

Canadian sculptor finds inspiration amid the coronavirus crisis

The coronavirus crisis has inspired Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz to create – and motivated him to help. Even as the daily news has quantified new cases and new deaths from COVID-19, Schmalz used an annual tradition, his Easter Jesus statue, to reveal something of God’s tender love and care for the world he created. And as Italy was overwhelmed by high rates of infection, which meant overcrowded beds and hallways, Schmalz was inspired to use his craft to help the overburdened Italian hospitals.

Showing God’s care in times like these

“I believe that God uses not only my hands, but everyone’s,” said Tim Schmalz, an acclaimed Catholic sculptor whose works include the famous “Homeless Jesus” asleep on a park bench and, more recently, “Angels Unawares,” which was recently unveiled by Pope Francis in St. Peter’s Square. Schmalz recently talked with Our Sunday Visitor about the inspiration that culminated in his most recent creation, a sculpture of Christ which was finished on Easter morning, and which depicts Jesus’ care for the world during the coronavirus pandemic. “What I love about it,” Schmalz mused, “is that I was completely surprised by its birth. I was like a passenger on this ride – I didn’t know what I had to do, but I felt compelled to stop what I had been working on and turn my attention to this.”

The sculpture that demanded Schmalz’ attention, causing him to set aside another project, is titled simply “2020 Jesus.” For the past 20 years, Schmalz explained, it’s been his custom to create a statue of Jesus at Easter. This year he almost failed

to meet that goal, as he worked feverishly carving a series of bas relief sculptures depicting the 100 cantos of Dante's "The Divine Comedy." That series, which Schmalz calls "The Dante Project," will illustrate a new translation of "The Divine Comedy."

Indeed, both of Schmalz's most recent works have at their heart the pandemic that has caused people to seek refuge in their homes and behind their masks and to turn their hearts to God, whom they long to receive in the Eucharist.

God is still there



2020 Jesus. Timothy Schmalz photos.

Schmalz explained that when he began sculpting "2020 Jesus" on Good Friday, he was uncertain what would emerge. "So I picked up a piece of clay," Schmalz said, "and in my hands, I started to model a cross. As I worked, the cross sort of turned into flames, revealing the suffering of humanity during this time. Centered before the cross was a sphere that turned into the world. In the center of the world is a fetus, a new human life being created. That is a sign of hope, suggesting that new

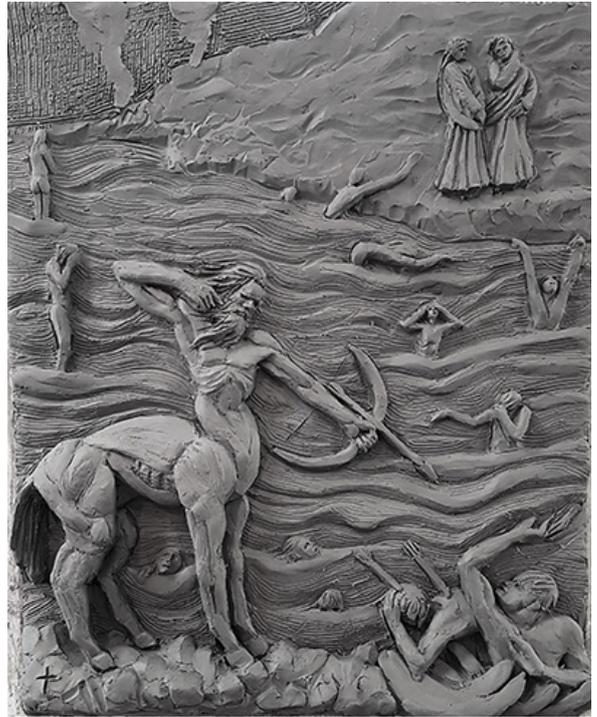
life continues, life will go on.”

And finally, Christ is in control, his arms wrapped firmly around the earth. If you look at the face of Jesus, Schmalz says, you can see his abundant love. Schmalz points out that the unborn child – suspended as he is in the center of the world – is still attached. The message is that beautiful things can come out of this period of pain and silence; humanity is going to bring forth new life.

Schmalz’s sculpture of “2020 Jesus” took shape in only three days, as Catholics around the world observed the Triduum. The statue is small, but he hopes to recreate it in a life-size version, and he hopes that a church or city will want to exhibit it as a symbol of global spirituality.

Financial help for Italian hospitals

Relieved to have completed his annual Easter sculpture with its focus on the coronavirus, Schmalz turned his attention back to the Dante series. That work, too, had the pandemic as its impetus. Schmalz had initially begun his ambitious project – sculpting an image representing each of 100 cantos in Dante Alighieri’s “Divine Comedy” – with plans to release a hardcover book in March 2021, on the 700th anniversary of the Italian poet’s death. But as Schmalz was driving to his studio one Lenten morning, he heard a report on the radio about the scope of the pandemic in Italy. Despite their best efforts, Italian hospitals and medical teams were challenged beyond their capacity by patients with COVID-19. Hospital hallways were crowded, and the streets were empty as the death toll in that country neared 30,000.



Dante

As Tim Schmalz realized the scope of the tragedy facing Dante's country of origin, he knew what he must do. "I thought, 'Isn't it ironic?'" Schmalz said. "Here I am, creating this greatest hero of Italy, while Italy is going through such a horrible situation." Then he put the two things, his Dante project and Italy's crisis, together, and he devised a plan to help. Schmalz phoned his co-author Daniel Fitzpatrick, the writer whose modern-day translation of "The Divine Comedy" would accompany the photos of Schmalz's sculptures. Fitzpatrick agreed: Rather than waiting until 2021 to release in hardcover, the two would release their book of poetry and art as an e-book in a series format. For a donation of just \$5, readers could sign up to receive two cantos each week – one on Wednesday and the second on Sunday – beginning with Dante's first recounting of the Inferno (Hell), moving through Purgatorio (Purgatory) and culminating in the Paradiso (Paradise), just in time for Italy's 700th anniversary celebration. All proceeds from the sale of the e-book would be donated to help the hospitals of Italy better care for their critically ill patients.

The e-book of Dante's "The Divine Comedy" is available for purchase through En Route Books and Media, a Catholic publishing house launched in 2014. Readers can access the first canto and sign up to receive future cantos at "[Help Dante Help Italy](#)." For a donation of at least \$5 through the GoFundMe page, they can be added to the email list to receive semiweekly installments.

Kathy Schiffer writes from South Carolina.