

AN ARTIST'S DIVINE INSPIRATION
MICHAEL KODAS; Courant Staff Writer

Inside the abandoned school of the St. Stanislaus parish, a young man in a paint-splattered apron sits before Christ.

Saints, angels and the Virgin Mary watch from the shadows as he delicately passes his fingers across the feet of the crucified savior. Sunlight bleeds from large windows onto his shoulders as he hunches over the cross.

He smooths the muddy skin of a plaster toe with a small paintbrush as the chorales of Henryk Gorecki's Third Symphony seep into the air like incense.

In the Bristol classroom where he once studied catechism, Marek Czarnecki has been using his faith and talent to create and preserve traditional Catholic artwork.

From the icons he has painted to the sacred statuary he has lovingly restored, Czarnecki is trying to create a lifework from an art form that was popular centuries ago.

"The ultimate goal is to lift the heart in prayer," he said. "That's why I like this kind of work so much. Icons are ladders that help you ascend to the heights."

* It was an offer three years ago from the Rev. Brian Shaw, his hometown priest, that summoned Czarnecki, 31, from his apartment in Brooklyn back to Bristol.

Shaw wanted a large silhouette of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus to ride on the church's float in the annual Mum Parade.

Czarnecki, who had recently graduated from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, took the job. But rather than paint a simple outline of Jesus and Mary, he delivered a completed painting.

Shaw was so thrilled with the painting he hung it in the church after the parade and offered the artist a more ambitious opportunity -- a commission to paint icons of the 12 apostles.

With little experience holding a brush, and none working within the strict style that defines icons, Czarnecki began researching the apostles. And painting. He realized it would take years to complete the icons if he did not devote himself completely to the task.

"I told Father Shaw that I would move back to Bristol to work on the icons full time if he could provide me with a space," Czarnecki said. "He gave me a whole school."

Czarnecki charged only \$650 for each painting, though each took about two months to complete. He says he would have charged \$5,000 for each had he made them for a different church. His rent-free studio in the school and bedroom in his parents' house helped defray the cost, he said. By the time Czarnecki had completed the first two icons for St. Stanislaus, members of the parish had offered to sponsor the remaining icons.

"It was spontaneous," Shaw said. "People in the parish got very excited about the project."

Czarnecki completed the paintings for Easter 1994. It was the parish's 75th anniversary.

"Anybody who sees his art in the church asks, 'Where did you get those?' I tell them, 'Oh, right next door,'" the priest said, laughing. "Do you want to meet the

artist?"

Closely cropped bangs and sharply chiseled features make Czarnecki look like many of the Old World saints he paints. Only the black boots, baggy green knickers and thrift-store sweater hint at his 10 years in New York.

His portable CD player first fills the room with Gregorian chants, then with the monotone rock 'n' roll of The Velvet Underground. He seems as though he'd be as comfortable walking into a Soho gallery as stepping to the altar at St. Stanislaus.

Inside the church, located next door to his improvised studio, Czarnecki's completed icons now hang above the pews.

Each apostle's story is told in his gestures, the objects he carries, the patterns on his robe. Those who were martyred hold the implements of their torture. St. Bartholomew holds the knife used to peel away his skin. St. Jude carries a piece of fabric displaying the image that was left when Jesus pressed his face to the cloth.

"The whole idea of the icon is to induce the worshipful state," Shaw said. "It elevates consciousness, gives a sense of the holy and of being around holy people which disposes a person [to worship.]"

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Statues and paintings fill the artist's studio. Czarnecki rescued these once-revered artworks from church basements, yard sales, antique shops, flea markets and convents.

In the 30 years since the Second Vatican Council encouraged the Catholic Church to become more accessible to its laity, many parishes have discarded traditional religious artworks in an effort to simplify their churches and focus worship on the altar, Czarnecki explained.

"I traveled around Europe and saw how proud they were of their [heritage]," he said. "When I came back I saw that our culture and religious heritage were being destroyed, and I realized that I could preserve some of this.

"Catholics have invented all these brilliant [works of art] and I hate to see them belittled, thrown away and disregarded as kitsch, because they're not."

Months were spent restoring the reclaimed figures with gauze and plaster, using the skills of a surgeon as well as a sculptor.

