

‘An Ordinary Mystic’

The faith and art of Alfonse Borysewicz

BY MAURICE TIMOTHY REIDY



PHOTO: ANNE REIDY

Alfonse Borysewicz standing in front of “Cor Unum” in the private chapel of the Oratory Church of St. Boniface, Brooklyn, N.Y.

THE RELATIONSHIP between the art world and the Catholic Church in recent years has been, to say the least, strained. To pick two prominent examples, Andres Serrano’s photograph “Piss Christ” was condemned by Catholic leaders when it was first shown in 1989, as was Chris Ofili’s elephant-dung-covered Madonna, “The Holy Virgin Mary,” when it was unveiled at the Brooklyn Museum 10 years later. While these works have their Catholic defenders, the controversies that erupted around them are a sign of a wide gap that has opened up between art—specifically the visual arts—and religion.

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Once the foremost patron of the arts, the church is now more circumspect about contemporary painting. The art world, meanwhile, seems glad to be rid of the church’s influence, exercising its own kind of censorship on material it deems tainted by sentimental piety.

Trying to bridge the gap between these two spheres is not for the faint of heart, and one is hard-pressed to find many artists who have the courage to try. One painter who is both a committed Catholic and a serious artist is Alfonse Borysewicz (pronounced Bor-uh-CHEV-itz), a Brooklyn-based former seminarian whose work has been shown both in Chelsea and in a Catholic church in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Gregory Wolfe, an editor at Image, a quarterly review

of arts and religion, calls Borysewicz one of the most important religious artists since the French Catholic Georges Rouault. When first encountering Borysewicz's work, Wolfe felt "he was in the presence of something sacred." He sensed that the art was "almost being offered up, instead of saying 'Look at me.'"

Yet despite his strong desire to exhibit his work in "sacred spaces," Borysewicz has received little attention from the church. His work is currently on display at the Oratory Church of St. Boniface in Brooklyn and has appeared in a few liturgical art magazines, but he has failed to break through to the next level. His difficulties as a Catholic trying to make it in the art world—and an artist trying to make it in the Catholic world—say much about the state of religion and art in our era.

'Separated' From New York

Borysewicz is an avid reader of theology. He likes to sprinkle his conversation with quotes from Karl Rahner ("Every act has eternal consequences") or René Girard (a historian who has written on violence and religion), and recently he has been working his way through the writings of Bernard Lonergan. While he does not claim to understand it all, Borysewicz hopes that certain parts seep into his consciousness and find their way into his paintings. In the past he has found inspiration in homilies. In one, his pastor compared the outstretched arms of Jesus to an open embrace. That idea is reflected in his three-panel painting "Cross I & II and Blessing," which shows the two outstretched arms of Jesus, as well as a hand held in a gesture of blessing (see p. 17).

Borysewicz lives in Bay Ridge, a traditionally Italian section of Brooklyn, with his wife and two children, ages 20 and 14. A tall man approaching 50 who still favors the clothes of a Brooklyn hipster, Borysewicz paints in a walk-up studio apartment in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, in a neighborhood known as Dumbo. Down the street is the storied River Café, and in the distance the skyline of Lower Manhattan. When he was young, Borysewicz enjoyed success across the river, where his work was exhibited in gal-

leries in Chelsea.

Borysewicz now considers himself "separated" from the New York art scene. He sees theology and art as "one continuum," but as of late, he says, he has been forced to choose between the two. Asked to pinpoint the moment when his fortunes changed, he recalls a show in the late 1990s. (It is a

sign of Borysewicz's liturgical-mindedness that the show was meant to mark the last Advent of the millennium.) The centerpiece of the exhibit was "Your Own Soul," a small chapel he constructed from paintings and collages. The title, taken from Simeon's words to Mary in Luke's Gospel ("a sword will pierce your own soul") was suggested by Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., a professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, who first met Borysewicz in 1993.

"It took the form of a four-sided small chapel," Gallagher recalled in an e-mail interview, "with symbols of tears on the outside, and one had to enter the interior on one's knees. Inside you first saw a large, dark figure suggesting a dead body, and as the eyes became used to the

dim light, one discovered smaller gold hints of resurrection."

As a Catholic, Borysewicz had always been interested in religious themes, but in early paintings, like "River Rouge and Grace" (1993-96) or in his "Strata" series (1992), the imagery was more abstract. In such works as "Your Own Soul," his art became more representational, which, he says, was "the beginning of my undoing." Curators and collectors were "comfortable with [his faith] in the abstract, but not in the flesh." That may seem like a broad indictment, but Wolfe thinks it is particularly difficult for a religious painter to make his way in the contemporary art world. "Of all the different art forms, the one that is the most hostile, the most hermetically sealed against religion in any kind of dimension...is the visual arts," he says.

In 1995 at least one critic recognized the spiritual dimension of Borysewicz's painting. "One look around the gallery tells you that Alfonse Borysewicz is a person of tremendous spiritual intensity," Pepe Karmel wrote in a



"Your Own Soul," 1998

1995 review in *The New York Times*. “The problem is getting this intensity onto canvas in a convincing way.” Borysewicz, not surprisingly, disagrees with Karmel’s implied criticism—where else could the critic sense the intensity except from the canvas?—but tries to take a detached approach to criticism. What is most important to him now, he says, is “not so much how I changed painting but how painting changed me.” His goal is no longer to mount a show in New York, but to present his art in churches and to help younger artists to do so as well.

“Sacred spaces have to inspire again,” he told me during an interview at his studio. “So many churches rest on what they’ve been given. There’s a younger generation out there who want to authentically give their voice to it.”

