

FEATURE

'Return of Christ' wins artist wide recognition

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant Editor

Artist Paul J. Parkman of Greece heard many encouraging voices - those of his wife, his "personal saint" (St. Basil the Great), a co-worker and a regular church-goer who frequently asked how his painting was going. He knew his mission was to paint the return of Christ.

Measuring 5 feet by 6 feet, his completed canvas, "The Return of Christ: A Divine Revelation," won recognition in the "Jesus 2000" art competition sponsored last year by the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Through the contest, *NCR* intended to turn people's focus from potential Y2K disaster to a celebration of Christ. Its famed judge, Sister Wendy Beckett, a BBC and PBS TV art expert, chose "Jesus of the People," a black Jesus based on a female model, as the overall winner. That piece and 60 of the 1,678 entries - including Parkman's - are featured in a special magazine *NCR* published at the end of 1999.

Sister Beckett commented in the magazine, "For myself, I have no image. I cannot even begin to visualize the Jesus in whom and through whom I live. But the very act of trying to envisage him is deeply fruitful."

Parkman has painted numerous images of Christ, devoting himself to the effort for the past 10 years. Previously, he had painted landscapes and said he usually had one on display at Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery at any given time from the late 1970s through the 1980s. But 10 years ago when he turned 40, he pondered whether an artist has anything to say as a Christian - "Or has it already been said far more eloquently than I can?"

While praying after receiving the Eucharist one day, he said he heard an "extremely strong interior voice," perhaps a "thought injected into my mind" that told him, "I am commissioning you to paint 200 pictures of my Son."

So he started to paint pictures of Christ, and turn out posters he gave to anyone interested.

Last year a designer at the furniture store he manages in Webster told him about the *NCR* contest, and he considered



sending one of his images of Christ. He had completed six or seven. But his wife, Audrey, advised him to paint a new Jesus 2000.

He went to work, painting at odd hours when he had the chance, and completed the busy canvas and its multitude of figures in less than a month.

At the top is a blue heaven, at the bottom, a gray and brown earth. In the middle is Christ on a white horse. Christ is spilling a chalice of blood on the earth. Behind him in heaven, are 43 angels wearing gold belts and tassels, and 103 recognizable saints or saint candidates.

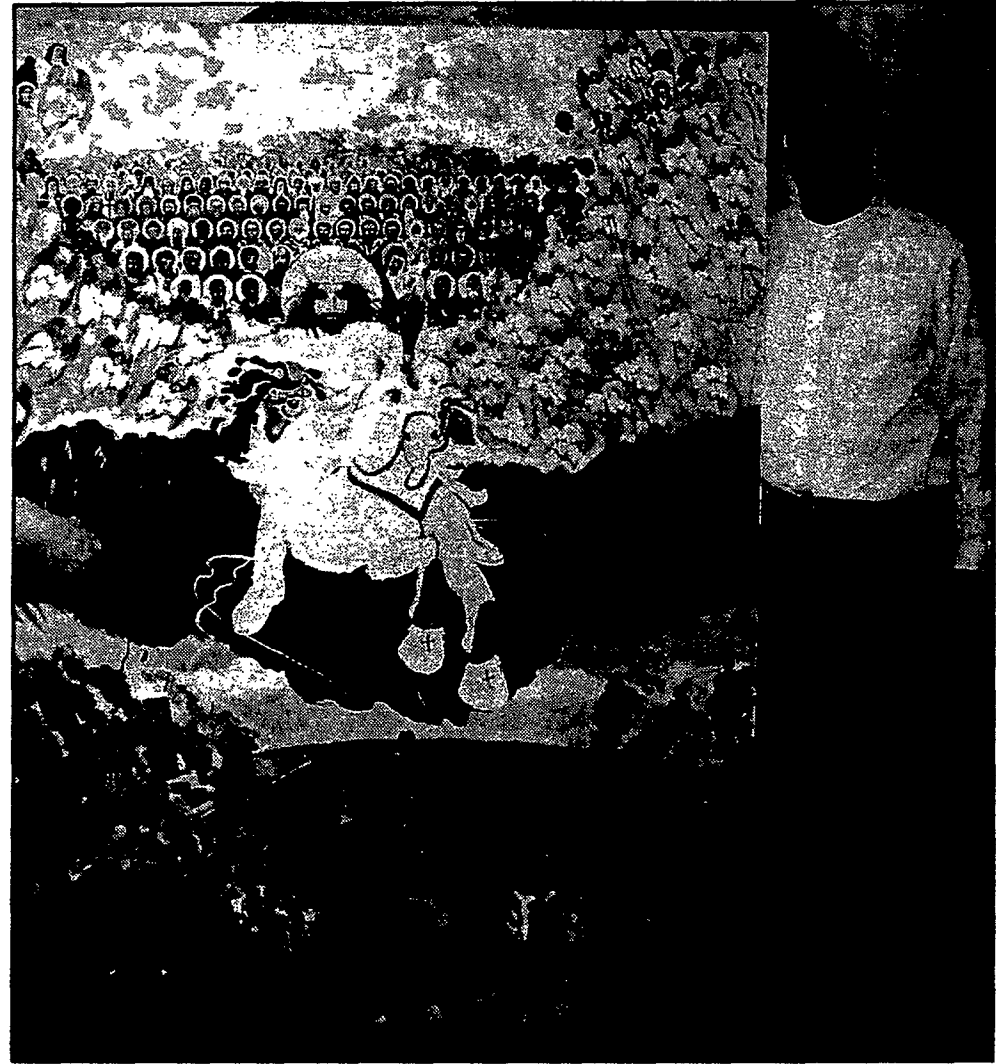
"I had such a wonderful time painting these saints; I felt I was getting to know every one of them," he said. "While I was doing it, I felt an interior voice saying this isn't a painting, it's a document, a testament to these people's lives that Christ has died, is risen and will come again."

