

FEATURE

Artist 'alone with God' as she paints her icons

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

On April 19, 1995, when the federal building in Oklahoma City was blown up, Minhang K. Huynh was in Siena, Italy, where she was studying the ancient painting techniques of egg tempera and fresco with famed artist Otello Chiti.

"That really shook me," she said of hearing news of the bombing. She added that she decided right then and there that she would respond to the act of evil with an act of good.

"I wanted to share my art with people," she said. "I wanted to help to bring peace to people's lives."

The Diocese of Rochester will soon benefit from Huynh's decision, as she is working to complete an icon of Blessed Grimoaldo Santamaria, who was beatified by Pope John Paul II in January 1995. Beatification is the final step before canonization of a person as a saint in the Catholic Church. Grimoaldo's icon is slated to be displayed at Holy Cross Church, Rochester, by January.

Grimoaldo was an Italian who died at age 19 on Nov. 18, 1902. A member of the Congregation of the Passion, he was felled by meningitis in the seminary where he was studying for the priesthood. Grimoaldo's mother and sister later emigrated to Rochester, and his mother is buried in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. His descendants still live here, and friends of his mother and sister from this area played a crucial role in pressing his sainthood cause with the Vatican.

"Like St. Therese of Lisieux, he was so devoted to doing small things perfectly that he outpaced his admiring colleagues in total commitment to God and neighbor," Father Robert F. McNamara, wrote of the saintly Italian in an Oct. 20, 1994, *Catholic Courier* article.

On behalf of a local group of Catholics, Friends of Blessed Grimoaldo, Father McNamara learned of Huynh when he was searching for someone to create an icon of the saintly Italian. A graduate of the State University of New York College at Geneseo, whose art department she credited with helping her career enormously, Huynh has already created a number of icons, which are on display at various sites throughout the country. She is also working on a series of 16 paintings for a renovated Methodist chapel in Rochester.

Many examples of her work can be seen at her Web site at <http://www.urladyofnewhelfta.com/>. The Web site is named for Mary and the "New Helfta" refers to Helfta, the monastery of St. Gertrude the Great, a 13th century Cistercian nun whom Huynh considers a role model for her own spiritual journey. Huynh considers the room where she paints and lives a monastic cell of sorts, and she said she often paints her icons while on her knees, as if she were unconsciously praying.

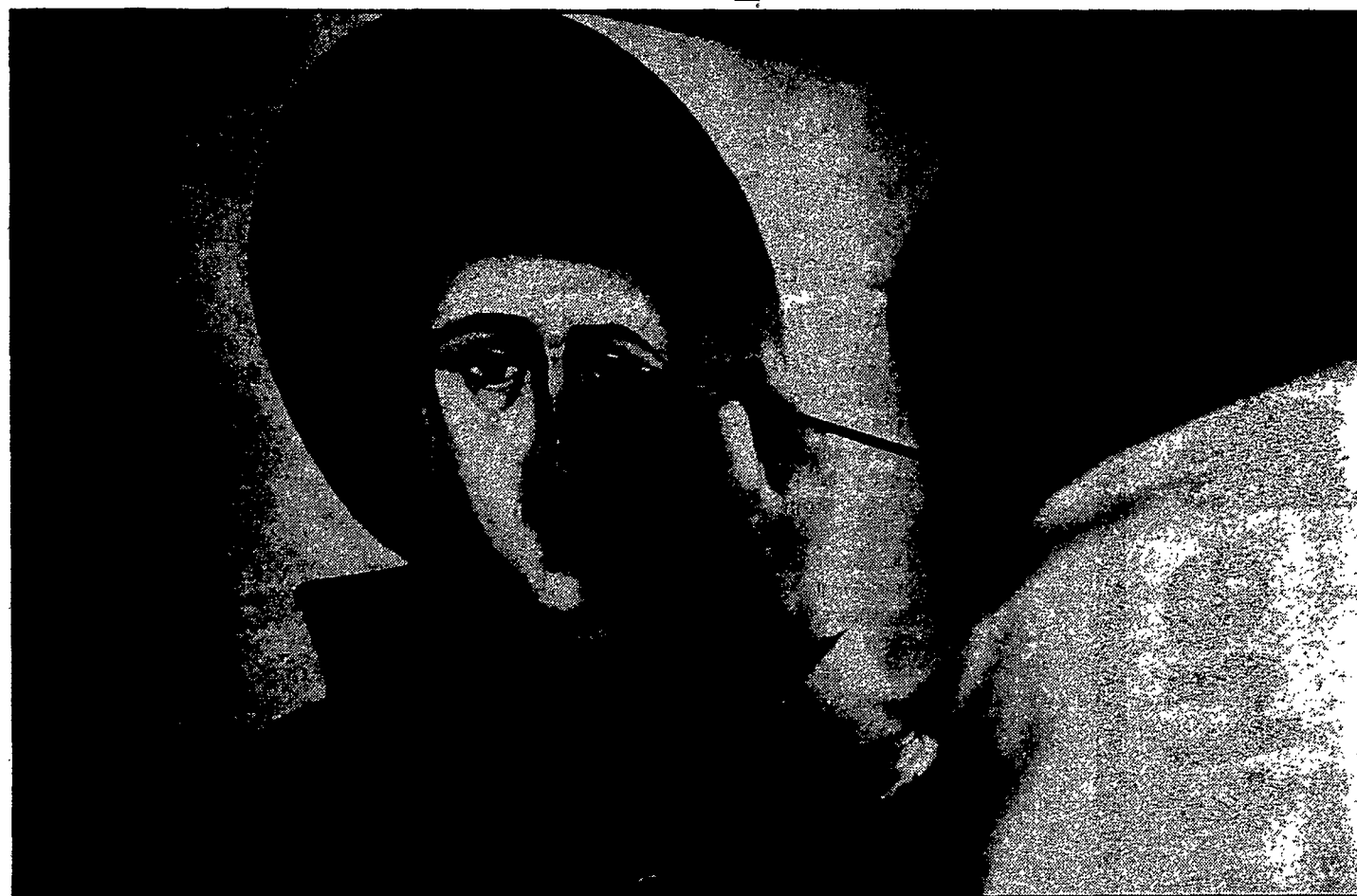
"It's not just painting," she said of her work. "It's like being alone with God."

