

# GOD & I: Regan O'Callaghan

*An Anglican artist/priest shares with our editor his  
Christian faith and his admiration for Saint Anthony*

*By Mario Conte, OFM Conv.*

**F**R REGAN, you were born in New Zealand, and your mother belongs to the Arawa tribe. What are the salient features of the spirituality of the Arawa?

Racially, I am half Irish and half Maori. My Maori name is 'Rehe' and my mother's name is 'Rangikawatia', while my surname is O'Callaghan.

Arawa spirituality is very much connected to the land and has a strong affinity with the relationship between the earth and the sky, and with nature in general. This connection with the earth is something we need to recover in our western society.

Arawa spirituality has a strong visionary component and contains elements of mystery and wonder, with many interesting crossovers into our Christian faith.

**Can you tell us something about your religious upbringing at home?**

I went to the local Catholic church of St Patrick's with my grandmother; I was, in fact, baptised and had my first communion in the Roman Catholic Church, but when I came to England in my early 20s I was exploring a lot, and started going to a Methodist Church. This penchant for exploring things might be part of my Irish-Maori heritage. Legend has it that the Maori people discovered New Zealand in 12 giant canoes, called 'wakas', so they were a pilgrim people. And the Irish, of course, also had their exodus around the world, so I suspect it's in my blood.

In England I started going to a Methodist Church which was very welcoming and friendly, but I ended up working in an Anglican Church while I was studying for my first degree in religious studies and art, and when I finished that I did a Masters in Christian ethics.

So it wasn't any real conversion from Catholicism to Anglicanism at all, it was just a journey.

**When did you decide to become a priest in the Anglican Church?**

It was after I did my Masters that a priest in the Anglican Church suggested I explore ordination, and I accepted.

It was proposed to me. I couldn't say hand on heart that I felt it was right; I sensed that I needed to test the calling, and I said to myself, "If it is meant to be it will happen, if it isn't it won't".

I had to be re-confirmed into the Church of England by the Bishop of Kensington, and on the day of my ordination I still couldn't say 100 percent that I knew I was doing the right thing. In hindsight I can say it was definitely right.

**Where did you get your initial interest in the Byzantine icon tradition?**

I had an art background before I was ordained, and when I became a priest I was very keen to continue my art

practice, not only personally, but also through and because of my religious ministry. So in my first year of curacy I went on an icon-writing retreat at Alton Abbey in Hampshire. I was there for a week, being taught by a lovely man called Dom Anselm Shrobbrook, a truly fantastic iconographer, and I fell in love with the tradition and the process.

In icon writing you are always learning, so after that week I came back to London and was very keen to continue because I felt that icon writing was an amalgamation between



my faith and my creativity, between my religion and my art.

In my search for a mentor I found a couple of people in London, but they were charging huge amounts of money. Finally, the father-in-law of a friend who is a member of the British Association of Iconographers, and who himself is an Anglican priest, put me in contact with Sr Bernadette Crook, a Catholic nun who is an iconographer. Sr Bernadette literally lives 15 minutes from where I live, so all I had to do was get on the bus outside my home and get off the bus near Sr Bernadette's.

I studied in her studio and learned the technique for about six years; I also worked with her and with other members of the British Association of Iconographers in painting an iconostasis for peace in a new Melkite Church in Ibillin, Israel. I loved doing this. Sr Bernadette was a great teacher, tutor and mentor. I respect her spirituality and her creativity.

After a few years, because I saw the depth, the beauty and the spirituality of icon writing, which is not art in the contemporary sense, but a form of prayer, I started to teach icon writing myself within my own parish, and people are very interested in it.

**Why do icon artists prefer to be called iconographers and to say that they write icons instead of painting them?**

I would explain it like this: just as I would write a sermon to preach verbally on a Sunday, so I write an icon to preach visually, because an icon is basically a visual sermon. However, icon writing is a creative process with rules you have to respect, especially if you are working within the Orthodox Christian tradition.

Some Orthodox iconographers, however, would not consider my work as true icons for the following two reasons. First, because I am not a member of the Orthodox Church, and secondly because I add visual elements and or work with contemporary themes.

**AN ARTIST** who lives in London, England, Regan O'Callaghan is originally from New Zealand. Regan's family on his mothers side come from the *Arawa* tribe of *Aotearoa* (Land of the long white cloud, the Maori name for New Zealand). He moved to the United Kingdom in 1993 where he later studied art and religious studies including the technique of icon writing (painting) in the studio of Sr. Bernadette Crook.

In 2001 Regan was ordained into the Church of England. He combines his religious ministry with art leading many art projects and workshops as well as painting a number of important commissions including an icon for Saint Paul's Cathedral London.

