

## Editorial (Ann McNelley)

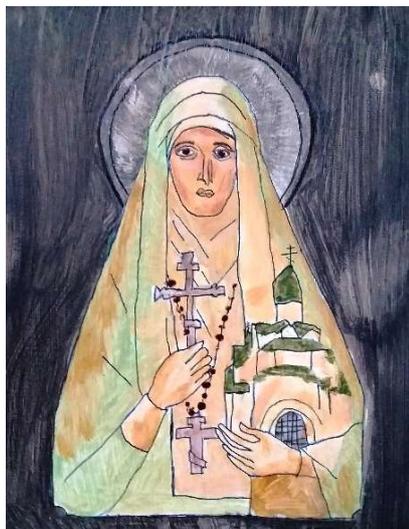


With the opening of the borders, we are faced with yet another COVID threat by way of the new variant that has emerged. For some it may be an anxious time, or one of division with questions raised about what will happen with those who have not been vaccinated. The birth of the Christ Child prepared a new way for us to live. Embrace it with hope for the future! Greet everyone you meet with kindness and understanding.

This Christmas hold your loved ones close and greet the Season with loving, grateful hearts. May you all be blessed with a safe, joyous and Holy Christmas and allow the Spirit to lead you to a healthy and fruitful New Year.

## “A Prayerful Exercise in Humility before God” (Mary Otto)

On a windy Saturday morning in November, I was blessed to be one of five people who participated in the creative workshop “Encountering the Holy One through Icons”, with Angela Travers as our facilitator. Leading up to the workshop, Angela invited each participant to select an icon of their choice with the plan being that each would recreate their icon, during the course of the workshop.



*St. Elizabeth of Russia* (Mary Otto)

Most of us had little knowledge of icons and yet were drawn to them for some reason. Following our opening prayer, Angela invited each of us to share the reason for our personal choice. That sharing itself opened a window to the sacred as we listened attentively to each other. Hearing about St Francis of Assisi, Mary (Our Lady), Hildegard of Bingen, St Ita, and St Elizabeth of Russia, and their



*St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio*  
(Cheryl Calder)

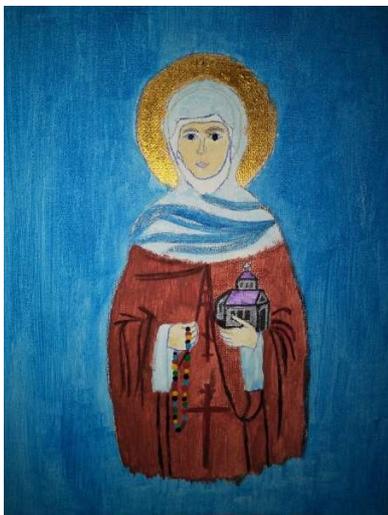
impact on each of our personal lives was enlightening, inadvertently giving all of us an insight into the others' experience of the Divine.

Much of the morning was spent in reflective focus as we reproduced our choice of icon through brush and paint on canvas. Despite our initial fears that we may not have the talent for such an activity, Angela gently encouraged each of us with some simple steps to follow, and yet allowed us to freely interpret the work in our own way. As we sat around a common table, Francis, Mary, Hildegard, Ita and Elizabeth emerged in brilliant colours from our canvases. It was quite remarkable to discover that each icon unwittingly reflected something personal of the one who recreated it.



Mary (Krys Keryk)

St. Ita of Ireland (Joanne Anderson)



Prior to our painting, Angela gave us an insight into her own interest and experience of icons before outlining some fascinating points on their origins, their design and their purpose. I was particularly struck by the fact that the iconographers are said to “write the icon” not paint it, because it is seen as a prayerful exercise in humility before God. Angela also drew our attention to the focus on the nose and eyes of the icon, that when gazing upon the icon



St Hildegard of Bingen (Elaine Bartlett)

we are drawn into the presence of God in their serene selves.

Thanks to Angela's gentle and affirming guidance and input, I left that morning carrying my reproduction of Elizabeth of Russia, with a deeper sense of the sacred in my life, a better understanding of the need to slow down for prayer and contemplation, and an awareness of the power within the icon to draw me closer to the experience of God's love. I suspect the others felt the same.

### **Journeying with the Women Mystics: Praying with Hildegard of Bingen (Elaine Bartlett)**

A group of us attended a 8-week gathering to read and reflect the thoughts, poems, prayers and music of this remarkable woman, Hildegard. She was a 12<sup>th</sup> century abbess, prophetess, healer and mystic. Each session highlighted different themes, from justice to wellness to compassion. For example, Hildegard was very conscious of God's creative presence in everything, the interdependence of all life and how this sustains life, the planet and indeed the cosmos.

Hildegard's thoughts on the world she lived in were revealed through her poetry, letters and writings and showed her to be a strong and courageous woman as she followed the will of God. Her ideas and actions about many subjects came through visions from God and she was sort after by many for her prophesies, wisdom, and healing ability. Her lifestyle of political and social activism and her support of women lead us to wonder what a force she would be if she lived in 2021.



