

In the Midst of the Garden

**A Homily for St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church
September 27 & 28, 2003**

Michael R. Kapetan

“Out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every trees that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The Tree of Life also in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” *Genesis: 2: 9*

I want to discuss two ideas embedded in this verse from Genesis, the idea of trees and the idea of creativity.

Trees occupied a pivotal place in the first Eden for good reason. Most of the imagery that I have created for churches and synagogues over the past twenty-three years has been fashioned from wood. Wood comes from trees, the royalty of the plant kingdom. It seems that even as we enter the third millennium, we will worship among trees. The fine irony of carving oak wood into rose petals and basswood into oak leafs is not lost on me. Fashioning wood into objects of contemplation, one can hardly avoid contemplating the nature of wood and the nature of trees and the powerful claims that they make on our imaginations.

Our relationship to trees is symbiotic at many levels. We trade the trees carbon dioxide for oxygen. We cultivate trees for their fruits and nuts, saps and medicines, lumber, and their sheer ornamental beauty. What have we not made from their wood? Tools, weapons, utensils, musical instruments, clipper ships, canoes, paper, cloth, shoes, furniture, dwellings, temples, and sculpture. As we approach the centenary of powered flight we recall that the Wright brothers built their first airplane mainly from wood. We identify with trees as living beings with their trunks, limbs, and crowns. The Sequoia are the largest forms of life standing on the dry land, and the Joshua the oldest living beings on the surface of the planet. In the past we have identified with them as spiritual entities. Holders of the knowledge of trees were the Druids. Trees continually remind us of the passage of the seasons in the budding, flowering, greening, coloring, and falling of their leafs. Trees have fed our coking stoves and fired our hearths through eons of long winter nights. We trace our family ancestries in their stems and branchings. We emulate their attributes. Durability and trust, treaty and truth are but a few of the words that we derive from *deru*, the ancient Indo-European word for tree. It is no wonder, then, that we entreat our God from among them, living exemplars of the best qualities of life.

As God created us in His image He made us creators. In Genesis, in Eden, God made the trees to grow. Such is His power to create from nothing, *ex nihilo*. In Waupaca the enterprise of making the trees, being somewhat less divine, became a little more complex, more difficult, and much more time consuming.

Human creativity while not as miraculous as God's is nonetheless mysterious and compelling. Our power lies in discovering combinations of familiar ideas and things in ways that produce qualities beyond the nature of the component parts. We take the elements of God's creation and rediscover their endless possibilities. The spectrum of Noah's great rainbow holds only seven colors, and yet there is no end to art.

The creation of these trees spanned more than eighteen months. We spent the first ten months in a long distance conversation among the clergy, laity, architect, liturgical consultant, and artist. Doing liturgical art becomes a uniquely collaborative effort. Self-expression, rightly regarded among the highest goals in much art, becomes secondary in the liturgical arts. It happens by the way, because we church artists must first pay careful heed to the liturgical imperatives of the clergy, the spiritual and social vision of the community, the aesthetics of the architecture, and the iconographic traditions of the faith. Within these challenging parameters but without abandoning my individuality, I try to make myself the eyes and hands of the community.

From the outset, we all realized that our liturgical consultant, Christine Reinhart, had asked us to contemplate a radically new idea. Many churches have images of the Tree of Life and many more have life-size carvings of Old and New Testament Saints. We began to explore the possibility of incorporating life-sized images of holy people within a life-size image of the tree—or more precisely of two trees—the Tree of Judah on the left and the Tree of Christ on the right—that would frame the threshold to the Tabernacle. My first three sketches were deservedly rejected, and I wouldn't have blamed you if you had excused me from the project. After traveling to Waupaca and speaking with the community in our only face-to-face encounter, I began to sense a solution, an image in which the people do not merely appear within the trees, but rather form the actual substance of the trees. Looking at the completed trees, one cannot readily see where the torsos end and the trunks begin. Most of the branches grow as extensions of the figures' limbs. Sharing one another's form, the people and the trees share each other's vital spiritual qualities.

With this inspiring concept in place I could devote my attention to the representations of the fourteen holy people selected by the parish. For the difficult task of creating the branches and leafs of the two trees, I turned to the capable hands of my brother George.

Although each of the chosen fourteen is familiar to us and has been rendered hundreds if not thousand of times in the history of art, the creative challenge became to reintroduce them to us with a new vividness and a sense of their significance to our time. Each of the holy persons must be recognizable not only in their physical form but also in the spiritual qualities that set them apart. Sketching them repeatedly I found myself preoccupied in a search for those special facial features, details of hand and body gestures, articles of clothing, and objects of symbolic significance that might guide us to the outer and inner identities of these people.

