



## THE ICONS OF THEOSIS CHAPEL: PART III

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*By Nancy Rebal*

Painting the Virgin was a different experience. While working on my Master of Fine Arts degree I had painted a series of Virgin and Child studies working from Renaissance pieces. I learn through painting and I was wondering how being a painter AND a mother would make my take differ from Raphael's. I couldn't help but inhabit the mother, the most primal element of my self definition. When my children were babies, I had painted a series called 'Facing my Demons,' pietas and such, where the mother could not protect her beloved. The series helped me find the courage to raise my children in the real world.

Now I came to the sad-eyed Virgin with her beautiful wise Child. The same empathic sadness swept in. As I painted next to the open window of the studio on a beautiful fall day a hawk swooped down into the ivy, and caught a little black creature. She flew up to the branch outside my window where she ate it in an instant. She sat there looking at me, then preening her feathers, then watching me again, for half of an hour. Finally she took flight. It was a wonderful sitting together.

The next week I was again painting the Virgin by the open window. I was feeling her sadness for not being able to protect her child. All hell broke loose. A pit bull came out of nowhere chasing my terrified cat down the steps and under the studio. As I screamed and pounded he ripped at the building, in a frenzy I had never witnessed before. Katie made a run for it to the tree roots across the stream, and was caught. I could do nothing as I watched her die, and then become a limp prize that he was tearing at and protecting, while eyeing me. A horrible hour passed as I waited for the police and animal control to come while I was trapped in the studio. My neighbor held her gun on the dog over the iron fence. Then it was over, and Katie was gone. The pit bull went docily with the animal control officer. There was an unnatural kind of killing in this dog, and Katie's death had kept it from getting to my neighboring children. I had protected this traumatized kitten for 13 years and now the monster she always feared came out of the blue, like she always seemed to be expecting.

Words for a life lesson again are hard. I was thrown back into terror I had not felt since childhood, had to be helped by my friend David to go

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*The artist's studio*

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outside at all, and then that evening down to what had so recently become my personal hidden sanctuary. He filled Katie's dish with food topped with a votive candle. Placing it on a rock in the stream he invited me to sit with him. My other cat Lee joined us, retracing every inch of the recent killing with his hair standing on end. Eventually he came and sat with us. Somehow in all the pain and terror, the night was impossibly beautiful. I read days later that there are no unsacred places. There are only sacred places and desecrated places. We redeemed the stream and little house.

I have been called one step higher into courage to live by. I couldn't protect Katie. It dawned on me that if I never had children at all, there would still be innocents that suffer in this world. I simply had to be brave enough to live without reservation in the world as it is. One more step.

'Taking on' these icons had been just that for me. As a liturgical artist I had said that I was acting as the hands for the vision of the group. It now became clear to me the literal truth of this: I was a conduit, and was affected profoundly as the intention passed through me. I had 'downloaded' some essence and was a changed person. The icons have now moved out of relationship with me to other people. They no longer are of my hand. May their relationships with all who contemplate them through the years be a blessing such as my experience has been.

### *Postscript ...*

The icons are complete. The dedications are written on the backs. Two layers of 23K gold leaf surround the figures with a burnished glow. For my last task, I write to Dr. AnneMarie Carr for permission to quote from her e-mails to me about these icons. I attached a photo of the finished works.

Within an hour of the sending the email, the phone rang. AnneMarie's words are the ultimate blessing on this work for me. As a modern painter writing icons, I work in an uncertain territory. I am responding as a layperson to the history of a great tradition full of deep meaning.

AnneMarie has just returned from teaching a semester on Byzantine art at Yale. She tells me she is so moved by my work that she has to call to express herself well enough. I had done what she had hoped I would: painted for content rather than form.

As an art historian and a visual artist, we each bring ourselves face to face with the painted images, in close personal relationship. We both feel acutely the audacity of staring into the face of Christness. It is not to be put



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*At night*



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into words. She had this experience recently with an icon in London. I had the experience as this Christ came to life under my brush.

Talking to Tim later I remembered that I wouldn't paint the face of Christ earlier. Working on my Master of Fine Arts degree, I painted from Italian Renaissance paintings, my way of understanding them. I painted many Madonnas, feeling the identification of mother: I had two small children. However I would never paint the face of Christ: I didn't know how to approach it. In working from a Deposition from the Cross, I painted the dead Christ from the neck down. His hand was held tenderly by the Magdalene. I could identify with her. However, I painted her head as an abstraction of disconnected parts. I didn't know what she could possibly think.

Now I had painted Christ's direct gaze. Again, I have no words. AnneMarie's emotional approval of the work tells me something real has been said. 

*Nancy Rebal is the artist of the icons of Theosis Chapel.*

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*The artist*