

Seeds of Possibility

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By Matthew Martin Nickoloff

Icons have long been considered windows into heaven. But for the Rev. Regan O’Callaghan, iconographer and artist-in-residence for three months in the *Diocese* of Long Island, they can also train our vision to see more deeply the glories of the earth. He describes it as teaching the art of “seeing the world and praying for the world with eyes open, opening us up to new and wondrous things.”



Though a British citizen, O’Callaghan has deep family roots in the Maori people of New Zealand. From these roots he nourishes his artistic practice as part of his priestly vocation. His great-great uncle was a master carver, and in a culture that revered ties to land and family, the artist carried spiritual responsibilities akin to a shaman.

“The shaman went on the vision quest for the well-being of the tribe or village, and the art they create from these visions — the cosmic serpent, for example — almost always shows the interconnectedness of all things,” he said. “The aborigines speak of themselves as the rock people, the sand people, the star people, which kind of blows your mind, because it doesn’t place humans at the pinnacle of things, but in the midst of things.”

It is in the midst of things that O’Callaghan feels most called to awaken his students and parishioners to a deeper encounter with God through the practice of art. “In our age of so much information, people feel themselves more isolated than ever,” he said. But from the Maori, he learned that “art is a binder, just as food or hospitality can be. Even before icon writing I believed in the communal, social power of art.”

The extent of O’Callaghan’s gathering is on display at **George Mercer, Jr. Memorial School of Theology** in Garden City, New York, in an exhibit of his students’ work created during his residency. Jacqueline Rodriguez, an artist who participated in a six-week course with O’Callaghan, helped cater the opening and was moved by the sense of community that emerged from the difficult discipline of creating together.

“Writing icons wasn’t easy, and it wasn’t always enjoyable,” Rodriguez said. “There were so many times of frustration. Regan likes to say its like entering into a cave, and while you can’t see what’s going to come, you see a shadow, and then there’s more light and you see it’s a shadow of a man. It’s very multidimensional and reveals things in layers.”

For students like Rodriguez, the process of writing icons was a microcosm of the challenges — and discoveries — of the spiritual life.

While a traditional artistic process typically begins with light colors and then defines the light using shading and shadows, iconography can be particularly challenging because it plunges beginners into darkness. “It blurs the lines; you can’t really see and aren’t sure of what’s going to be created,” Rodriguez said. The formlessness, it’s like a mirror to the Genesis story, of God working and forming and creating in the darkness.”

Even as layers were added, students experienced themselves constantly covering and blending and remaking the image they sought. For Rodriguez, the process became “reflective of life: unsure where you’re going to go, but having to continue to create and to build and to pursue the connection, such that the icon becomes the instrument that connects you to the divine, to sacred time and sacred space.”

While the inward journey can be daunting for many, O’Callaghan considers it necessary for spiritual awakening. “[Shamanic spirituality] teaches that everything is combustible, but some things require a bit more energy before they catch fire, take flame,” he said. “So for me, that means I think everything is redeemable, just some things take more energy and prayer before they are combusted into light.”

For O’Callaghan, art is a practice of prayer, which in turn permeates his class sessions and personal practice. In particular, he often asks the Holy Spirit for assistance in putting aside self-doubts, creating space for inspiration that can be carried out into all aspects of life.

“As a priest, I’m called to express my practice in a liturgical, ritualistic way, but for me, priesthood is actually about recognizing who we are in God, about being fully human, which is what Jesus was. If we believe in a creative God who created the universe, this planet we live on in all its beauty and diversity, then surely we ourselves must be creative. Not that we’re all artists, but we all have that divine creative spark within. I want to encourage people to connect and tap into that.”

In addition to binding practitioners to God and one another, O’Callaghan hopes to open his students’ eyes to art’s relationship with place. “With icon writing or painting, you’re working with mostly organic materials, pigments and egg, and you can find these materials almost anywhere you go. You can grind your own charcoal, make your own pigments for free. So in addition to being sustainable, this speaks to me of reclaiming a lost sense of connection to your surroundings.”

Much of O’Callaghan’s work outside of iconography deals in media and themes of locality and sustainability, such as a mixed-media celebration of endangered New Zealand quail for the collection *Ghost of Gone Birds*.

O’Callaghan combines these themes with his priestly vocation, pointing not only to life under threat but also the resurrection of life. While in residence in the Peruvian Amazon, he created a biodegradable work called *Aguaje: Fire in the Belly* that contained the eponymous palm seeds, sacred to Amazonian cultures, within it. When the art decays, the beginning of new life will be left behind, poised to bear fruit in the seasons ahead. Life mimicked this art: O’Callaghan baptized a local child in the Amazon River, contributing to the presence of the church even after his own departure.

For O’Callaghan, icon writing and the spiritual practice of art are part of the energy and prayer needed to leave behind the old and plant seeds of possibility. “When you are creative you are allowing yourself to be vulnerable, and that darkness can be scary, because you are revealing what you think is your lack of ability,” he said. “Icon writing is asking you to rest with the lack, the darkness, let your eyes rest sufficiently, until you can move forward. Or, discover something is coming towards you.”

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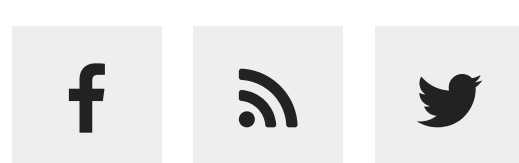
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