

Interview with Thomas Skowron

Capuchin Franciscan Iconographer

Let's begin with your art, Brother Thomas, and what you are doing now as a religious artist.

by Jon M. Sweeney

I'm an iconographer. I studied at *Eikonon Schole*, an iconography school in Uzhhorod in western Ukraine. It was run by our Capuchin brothers from Ukraine and the local Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy (diocese) of Mukachevo.

I focus on classical Byzantine and neo-Byzantine iconography made in a traditional way. I paint with egg tempera and often use genuine gold leaf. It's an ancient medium. It's very easy to mix, but it can be tricky to work with. Then it dries fast and allows the artist to build semi-transparent layers that "communicate" with each other. I am often intentional about leaving areas of a finished icon with the first layers still visible.

From a theological perspective, I like to see this as a reminder of the story of creation: out of nothing God creates the world with all its beauty. Where first there was only chaos, God slowly brings in more and more complex order, *cosmos* in Greek.

In 2020, I started thinking about sharing what I have learned. The pandemic helped me take a first step. I was living at our postulancy house in Milwaukee, helping at our soup kitchen. Because of Covid-19, our regular ministries were limited. We had to look for new ways of serving people in need while keeping everyone safe. We also had more free time. That's when the postulancy director asked if I would like to teach our youngest brothers. I was anxious but agreed, and that's how my adventure with teaching began.

Since then, you've moved to Detroit.

Yes, I minister as chaplain at our soup kitchen. That's a fulltime job and I don't

Thomas Skowron. OFM Cap., is a brother and priest in the Capuchin Franciscan Province of Saint Joseph (The Midwest Capuchins), living in Detroit.

have much time left for icons. I still try to go to my studio every day and paint at least for a moment.

From time to time, I have individual students who work with me at the monastery. And I offer two retreats a year at our own retreat house in Washington, Michigan. I call them "retreats" intentionally. I could offer a simple workshop or a class, but I want people to engage in iconography as a spiritual exercise. We have times of prayers and of silence. I give a basic introduction to the Jesus Prayer. I want everyone to finish their icons and experience the joy of that encounter with Christ or with the saint they paint, but in the end, it's not about artistic perfection.

Were you interested in art as a child?

I loved drawing and painting. At some point, I started moving almost entirely to pencils and color pencils. I loved the precision they allowed for. I remember one day in art class in high school, we went out

to draw from nature. I picked a house at a river. I spent the whole two hours drawing the tiniest details of bricks, the rough texture of cracks, etc. My teacher saw it at the end of the class and said, "You can't work like that." I had two hours and wasn't able to finish the picture because I was too focused on details.

I still love painting the tiniest details in icons. It gives me a lot of joy. But it's also important to step back and see the whole picture. That change of perspective is crucial.

Later, I gave up arts. I did some graphic design stuff and even worked as a graphic designer for a while, but it wasn't really very creative. It was my hobby and a job. Icons would later become my passion.

Were you noticing icons in church as a child, or at home?

Not really. I didn't grow up with icons around me. They started popping up later in life. The first crucial experience was in my novitiate. Another friar would



Photo by Thomas Skowron

visit to give spiritual talks. He often used icons to tell biblical stories in a different dimension. That's how I learned the depth of Eastern iconography.

Then I met Capuchin friars who were iconographers. Their works were so incredible. One was just as obsessed with details as me. Another introduced me to more contemporary iconography, in particular to works of Jan Nowosielski.

Time and again I thought of trying it myself, but I would always find reasons not to. I wasn't an artist. I never went to art school. I was a Capuchin and vowed to live in poverty, and art supplies can be expensive. The desire to learn iconography was still in my heart, though.

One day, while living in Germany, another young friar remarked that he'd like to learn to paint icons. That was the spark I needed to ignite the dormant fire in my heart. Suddenly, it was two of us. We could share the supplies so it wouldn't stretch the budget so much. Suddenly, everything made sense. Then we found a course at a Benedictine priory not too far away from where we lived, and Brother Ansgar became our first real teacher.

You must have been so happy.

I fell in love with icon painting right away. I noticed that it wasn't actually as hard as I feared, and my first icon turned out surprisingly good. It hangs now in my parents' living room. I like looking at it when I visit them. I can see many mistakes I wouldn't make today, and I'm not sure I would call it pretty, but for me it is indeed beautiful. God found me through that icon.

Encouraged by the initial success, we both decided to keep painting. Then I found the school in Ukraine I mentioned before. Their classes were cheap and even with the cost of traveling to Ukraine and back, it was still cheaper than taking professional classes in Germany. Plus, the school was co-run by our own brothers and the main teacher was actually a Capuchin.

Last but not least, it was a Byzantine-rite area. That means that icons were literally everywhere. Every day we would go to the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. I loved it so much!

For the next three years, every August I would go to Ukraine for two weeks. Over time I learned some Ukrainian, met artists and iconographers from Lviv and Kyiv. Ukraine still has an important place in my heart.

Is it common for a Capuchin Franciscan to be a visual artist? I usually think of Capuchins as pastors and confessors, or running soup kitchens.

No, it is not, but it does happen, and I believe there is a place for this kind of vocation in Capuchin spirituality. There's a lot of diversity in our order around the world. I don't think it's so much about what we do, but how and why we do it, or maybe even more so about who we are. We are human beings after all, not human doings.



Francis of Assisi reflected a lot on Christ's incarnation, about the almighty God becoming a vulnerable baby, the invisible becoming visible. And don't forget that one of the crucial events of his conversion happened in front of a literal Byzantine icon, when Christ spoke to him from the cross in San Damiano. I mean, maybe the order wouldn't exist if Francis didn't find that icon in a little ruin of a church?

There are a few Capuchin iconographers around the world, plus more and more young friars discover it for themselves. There is a Capuchin iconographer in Malta, two in Germany, three or four in Poland, a few in Ukraine—and these are only those I know personally. I'm sure there are more. I'm working on creating a network of Capuchin iconographers.

Are there ways in which your iconography and soup kitchen chaplaincy come together?

In Germany, I volunteered at a small soup kitchen. It was in a basement of an old building. Before moving to America, I gifted them a small icon of the Holy Face of Christ. Years later, it's still there on the wall of the dining room. Jesus looks at his brothers and sisters with his gentle eyes. I've been told how the guests really like the icon. I hope they can see the Presence in it.

In Detroit, our ministry is different from what I knew in Germany. Our soup kitchen is much bigger. There's a lot of poverty in this city and we have many more guests. It feels more like an organization, rather than a cozy basement. I don't think it would make a lot of sense to hang an icon there, at least I haven't yet tried.

I do believe, though, that icons teach me to see people differently. I started looking at people's faces more closely when I began learning iconography. It made me a more sensible viewer of the world and the people around me. It made me encounter people more intentionally, be more present. 

For Br. Thomas's answer to the question, "Why do saints in icons often look sad?" go to our website: www.focolaremedia.com/Skowron

Photo by courtesy of Thomas Skowron