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A Conversation with Brother Mickey McGrath

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Oblates of St. Francis de Sales

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Marian Forum 2023: A Conversation with Brother Mickey McGrath

Transcript of presentation

Gloria Falcão Dodd: I am Dr. Gloria Falcão Dodd. I am a research professor with the International Marian Research Institute, and it is my pleasure also to welcome you to Part Two of the Marian Forum 2023. And I am delighted to have you here with us as we are sponsored by many wonderful organizations here at the university. The International Marian Research Institute has been hosting the Marian Forum since 2015 and has been wonderfully joined by the Marian Library, Religious Studies Department, Campus Ministry, and the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives. Dr. Neomi DeAnda, who will officially begin her duties as the new executive director for the International Marian Research Institute on July 15, 2023, is with us in spirit, as the class she is teaching is unable to attend today's forum. Now, today's event will take the form of a conversation with Brother Mickey McGrath, facilitated by Dr. Darden Bradshaw, before the audience will have an opportunity to share their comments and questions. Brother Mickey McGrath has been a religious brother in the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales for over forty years. He is the 2023 recipient of the Marianist Award, presented annually by the University of Dayton to Catholics who have made significant contributions to the Catholic intellectual tradition. He is an artist, professor, activist, and social justice advocate, who grew up in Philadelphia and studied art first at Moravian College, before earning his Master of Fine Arts, specializing in painting. After eleven years as an associate professor of studio art and art history at De Sales University in Center Valley, Pennsylvania, Brother Mickey has become a full-time retreat master, author, and presenter. Since 2009, he has lived in Camden, New Jersey, where he has focused on social justice and finding beauty in the margins. He has painted wonderful images of Our Lady in contemporary style and context, responding to the current issues of social justice. Some of his lovely Madonnas of Color are on display on the seventh floor upstairs and also on the second floor of the Roesch Library, down the hall, behind the audience. His work celebrates the joy of art and being. In his own words, he paints, writes, and tells stories and then travels all over the place, telling the stories behind what he paints and writes.

Brother Mickey's interviewer, Dr. Darden Bradshaw, is an assistant professor of art education and an area coordinator for art education. As she believes, the role of an art educator is a dialogic one, navigating between the worlds of artist and educator, maker and thinker. She will prompt him to tell the stories he wants to tell through his Marian art. And so I present to you. Dr. Darden Bradshaw.

Bradshaw: Thank you so much. Thank you to Dr. Jana Bennett, the Marian Forum Committee for this invitation. I'm really excited and honored to have been asked to have this conversation with Brother Mickey. The focus of the Marian Forum is on healing, physically and spiritually, through rituals and miracles, as well as healing of communities. So, I focused my questions for Brother Mickey around Mary and healing and how art can be a vehicle to bring folks either to Mary or to healing. So, we're going to begin. I've written the questions. Brother Mickey has seen them. We'll sort of bounce around and see where we go. Brother Mickey

McGrath: Alright.

Bradshaw: Alright. In your book *Madonnas of Color*, you discuss many of the practices in which you engage as an artist and maker that are intimately tied to your spiritual practice and tied to the practice of promoting healing, both personal and communal. There are two in particular I was hoping we could discuss. The first of these is when you share about the Windsock Visitation, your first representation of a Black Madonna. You talk about being with the Sisters of the Visitation and how they would hang a windsock outside the monastery as a signal for children that this was a place to come for friendship, games, and connection. You continue on by noting an experience when, in your presence, they offered support or care to a local family in need. I wonder if you would relay some of that and also address the question of how we can create such a signal, either a literal hanging of a windsock or a metaphorical- or form a personal space for others through art to come and know that we are a welcoming space.

McGrath: Yeah. So, great question. That, the Windsock Visitation is a, kind of a key painting for me. I taught art and art history for eleven years at De Sales University, as we heard, and when I asked the community for permission to get out of teaching, figuring they'd say no, they said yes, and I thought, "Uh-oh, well, now what am I gonna do?" And that first commission I received was to do this painting for a group of monastic sisters who have become very, very, who I've grown very close to, and I'll show you some pictures in a bit, but this was when I first met them in Minneapolis. And we're sitting there in their living room. I was with, it was at a big spirituality convention, and they had just moved into this house about two years before that, and they were called the "Nuns in the Hood." They're a monastic community, but they're very, very active, and everybody in Minneapolis, North Minneapolis knew them. And I went and spent six months with them later as a sabbatical from teaching. And at that time, the state senate of Minnesota declared it Visitation Day, because they said they had done so much to change the face of North Minneapolis. So anyhow, I was thrilled to get this commission to do this painting for them. But when I first met them, we went, I was sitting there on the couch in front of their fireplace in the living room, and over it, over the fireplace was a painting of the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, the name, you know, of the sponsor, the patrons of their community. And, but it was from the German Renaissance. It was an Albrecht Dürer print. So, it was two blonde-haired, chubby German women with rosy cheeks and dressed in Renaissance clothes. And my friend that I was with leaned over and she said, "What is that doing here?" She said, "I'm commissioning a painting from you right here and now that reflects the women of this neighborhood." And I was still teaching part-time, and I didn't have a studio, I was painting in my bedroom in Philly, and drove it down to Linda and I said, "Here, I'm finished! I'm going to send it out." And she's, she said, "Oh, we can't be there when they open it." She said, "Let's go out, and we'll have an unveiling. So, we had this unveiling. There were twenty-four neighborhood children sitting there, and I told them the story of Mary and Elizabeth, but through the lens of these two women now that appeared over the fireplace that looked like Black women from their neighborhood, you know. And it was really, it was awesome. They had a Jesuit priest friend come over and sprinkle holy water on it. And it was a real wonderful little event. And they called to tell me a couple of months later that the Archbishop of Minneapolis

had stopped by their house to say Mass in the living room. And he was looking at the painting, and a little five-year-old girl went up and tugged on his sleeve, and she said, "Want me to tell you what that painting's about?" Audience: [Aww]

