

## Windows to the Spirit

# A Pentecost Liturgical Art Retreat

In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. It must therefore translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable. (Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* [April 1999], 12)

### Teaching about faith through art

Teaching about faith through art can etch the love of God on our hearts and on the hearts of others. Through the years and in many cultures, art has been a moving form of expression chosen to pass faith to future generations. Times change and so does the way we communicate. To reach believers today, we must communicate in a visual language that we understand. Our art must change to reflect our day.

Every age has its unique teaching philosophies. In ages past, most people could not read, so it was important to proclaim the word through the art of storytelling. In our age, art goes beyond intellectual education to new, innovative forms that invite contemplation and have the power to move viewers to conversion of heart.

We are free to translate sacred realities into new forms of artistic expression to deepen personal devotion and to invite others to explore their spirituality. Art without narration opens our hearts to contemplate the mysteries with our whole selves, not just our intellect. Abstract art is one of many contemporary art forms that can convey the sacred in a broader spiritual sense. This universal visual language is first read by the heart through abstract elements such as color, shape, and line. Sometimes abstract art is read secondly with our intellect. Abstract elements can also be read symbolically. For example,

red feels like hot tongues of fire and is the symbolic liturgical color for Pentecost.

I use abstract elements and symbolism in my abstract spiritual paintings. For example, in *Passion to Pentecost*, I symbolized the five wounds of Christ with red drips of paint, resurrection with gold drips upward, and Pentecost with a few white brushstrokes, evoking a dove, and the color red flaming down from above.

### Deepening personal devotion through making art

I am taken by how the Holy Spirit works through our hearts and hands. While imitating our Creator, we plunge deeper into communion with God. Some write in journals to clarify their reflections. For those of us who are visual communicators, creating art moves us beyond thoughts to deeper levels of insight.

**Below and opposite:** Members of the catechumenate and intergenerational group at St. Mary Catholic Community in Helena, Mont., work together to create their community's Pentecost window banners.



### The Coming of the Spirit

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. (Acts 2:1-4)

Through the years artists have created art devotionally. For example, monks worked for years hand-lettering and illuminating manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells*. Their creative devotion made manifest the word of God. This time-honored tradition of deepening devotion through making art lives on as an intense form of prayer. The combination of creating and resting in God's presence is still a moving experience.

I have been inspired by carvers of wooden crosses. When I read about how they prayed and fasted for weeks before carving, it suddenly dawned on me that I should prepare myself before making art for God's sake. In today's busy world, I don't have weeks to pray and fast, so I modified the concept to fit my life. In my studio, I enrich my spirituality with prayer and reading about sacred art, Catholicism, and other world religions. Reading Scripture most especially deepens my reflections when creating. My spiritual art journey has brought me into a closer relationship with God, and I hope to welcome others to that experience. I share this art-and-faith process, which is rooted in tradition, while facilitating retreats.

### Following the Spirit

When I first started painting sacred themes, I designed the painting and then painted it. This process did not allow for spontaneous listening and responding to the Spirit. When my spiritual art journey became guided by the Spirit, it catapulted me to a higher level of faith.

I paint to express sacred realities for which I have not found adequate words. Making art in prayer leads me to richer spiritual reflections. Slowing down to paint opens my mind and heart, my whole being, to God's sustaining grace. My creative process is a commingling of the Spirit's actions and mine. While creating, I open my heart to God and invite the Spirit to work through my heart and hands. I believe that I must let go of control to receive gifts from God, and that is so very important in how I respond to these gifts. I view chance as faith. To incorporate these beliefs into my art, I have deeply prayerful moments when I offer up control and apply paint with the least amount of control possible. For example, I may close my eyes and fling some paint while praying. I respond to God's gifts by painting the message further.

### Inspired by the Spirit

We are God's work of art. The Spirit is within us and around us when we do all things, including making art. When we paint spiritually, we become brushes in God's hands. The feast of Pentecost reminds us that the Spirit comes upon us in many ways and at many times. The Spirit is always with us and ready to help us to seek God. We just need to open our hearts and follow.

