

Icon is visual language of saint's life

Stephen Kiltonic/CNS

AVON, Conn. — When he finished the icon of St. Maximilian Kolbe, Marek Czarnecki was concerned.

He hoped its likeness would please his “clients” — the Conventual Franciscans at St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Basilica Church in Chicopee, Mass. They personally knew St. Maximilian as their teacher and companion.

Czarnecki, 39, spends many of his waking hours at his studio at the Farmington Valley Arts Center in Avon. His enterprise, called “Seraphic Restorations,” consists of preserving and restoring Catholic statuary art and antique icons that use images of prayer.

The principles, or rubrics, he has learned as an iconographer are steeped in tradition. The process of “writing” an icon, a visual language that teaches about a saint's life, goes back centuries to the early years of the Orthodox Church and is as much spiritual as artistic.

“Technically, I'm not an icon painter but an icon ‘writer,’” he told *The Catholic Observer*, newspaper of the Diocese of Springfield, Mass.

According to Czarnecki, the icon cannot contradict the written Scripture. “If it wasn't written down, it can't be painted.”

He does not sign any of his icons, an attitude shared by other iconographers. “In a way, it isn't ours,” Czarnecki explained.

A Catholic from a Polish immigrant family, Czarnecki grew up praying in front of religious pictures cut out of calendars.

A graduate of the School of Visual Arts in New York City, Czarnecki was living as an artist in Brooklyn, N.Y., exhibiting his work in galleries and working at a rare bookstore when his father volunteered him to paint the Virgin of Czestochowa, or Black Madonna, for his home parish in Connecticut, St. Stanislaus of Kostka in Bristol.

Initially, he was reluctant, but took the job as an “artistic exercise.” He said he did not understand what he was doing until he saw people praying with his work, and then he decided it would become his life's work. In 1996 a fellowship allowed him to begin formal training in the specialized art form.

Czarnecki uses only natural materials as an homage to God. “We use only the best, highest quality material because the icon is the highest point of heaven and the lowest point of earth,” he said.

The process begins when Czarnecki drapes cheesecloth dipped in



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Marek Czarnecki works on an icon of St. Maximilian Kolbe in his studio at the Farmington Valley Arts Center in Avon, Conn. “The primary purpose of the icon is to be sacramental, not a work of art,” said Czarnecki, a Catholic from a Polish immigrant family whose interest in religious imagery grew from the devotions of his childhood.

rabbit-skin glue over a wood panel or vessel. Numerous layers of linen are put down. About 10 coats of alabaster gesso, made from crushed marble and chalk mixed with glue, are applied. The paint he uses is egg tempera, though he also uses natural pigments made from crushed stones and gems.

Oil varnish is painted on a wood panel and 23-karat gold leaf is applied for the background to symbolize the space the saints occupy in heaven.

“Natural materials are used as a sign of our homage to the Creator. There's no way to think we're ever going to construct anything suitable for God. It's hubris to think that. Still we try.”

Before a drawing is made, Czarnecki studies the saint's history. “I have to know them so it doesn't feel like I'm making a picture,” he said.

“We also have to idealize them. Because an icon isn't just a naturalistic portrait, it's meant to show the saint transfigured. So, all of their shortcomings are erased. They're much more beautiful but not so far idealized that you lose that individuality,” he said.

Each icon usually takes two months to complete because of the

labor-intensive work.

Czarnecki says he wears many hats as an iconographer: carpenter, chemist, craftsman, artist, gold-leaf guildler and theologian. He says a prayer after completing an icon and knows it is a success “when you can't see your own hand in the work,” he noted.

“Another aspect of the work is that it's not personal, it's transpersonal. For me, it doesn't matter whether I'm working for someone else or my own ideas,” he said.

For inspiration, he goes to the saints themselves. Czarnecki said people sometimes overmystify icons. “They're a real, pragmatic part of daily spiritual life. They get their power from the way they're woven into the liturgy of the church, from the connection to the church, and from the real example of the saints,” he said.

For the Franciscans of St. Stanislaus, Czarnecki depicted St. Maximilian with a beard in his Franciscan robe. He is standing, looking up at an apparition of Our Lady that shows her holding a red and white crown.

In most photos, St. Maximilian is wearing glasses. “I like the idea of everything being corrected in the next life. I have him holding his glasses in his hands because he doesn't need his physical sight to see Our Lady, only his spiritual vision.”

“Because an icon should be the image of a saint transfigured, there are no deep, dark colors or shadows on the icon. The figure has to look like light is coming from inside, almost like a burning ember,” Czarnecki said.

There are thousands of people who write icons for their own spirituality but only 60 professional iconographers nationwide, he said.

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