish Reservation.

J.S.: *I'd love to hear about the effects icons have on people when they first encounter them.*

M.K.: Years ago, I had an exhibition of some of my icons at a gallery in the Pearl District. I was sitting in the window painting to demonstrate the art. I watched the people coming in. One man stepped

inside the door and turned around immediately and went out. But the street kids came in, with all their piercings and black clothes and hair and everything. Some people were just anti-anything religious, but not the street kids. They wanted to know all about it. They asked me questions. The icon is supposed to stop you dead in your tracks.

J.S.: *What is it about the icon that stops people like that?*

M.K.: Every aspect of the icon is designed to let us know about the truth, that God is coming to us. The geometry, the inverse perspective, shows that God is not going away, but coming towards us, pushing towards us. That is the inverse perspective. In Western art, we are in charge. We paint in a perspective that goes to a point on the horizon. In an icon, we are not in charge, but instead it is God who rushes out at us. God looks at us as his image and likeness and calls us into being. We are God's icons. God writes us.

Before I leave Mary's studio, she hands me a card of her icon of St. Kateri Tekawitha, standing tall in her dark red cloak, the color of martyrdom, and her Algonquin leggings, a rosary in one hand and a cross in the other. At her feet are green trees and a swirl of water. In the manner of a traditional icon, her right hand points in an ancient gesture to the cross.

You can see some of Mary Katsilometes' icons at Resurrection Church in Tualatin, and read about the process of writing icons at the parish web site: www.resurrection-catholic-parish.org/icons. Her icons are installed at the Trappist Abbey in Lafayette, the University of Portland, the Queen of Angels Monastery and in many other churches and chapels. Every summer she teaches at the Iconographic Arts Institute, in Mount Angel, Oregon.

More in-depth reading about icons, their meaning and history is available on Mary Katsilometes' website: www.anastasisicons.com/iconographer.htm

Daddy

by Kareem Ali

My father calls on Sunday
his voice saturated with venom
He now collects teeth in jars
They are his stamps.
He says he has a set from Thomas Jefferson.

On Mondays
he collects past hurts
they are his stamps.
In his collection
is an original baseball bat
that I never stole,
Nuremberg is certainly waiting.

He says that I did steal it
and sprays out the guilt
like a big hose fireman.

But I say
what about the times
that we always never
went fishing
or the campfires never made
the skateboards never promised
the bike never rode.

When he calls now
I converse in sign language
and pray for release.

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