The earthly portion of the painting shows the earth cracking. A burning Satan is about to fall into a crack. Some people flee from Christ and others welcome him. Two children in the front seem totally unaffected as they bounce a ball.

"It was a very moving experience to paint this picture," Parkman said. As for the winning *NCR* picture of Christ, he said, it is excellent artwork but "as an icon of Christ, it leaves me a little bit lacking. Maybe because I want there to be no mistake that it's a picture of Christ."

However, he added, "The goodness that Christ is being proclaimed."

Parkman has been on a spiritual journey most of his life. Raised a United Methodist, he turned from religion for some time. At the age of 23 he felt Christ speaking to him out of the Bible, particularly out of Matthew 7:26: "And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

For now, Paul Parkman keeps his painting titled "The Return of Christ: A Divine Revelation," in his home in Greece. But it goes on the road soon. Parkman's work was among 60 in the *National Catholic Reporter's* "Jesus 2000" contest chosen for publication in a special magazine and among a lesser number to be exhibited.

who built his house on sand. ..."

"At that point I knew in my soul I had heard the words throughout my childhood," Parkman said, "and never put one of them into practice. I said from now on, 'Lord, I will do everything you say in this book to do.'"

He joined a nondenominational, charismatic church for 13 years, and later was drawn to the Episcopal Church, especially the contemplative nature of its liturgy. More lately, he has been drawn to Roman Catholicism, which he believes "happens to hold all the fullness of what Christ gave the church."

He is currently seeking an annulment so that he and his wife may be remarried in the Catholic Church, and then he plans to become a Catholic. He has been attending St. Jude's Church in Gates and Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Parkman said he has gained respect for

the institutionalized church. "Specifically, the Catholic Church prevents people from getting into heresies, wrong doctrines, because of the institution. That is something I've learned to appreciate."

Noting that churches continue to split off from churches, he said, "instead of a bright light for people to run to, there are a lot of flickering candles around. The desire of my heart is that everyone will come back into the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church will join. Then they'll see Jesus, they'll see love."

Parkman's canvas and several other *NCR* winning artworks, possibly as many as 35, will be on exhibit May 1-June 30 at Pace University's Schimmel Center for the Arts, near the World Trade Center in New York City. From there, many of the works will go on to the Courtyard Gallery at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

Father Peyton's message lives on through billboards

(CNS) - Billboards throughout the Rochester area and other parts of the country say it simply: "Troubled? Try Prayer!"

