

The Good Thief and the Gentle Forger

By **BOB DRISCOLL**

DANNEMORA PRISON in New York state was like all prisons to convicted forger Carmelo Soraci in 1940—a bleak limbo void of hope or identity.

But he was glad he was being transferred there from Sing Sing. Some priest had heard Soraci was an "artist"—not with pen and check but with brush and paints—and wanted him to help build a chapel. In prison parlance, it was a "good deal," a chance to dodge backbreaking work. Nothing more, prison-wise Soraci figured.

Father Ambrose Hyland was like all prison chaplains—eager, hopeful, trying to make life a little more meaningful for caged men. Soraci listened to him respectfully but not without cynicism.

"I want to give Dannemora a chapel, Carmelo. One dedicated to St. Dismas, 'The Good Thief' who died on the cross next to Jesus. I want you to do the murals. Of course, we don't have any money . . ."

The cynicism was visible now in a bitter smile on Carmelo's face. Why had he even hoped he'd get a chance to play artist? Since he was a kid, he'd been driven by a love of art and always frustrated. The depression had cheated him of a chance to study, and his own weaknesses and needs had put him behind bars at 18. Now art again had been held out to him, then snatched away.

Father Hyland saw the disappointment. "Carmelo, this St. Dismas lived a life of crime; he was without hope; yet Jesus

Carmelo Soraci's windows in Sing Sing chapels include gem-like rose window (top right), and (in clockwise order) the Crucifixion with scene at Christ's tomb, the Holy Eucharist, and Christ in the Garden and His betrayal.

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