Finding a Vocation and a Home

Borysewicz was raised in a working-class neighborhood in Detroit when the city was undergoing tumultuous change. As a boy, he learned about the importance of faith from his parents, who were still mourning the loss of his older sister, who had died two years before he was born. Every week the family would go to the graveyard, and his parents often spoke about her. That experience gave him a sense that “you were always breaking bread with your past, that the past was present...and the vehicle for that was faith,” he says.

Borysewicz attended college for two years before entering the seminary, where he met Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Mich., who encouraged him to paint. In 1981, he left the seminary and moved to Boston, where he taught in a Catholic high school while taking art classes at night.

He describes his work from that period as “Otto Dix meets Marc Chagall.” In a few years he was showing his paintings in New York and Boston. The twin tragedies of his father’s death in 1983 and the outbreak of the AIDS pandemic, which took the lives of many friends and colleagues, gave him a sense that suffering and death were very much a part of life.

In his essay in *Image* (No. 32), Borysewicz wrote that he was also struggling with “guilt over my choice of vocation.” He wrote:

Given my family’s working-class ethic, what I was doing seemed strange. At times it was construed as lazy, arrogant

or sissy, but the charge that hurt me the most, and still does, was that what I was doing was indulging in artifice. People make that accusation because they don’t see art as part of the real world, which they see as made up of bread-and-butter issues like building a solid career; they do not see how the struggle of faith and its representations connects with all of our lives.

Borysewicz has found an artistic home at the Oratory Church of St. Boniface. He was encouraged to paint for the church when the parish moved from its former home a few miles away to its current site in downtown Brooklyn. The Rev. Mark Lane, the pastor, coordinated the redesign of the old church of St. Boniface with the goal of bringing together “the old and the new.” He recruited Borysewicz, a parishioner, to contribute to the project.

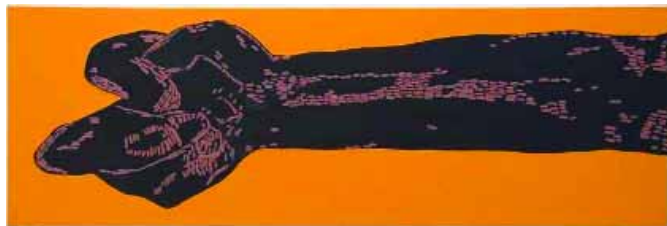
Two of Borysewicz’s paintings are displayed behind statues in the church’s vestibule. Borysewicz would prefer the art to stand on its own, rather than behind more traditional works of art, but Lane gave serious thought to the decision. He believes the older statues—like one of St. Philip Neri—will help lead the worshipers to the more modern, challenging work.

“We’ve never had any negative comments from anyone,” says Lane. “Although sometimes you hear, ‘I don’t understand what it means’—the sort of standard response to contemporary modern art.”

The most challenging piece of art at St. Boniface is not in the sanctuary, but in the priests’ private chapel. Known as “Cor Unum,” Borysewicz’s four-paneled canvas covers an entire wall of the room. The center panel depicts a bee hive of activity; the right panel shows Jesus peering from behind a honeycomb. The images are scattered about, some difficult to discern. It is difficult to imagine “Cor Unum” displayed on the wall of your local parish, but unlike many pieces of conventional liturgical art, it provokes contemplation. When showing off the piece, Lane pointed to the honeycomb motif, which he interprets as a symbol of how, in John’s Gospel, the early church viewed life through the lens of the community.

“It’s actually quite accurate, theologically,” Lane says.

Borysewicz finds it frustrating that he can-



“Cross I & II and Blessing,” 2006

not place his art in more churches. Too many churches are unimaginative, he says, adding that while parishes have experimented with modern music, architecture, even dance, they seem less willing to embrace modern visual art.

Why? "A cautious piety seems safer," says Father Gallagher. "I suppose there is a fear that people will find [modern art] too strange, difficult or different. Caravaggio got something of the same reaction in his day. One of Alfonse's favorite theologians, Bernard Lonergan, once quipped that the church always arrives on the scene a little breathless and a little late."

A Difficult Choice

Making the choice to be a painter has been a difficult one for Borysewicz. He has struggled financially and has done teaching on the side to provide for his family. "I feel like I've taken a vow with painting," he says. At a conference for young evangelicals in New York in March, Borysewicz told the crowd that he is often approached by people who say they intend to devote their lives to painting when they retire. "No you won't," he tells them. "This life is not a dress rehearsal."

"Alfonse is very down to earth," says Gallagher, "often surprising audiences with his emphasis on art as hard work [and] daily waiting." He tells them it is "not as romantic as people imagine."

Gregory Wolfe, a fan and friend, suggested that Borysewicz has suffered some "emotional fallout" as a result of separating himself from the contemporary art scene. In our conversations, Borysewicz also suggested that he was emerging from a dark time. When pressed, he noted enigmatically, "I've taken hostages on this journey—my kids and my wife."

After meeting with Borysewicz several times, I was struck by the ways he describes himself. He often identifies himself as an "ordinary mystic"—an allusion to Rahner's comment that all modern believers are in some ways mystics. In professional circles he has taken to calling himself an "icon painter," although more traditional icon painters might take exception to that description. It is obvious that he sees himself as part of an artistic religious tradition that stretches back centuries.

Identifying himself so clearly as a religious painter has had its consequences, but Borysewicz does not seem to regret his choice. He likes to say that the purpose of the religious image is twofold: to "tell us what happened and to remind us what was promised." Finding new ways to present the Gospel story may be a rare artistic endeavor today, but Borysewicz's work is a reminder that it is still fertile soil for those willing to till it. **A**

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