

MARGARET AYLWARD ICON

It is in a spirit of Humility, Simplicity, Faith and Charity that I offer you my reflection on the Margaret Aylward icon that I have written.

Icon writing has been a great blessing in my life and for which I am very grateful. From beginning to end it is a prayerful experience and that includes times of consolation and desolation!

The sign of the Cross is always made at the beginning of work on icons. And on completion the icon is blessed and becomes a sacramental and is treated with great reverence and respect.

Icons are to enhance the beauty of the Church, to instruct us and lift us up, to enlighten us to imitate the virtues of the person we are gazing upon and who is gazing on us, and to transform and sanctify us through healing and intercession.

BACKGROUND

Over the years Sisters suggested that I do an icon of Margaret Aylward. I put them off by saying that she never wanted an image of herself, but the real reason was that I did not feel competent to do it. It was only when Sr Maura O'Donovan said that there was a Vincentian Church in New Orleans where there were pictures of Vincentian saints on the wall and there was a space for Margaret that I agreed to give it a try. At that moment I had an extraordinary feeling that whenever I got round to doing it Margaret Aylward herself would help me. And she did!

RESEARCH

I read and re-read everything written about Margaret. I visited the Archives where Sr Alice could not have been more helpful and supportive.

I had an image in my head but could not get it on to paper. It was a real struggle for me to let go and trust that Margaret would guide me. So, after many attempts at drawing an image, and with the approval of my teacher Colette Clarke, Margaret was transferred from paper to board.

I wanted an icon that was simple and that the presence of Margaret would come through and touch hearts. After I traced the image onto the gessoed board, I then put on the gold.

Gold is important because it is very beautiful and neither changes or tarnishes. It represents the uncreated light of Christ. So even before you begin painting the icon the gold is a reminder of God's Presence and a glimpse into what is to come, what God has prepared for those who love Him.

In iconography there are stages that one follows. Beginning with the garments, then hair, face, hands, halo and naming.

THE GARMENTS

Dress

After the gilding I began to think of the colours of the garments. I asked myself what colours would Margaret choose? I talked to her and found that I was very drawn to the colour green for her dress. I felt that it tied into her love and appreciation of nature, the sense of freshness and newness ...always Spring in the soul united to God", and her love of her native land. The pendant with loop which I found in the Archives | turned into a cameo on the collar of the dress. As it belonged to Margaret, I thought it was symbolic of her family life and comfortable lifestyle. I am not sure who

it represents. It may be a symbol of Our Lady; it has a halo and a sword at the breast, or it may be St Agatha whose name Margaret was given at her religious Profession.

Cloak

Many years ago, each house of the Congregation was given a piece of a cloak that belonged to Margaret. It was brown so that is why I choose that colour for the cloak. The cloak symbolised for me her prayerfulness and times of contemplation. In icon painting brown often represents poverty and in Margaret's case poverty of spirit. The poverty of spirit she experienced leaving two religious' congregations, the difficulties within her family circle, her scrupulosity and all the difficulties she encountered in her life. As I painted the cloak, I became aware of its protective and sheltering quality, a quality that I would associate with prayer.

Headdress

I felt she needed something on her head. As I painted the bonnet, I felt Margaret exuded energy. She was a woman on a mission with the ribbons flowing proclaiming Humility, Simplicity, Faith and Charity. Values that had come to her through the Ladies of Charity. As I worked on the bonnet and painted the folds on it, I reflected on all the Holy Faith ministries from the foundation until now. Some highly organised and high profile and others consisting of "the little unremembered acts of kindness and love".

The edging which consists of dots reminded me of the many Sisters I had known and loved, both living and dead. The painting of the bonnet turned out to be a prayerful reflection on our Holy Faith ministries.

Margaret's Hand

I had difficulty with the hand, it was either too big or too small. I wanted it to be strong as my idea of Margaret was a woman who put her hand to the plough and did not look back. I was pleased with the finished product.

The Lamp

Here I asked Margaret to lend me her artistic ability. At that stage I felt I needed a lamp to encourage me. I always loved the lamp as a symbol of faith but as I painted, I got a very different sense of the lamp. I felt a strong presence of the Holy Spirit burning within her and I prayed that that Presence would be with me and all who gazed on her in the future. This insight gave me great encouragement as I began her hair and face.

Hair

During one of her illnesses Margaret had to have her abundance of haircut. It was made into a hairpiece and is in the Archives. Many years ago, when doing a spring-clean in the Archives Sr Mary Ursula asked me to wash the hairpiece. I talked to Margaret through the whole process, and thanks to her the hair came out perfect. Now as I painted told her I wanted the same outcome, beautiful hair. As I painted the layers of pigment, I thought of Ursula's confidence in me and my foolishness to undertake such a task!

Face

The basic colour of the face is almost an earth like colour which gradually goes from dark to the brightest of final white lines, showing how the light of Christ can transform us. I read somewhere that the image is not meant to be a likeness, but it ought to be beautiful. The finished face was not what I had envisaged at the beginning but the more I look at her the more I love her expression. Some days I see a little smile on her lips. And note that the closed lips signify contemplation which demands silence. Some days I think she is holding me in her mind's eye. And as I am drawn to gaze at her ears, I know she is listening.

CONCLUSION

Some have asked me how I feel now that the icon is finished. A tremendous sense of gratitude, for the highs and lows of the whole process. The times of consolation when my heart, hand, and pigments worked in tandem. For the times of desolation when I could not face the board and had to beg for the grace to continue.

Gratitude for the trust that I able to place in Margaret's guidance and how that gift of trust and confidence has spilt over into other areas of my life. Gratitude that Margaret whom I always admired and loved is now with me at a deeper level more like a friend. And that gives me great hope for the future for myself and for each one of us at whatever stage we are at. I have found that an icon that has been prayed with and worked on never leaves you. Close your eyes and the person is there and that applies to all icons.

You may wonder why Margaret has a halo. Well, I have it on good authority that it is permissible to put an icon on a holy person whom we believe is in Heaven. Before completing the icon, the person's name is inscribed, and I must say that felt real joy inscribing Margaret Aylward.

My prayer is that as Margaret gazes on us and we on her, she will give us new insights into ourselves, the Congregation and the world in which we live. Remembering the words of Fr Gowan "that we make good use of the present and leave the future to God"