McGrath: And she told him the whole story of Mary and Elizabeth, she remembered all the symbols in it, and then she ended up by saying, "And if you don't know where that story's from, I can get you a copy. It's in the Bible." Audience: [Laughter]

McGrath: So, that's kinda become this real gathering, a real symbol, you know, and not only for them but for me too, you know, because over the years- that's what introduced me to the healing power of art and how it can help people spiritually heal. One time, I remember, they told me a woman stopped, knocked on their door, somebody from the neighborhood they were very friendly with, and she was sobbing, and they said, "Come in. What's the matter?" And she had just found out she was pregnant and she said this wasn't good news and said, "Can I come up and sit in front of that painting and say some prayers," you know, because she could identify with that picture, you know. And, so, that's what I love. That's what art's- You mentioned I'm from Philly, you know, and Camden, New Jersey, where I live now, is just across the river from Philadelphia. And we just experienced that with the Super Bowl. Right? For two weeks before the Super Bowl, with the Eagles, every night on the news, "Go, Eagles, go," and "Fly, Eagles, fly," and, I mean, it really brought the city together in ways that nothing else could, but I thought, "That's what religion is supposed to do." But it's kinda lost that in our institutional religions and setting up walls between each other. We've lost that, but music, art, sports, are ways to bring people together in common purpose, so.

Bradshaw: I love that. And I love that in the speaking about the, this particular group of devotees, you talk about that they had a signal outside the monastery that would be that signal that they were open and sort of waiting for communion from the community and the space for art to create that, to begin that dialogue and that discourse, as that young girl shared. That's really beautiful...sharing.

McGrath: Yeah. Yeah.

Bradshaw: You mentioned in your studio, you mentioned, the studio in Camden, New Jersey, so, what folks may not understand if they're not necessarily artists and they aren't engaged in making art, is that we often have a series of practices or actions that we engage in - one might call it a ritual, if you will - before we begin and undertake our work. Could you describe your studio practice, particularly thinking about the location of your studio and how you get yourself into the frame of mind and into the space where you are engaging both in the community where your studio resides and in the work you hope to achieve in your studio.

McGrath: It's all about going into the present moment and having quiet. That's how I get- A lot of my ideas and inspirations come from reading my morning reading, what we call Lectio Divina, and then I turned it into Visio Divina, visual. And what I'm learning more and more, and I'm getting very involved in Native American spirituality, is that we're all connected. And I think that's what feeds it more than anything that just today, I've talked to three different people that had something that's, "I can't believe we're connected that way," you know, here I've never been to Dayton, University of Dayton before, and, being from Philly. And the reason my studio's there, has been there for thirteen years. I'm in the process of getting ready to move it, actually, but I was invited there by a pastor, Fr. Michael Doyle, who was a real amazing figure. He just died around Christmas time. But he gave me this space for free. He said, "I'll just pay utilities." He said, "But you're- " He was a real social justice advocate and did an enormous amount to change the city of Camden. He opened a theater, he opened an art studio, he opened a rec center, and he gave me this space. And, but he said the whole idea being that beauty will heal. He said, "There's no expectations from you, on behalf of the parish. He said, "Just whatever you're doing in here and creating beauty will resonate and spread." And, so, and I believe that, you know, thirteen years later that when each of us, whatever we do, whatever, everybody sitting here has a unique gift that's yours. And it doesn't mean you have to make a living out of it, but yeah, you need to share it. That's why it's been given to you, you know? And, and that's what I learned through Fr. Doyle. So, my, my moti- my practice is to get, make

sure I'm in that zone, you know. I don't treat my visits to the studio or my monk cell, you know, it's my getaway time. So, I'm moving it, because I have to, they need to turn it into habitable space for a family, you know, and they'll renovate it. It's in bad shape. But I'm going to a more rural setting, so I thought, "Eh, it's fine now," you know.

Bradshaw: That'll be interesting for your practice, to see how it changes.

McGrath: Yeah, it will, yeah. But that's what I need. I need that quiet and meditation time, you know.

Bradshaw: And so, in those- meditation time and in those moments of quiet, you talk about "Gabriel announcements." I am so fascinated by the way you reference them as these moments when our lives are on the verge of transformation. We often look at our students here and this community, and we think about vocation. We think about why we are here, which is not just to learn, but to think about who am I and how will I serve in the Marianist charism? And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you - and you referenced in your text - that our job as humanity is to be like Mary, to be patient, to remain open until the end. When we're in the midst of such turmoil and upheaval that we're experiencing culturally, it can feel really challenging to remain open and to be patient. Can you talk a little bit about how you have found art in communities creating this space for us to celebrate those Gabriel announcements?