Regan believes in a ministry of encouragement where art is the facilitator. Today Regan's painting has built on the technique of icon writing combining contemporary themes with traditional techniques. His Maori heritage can be seen as a strong influence in his art with the *Koru* (spiral) and *Huia* (a New Zealand bird with long feathers) appearing in much of his work.

Visit his website at: [www.reganocallaghan.com](http://www.reganocallaghan.com)



**I have heard that many iconographers pray or meditate while working on their icons. Do you do this yourself?**

Absolutely. Often I have contemplative music in the background while working. When I come into my studio I start with a prayer and I finish with a prayer. Icon writing is a process of prayer for me more than anything else, and I underline this point when I teach. When people come to my classes I say, "This is not an art class, it is a class in prayer more than anything; it is a spiritual discipline. You must be focused and able to leave your troubles and worries behind, and focus on the present and on what is good".

**What makes an icon different from any other religious painting?**

First, icons are about your relationship to the divine. Icons are windows into the divine, into heaven. They should not just be left on a wall, but you should develop a 'liturgical' relationship with them. In the Orthodox tradition you will see icons being kissed, held, touched and processed with. The beauty of icons, especially the old ones, is that often they are damaged, and this is usually

because they have been used liturgically, exposed to smoke, dropped, carried around, etc. There is an intimacy about them. You do not see people walking around with an oil painting and hugging it, but this happens with icons.

**While working on an icon, have you ever felt the presence of the person or being depicted?**

Absolutely. Last year I was working on an icon of the Archangel Michael. Now I have quite a bit of music on my laptop, and play quite



**Icon of The Sermon to the Fish; Saint Anthony preached to the fish at Rimini after the heretics refused to listen to him**





**Hospitality Icon for the reception of Diocesan House; Regan was commissioned to write the icon in 2008**

random things. As I was working on the icon a meditation with music came up on the Archangel Michael, and I felt an enormous sense of poignancy which made me feel closer to that divine being.

When I was artist-in-residence at St Paul's Cathedral in London working on the icon of St Paul, I was given a room in the north of the Cathedral which was up a winding staircase. I really developed a relationship with the icon I was writing, to the point that every time I left the room I would say goodbye to the image, and when I entered in the morning I would say hello to it. I gained a greater understanding of St Paul in the process. So in icon writing you do indeed learn about the saints you are portraying, their virtues, humility, etc.

**Which of your icons are you particularly proud of, and why?**

The technique of writing icons in the Russian and Greek Orthodox style has been a great foundation for me, but I have taken their technique a bit further, which is where I might get into trouble. This is because I believe in the sainthood of all believers, and I also believe in the divine spark that we have within ourselves, and my work celebrates these two beliefs.

In 2008 Richard Chartres, the

Bishop of London, commissioned me to write an icon on hospitality for Diocesan House in London, but I wanted to do something different, so I wrote the icon of the three mothers, which depicts three smiling women seated around a table. This is one of my favourite pieces. I know those three women and love them very much; they are from my congregation of St John on Bethnal Green Church. Each woman is a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. They represent older women who are often forgotten about because what they do for the Church goes unremembered or unrecognised.

The opened hand of Mother Pearl is held out to greet the viewer to the table, a place of fellowship and hospitality, while Mother Becky and Mother Miriam look on. The stars on the table cloth symbolize the many descendants of Abraham. The colours represent the liturgical seasons.

**How would you define God?**

You cannot define God. The older I get and the more I know about God the more I learn that God is a mystery. I went through my evangelical state where I said to myself that I wanted to know, but now I rest in the sense of mystery and wonder, and icons too are about mystery and wonder.

God is so much more than any of us know or anticipate or expect, particularly when we try to see God in each other and within creation with its beauty.

**Can all of us become artists?**

I believe in a creative God; as a consequence we human beings, created in His image and likeness, can be creative beings as well. This entails being able to look outside our own little box, to be open to challenges, and to move into domains and territories which we thought we never could.

One of the things I come up against all the time when teaching art and religious education, especially with adults, is that my students often say, "I'm rubbish at art! I can't draw! I can't paint!" I find that very sad because it is denying our own God-given creativity.

This doesn't mean we must all be painters and artists, but we are all called to be creators, though it may be in gardening or in cooking or in singing or in writing or in sports.

**You have been to Padua and have visited the Basilica. Do you have any tie with St Anthony?**

I was in Padua about 20 years ago, which is a beautiful colourful city with many artistic masterpieces.

I wrote an icon of St Anthony a couple of years ago [on the cover of this issue]. It describes the *Sermon to the Fish*. The Saint was in the town of Rimini preaching to the population, but the people there were deaf to his God-filled words, so he preached to the fish, and the fish responded to him! I love that story; one of the things it teaches us is that if trees, for instance, can clap their hands and worship God, then so much more should we human beings worship God. ♦