



## Sacred Images

An Italian Priest Honors Native Americans through the Craft of Russian Iconography

BY CYNTHIA ALLEN OSTLUND

In the Pueblo tradition of pottery making, the miracle of creation begins with prayer. Pueblo potters speak of "picking clay" the way one picks flowers. They pray before taking the clay, asking permission from Mother Earth.<sup>1</sup> Then they sort, grind, sift, soak and dry the clay before adding a temper of sand, finely crushed rock or shards of broken pottery. When the paste is ready, the work of shaping, decorating, drying and painting the pottery begins. Finally the pot is fired. During each stage of the process, the potter says a prayer to the source of her material and her inspiration. The craft of the potter

is at once practical and sacred.

In a small monastic community in West Redding, Connecticut, Fr. John Giuliani is creating his own miracles through the art of iconography. His inspiration comes from the potters and weavers, bead workers and basket makers of the Pueblo, Navajo, Lakota and Crow nations. He has been called a "visual missionary" for his depictions of Christian saints. **Through his art, he is acknowledging the Native American as the original spiritual presence on the land.** "It is a work of personal reparation," he says, "a way of honoring the individual as well as the rich traditions

inherent in the Native American culture."

How is it that a priest of Italian-American heritage begins painting Russian icons in the form of Native Americans? That was the question I posed to him on a brisk fall day this past November. He told me his journey began with his parents and an artistic sensibility which is both personal and, in his words, genetic. Born Giovanni Baptiste Giuliani, Fr. John is the son of Italian peasants who emigrated from Castelgrande, in the province of Potenza, a small hilltop town sixty miles east of

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#### THE MADONNA AND CHRIST CHILD

Naples. His father was a shoemaker, his mother, his "first teacher in terms of being a priest," a woman who "lived pure hospitality." Their home was like the United Nations. "If someone she met looked like they needed a meal, she would bring them home and feed them. Chinese, Japanese, Black, Hispanic. She made room for everyone. It was all done unconsciously, out of affection and being open to the

other person."

As a young man, he studied art at the Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, New York. "The gift was evident at an early age," he says, "that's the genetic determination. Peasant Italians are all crafts people: carpenters, tailors—the domestic arts. I had the talent; it just needed to be disciplined." While at Pratt, Giuliani happened upon Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and "was slain in the spirit, with the love of God." He became a Diocesan priest and spent the next thirty years teaching in high schools and colleges.

Like Merton, his art was put on hold but "the sensibility never left me," he says. "It was expressed through the Liturgy, which is itself a work of art."

However, it was his parents' tolerance and compassion toward the poor that most influenced his life as a priest. "My mother adored orphans; she called them *orphanel-la*." Although she herself was poor, she managed to periodically send money to them in Italy. This compassion and a sense of political jus-

tice led to his activism in the 1970's. "I became politicized by the students," he says. "It was an exhausting and invigorating era." By the end of the 1970's Fr. John sought a more contemplative life. Just as Thomas Merton found his place in the monastic community of Gethsemane, Fr. John sought a home of his own. In 1977, he was granted permission from the bishop to start a small monastic community in rural Connecticut with four other brothers. The Benedictine Grange was founded on the principles of prayer, manual labor, study, and creativity. It was a fulfilling life and one which he expected to continue, but by 1989, the others had left the monastery and he was living alone. "I knew I had to do something creative to stir my soul and not to suffer the loneliness that solitude can create. However, I didn't know if I could return to painting. I hadn't painted since 1954." True to his Italian heritage, he became a craftsman, in the art of Russian iconography, studying for a year at the School of the Sacred Arts in New York.

"It was evident from the beginning that I was Italian, not Russian," he says. "Italian painting in the Renaissance celebrated the human form. In that sense I am a realist. I love all things human and the artifacts that the human is capable of expressing, and bringing into being." He was searching for a subject that had a human dimension when a friend suggested he paint Native Americans as the sacred person. The flood gates opened. Within a year he painted 30 panels. "Time was unreal. I could not get over the ability that was unleashed, that had been dormant for all those years." His first exhibition was at the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut. The rest is history.

Fr. Giuliani's first commissioned

work was for the Sioux, also known as the Lakota, on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Bishop Charles Chaput of South Dakota saw his work and introduced him to Father Hatcher a Jesuit priest who was a running a spiritual retreat in South Dakota. Father Hatcher was having difficulty conveying the concept of the Trinity. Fr. Giuliani's answer was a two ft. by four ft. panel which incorporated the traditional Lakota images of the great grandfather, victorious warrior and sacred red-winged hawk. He confesses to being a bit nervous about how his work would be received; he was afraid it might be interpreted as proselytizing. These fears were quickly allayed. "When the Lakota Sioux first saw themselves depicted in my work as saints, they were ecstatic," he says. "People would call me, literally in tears, with the joy of seeing their own facial features and artifacts portrayed as holy in a Christian context." The work took on a ministerial dimension, and soon he was being asked to create paintings as memorials for an Indian child or an important Indian woman.

Fr. Giuliani's most significant body of work, fourteen three ft. by six ft. panels, signifying the Marion Mysteries, was for the Crow Agency, St. Dennis Church, in Montana. An Indian man named Larry Hogan had a vision of the mysteries of the Blessed Mother, particularly the sorrowful mysteries which resonated with the Indian sense of loss. The full series took over a year to create, and the installation was celebrated with an Indian Pow-Wow which included the traditional blessing of sweet grass and incense. Bishop Chaput, the Jesuit missionaries, and the Crow Indian community took part. Fr. Giuliani received the Millennium Award for Religious Art and Architecture from the American Institute of Architects for the Crow series.

The most thrilling honor of all though was that bestowed upon him by the city of Siena, Italy. In 2001, the Palazzo Publico of Siena contacted Fr. Giuliani to paint the Palio dedicated to the Virgin and honoring the 15th century botanist, Pietro Andrea Mattioli. Dating back to the Middle Ages, the Palio race is celebrated each July and the winning contrado or society is awarded the symbolic prize—a 3ft. by 9ft. banner to hang in their church. There are 17 contrado in Siena, and each has its own symbol. This year, the unicorn contrado, symbolizing chastity, won the race. "The rider fell off, but the horse kept running," says Giuliani.

"Afterward, the crowd celebrated as only Italians can, by taking to the street and hugging and kissing each other, and the horse. It was wonderful."

"I cannot deny that my faith is truly operative in my work," he continues. "I have the soul of an artist, the soul of an Italian. The soul of the Italian celebrates sensuousness in nature—whether it's food, or singing, painting. I take great joy and gratitude in having that as my genetic heritage."

A website featuring the Crow Series is maintained by The Marian Library /International Marian Research Institute at: <http://www.udayton.edu/mary/gallery/johngallery/johngallery.html>

Fr. Giuliani's images are available through [www.bridgebuilding.com/catalog/jg1.html](http://www.bridgebuilding.com/catalog/jg1.html)

<sup>1</sup> Trimble, Stephen, *Talking with Clay: The Art of Pueblo Pottery*, Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1987.

#### THE TRINITY