McGrath: Gabriel announcements are what I call, are the Annunciation moment. That's such a popular subject matter in [the] religious art world. And since the Renaissance, when the angel Gabriel goes to Mary and announces that she'll be the mother of Jesus, and- but it's really on a deeper level, more relevant to us than it- See my big thing with art is to show it, take these stories from old and make them relevant to us today. So, it's not just some, "Oh, it's a nice thing that happened two thousand years ago," to help us discover our Annunciation moments and discover the presence of God in here. Now, God's not like up here somewhere. As I was telling to a group earlier a favorite, one of my favorite spiritual writers these days is Fr. Greg Boyle,

who works, who founded Homeboy Industries. I just saw him yesterday and look- I mean, I'm across a room, but he started Homeboy Industries to take gang members. And he said that our society is so big into punishment and judgment and lock them up and all that, and that doesn't help anybody. You know? It just makes more bitterness and more anger and resentment. And the Homeboy Industries and Homegirl Industries is designed to help people learn that they are lovable and that all of us have lovable traits inside of us, you know, And that, and that's what we're here on Earth to do. As he said - and I love quoting this all the time - "God does not care about your behavior." And we have turned religion into such a, being a good little boy or girl or you won't get to heaven and being so mindful of behavior, and I'm not saying behavior is not important, but that's not what God, God, what God wants you to know more than anything is that there's nothing you can do that God's love will stop. It will not stop coming. You know, it's, it's only fair, and that God's a force of energy of love, which is what modern theology is teaching us, you know, this great universe, you know. It's bigger, that we diminished God, when we just make God into a little police figure, you know. I always say, you know, when I was a kid, I did not like Santa Claus. You know, it came around and we had to go to Sears and sit on the lap and get the picture taken and all, because he knows when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, and I thought, "He can mind his own business!" And that's, I think we kind of do that to God too. We turned God into this Santa Claus figure that's watching every little flaw that you have. And...grow up! You know?

Bradshaw: That's so fascinating. That's a fascinating thing to think about, that relationship of loving ourselves.

McGrath: It's tough to do sometimes.

Bradshaw: It really is, absolutely. And in thinking about your, your journey as an artist and your journey through your spiritual path, it seems, in reading about you and spending time with you, that the parallel of those two is that loving others and loving in community through your art has led you to this sense of connection to yourself and to that love. Have you always been sort of

centered in that relationship of the making and the connection between the creativity and the creator, right?

McGrath: I think so. I have been an artist as long as I can remember. My early- I'm the youngest of five, so all my siblings were in school and I remember that I was four years old - I always share this - sitting underneath my mom's ironing board. Every day, she did her ironing and watched as the world turns on TV. And I would sit and draw on paper that my dad brought home from work. He worked for Sears for forty years, he was an auditor, you know, passed none of that accounting stuff on to any of us, but there, he'd bring paper home and I would turn it over on the blank side and draw and color. And by the time I got to high school, I'll never forget, I hated to go there. I went to an all-boys high school run by the community in which I'm now remember for forty-seven years. Who knew at that age? But I was kinda like, "Can't we homeschool?" You know, because, I was lousy at sports, I was so shy, I thought, "I am not going to make it in this all-boys high school." And the only thing I could, felt good and comfortable doing was art, and they didn't have art class. About two weeks before school started in August, I remember I came down on a Saturday morning my dad was sitting at the paper- at the kitchen table, reading the paper, and he said, "I'm just reading an article here about art classes for young people downtown at the Moore College of Art" - the oldest women's art school in the country - and he said, "They meet every Saturday. Kids of all ages," he said, "Do you think you'd be interested in that?" And three hours later we were downtown, signing me up for art classes that I did every Saturday for four years of high school. And that built up confidence. I thought, "I am good at something," you know? So, I couldn't play. I was always that kid in gym class, they had to go, "Aaah, don't dribble by yourself!" They kind of gave up on me and that was always embarrassing too. But I thought, "I bet I can prove you can't draw like I can." Well, you know. I guess my point is we all have a gift, and you've just got to find that and be comfortable. I always remember I did a mural in, in Kenya a couple of years ago for a Maryknoll missionary friend in an AIDS relief center, and I had seven teenagers helping me. They were awesome. I just loved these kids immediately, and they got right into it, ended up doing four murals while I was there, just in a week's time. And they were there in the morning before I even got there. And what

this was, they were all HIV positive, because their mothers, this clinic where we did the first mural, again of Mary and Elizabeth, was in a clinic for pregnant women with HIV, and they would go there every day for their appointments, doctors, and medications of all this stuff they needed so that they were gonna be freed from passing on HIV to their babies. But these teens didn't have that; their mothers didn't have this luxury. So, my friend Rick, who had invited me to do these murals- I have pictures of them. I don't know if-

Bradshaw: Yeah, that's it.

McGrath: Oh, there they are. Are they being seen? And it's not advancing that.

Bradshaw: Do you want me to advance it? Ben Daigle: I can help with that.

Bradshaw: Thank you.

McGrath: But anyhow we've done, so, again, it was a case of beauty, you know, and healing and helping people. Here were are. So, this is the sketch. I designed it on my laptop - thank you - over here at home and sent it over. So, as soon as we got there, their counselor - his name was Sampson, the guy on the left there - helped me - he's the one who invited these seven teens - and he helped me outline it in black, numbered everything, so it was a giant paint-by-number coloring book. And these- and that freed me up. As soon they- we almost had it done by the next morning, I mean, that's how enthusiastic they were, and it was looking beautiful. And so that freed me up to walk around and explore and sketch. So, there's the seven of them, and that little kid, a two-year-old, was there every day, Rick said probably because he wasn't getting any other meals. You know, we were right next to the slums. We went in there for two days, and I've never been anywhere like it in my life. I felt like I was walking through hell. But I brought my sketchbook, and I always ask people, "Can I- Do you mind if I sketch you?" Nobody minded that. I would never take a picture, because I would feel like I was exploiting it, you know. But somehow sketching is different for people. And so anyhow, it was an incredible

