



ArtWay

Redemption rips through the surface of time in the cry of a tiny babe. *Bruce Cockburn*

[Home](#) [Artists](#) [Christianity and Art](#) [Books](#) [Articles](#) [Art and the Church](#) [Travel Tips](#)


Nederlands Deutsch Français Português

By Name (A-Z) →

By Country →

By Period →

**ARTWAY:
OPENING EYES,
HEARTS & MINDS**

Follow Us



New on the website:

- [William Kurelek: Across the River from the Capital](#)
- [Pranas Domšaitis: Untitled](#)
- [ArtWay Newsletter and List of Books 2021](#)
- [Ludovica Rambelli Teatro - VM - Katouchka Pool](#)
- [Clementine Hunter: Picking Cotton](#)
- [Georges Rouault: The Old King](#)
- [Eduardo Kingman: Procession](#)
- [Sufjan Stevens & Geertgen tot Sint Jans](#)
- [Luci Shaw & Worku Goshu](#)
- [The Seven Works of Mercy in Art](#)

Artists

O Callaghan, Regan - VM - Jonathan Evens

Regan O'Callaghan: 3 Mothers



The Sainthood of All Believers

by Jonathan Evens

Icons depicting contemporary saints or church members, as with *3 Mothers*, are unusual. The iconographer Aidan Hart has explained why. Icons, he writes, depict 'people who are full of the Holy Spirit' and therefore are 'radiant with the same divine glory seen by Peter, James and John when Christ was transfigured.' This presents a challenge for iconographers as on the one hand those depicted 'are unique human persons, and their icons need to include at least some of their unique attributes,' while on the other hand 'icon painters are not called to paint naturalistic portraits.'

Instead icon painters are 'concerned not only with what the physical eyes see but also with what the spirit sees - the indwelling presence of Christ.' As a result the iconographer 'cannot ignore the saint's physical likeness as revealed in their photographs, nor can they simply reproduce it. They need somehow to affirm both visible and invisible realities.'

Hart has explained that when painting a contemporary saint, he will accommodate the person's likeness while changing some facial proportions to emphasize the inner spiritual state. Such abstractions, he suggests, are a feature of the icon tradition. 'The organs of expression - lips and gestures for example - tend to be made smaller or refined,' as saints are so full of divine power that 'they need not say or do a lot for a lot to happen.' 'By contrast, the organs of reception - eyes, ears, nose - are enlarged or elongated.' 'This is to show that a saint is one who contemplates divine mysteries, hears the word of God and does it, and smells the fragrance of paradise.' 'The icon is completed with the halo - a symbol of the indwelling Holy Spirit common to all saints.'

The abstractions which Hart uses are intended to suggest a beyond the ordinary difference in the saints he depicts. By definition such abstraction cannot indicate a sense of the sainthood of all believers. To do so, in his series of icons entitled 'Sainthood of all Believers' of which *3 Mothers* is one, Regan O'Callaghan deliberately takes the opposite approach to that of Hart by painting naturalistic portraits.

O'Callaghan 'believes in representing the sainthood of all believers by painting living Christians with the same care and honour that you would reserve for painting a saint.' There are many such wonderful images of ordinary holiness among his icons which, while 'influenced by traditional orthodox religious imagery and having a similar function which is to instruct the faithful theologically, spiritually and liturgically,' have been created 'to challenge the viewer to consider the belief of the divine spark within all and the sainthood of all believers.'

In doing so he is consciously building on the tradition of iconography, having studied the technique of icon writing for 6 years, specifically focusing on the Greek and Russian traditions. The 'Sainthood of all Believers' series is therefore a contemporary response to an ancient tradition. Religious icons belong in the realm of what he calls a ministry of encouragement, whether this is experienced in their writing or the praying before them. It is this spirit that is of interest to him.

In *3 Mothers* Mother Pearl is seated centrally at the table, a place of fellowship and hospitality, holding out an opened hand to greet the viewer to the table, while Mother Becky and Mother Miriam look on. These women reflect the diverse nature of the congregation at St John's Bethnal Green, of which they are committed hard working members, and of the local East End community. Each woman is a wife, mother and grandmother, a person of faith, and symbolises the important role of women - particularly older women - in the Church of England.

O'Callaghan has depicted these three mothers as people who are full of the Holy Spirit and therefore as 'radiant with the same divine glory seen by Peter, James and John when Christ was transfigured.' The *3 Mothers* therefore represent the divine spark within all of us, with the gold leaf in the background indicating belief in the sainthood of all believers.

Regan O'Callaghan: *3 Mothers*, 35 cm x 40 cm each, painted in egg tempera, gold leaf on gesso with a dark wooden frame. This triptych was commissioned in 2007 by the Bishop of London as a meditation on the theme of hospitality. *3 Mothers* was blessed by the Bishop and installed in the reception of Diocesan House, London where they resided for a few years. After this they have been on the move and have been installed in different places, which so far have included the Jewish Museum London, St James's Piccadilly, St Stephen Walbrook, St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne and Lambeth Palace.

Regan O'Callaghan is an artist who lives in London, England. Originally from New Zealand he moved to the UK in 1993 where he later studied art and religious studies including the technique of icon writing (painting). In 2001 Regan was ordained into the Church of England. He combines his religious ministry with leading art projects and workshops as well as painting a number of important commissions including an icon for St Paul's Cathedral. He believes in a ministry of encouragement where art is the facilitator.

Jonathan Evens is Priest-in-Charge at St Stephen Walbrook and Associate Vicar for Partnership Development at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, England. A keen blogger, he posts regularly on issues of faith and culture at www.joninbetween.blogspot.co.uk. His journalism and art criticism ranges from A.W.N. Pugin to U2 and has appeared in a range of publications, including the *Church Times*. He runs a visual arts organisation called commission4mission, which encourages churches to commission contemporary art and, together with the artist Henry Shelton, has published two collections of meditations and images on Christ's Passion. Together with the musician Peter Banks, he has published a book on faith and music entitled *The Secret Chord*.

ArtWay Visual Meditation June 25, 2017