As Catholics, we’re familiar with sacred art. We have the privilege of a rich history of paintings and sculptures that reflect our many stories. You may have had a chance to experience one of these art mediums — iconography — during the beautiful and mystical Icon Festival The Basilica has held every November since 1995.

Iconography is a stylized art form depicting persons in their transfigured — rather than human — state. For centuries, icons have served as vehicles of prayer and helped bring a fullness to our faith. They are purposely two dimensional so that we, as the onlookers, create the third dimension as we are drawn in and given the opportunity to experience grace.

Moving closer to God through iconography is something which artist Debra Korluka understands well. “During my formative years,” she shares, “icons brought me joy and contemplation and transported me into a world where the laws of existence were far more harmonious than in our temporal world. The images spoke to me about this: everything visible assumes an invisible dimension, everything created assumes an uncreated perspective. Everything mundane becomes deeply mystical and timeless.”

Years of creating icons depicting the lives of the saints have taught Debra that “growth and wisdom experienced through suffering opens us to the source of life and love.” Her work flows into her everyday life as she “seeks the face of Christ in every individual I encounter.”

In Debra’s studio, while chant music plays softly in the background, natural light filters in and illuminates years of her Byzantine iconography work. Laid out on a table as a work in progress is a new icon, “Mary Untier of Knots,” which has been commissioned by The Basilica as part of the parish’s 150th anniversary celebration.

Fr. Bauer explains this icon’s history: “The devotion to this icon has existed for centuries. It is not based on an apparition of Mary. Rather it finds its origins in a meditation of St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, who was martyred in 202. He wrote about how Adam and Eve tied the knot of human disgrace for the human race by disobeying God, while Mary undid it by saying yes to God and becoming the Mother of Jesus.”
This icon offers a relevant perspective for us today. “We all have knots in our lives,” Fr. Bauer reflects. “Knots of alienation, addiction, discord, hurt, fears, a lack of respect, or the absence of peace or harmony. Through veneration of this icon, we hope to invite people to invoke the powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin as we seek her assistance in untying those knots that hold us bound and keep us moving forward in our relationship with God.”

What a beautiful reminder of our relationship with and need for God; to acknowledge that as humans we can’t help but have discord or pain, yet we strive through prayer and God’s mercy to continually undo them.

While The Basilica commissioned Debra to create this icon, her artistic licensure doesn’t play a role in the piece the way it would in other art forms. Rather, her work adheres to the traditions that have been handed down over centuries in the Byzantine icon style. It’s the Holy Spirit guiding her brush. Debra parallels creating icons to the first verse of Genesis. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” She further describes her process as “contemplating an image for an icon is a movement of being ‘without form’ to the ‘being of Light.’ The beginnings of an icon gradually develop in the hands of the artist through many stages before becoming a clear and luminous image.”

When you have the opportunity to gaze upon this icon, or any other, allow yourself to be immersed and to contemplate your emotional response. Be absorbed into the image and the silent Word of God. Quiet yourself in prayer and open yourself up to evoke communication with the Divine.

While icons offer a chance to experience contemplation and grace, Debra also gently reminds us that “every person is created in God’s image and is desired by God to be a living icon through our lives of faith.” In that respect, we are intrinsically woven together. We are both invited into and invited to become icons.

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