Father McNamara spoke highly of Huynh and her work, noting he was pleased that he found such a talented artist so close to home.

"Why go across the world ... to find an iconographer when we have one right here," he said.

Huynh, 33, was born in Saigon, Vietnam, and grew up Buddhist in the rural village of Di An. She nurtured ambitions of becoming a scientist or mathematician someday, and only became interested in art as a young adult living in America. Despite her Asian background, she noted that she specializes in the European tradition of icon-painting because she is most interested in artists from beyond her homeland.

Although she came from a wealthy family, she said she and her relatives were not persecuted by the communists



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Minhang K. Huynh works on a detail of her icon of Blessed Grimoaldo Santamaria at her home in Geneseo Nov. 8.



Huynh talks about her conversion to Catholicism. She often has dreams about Mary and Christian symbols.

who took over South Vietnam in 1975.

However, desiring a better life economically, in 1977, she and several of her family members tried to leave Vietnam, but were arrested by the authorities. She spent a month in jail with her family, and, upon their release, she and her family members were looked upon with suspicion by their neighbors.

"It was really bad because everybody looked at us as traitors."

Her father was able to eventually escape to Malaysia and was allowed to come to the United States where a family in Albany sponsored him and another relative who had fled. Eventually, she and the rest of her family, including her mother, were allowed to join her father in Albany, and they left Vietnam in 1985.

In 1988, she came to Geneseo to study, and she and her younger sister, who also attended the school, eventually moved in with a local Catholic couple, Wes and Lynn Kennison. She met the Kennisons through a Vietnamese immigrant she was helping. She considers the Kennisons second parents, and she credited the couple for inspiring her interest in Catholicism by taking her to Mass regularly at the Abbey of the Genesee. A monastery of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance in nearby Piffard, the abbey is probably best known for the Monk's Bread its monks make.

"I'd say, 'Oh no, not the abbey, it's going to be a long Mass,' she said with a chuckle.

However, the long Masses apparently had an effect on her, and she gradually became interested in the Catholic faith. She became friends with the abbey's Abbot John Eudes Bamberger, who retired from his position in September of this year, and considers him her spiritual director. While still a "pagan," as she called herself, she was commissioned to paint a 200-pound crucifix for the abbey, an experience she credited with beginning her conversion.

Through her regular contact with the monastery, and her growing interest in Christian iconography, she developed a desire to become a Catholic, and entered the church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program at St. Mary's Parish, Geneseo, in spring of 1998.

Interestingly, Huynh noted that her conversion to Catholicism came about not so much because she intellectually agreed with all the church's teachings but more because she felt God was calling her to become Catholic.



Huynh plans to present her painting for display in Holy Cross Church in Rochester.

"I believe that when you're called to do something, as long as you do it for God, and you do it for love, that's enough."

Huynh said she has explored becoming a cloistered nun, and lives like a Cistercian in many ways, but at this point in her life, she's still searching for the role she believes God has designed for her. With no apparent pretense or embarrassment, she speaks of regularly dreaming of having conversations with saints and Mary, and she credited one dream she had of Mary for inspiring her to continue her work as an artist. She said Mary told her to tell the world about herself and God, and like the monks and cloistered nuns she so admires, she hopes to bring that message to the world through her work.

"Instead of making Monk's Bread, I'm painting icons," she said with a smile.