During our sessions we had time to sit with, then share the impact of Hildegard's words, actions, and beliefs after a time of quiet reflection. This brought about rich, respectful, and thoughtful sharings. Elaine M shared the facilitator role with Elaine B, Angela, Hilary, and Trish over the weeks. One of the lovely outcomes of this was the eclectic range of music introduced by each person.

The time spent exploring Hildegard's words echoing from 800 years ago reminded me that no matter when we live, we all share the same joys and difficulties living in this world brings. Hildegard's words and music from God still inspire and bring hope and wisdom to help us navigate our world and consider our planet.

They can also challenge our understanding of spirituality. It was a privilege to share each session with a group of open, authentic women as we explored *Praying with Hildegard*.



**Standing:** Elaine Bartlett, Colleen Free, Moyalial Tokmak, Angela Travers, Hilary Fogerty

**Sitting:** Cheryl Calder, Trish Sheely



## **TWO BABES IN A MANGER**

*In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on biblical principles) in the public schools. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, the fire and the police departments and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. The men related the following story in their own words:*

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It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to the stable, where the baby was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edge of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins we had brought with us. No coloured paper was available in the city.

Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately - - until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said,

“And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked up at me and asked if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don’t have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn’t, because I didn’t have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift.

So I asked Jesus, “If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?” And Jesus told me, “If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.” “So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and told me I could stay with him --- for always.”

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him – FOR ALWAYS.

It’s not what you have in your life, but who you have in your life that counts.



### **Reflection: Christmas Thought**

God decided to become visible to a king and a peasant and sent an angel to inform them of the blessed event.

“O King,” the angel announced. “God has deigned to reveal to you in whatever manner you wish. In what form do you want God to appear?”

Seated in his throne and surrounded by awe-struck subjects, the King proclaimed, “How else would I wish to see God, save in Majesty and Power? Show God to us in full glory and power.”

God granted his wish and appeared as a bolt of lightning that instantly pulverised the King and his court. Nothing, not even a cinder remained.

The angel then manifested herself to a peasant saying, “God deigns to be revealed to you in whatever manner you desire. How do you wish to see God?”

Scratching his head and puzzling a long while, the peasant finally said, “I am a poor man and not worthy to see God face to face. But if it is God’s will to be revealed to me, let it be in those things with which I am familiar. Let me see God in the earth I plough, the water I drink, the food I eat. Let me see God in the faces of my family and neighbours.”

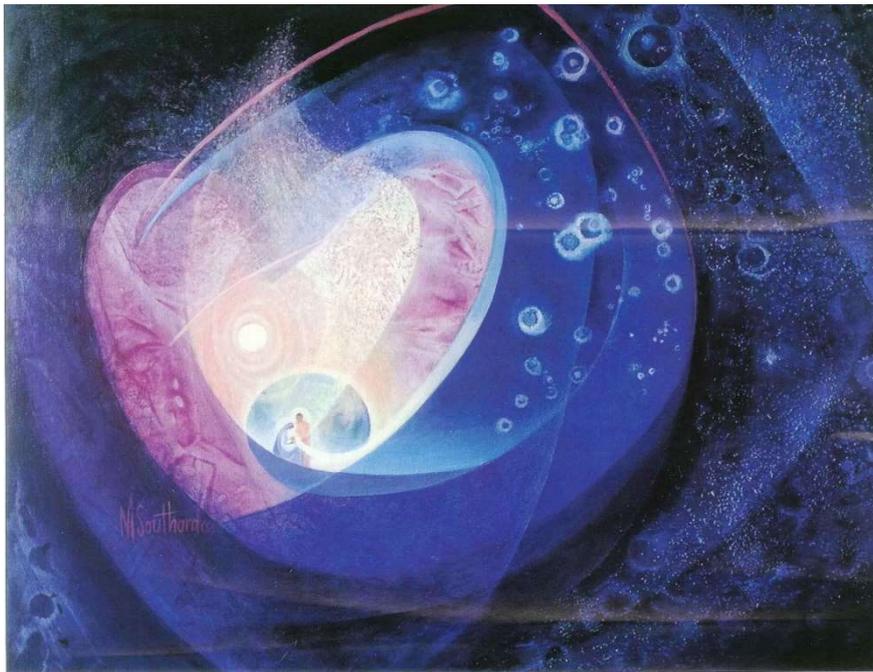
God granted the peasant his wish, and he lived a long and happy life.

May God grant you the same!  
and may your Christmas be a blessed and joyous reminder  
of Emmanuel – God with us.

Every time a hand reaches out to help another .....  
that is Christmas.

Every time someone puts anger aside and strives for understanding ...  
that is Christmas.

Every time people forget their differences and realise their love for each other ...  
that is Christmas



“At the Heart of the Universe” by Mary Stouland, CSJ

*Love is at the heart of all creation.*

*When we love, we are the universe and the universe lives in us.*

*~ Octave Dimex*

***Happy Christmas to All!***