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-- Valerie Tobias

Sr. Nancy Lee Smith paints at her studio.

It's time for beautiful 'feminine blooms'

The wisdom of the Syriac Fathers inspires feminine images of God

By ANTONIA RYAN

“All we have of God is metaphor. We don’t have anything else,” said Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Nancy Lee Smith.

An iconographer, the 66-year-old Sr. Smith recently held an exhibition of paintings to expand the metaphors available in people’s minds when they think about God.

“The Mother God and Other Secrets of the Ancient Fathers” opened in September at Marygrove College in Detroit before traveling to Monroe, Mich., in October and Taylor, Mich., in November.

The “Ancient Fathers” in Sr. Smith’s exhibit are those from the Syriac tradition. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. These Christians’ writings contain a wealth of images of God -- including many feminine images -- that are not generally part of the Western Christian imagination.

“The [Aramaic] language is based in poetry ... as opposed to the philosophical Greek and the legal Latin,” said Sr. Smith, noting that the other two languages, which were the primary influence on Western Christianity, tended to impart a more “patriarchal” image of God.

According to scholar Kathleen McVay, the Aramaic language used a feminine pronoun for the Holy Spirit for the first four centuries of Christianity. For example, Sr. Smith quoted the fourth-century Syriac author Aphrahat, known as the “Persian sage,” describing the sacrament of baptism: “For by baptism we receive the spirit of Christ and at that moment when the priests invoke the Spirit, she opens the heavens and descends and hovers over the waters, and those who are baptized put her on, for the Spirit is far from all who are born of the body until they come to the birth from water, and then they receive the Holy Spirit.”

Sr. Smith said that most of the people who are aware of these images now are scholars. She wanted to bring them through art to a wider variety of people.

“What I find is I have friends that I love dearly that are shocked if you think of God being called anything but ‘he’ and ‘him.’ And I have other friends that are shocked if you use those words,” she said. “I wanted to do a visual, theological bridge for people so that they could look at these and say, ‘Hey, this is in the magisterial teaching of the church. Look at what they said.’ ”

Sr. Smith’s exhibit was made up of six large paintings of mothers holding and interacting with their infants. The women in the pictures are of many ethnicities -- Indian, Arab, African-American, Japanese -- draped in fabric so their dress would have a “timeless quality.”

Each canvas is inspired by a passage taken from the Syriac literature that contains a feminine image of God. Sr. Smith’s first painting was “The Comforting Mother,” which is taken from a passage in Syriac liturgy texts that says the Spirit helps and comforts the martyrs as a mother comforts her children. Another painting, “Nursing Mother,” comes from a passage of St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373): “Attuned to us is the Deity like a nursing woman to an infant, watching

the time for his benefits, knowing the time for weaning him, both when to rear him on milk and when to feed him with solid food, weighing and offering benefits according to the measure of his maturity.”

Most of the images in Sr. Smith’s exhibit are taken from St. Ephrem, probably the most famous of the Syriac Fathers. Ephrem was born, baptized and ordained a deacon in Nisbis, the modern Turkish town of Nusaybin, on the border with Syria. In his teaching role, Ephrem composed a great number of hymns. Over 400 of these hymns still exist. Each group of his hymn cycles has a title -- On Faith, On Paradise, On Virginity, Against Heresies, etc. (In one of his “Hymns against Heresies,” Ephrem wrote of himself as a herdsman for the Lord, building “enclosures of hymns for the lambs of your flock.”)

Scholar Robert Murray, author of *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, called St. Ephrem “The greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.”

Sr. Smith was introduced to these writings in a class she took 13 years ago at Aquinas Institute in St. Louis, “Preaching from the Syriac Fathers,” and her idea to do the series of paintings began during class.

Before she began her project, Sr. Smith went back to the sources, doing about 10 years of research before she took up a brush. Two years ago she called Fr. Kilian McDonnell, a monk, scholar and poet at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minn. She told him she needed a list of the Syriac Fathers.

“He said to me, ‘What is this for?’

“I told him I wanted to do this painting series, and there was this big silence, and he said, ‘Wow!’ ... And then he said, ‘That’s really important work. That’s an untapped resource in the West,’ ” she said.

Fr. McDonnell introduced her to the work of Sebastian Brock, the head of the Eastern Studies Department at Oxford University, whose translations of the Syriac Fathers were foundational for modern scholarship on the subject.

Sr. Smith said that at first she imagined that her paintings would be a series of the Syriac Fathers’ images of the Holy Spirit. After she did some more research, she realized that the images were more expansive. In the Syriac writings, she said, “the Father is described as having a womb, and we come from that womb, and ... words are even put on Mary’s lips referring to the Son as the one who gives birth to her through baptism -- so it really refers to all the Persons of the Trinity.”

Recently, feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson in her book *She Who Is* have also used feminine language for the persons of the Trinity.

For the past 11 years, Sr. Smith has worked in [Saint Joseph] Studio on the IHM motherhouse campus in Monroe, Mich., writing icons. (People who create icons refer to the action as writing.) The icons Sr. Smith makes in the Studio are all commissioned, and she says she always has at least a two-year waiting list. Her pieces are all over the world; recently, she worked on a St. Alphonsus icon for the Redemptorists of Dublin, Ireland, for the Marianella Center there.

She pointed out that icons are not quite the same as paintings or stained glass or other types of religious art, which are meant to be a reminder of the persons or events that are being depicted. Icons are more than a “reminder,” she said. “Icons are a window to heaven. They are a vehicle in sacred art to be the locus for the presence of the saint.”

All of the art she has done -- icons, paintings, sculpture -- opens up a different window onto the Divine, allows her to approach the same subjects with different eyes and different parts of the brain.

“Icons are extremely structured,” she said. “You can’t change anything or do anything that’s not really strictly within that code.”

Sr. Smith said icons are left-brained whereas her paintings for the “Ancient Fathers” exhibit were very right-brained. “I just kind of let my arm move, the whole arm,” she said. “You get into it. It’s a physical operation, step back and dance forward and go back and forth. ... It’s not linear the way the icons are: one step and then the next step and then the next

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layer.”

Sr. Smith would still like to keep adding paintings to her project, exploring even more of the quotes she has pulled from the Syriac writings. She mentioned there are other sources that help enrich the landscape with feminine as well as masculine images of God. Christian theologians have long identified Christ with Sophia (the Greek word for “wisdom”), who is said in the Book of Wisdom to have been there when God made the world. And Sr. Smith described a centuries-old Russian icon of “Christ of the Blessed Silence,” also known as “The Angel of the Countenance of God,” that depicts Christ as a “beautiful feminine angel.”

“Somebody gave a homily this morning about today’s first reading from Isaiah about ‘the steppe will bloom’ and all that, and this person lived in the desert, and they said when you finally get a huge, big, heavy rain about once every 10 years, tiny little seeds that have been below the surface just burst into bloom. Well, the day has come, the time has come for the rain to fall and these beautiful feminine blooms to come out,” Sr. Smith said.

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Related Web site

Saint Joseph Studio

www.saintjosephstudio.com

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