Standing from the roots of the Tree of Judah, Sarah and Abraham, shown as an expectant couple must be distinguishable from the Bible's other important expectant couples such as Joachim and Anna and Mary and Joseph. To this end, I dressed them in desert nomad Bedouin attire, and most importantly, I showed their facial features and hands to be aged supposedly beyond childbearing. Abraham gazes somewhat awestruck into a future fatherhood that must have bewildered the ninety-year-old man. As Sarah relaxes into his comforting embrace, she gazes contentedly inward, cradling her miraculously fruitful womb. In this form they present themselves as God's prophetic agents founding a new family of faith.

Moses the Lawgiver is much easier to identify—clearly distinguished by the clay tablets locked in his powerful grip and by the supernatural radiance bursting from his face. These two attributes have a long and storied tradition in historic portrayals of Moses. An early mistranslation of the Hebrew word for “rays” has led many artists, including Michelangelo, to depict Moses with horns rather than light issuing from his forehead. I depicted Moses squarely from the front and in riveting symmetry to emphasize his unique experience of having looked directly upon the countenance of God.

David, the founder of the earthly lineage of Christ remains a complex and even contradictory character. Courageous selfless youth who risks all against Goliath, brilliant King of Israel, mystical poet of the Psalms, but also the feckless philander and plotter against Urias. As one artist to another, I chose to portray the Prophet David to his best advantage, wearing the robes and crown of Kingship, playing his lyre, lost in the reverie of singing praise to God.

Although located out of place chronologically, Ruth the Moabite, David's grandmother, beholds him prophetically from the perspective of her youthful beauty. In this way she adds the quality of timelessness to the qualities of loyalty, steadfastness, and courage to leave the comfort of her upbringing to embrace a foreign culture and a mysterious new faith.

Isaiah, young—still in his twenties—eyes transfixed upon the scroll of the future that seems to unroll directly from himself. Like many gifted with genius and foresight—like Newton and Einstein in the realm of science—Isaiah's great prophetic work was behind him before he reached age thirty. And like so many others with prophetic foresight, his vision of the future must have been bittersweet, because seeing the coming of the blessed Messiah meant also seeing the awful price of redemption.

John the Baptist, John the Forerunner— a wonderful choice the community made for the culminating figure for the Tree of Judah—the last Prophet of the Old Testament. His spare almost gaunt face set in fierce resolve, his wild, unbarbered hair, bare sinewy arms jutting from ragged sleeveless clothing come directly from the visual tradition of Byzantine iconography, which in turn rests upon the vivid verbal sketches of John found in the Gospels. John the man of the savage desert surviving on locusts, wild honey, and hope. John stands in pure profile so that his face and his pointing left hand—borrowed lovingly from God's and Adam's hands in the Sistine Ceiling—turn our attention from the Tree of Judah to the Tree of Christ, from the past to the future, from times, places, and people lovingly remembered to our time.

Like the image of John, the images of St. Peter and St. Paul descend directly from the earliest icons of them that began to appear between the years 350 and 400. We can safely assume that descriptions of their distinct facial features were handed down to the early artists by word of mouth from people who had personally known them—Peter's stocky powerful build, square pugnacious features, full head of bristly hair as close cropped as his curly beard—Paul slender, more graceful in stature, calmly intense scholarly features framed by elegantly coiffed hair and beard. Peter stands on his namesake rock, stepping forward with the keys to heaven locked in his strong fisherman's fists—keys of faith, hope, and love. Paul plants his right hand like tree roots on the cover of the Book of Books so much of which he personally authored. What a complex pair of human beings. Worker— thinker, fighter—writer, commoner—patrician. Calling those two to work together, that was real creativity. But how else to found a new spiritual way except by encompassing the whole confounding spectrum of human character?

To visualize St. Isidore the Farmer, I relied directly upon images of him in popular Catholic art. Because we have no record of what he looked like, his appearance in the Tree of Christ is pure invention. But the fiber of his character is well understood—a strong salt of the earth fellow, hail and well met, and yet a man so devout that he truly lived in two worlds. His rugged sharecropper’s hands commanding a plow handle bind him directly to the gritty solid redolent world of the soil. His open naïve face confesses a soul that speaks to the ethereal world of the angels.

Above St. Isidore, we enter a new and courageous realm of prophecy, because the final four figures in the Tree of Christ do not yet enjoy the imprimatur of official Sainthood. They reflect the forward-looking vision of this community. These are your choices of spiritual guides. As such they reflect the original Christian method of selecting Saints—popular acclamation. They are holy, because we find holiness in them. We find holiness in them, because they are holy. They seem to leave us no choice.