experience. But the one, here they are sketching, and, me sketching them rather, and then we're getting up to the finished product, and there it is. And we put the word "upendo" up there - you can't see it in that - but "upendo" is the Swahili word for love. So, I thought even their non-Christian patients here, the women will understand upendo if they don't know who Mary and Elizabeth were. And then I had them sign it all at the bottom. So there they are. But I remember one day at lunch Rick was getting them fried chicken and, they say "chips," "french fries" for us, and every day we had that lunch, and he had started a group that he asked a different kid to pray each day at the beginning of the meal. But that one boy on the lower right, we, one day, we're just ready to eat, and he said, "You're always asking us questions. Can I ask you a question?" I said, "Sure." I'm thinking he's going to ask, "Why do Americans call chips 'french fries'?" which, I have no idea why we do that, but there it was, but he said, "What's your definition of success?" And I was like, I literally went, "Ah, d-, ah, dah-..." I just was not expecting that, something of such depth. I said, "I think it's when you discover your gift." I said, "Everybody- God has given everybody some kind of talent or gift that's uniquely yours." And I said, "When you nurture that gift, when, no matter what you do in life, you're going to be successful." I said, "It's not about how much money I make." And he said, "I agree with that." And I thought, "Whoa." That was a powerful, one of those moments you don't see coming, like you were asking me before, you know. It's like, yeah, you just gotta be open to the present moment and then, the Annunciation moments. And that's what that was.

Bradshaw: It's, I would imagine that in the process of creating, as you've just described with these individuals, and in every community they're in, in the process of creating, you begin to build that sense of common humanity. Right? And I think one of the things that we see culturally is that when we believe we are different from another person, that that is what divides us, and that is what creates those bridges that we cannot cross over. And what I'm hearing you say, and what I've read and experienced from you, even just this morning- You guys, you have to come over to Fitz Hall, because Brother Mickey is working on a collaborative mural, and this morning he started it, and we've had raucous laughter and joy and excitement and community-building...

McGrath: Even ten minutes.

Bradshaw: It's really- and everyone is welcome to come and participate in the creation of this. But in that process, it seems like we find ways to connect with one another, that you are finding the healing through the art process, through the creation together. And we connect to one another as creative.

McGrath: As humans. Right, as creative. But we alw- God's a creator first and foremost, not the stern Father, overlooking, it's- The act of making and creating anything is sacred, you know. The pictures that you're seeing now, when I got home from that trip to Africa, I was one week in Nairobi and then Western Kenya, where I did a sketching tour for Catholic Relief Services, and I came home and just to process it all, I needed to come up with something that was familiar yet African. So these are just, these are just three images on the left there of this Stations of the Cross. And I figured it was something traditional Catholic imagery - I had done many of them before - but I wanted to give them that flavor, you know, that of what I'd seen and witnessed. And then a couple summers later, George Floyd happened. And I thought, "How's my response as an artist to these very difficult things that happen in our world these days and the racial tension and antisemitism, all of it?" My only, the only thing I can do is respond to it as an artist and create picture in story. So I took the, what was the First- the Third Station of the Cross, which is Jesus Falls the First Time, and revamped it a little bit and put the words "I can't breathe" on there and posted it, and ten thousand people saw it. I don't remember any negative ones, but I wouldn't anyhow. They're not worth worrying about, except that I heard from three priests in Atlanta who asked permission to use it. They went to a Black Lives Matter rally in Atlanta and put that on their protest sign. And another priest in Chicago told me his school was right on the highway in downtown Chicago, and he wanted to make it up, put it in a billboard over the school. And I thought, "That's what this is about." You know?

Bradshaw: That's beautiful. I wonder if you- Can we go to the Let Tears Come image?

McGrath: Let Tears Come. Where's that?

Bradshaw: It's, I believe it's the image of Mary where you're referencing the pandemic?

McGrath: Oh, that's right at the beginning. Okay. Good. I think? Yeah.

Bradshaw: Yes. So, in this one, I was wondering about your- I mentioned to you we recently experienced the passing of Dr. Anne Crecelius,

McGrath: Oh, right!

Bradshaw: a beloved faculty member of our community after fighting a valiant battle with cancer. There is a tremendous amount of pain, loss, and suffering. You just referenced the murder of George Floyd, and you're talking a little bit about the pandemic and this loss that we saw, both of human life but also of connection to one another. During [the] COVID-19 pandemic, we had more than a million people lose their lives here in the United States alone. And amidst that you created this image, correct?

McGrath: M-hm.

Bradshaw: Prayer to Mary in the pandemic. So, I wonder about how you see creating art in community as a form of commentary on what you're seeing as an artist and as a social justice artist and an advocate. Your voice is in fact communicated through the work that you're creating. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your relationship of privilege and how you use that privilege to comment on what you see and experience.

McGrath: Yeah. Right before I did that picture, the one on the right, I did both of them in the early days of the pandemic. But my brother died of COVID just a month into it, and we weren't allowed to see him in the hospital and the nurse contact, but she said somebody had donated

iPads and she could go into the room, and so we could visit with him that way. He was unconscious. And the day we had scheduled it for Sunday at 4:00, and she went in at 3:00 to tell him, not knowing if he could even hear her or not, that his siblings were, you know, were going to come and visit via iPad, and at 3:30 she called to tell us he had died just in that half hour. And so I did a funeral cover. I do a lot of funeral covers for loved ones and friends and the last two I did, one for Fr. Doyle, the pastor who brought me to Camden, I did right by their bedside while they were dying. And my friend Joe, classmate, he was unconscious but he came to just as I was leaving, and I said, "Joe, I want to show you what I just did. It's your cover for your funeral." And that's not tough anymore. The first ones I did were tough. It's hard to talk about to somebody about their death, but guess what? It's coming for all of us eventually. And I always say, "I hope there's somebody doing it for me," you know, to open up the conversation. Anyhow back to my brother. He was not a religious person, he was a real child of the '60s, and so I thought his cover, was gonna, he loved music, all 60- anything to do with '60s music, especially the Beatles, so I just put the words "let it be" and his name, and I've been singing that song in my head, you know, the Beatles. [singing] "Let it be, let it be." And I thought that's- Then that led to that. I wanted to do something that was a little more overtly- So, that's Mary as healer with the nurses and doctor beneath her cape, you know, because they needed as much protection as was there. I did one of first responders as well with, because my nephew grew up to be a firefighter. I've just thought I need that and cops, you know, more attention.