Every retreat session I facilitate is customized to the group and their

mission. The genesis for this project was an invitation to pray and paint on the subject of Pentecost with about 50 members of the catechumenate and the intergenerational group at St. Mary Catholic Community in Helena, Mont. At first, working with a group of all ages, from preschoolers to senior citizens, seemed daunting.

My goal was to facilitate a sacred art experience for participants who were creating work of the Spirit. A safe way to go would have been for me to design the piece and have the participants be worker bees. Instead, I took a leap of faith, let go of the design, and had participants work directly from their hearts.

### Cloud of unknowing

It can be scary when you enter into a cloud of unknowing. I didn't want anyone new to religious art experiences to feel anxiety or confusion in any way. To introduce them to this fresh new form of prayer, I talked about its rich history. To prepare them for making spiritual art, we discussed sacred art history, art within the church, liturgical art in worship, Pentecost, how the Holy Spirit feels to us personally, and how we may convey those feelings through contemporary visual language. We toured the art in their church, which heightened their awareness of art in (continued on page 27)



worship. Some did not know there was art in their church. Some did not view the font and cross as artwork until we talked about it. These basic concepts are not surprising, since liturgical art is not meant to call attention to itself but to create sublime sacred space that fosters prayer.

We talked about the symbolic liturgical color for Pentecost, red, and how a symbol is something that stands for something else. Instead of using symbols, I wanted them to work directly from their hearts. I asked them what colors would express their feelings of the Holy Spirit. Working from their thoughts, a variety of colors came forth. Some said yellow and orange for warmth, others said red for fire, and others blue for peace. These colors were the genesis of their expressions.

Many people have phobias about making art. I emphasize that painting

What could be more direct than expressing our innermost beliefs through laying on paint with our hands? I chose finger paints because most people are familiar with them and their inherent expressive qualities. To add to participants' painting confidence level, I gave instruction on finger painting beforehand. I encouraged those who were hesitant to jump in. To warm up, everyone painted small individual paintings. Sometimes getting started is the hardest part.

### Creating the Pentecost window banners

To listen to the Spirit, it is important to work individually and in silence. St. John of the Cross wrote, "The Father spoke one word for all eternity and he spoke it in silence, and it is in silence that we hear it" (quoted in Thomas

want to interfere with their spiritual connection during creation.

After we consented to God's presence, prayed, and read Acts 2:1-4, I invited them to express their feelings of Pentecost in finger paint. I asked them to begin at the top of the banners with yellow and explained how over time gold and yellow have symbolized divinity. As they created, I hoped the Scripture reading took on new meaning and brought them to a higher level of understanding. They worked in silence as they listened and responded to the Spirit's presence during this time of prayer.

Through this liturgical art retreat, participants created art to deepen their personal devotion and to invite members of their faith community into the mystery. Participants of all ages went beyond words to express their innermost beliefs in finger paint. They simply opened their hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and created artistically expressive Pentecost window banners for their community.

### A new and different way

As Nina Heinzinger, a retreat participant, said, "The opportunity to create artwork for our worship space was a truly exceptional experience for my son. We created a banner for Pentecost and the whole time he was engrossed in the project. He is a reluctant Mass-goer, but he looked forward to the day that the banners would be in our worship space. It made his faith come alive in a new and different way."

Let's use this fresh new form of creative prayer to bring up to date (*aggiornamento*) sacred art, deepen personal devotion, and inspire liturgical art that ignites the spiritual imagination of believers today.

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Linda McCray, MFA, creates abstract spiritual paintings for sacred space, facilitates art-and-faith retreats, and teaches art at the University of Montana-Helena College of Technology. She is a member of the Association of Consultants for Liturgical Space. To see more of her artwork, visit [MontanaDesignsUnlimited.com](http://MontanaDesignsUnlimited.com).



The completed Pentecost window banners.

for God's sake is not about creating great art. It is about connecting spiritually. I comforted them by saying such things as "No one has to know which part you painted" and "I won't be giving you a grade on your art."

Keating, *Intimacy with God* [New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008], 55). I did all of my verbal and art material preparation before beginning the spiritual readiness process of reading and praying because I did not