We also enter a new dimension of artistic vision. For the artist the task shifts from sifting through traditional representations, imagining appearances based on ancient stories, or inventing faces purely from the mind’s eye. Because these four people are of our time—they have been contemporaries of many of us—our visual sense of them has been profoundly shaped by the camera. We know what they looked like throughout the stages of their lives. Along with the sound recorder, the camera has unalterably reshaped our cultural memory. The artist must therefore translate the variable multiple camera images into a singular sculptural portrait. It is a search for the perfect moment—the fleeting outer expression that opens a window onto the eternal character of the soul.

The old adage goes that at forty we get the face that we deserve. Not far enough beyond forty at the time of his martyrdom, Oscar Romero had earned an appearance of deeply compassionate humanity. Searching for the core of the man, I stayed away from his many posed portraits, where he projects the dignified formal mask of office, and chose instead a spontaneous almost boyish grin—a crooked grin that glows with infectious warmth and charm. I raised his hand in an enthusiastic wave of greeting—a large expansive gesture that throws his pectoral cross slightly askew—a welcoming, courageous man.

Thankfully unlike Bishop Romero, Dorothy Day was blessed with length of days. For her portrait, I created a composite of images from her middle years—from the 1930s and 1940s—when the full force of her conversion was being channeled into the Catholic Worker newsletter

and into the foundation of the hospitality centers which thrive to this day—when her youthful prettiness began to settle into a deeper more mature inner beauty. Equally philosopher and activist, we see her absorption in reading the *Catholic Worker* interrupted by a world needing her attention calling her away from her thoughts.

How else to portray Pope John XXIII than giving us benediction as he so frequently did from the balcony at St. Peter's Basilica? What Pope ever used his office more brilliantly, more effectively, more creatively than this unlikely Prelate? This new church building and all of its artwork are one small part of the great new flowering of Catholic art that stems directly from the seed that he planted in Vatican II. His awkward peasant features rendered transcendent in his luminous smile. His pudgy fingers gain gracefulness as they sign the anagram of Christ's name, *ΙΣ ΧΣ*. (*ΙσονΣ ΧριστοΣ*)

I lent Mother Teresa's hands the abiding gesture of welcome reminiscent of the gesture of Our Lady of Grace. This community made a particularly inspired choice in having her culminate the Tree of Christ. We tried to make this tree a young, budding, springtime tree, a tree of promise whose fullness is yet to come. And who better to represent Christian hope in our time than Mother Teresa? She lived on a daily basis a life that rose above the relentless litany of self-inflicted horrors that mankind brought forth in the twentieth century. If not for people like her, places like Auschwitz, Srebrenica, and Rwanda might have permanently broken the human spirit.

I cannot say what effect meeting these people and living closely with them as they took form in my workshop might eventually have on me. I loved going to work every day and watching them emerge from the blocks of wood, although at times I felt them reproaching my easy acceptance of the comforts of success, the satisfaction of self-expression, and the security of knowledge. This is a very challenging bunch. Nor can I foresee what effect they may have on this community, now and as it grows through the years. I know that they are well received, and I am humbly gratified that they have already touched so many of you, and that so many of you have literally reached out to touch them. As a sculptor—one who naturally deals in the substance and texture of the world—I am pleased to note that no museum rules against touching the artwork apply within the spiritual confines of the church.

I know that these words, which have gone on far too long, cannot hold anything like the full meaning of the work, because that meaning remains nothing less than the significance that each of us may find in fourteen of the most remarkable human lives ever lived. Because words won't

do, we have art. I believe in the power of images to bring spirit into form, and so I am confident that together we have made these fourteen venerable folks a lasting presence in our lives.

Two final observations. Three trees stand before us. The Tree of Judah and the Tree of Christ each standing some thirty-six feet in height are unmistakable. But here also, as in Eden—in the midst of the Garden—stands the Tree of Life. It takes the form of the Cross that John the Baptist holds in his right hand. It is John's way of foretelling that Christ's cross will become the Tree of Life in the new Eden and that its first fruit will be the redemptive sacrifice of the Savior, the new Adam in a new creation of spirit. To heighten its importance, I made the cross the only fully three-dimensional element in the sculpture.

The last act of creativity that went into these trees involved the text of the Catholic Worker that Dorothy Day holds in her hands, upon which I had carved a pattern of simple marks to simulate three columns of newsprint. After everything was finished and ready to be loaded into a van and driven up here for installation, it occurred to me in a proverbial flash that the newspaper could tell the story of the project. So, at the eleventh hour, I unpacked my tools, carved away the simulated printing and engraved the fourteen sainted names along with the sainted name and place of this church, St. Mary Magdalene, Waupaca, Wisconsin. Finally, I dated the project and signed my brother George's name and mine in the traditional way, "By Hand," thus acknowledging both the honest exertions of the craftsmen and the fact that we are instruments of the one true spiritual Creator.

During the installation, Father Jim pointed out a misspelling in the list of Saints, and Father John pointed out another, and I'm not going to tell you what they are.