As the demand for religious art dwindles, repairing statues has emerged as a way to help make ends meet, Czarnecki said.

His devotion to the works stems as much from his belief in what they symbolize as their material beauty.

"This is what it is supposed to look like on the other side," Czarnecki said. "Like the way a statue of the Virgin Mary makes you feel. She's the most beautiful woman in the world, and she looks at you and listens to you and cares about what you have to say."

Czarnecki's parents, Bernard and Jadwiga, brought their love of Catholic art with them when they immigrated after World War II. Bernard had served in the Polish army; Jadwiga survived a concentration camp.

Images of Catholic devotion and Polish heritage are scattered throughout their home. But in their son's room, crucifixes and statues fill the walls.

The bedroom is tiny compared to his Brooklyn apartment's. And Czarnecki's earnings as an artist are a fraction of what he made working in a rare-book store in

Manhattan.

But Czarnecki says he is happy to be living with his family again and working in the community where he grew up.

“It’s a rare situation where an artist gets to work among his patrons,” he said. “Most of these people have never met an artist. I just thought, ‘When am I going to get this chance again?’ ”

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The walls of Czarnecki’s studio are now bare. He is moving into a smaller space at the parish center while Shaw and his parishioners decide what to do with the empty school.

The last of the artist’s plaster saints are covered in bubble wrap and stand outside the door waiting to be moved into storage. Only the 6-foot lamp-bearing angels his parents gave him remain to watch as he turns his attention to the papier-mache Pieta he is restoring.

He replaces the halo above Mary’s head and begins delicately mending the paint in her wounded son’s side.

“She was the first statue I ever bought,” he said as he leaned over to apply a fresh coat of blue stain to the Virgin’s robe.

“I’ve sold her,” Czarnecki said soberly. “They aren’t paying nearly what she’s worth, but I need the money. I don’t have people knocking down my door for icons.”

When Czarnecki began repairing the statue, he discovered that its wooden skeleton was wrapped in Italian-American newspapers from the 1920s. It was built to be light enough to carry during religious processions.

“It’s ironic,” Czarnecki said. “It’s going to look better in the window of the antique shop than it ever did in my studio.”

Like a stack of snapshots, his latest works sit on a table in his studio: nearly 30 postcard-size collages made of black and white images cut out of old books.

A collage of St. Demetrius combines pictures from books on electricity, bandages and water safety. The saint’s halo is a picture of a plate cut from a book about dishes.

Another collage shows Jesus carrying his cross amidst a city destroyed by bombings in World War II. In a third collage, the Virgin floats above Pittsburgh as factory workers kneel before her.

“The black and white makes them look more like journalistic photos,” Czarnecki said.

“It’s like that song, ‘Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?’ and I say ‘Yes! And I had a camera.’ That’s the beauty of the collage. It expresses impossibility.”

Ten of his collages were displayed over the summer at the Trondhjems Kunstforening, a gallery in Norway.

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In Connecticut, one of Czarnecki’s paintings has become known to Catholics across the state.

Our Lady of Connecticut is an icon that combines a traditional painting of the Virgin Mary with the state seal. Since it was dedicated last New Year’s Day at St. Martha’s Church in Enfield, the painting has visited parishes around the state, said the Rev. Stanley Smolensky, who commissioned the work.

Thousand of prints and holy cards have been made of it, he said.

“She's going to be one busy painting,” Czarnecki said. “That's everything I've always wanted. To have one of my works mass- produced.”

In July, Smolensky took a small painting of the icon to the Vatican.

About the same time the pope was getting the icon, Czarnecki was worrying that he might have to put his art career on hold. His applications for grants and artist-in-residency programs had been rejected and he was searching for his next commission.

Then, in July, the Connecticut Commission on the Arts contacted him.

“I had forgotten that I applied for the fellowship,” he said.

The \$5,000 grant is allowing the self-taught iconographer to pursue formal training in the traditions of the art by seeking out the masters of the craft.

At a workshop with Russian iconographer Vladislav Andrejev on Enders Island in Long Island Sound, Czarnecki has begun to learn the arcane techniques.

“Every part of the process is allegorical,” he said.

“Before, I learned icon painting from the outside in. Now I can learn it from the inside out.”