Columns
Spirituality



Musician and composer Sister Theophane at the organ (Courtesy of the School Sisters of St. Francis of Milwaukee)



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A facilitator at a recent province gathering referred to my congregation as a community of artists. I had never heard of us being described that way, but it is a somewhat accurate description. Here is a short list of some of our deceased artists I personally knew:

Sister Helena, visual artist of every media there is

Her studio on the upper floors of the convent was a whirlwind of colors and "collected things." There was always at least one piece in progress. She worked in clay and wood. She made hanging banners and painted. She carved wood and stone and sculpted metal. A woman small in stature would approach trees multiple times her size and create life size (or greater) works. One of my favorite works of hers is a wood carving of Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio, in which the wolf is snuggling into him.

Sister Theophane, musician and composer

The things she could make an organ do! From my spot in the choir loft, I overlooked the organist. I was fascinated to watch her hands and feet "fly around" while the sounds filled our cavernous chapel. I've sung some of her compositions and am now learning of the vastness of her work and influence in the world of music.

Sister Waneta, cook and baker

She cooked and baked many things, but Waneta was best known for her cookies. The schoolchildren were never without homemade cookies; visitors to the convent were treated to cookies or other delicious bites as well. The freezer was always full, and there was always a wide variety. Cooking and baking may not be among the first things that come to mind when thinking of "artists," but be honest — the really good cooks and bakers are artists. They fill our physical beings in ways unlike any other artists can.

Sister Mary, spiritual director

Mary worked in initial formation for years. In the late 1970s, she began 20 years of ministry at Emmaus House. I never formally worked with her. Mary was always connected to the "new people," and when coming to community meetings she made a point of seeing each of us (and everyone else). Talk about being present, always

and to everyone! She knew names and ministries and other pieces about each of our lives — not intrusively but in support and care and welcome. Being as tuned in to people as Mary was is definitely an art, and my experience of her connections was always genuine.



From left: A student with Sister Waneta; Sister Helena sculpting; spiritual director Sister Mary (Photos courtesy of the School Sisters of St. Francis of Milwaukee)

While they might or might not agree with me classifying them as artists, I believe each of those sisters — and so many more before and after them — answered the question, "Who is God for you?" They took their passions and gifts and shared them and — if I may be so bold as to say — brought new faces of God to many.

Think about the God your family, your real first teachers, taught you about. Loving or judgmental? Present or spying? Friend or foe? Someone you could talk to like your best buddy or someone to be addressed only in the most formal of ways?

Think about the God of school or worship time. What about the God of your rebel teen years or your coming-of-age time? Who was God when you first discerned your life path? Who is God right now?

Saints and psalmists talk about searching for God. I believe God is always present. As individuals, we may or may not be "present" at any given time. What I'm asking, though, is: *Who is God for you, right now?*

If we pay attention and read between the lines, Scripture gives us images of God. My experiences and images of God change, based on my experience and need at any given moment. Sometimes I need a listening ear, sometimes a kick in the butt to get me moving, sometimes reassurance, and sometimes I have no clue what I need.

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When I was requesting profession of final vows in my congregation, this mathematics and computer programming teacher somehow knew I needed God the Artist, when I wrote:

> Creating God
> I have come to watch you work
> You have paint on your jeans and clay on your face
> From your pocket sticks a chisel and threads cling to you
> You hum a simple melody
>
> Mixing new colors to begin my day
> And more colors for the night
> You are Painter
>
> Working until the clay is perfect
> Carefully molding and shaping me ... many times if necessary
> You are Potter
>
> Chipping away at my rough edges
> Smoothing my knot holes
> You are Carver

Adding new strands to my fabric
Pulling colors and textures into one ... reinforcing as necessary
You are Weaver

Conducting your symphony of birds and bugs
Water and wind
Traffic and telephones
Clocks and computers
You are Musician

I catch the glimmer in your eye
All the pieces come together as one
Your creation, Your gift, Your me
To be constantly refined with the greatest care

Creating God, continue your work.

Here I am 30 years later (did I really request final vows that long ago?) and I know I need God to take me as I am and keep "working me."