

Art deepens faith, says Sulpician priest, who has international following

REISTERSTOWN, Md. (CNS) – Carefully unrolling an enormous canvas on the living room floor of his Reisterstown home in early March, Sulpician Father Peter W. Gray unveiled a striking image of Christ that he considers one of his best works.

In vibrant colors, Jesus is portrayed at the Last Supper in the moment before he breaks the unleavened bread. A thin, golden halo encircles a masculine, square-jawed face, while a notch in the neckline of his burgundy tunic hints at a priestly collar.

“It’s meant to show Jesus inviting you to be a part of this,” said Father Gray, likening the painting to one of his children.

“I want the viewer to be part of it by coming to him and letting him feed you,” he told the Catholic Review, Baltimore’s archdiocesan news outlet.

The oil painting was completed 12 years ago, but has not yet found a buyer. For an internationally acclaimed artist, that’s a frustration – but not one that distracts Father Gray from his craft.

“I’m waiting for the right home – the right chapel, the right retreat house, the right parish, the right diocese, the right bishop,” the priest said, rerolling the canvas and quietly setting it in a corner of a room with walls overflowing with his art. “God’s going to give me the right person.”

For Father Gray, art is his full-time ministry. He spends

hours a day working on a paint-splattered kitchen table to create sacred and secular art.

Known both for his contemporary realism and also for abstract works, the priest's images have included paintings of St. John Paul II and Pope John Paul I.

He was commissioned to paint Pope Francis' portrait for the apostolic nunciature in Washington and also painted several panels depicting the Pentecost that were installed in the neogothic frameworks of a former stained-glass window at the Theological College in Washington. The seminary, operated by the Sulpicians, is affiliated with The Catholic University of America.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Father Gray's works include paintings of Mother Mary Lange, who founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious order for women of color; Sulpician Father Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Society of the Priests of St. Sulpice, the formal name for the Sulpicians; and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. These and his paintings of others are at St. Mary's Spiritual Center and Historic Site in Baltimore.

He also designed the stained-glass windows for the chapel of Greater Baltimore Medical Center in Towson and allowed his works to be used with "The Journey to Racial Justice," Archbishop William E. Lori's 2019 pastoral reflection on racism.

Showing a playful side, Father Gray sometimes incorporates the faces of Hollywood stars in his religious art. A painting of St. Luke at his home features the visage of Ben Affleck, while a painting of St. Mark resembles Keanu Reeves.

Father Gray's unique ministry got its start when he was a child in Erie, Pennsylvania. At age 4, he was copying paintings by Rubens, Caravaggio and others that he saw in encyclopedias and religious calendars. He recalled that his

talent genuinely frightened his mother.

His parents enrolled him in a summer art program at what was then Mercyhurst College. There, the 5-year-old prodigy studied alongside college students.

Father Gray, who celebrates Mass only at his home, said he sometimes becomes so absorbed in painting that he loses track of time. He said he “subconsciously prays” with each brushstroke.

“I’ll look up and realize that I just spent five hours working on something,” said Father Gray, who holds a doctorate in philosophy and the arts from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

Visitors are captivated by Father Gray’s work, according to Deacon Vito Piazza Sr., director of St. Mary’s Spiritual Center and Historic Site.

“His art draws us closer to God,” Deacon Piazza said. “It tells us the extraordinary story of the people who have walked before us.”

Sulpician Father Thomas Ulshafer, a former provincial leader for his religious society, said God has given Father Gray a “special talent,” and he uses it well.

“Many people both inside and outside the Sulpician community are attracted to his art, especially to his portraits,” Father Ulshafer said. “He can capture the uniqueness of a person.”

Having previously worked with the United Nations and the Vatican’s Pathway to Peace program, Father Gray has visited 72 countries and has a heart for helping those in need. He uses the proceeds of his art sales to support a mission in Nepal and people experiencing homelessness in Baltimore.

With his eyesight deteriorating and age creeping up on the 69-year-old priest, Father Gray said he is laboring feverishly to

produce as many works of beauty as is possible while he has the ability.

“I’m not doing this art for me,” he said. “It’s going to help save people.”

Matysek is managing editor of the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.