Bradshaw: And we often see representations of Mary as teacher, and we don't often see these representations that you're showing of Mary as protector and healer in a contemporary form. You're really, as you said earlier, trying to reinfuse the iconology and the symbology of Mary. You carry over many of the historic items like blue, right, that we associate with Mary. Can you talk a little bit about how you go through the process of conceiving and changing iconology or updating it, not changing it, but maybe updating the symbology that you're using when you think about Mary and healing?

McGrath: Yeah. I guess one example of, not Mary, but St. Stephen, the patron of deacons. I did him with one of those microphones that, you know, are up here, because I just thought it's not going to get, it's updating the tradition, you know. Some traditions need to die, [chuckles] but visual ones, I like to, they're still here and we just need to give them a new twist, you know? And it makes it more appealing and accessible, I think, to, you know, and I'm not opposed to the traditional ones. I just, as an artist, I don't see, it's not black and white. It's not, you know, we don't just keep doing things just because "this is how we've always been. My grandmother did it this way!" The Tradition's a living, breathing thing, and we're always evolving. And that's a modern concept. Thank you, Teilhard de Chardin, who was silenced because of it, right, but now we know. When you see these images coming back from the James Webb Telescope, it's just mind-boggling. You know? It's- I can't fathom it. And God created that. So we get all- hell, we diminish God with it, you know? It's that force of love that's ruling the universe, and we forget that, don't we?

Bradshaw: And besides...

McGrath: You don't believe my way, then you're not right, you know? We're the one true religion, all that stuff.

Bradshaw: Exactly. And in some ways you're a catalyst for change, for that change, for bringing- using your art as a vehicle to - I don't want to say "update" - but to really reinvigorate some of the symbology through the more contemporary lens. Do you feel that it makes it possible in community for people to come and connect with you and with Mary and with the saints - and you're working on the Spectacle of Saints over in Fitz Hall right now - but does it make it easier for people to come and talk to you?

McGrath: I think totally, yeah. I just gave a retreat the other week, and a woman- it was on Native American spirituality, and that woman, at Q&A time, she said, she said, "Do you... how do you handle the pain?" She said, "Your subject matter is so tough," but as an artist, I'm

particularly, we're all overly sensitive. But I said, "I think that's my role, is to help find beauty, because that's where the healing comes." It'll be a connection that someone can make to me. I don't think that answers your question, but that it's, again, in beauty and even non-Catholics could love an image of Mary that, you know, that speaks in a relevant way, you know?

Bradshaw: Absolutely. As that one, as those two, very much do.

McGrath: But it's what I thought, "empowerment of women." The one on the left in this image was commissioned by a pastor, he's now got in Philly, and he had redone, was in the process, he got a grant or something, he was redoing his church. And he said, "I've got an image of Mary," and he said, "but if you could make it special to the-" he said, "We have a big AA meeting that gathers in this parish twice a week," and he said, "If you could make it special to that." So, this is Mary, Mother of the Addicted, and she's holding in her hands a - it's hard to see from your seats - but the cocktail glass that has a crack in it as a symbol of trying to end that, you know. And the flowers growing out of it are each symbolic. But there's a lily in the back as a symbol of the resurrection and rising above, and the big lotus is a symbol of, in the Buddhist tradition, it's beauty that grows in swamp- swampy, mucky water, you know, and it's kinda like in this- So, we are all lotuses. You can often see Buddha sitting on a lotus flower in iconography of the East. And so that's a way of bringing East and West together and the Twelve Steps. So, I've used this now on retreats for people on the Eleventh Step, which is meditation, and it's- Many people in AA are not necessarily religious, but this, I would hope, appeals to them and, you know, helps to see the universality of it. And so then all the Eleventh Steppers can learn how, a way, a new way of praying and meditating.

Bradshaw: Lovely. Do you have other works you want to talk about in your slides?

McGrath: The one on the right I did for my Madonnas of Color book. It's Our Lady of La Vang in Vietnam, and it's kinda again Buddhist related. But she, the story has it, in the early 1700s, there was a great persecution of Christians, and so a whole village of people went into the