They were produced by Family Theater Productions, a multimedia outreach of Holy Cross Family Ministries. The Hollywood production company was founded by Holy Cross Father Patrick Peyton of "rosary crusade" fame.

Like other not-for-profit organizations, Holy Cross Family Ministries takes whatever exposure it can get for its unpaid message. "We put (their message) up on a space-available basis," explained Stephen Hebert, vice president and general manager of Lamar Outdoor Advertising, which is putting up the free billboards in the Rochester area. "If the space gets sold, we will relocate it to a space not sold."

"It works for everybody," said Hebert, who is a parishioner at Church of the Assumption in Fairport. "It works for the group that wants to get the message out, and for us it makes the boards look good."

According to Holy Cross Father Bob Weisman, thousands of billboards across the country offer similar messages, including "God Makes House Calls," "God Listens" and "Don't Give Up, Pray. It Works."

"With billboards, you don't give a long message - just a few words," said the priest,

vice president for institutional advancement for Family Theater Productions.

"We don't put words into God's mouth. It's a simple thing, no hidden agenda," he said in a phone interview with the *Catholic Explorer*, newspaper of the Joliet Diocese. "It's a positive note, and I hope it gives motorists an opportunity to stop for a moment to think about the message."

Around Rochester, the billboards appear on Buffalo Road, Lake Avenue, the Inner Loop, Humboldt Street, Lexington Avenue by Mt. Read Boulevard, West Main Street, Hudson Street just off the Inner Loop, Emerson Street off Mt. Read Boulevard, and West Ridge Road at Carlisle Street.

A Catholic organization that has produced family-oriented radio and television dramas since 1947, Family Theater Productions supplies the pre-printed slogans free of charge to outdoor advertising companies.

Father Weisman said they are a viable alternative to blank billboards when the space is not being rented. More than 250 advertising companies have used the slogans in 134 cities in 37 states, he noted.

The idea for the slogans, he explained, came from an advertising campaign that Family Theater Productions launched shortly after its first radio drama aired on

Mutual Broadcasting in 1947. Those first billboards appeared only in the Los Angeles area to create awareness of the program.

The contemporary campaign was initiated about 20 years ago, Father Weisman continued. "Hopefully, (the billboards) will give people a chance to step back and say, 'What is this all about?' It's more of a question than an answer."

The success of Family Theater Productions stems from the vision of Father Peyton, who also began The Family Rosary movement in 1942.

Dennis Roverato, archivist for the 53-year-old multimedia ministry, said Father Peyton's motto, "The family that prays together, stays together," remains the backbone of the production company, which has made more than 600 radio and television programs.

One of nine children, Father Peyton worked as a Pennsylvania church sexton before studying for the priesthood, Roverato told the *Explorer*.

Not long after his ordination, the young priest began his trademark "rosary crusades," visiting Catholic parishes to speak about the importance of families praying the rosary together.

Convinced that radio was the best way to reach the masses, Father Peyton persuad-

ed Mutual to give him a free, half-hour time slot for a family-oriented program, said Roverato. But there was a catch: the Irish priest had to recruit a Hollywood star as headliner.

So, Father Peyton got Bing Crosby, and the rest was history, he added. "Family Theater of the Air" ran for 22 years, and featured such stars as Loretta Young, Jimmy Stewart and Don Ameche.

Family Theater Productions also has produced more than 58 films and television specials dealing with such issues as homelessness, alcoholism, drugs and runaways.

Though Father Peyton died in 1992, Roverato said, his ministry continues to thrive on public broadcasting stations and cable networks.

"(Father Peyton) was very charismatic," he said. "He had a holiness about him, an aura that you could feel. But he was a very human person. He had a wonderful sense of humor and a brilliant mind, but he was always a man of prayer. He treated everyone the same. You never saw him without that dignity."

Roverato said Catholic officials currently are examining a possible sainthood cause for Father Peyton.

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Includes reporting by Kathleen Schwar.