jungle to hide, and there were drinking the water of the stream that was there, it turns out it was contaminated, I guess, and people were starting to get very, very sick. And the vision of Mary that appeared in a tree said to the people, "Boil the leaves of this tree, and make a tea of it, and start drinking it," and it healed everyone in the village. And so Buddhists came ten years later and realized this is sacred ground. They didn't believe in the Christian idea of Mary, wasn't their thing, but they put a Buddhist shrine on it, because they knew healing had taken place. And why I love this story is, it was natural, you know, boil, whatever the tree was, I don't even know. But it was like nature's already healing, you know. We just have to learn how to, instead of exploiting it and ruining it, learn from it and use it, you know? So, that's why I like that story. And now there's a basilica there. I've not been to Vietnam yet, but that's built on that spot. These were when the pandemic started and I couldn't go anywhere, so I just took my sketchbook right outside. That statue has been outside my bedroom window. I live on the third floor in the rectory of the cathedral in Camden, and there she was, but I never really paid attention to it before until I had to. And so I just did a lot of versions of her. But she has a cracked neck, because somebody tried to decapitate it at some point, and it was never fixed, but I kinda like that, because somebody talked about, "Oh, we should get that fixed." I said, "No, it kinda speaks to Ca- It's Our Lady of Camden." But I'll never forget, one time, a woman had passed out on our back s- kitchen steps from a drug overdose. She was at a concert up the street, country music, believe it or not, in Camden. And so I called the- I couldn't get in the kitchen door, because he was blocking it, she was passed out, her bag was open all over. And they, finally the ambulance folks came and took her, and cops and everything. Everybody's very nice in Camden. But anyhow, this guy pulls up in a, in a Mercedes, and he was outraged. He said he had grown up in the parish and I guess he was coming back for something nostalgic reason or something. You don't see many Mercedes in Camden. But he said, "Why is that statue that, it's, it's broken? Her nose is gone, and her neck's cut," and he said, "Well, this should be taken care of." And I thought, "Did you see the real-live person just now that we loaded into an ambulance? Isn't that upsetting you more than a statue?" You know what I mean? It's, the people's values are kinda mixed up these days, so.

Bradshaw: Exactly. So maybe by, maybe by paying attention to the things that are right in front of us, right? You mentioned that in this case, you kept seeing the statue that was outside the rectory in the same way that this woman was, right? Maybe art can be this vehicle for us to really see what is directly in front of us and in that process create space for healing here, and that healing that happens between one or two people extends then into communities, and through that process, right?

McGrath: Yeah.

Bradshaw: That's lovely.

McGrath: I think whenever you say, hear yourself saying, "I've seen that all my life, but I never saw it this way before," or heard a Gospel pa- or something, yeah, "I've never heard it that way before," that's the Holy Spirit at work, because we're always new, we're always evolving, always fresh, and hearing with new eyes and seeing with new, well, ears rather. And I think there's- I went back in January, here we are, to do it. The sisters in Minneapolis had moved into a new house a year ago. So I went out this January to paint a new mural for them in their little area in the basement, and over three days, all kinds of folks showed up. I didn't put all the pictures then, but I was at the local girls high school, Visitation Academy, came over, neighbors, all kinds of people signed up just to paint for ten minutes, twenty minutes, whatever. But my favorite was the guy who on the right there, who on the far right that, the older gentleman, um, works with gang members and reforming them. He was in, when he was a teenager, he was in a gang himself and now he's a social worker. He cleaned up his act, went to college, is a social worker, and now he's working with kids trying, struggling to get out of gangs and that outlook. And so he brought one of them with him, the guy on the left there. And he just, he said, "What do you want me to paint?" I said, "Pick your favorite color and just start painting that house over there." And he painted, and he was so involved in it. And it was so exciting to see this kid who's struggling to get out of gang world. He had been arrested for a number of things, I was told, and even just in there, minding his own business and smiling away, and then until

somebody mentioned the Vikings, and he piped in, and again, there's sports bringing- He's, "Oh yeah, how about that game last Sunday," and bah-bah-bah. And it was, it was art and the mention of football that gave this guy new life. And hopefully in, just in that half hour, he learned, there are things he could do with his life outside of gang world, you know?

Bradshaw: I think, I think we're getting close, so I'm going to ask one more question before we turn it over to the audience. And this one is about, you just mentioned sort of seeing things new, seeing things that we see, and like this young individual that you were just sharing with us, sort of focusing on a connection and celebrating that connection. In 2021, you wrote a piece for the National Catholic Register about finding the Body of Christ in different spiritual communion. And you talk about the relationship that we have to obligations and to finding communion in spaces, particularly for those who are often not finding communion, particularly in Catholicism. Could you talk a little bit about, for you, how, like in this image that you're, in this moment you're talking about with this young man, finding communion, where you are bringing together these pieces of iconology that are represented and have often been used as harm, and how you are transforming them to create spaces for communion for those who are not necessarily feeling welcome?

McGrath: Yeah, and, which is a lot of people. I was, early on in the pandemic, when everything, nobody could come to church, and - as I said, I live at the cathedral - and the bishop was coming to our house with his two associates, and there were only seven of us there every Sunday. We go in to have breakfast. It was, it was nice. But as, I was the lector every Sunday, and I had to, as lector, my role at the end of communion time was to read. So it tells everybody, "For all of you at home who can't join us for sacramental communion, please join us for spirit- for spiritual communion by reading the prayers that appear on your screen." And I'd read this week after week. But I asked the bishop [chuckles], I said, "How's spiritual communion work?" I said, "Can people be denied it if they're divorced or gay, like they, you know, are sometimes denied it?" "Well, no," and he just kinda rolled his eyes and chuckled, because I knew he agreed with me, but I think we get so much, you know, all this - I might get too political now -

Bradshaw: Alright.

McGrath: but I think the, what the pandemic did for me is to show what the Eucharist is supposed to be about. That Jesus at the Last Supper wants to feed all of us and isn't taking records of, "Are you a Democrat or Republican?" You know, and so it was outrageous to me and to anybody I know, they start talking about denying people communion, and Jesus didn't do that at the Last Supper, he didn't, "Oh, except you, because you, you know, voted for Joe Biden," whatever, you know. And I just think that's, we're in that state now where we, "red pews" versus "blue pews," and beauty can find the purple in there. You know? I think that's, um... I put Eucharist, I was doing a whole series of monstrances. For those of you who might not be Catholic, you don't know what a monstrance is, that sun-shaped circular thing that holds the communion host for Adoration, and I was doing them with multicolored hosts, not just white, but the colors of humans, the black and brown and red, the color, Asian, you know, just to show the universality of Eucharist, that, we really, again, need to broaden our- not weaponize communion, not use it as a tool, weapon, or punishment. And I know a lot of bishops agree with me. So. And the Pope does, for that matter. Can't do worse than that, right?

Bradshaw: Thank you.

McGrath: You're welcome.

Bradshaw: So, I think that, if I'm not mistaken, so, we want to give time for questions from the audience. Thank you so much for all of those answers to our questions. I know that there's more interested in asking questions as well. Dodd: Yes. Thank you so much, Brother Mickey and Darden, for a really lovely presentation of your artwork and your beautiful faith that shows forth through that, so thank you. And, um...

McGrath: Did you say "face" or "faith"? [laughter] Dodd: "Faith." With a t-h. And we do have a chatbox, which I know probably has already been getting in. Not yet, okay. Well, we do have a

microphone. So, to enable everyone in this well-attended audience to be able to hear other's questions or comments, I invite those to come up to the microphone, so everybody can hear you, and also invite those online to put those questions and comments in the chatbox, and I see that they are rolling in. But someone is here. If we have a line, then we know those who are here who are interested in making- asking questions or making comments. [To Sarah Cahalan] So did you have something at this point? No. Oh! Head nodding? Just for "Yes. We want them." Cahalan: Encouragement. Dodd: Ah, very good. Yes. Well, I had a question for starters. And you have such beautiful artwork, and I really have been enjoying it up on the seventh floor as well as the second floor here. But how can people, such as myself, get copies of your work? I saw you have a lovely website, so...

McGrath: Yeah, yeah, which is in flux right now, but we're getting there. Brother Mickey McGrath, my website, and prints can be made through trinitystores.com. They're the place in Denver, and they do prints on demand. So. Dodd: Very good. So, trinitystorage.com?

McGrath: That's right, for prints. Dodd: Very good. Beautiful.

McGrath: Thank you. Audience: Question. Audience member: Okay, I have a question. Can you tell us how, maybe, how your art has changed over the years? Are you...[inaudible]? [chatter about the microphone] I'm just wondering how your art has changed over the years. Have you gotten a different perspective on how you represent God or, or, or maybe how art- and in that, how has your art changed you?

McGrath: Wow, that's a good question. I think it's more that art reflects the change, you know, I don't know which comes first. It's one of those chicken-and-egg questions, I guess. But as I have matured in my faith and my work, I guess I don't care anymore about approval. And I think that freedom, that sense of freedom has let me show what my experience of God is, which is, again, love and forgiveness and compassion, and, and I think that's shown, shows in the art

then, I guess through color and shape and all that, you know, I'm a little more self-secure, I guess. Audience member: Thank you.

McGrath: Yeah. Does that answer it, though, right, for you? Audience member: Absolutely. Yes.

McGrath: And also the multicultural and women, I, you know, to show the feminine side of the holy, you know, the... We got a lot of work to do. Audience member: Agreed. Thanks, Brother Mickey. My name's Dom. You addressed a little bit with Dr. Bradshaw about your conversation a little earlier. I've been thinking that your talk, I think, meshes in harmony with another speaker we had about a week and a half ago here, Dr. Tony Godzieba - You would- I wonder if you know him - he's a Villanova guy...

McGrath: Oh. Audience member: ...but he gave a talk about a week and a half ago about a lot of things, well, one of the topics was, he thinks about art and music a lot, how it really roots us in time, right, like in a tactile sense, and that, you know, he calls it like "social acceleration," right? We're in this era where everyone's running on the GCal [Google Calendar], our attention starts from appointment to appointment and thing to thing, and time is like- you know, like we're all slotted, and, "Oh, here's my two hours that I've got this meeting, and I gotta pick up this from the store," and it's kind of exhausting, that moment we're all in. So, someone suggested that it's kind of, it's like when you're looking at a painting or you're listening to a piece of music, it really just breaks that spell a little bit, in a sense. So, my question for you is: You started talking, you know, from your sense of your artist vocation evolving, like your perception of time over the years, and [inaudible] that's occurring, all of us hear about [inaudible] maybe a healthier way with your lens of art? If that makes sense, if that question kinda makes sense.

McGrath: Yeah. That's an excellent question and very "time"ly. Because I- often when I travel, I ha- bring a sketchbook with me... Audience member: Yeah.

McGrath: ...and I love to sketch in airports, and I've been looking at, over the years, I've been doing them for years, I'd forgotten how many I had till the pandemic and I'm home with nothing to do but look through old sketchbooks, right? But, and I didn't bring it on this trip, sadly, big room, but I'm sitting in an airport, and you know what I've noticed lately? Every single person is texting, or they're on their phone doing something, you know, games or whatever. And I don't judge it, it's just that, wow. What's that saying about us? That we don't know how to have quiet. We don't know how. And you cannot, cannot, cannot get to your creative self without quiet and just trust the silence, because that's where- You can't hear God speaking to you over the noise. And we just start, in our time now, the constant entertainment and distraction, and we're distracting ourselves from the very thing that we need to hear. Like when I go on a long car trip now - I like car trips - I often don't put the music on the radio at all, because I just say, "Hah, this is good." I'm guessing that's an age thing. You know? But I don't know. Is that answering your question? Audience member: Yeah. It's a weird question, kind of.

McGrath: Well, it's, it's true- Or even walking around campus! I don't know how many- every other student is walking along but texting or, you know, and it's like, I said to one - maybe to here, I don't know - one young woman, I said, "You're going to trip. You better watch it!" And she just kind of giggled. But it's, but it's not just a college-kid thing.

Bradshaw: Yeah, it's everyone.

McGrath: We're all obsessed with it.

Bradshaw: Yeah.

McGrath: And that's not healthy, I don't think. Audience member: Nah. I appreciate it...

McGrath: And especially with little children growing up, and they don't go out and play. Kids don't engage their imaginations anymore, and that's very frightening to me, you know, it's...

Bradshaw: Absolutely.

McGrath: ...you know, they don't pretend anymore. They just, they're playing [video games]. I was at a store recently, a little two, he must have been two, cutest little kid, and he's with one of those things that had two handles on it and he was doing a video, and he was at a bookstore. And his parents were looking around, and I'm not saying they were bad parents, they were very loving with him, but I thought, "Oh, shouldn't you let your kid be picking out a book?" Not, you know, whatever he's looking at. So.

Bradshaw: We have a question back here. Cahalan: We are getting some questions on the chat now. So I have to pick and choose, because there's a bunch of good ones, but one that just came in was about the image that's currently up on the screen and about the use of the star...

McGrath: Oh, yeah. Cahalan: ...and whether that was an intentional use of a Star of David, sort of incorporating other faith traditions into your artwork.

McGrath: Totally. Cahalan: Bonus question, what is your favorite medium to work in? That was another one.

McGrath: Oh, yeah, that's a good one too. I'll answer this one first, because this is a very recent picture. I just wrote an article for US Catholic Magazine that's gonna be out in October, and I created this for that. I don't know. A lot of people don't know this, but Teresa of Ávila was Jewish. Her grandfather was Jewish. She'd be even called "converso." And In the days of Ferdinand and Isabella - they were not nice people, you know? - We sing the little songs about Columbus sailing the ocean blue. Columbus was so cruel to the native people that he was sent back to Spain. He was very into torture and making them become Catholic and all that stuff. And this is all stuff we need to know. We can't heal it and move forward till we know the tough parts of our history. So, when I learned Teresa of Ávila was Jewish - well, her grandfather was Jewish, he grew up in Toledo, which was a great center of learning, great colleges and

universities, studying Jewish and Islamic mystical literature, and he was a successful merchant. So, Ferdinand and Isabella come along and tell everybody they'll banish- All Muslims were banished from Spain. You can see statues of St. James, Santiago de Compostela, cutting off the heads of Muslim people, as he rode by on his horse, you know, in their imagination. And Jews were told either convert or leave Spain altogether, and if you don't leave within six months, you'll be executed. So, Teresa of Ávila's grandfather, thought, "Everything I know and love is here. I'm not leaving Spain." So he converted and then moved his family to Ávila. But before that, Jews, the conversos were always under suspicion of still secretly practicing Judaism at home, and so they were often subjected, many of the men, Jewish men, were stripped naked and had to wear this goofy yellow outfit and get on all fours, and they were paraded through the streets of Madrid and Toledo, all the major cities, and people would spit at them and jeer at them and throw things at them. And that's what happened to her grandfather. And he had his little five-year-old son with him. And they were, Jewish, converso women, rather, had to wear a yellow mantilla, the sign of a prostitute on their heads. Oh, and converso people were not allowed to teach at Catholic schools and universities. They weren't allowed to hold public office. And if they entered religious life, they had to be third-generation Christian. Well, Teresa of Ávila was only second-generation, and we don't know how she got in and whether she even, some scholars think maybe she didn't even know it herself, that her father wanted to erase, her father was the little five-year-old boy that was tortured with his father. And, so we don't know what she did with that, and she wasn't third-generation. So how'd she get in? But she made it a rule of the Discalced Carmelites to accept converso women and to accept money from converso benefactors. And then when she died, they went back to the old ways again. And so anyhow, the article's about this Carmelite stuff, because Edith Stein comes along. Edith Stein- none of this was known until 1949 after the war. So, Edith Stein didn't know she was Jewish, and there she was and taken away and killed at Auschwitz. And Titus Brandsma was just converted, er, canonized last summer. He is my new hero. He defended modern art. And also in essays, he was a journalist in Holland. And he was very public in his condemnation of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. And the bishop of his area ordered priests to refuse communion to Nazis. You know, it's like, why didn't we ever hear this stuff before? Gave me a new hope, you know? So

anyhow, I did this article with Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which is a Holy Land image, it's, Mt. Carmel's where the prophet Elijah lives, and so there's a Star of David on her scapular, Jesus has a yarmulke on, and in the bushes behind are the names of Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross - whose mother was converso - Edith Stein, and Titus Brandsma to show that weaving, you know, through generations in the trees.

Bradshaw: And the question about your medium?

McGrath: And the medium, as, this is all iPad. I do a lot of digital art. I don't know if somebody, I've learned to love it, you know, because I can travel. I draw on planes now and get a lot of work done that way. But I still love pen and ink and paint. Cahalan: Thank you. Dodd: Well, thank you to everyone for, first of all, participating and coming and for those who asked questions, both in person as well as on Zoom. We have first of all, of course, thank you to Brother Mickey!

McGrath: You're welcome! Dodd: Let's give him a round of applause. [Applause]

McGrath: It's my pleasure. Thank you for having this. Dodd: We've been- Oh, our pleasure indeed. We know that you've created some beautiful work celebrating our Blessed Mother, and thank you so much for that and for coming here and telling us about your stories behind it.