



Illustrating THE STORY OF THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

BY ALEXANDRA CHELSE

It has been said that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” When artwork is used by the church as a tool for evangelism, these words are capable of speaking volumes. Past centuries have revealed a history rich in art and culture which largely contributed to the development of Christianity around the world. The art that we are witnesses to today – the intricacies of church architecture, paintings and sculptures – has stood the test of time. Yet, its early beginnings would quite literally rise from underground ashes.

Although it is hard to pinpoint exactly when Christian art first made its debut, the earliest sightings were found during the second century in the catacombs of Rome. Very few works of art had survived during those early periods, primarily because Christians were a persecuted group. As well, a large number of these believers were either poor or slaves, and so were unable to produce durable works of art freely.

The art produced during the times of early Christianity may not have been easily recognizable either, as it was heavily influenced by Roman pagan symbolism. In later years, such artistic pieces included special Christian meanings and were further adapted to become more in line with Scripture.

Then, 300 years after the death of Christ, fourth-century Christian artists began to feature Christ in their paintings and sculptures through the illustration

of scenes depicting His great mission on earth. These included the “Wedding at Cana”; the “Raising of Lazarus”; and “The Loaves,” representing the feeding of the five thousand. However, the figure of the cross – which symbolizes the crucifixion of Christ – was still lacking from virtually all artwork, and would not be represented for several centuries. This may have been partly due to the fact that during this time, crucifixion was known to be a punishment meted out to common criminals.

Yet, for the Christians living today, the cross is a symbol that represents a crucial element of our faith. And art is a most fitting medium to meaningfully describe its relevance – bringing to life a message so profound and transformative, one can easily be rendered speechless.

The power of the visual medium to clearly express the Christian faith and the needs of the church is one of the reasons why The Voice of the Martyrs Canada (VOMC) was pleased to present a Visual Arts Contest this year. Participants were encouraged to submit paintings, drawings and sculptures for the main purpose of helping Canadian Christians and believers all over the world remember their persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ, “*as if [we] were together with them in prison...*” (Hebrews 13:3 NIRV).

The contest also served to delineate a compelling picture of what it truly means to suffer for one’s faith,



the core vision behind VOMC's work. "Reaching people today with, what is for some, a new and difficult concept (the idea of suffering for one's faith), requires us to dig deeply into our creativity," states Vanessa Brobbel, VOMC's Events Manager, who also happens to be a gifted artist herself and an enthusiastic promoter of the arts. "This contest endeavors to prime the creative pump while being a voice for the voiceless. The deeper story of the persecuted church should shine throughout these visual application ideas."

This year's first-place prize went to Marty Umanetz, whose painting of the cross not only signifies God's universal redemption plan for humankind, but also illustrates an authentic portrait of Christ's persecution which further evokes a message of the beauty in suffering. "I'm extremely thankful that the painting will help many realize the symbolism of the cross as it relates to the persecuted Christ," Marty explains. "The painting is a product of my emotional and spiritual connection with the cross during the hours I composed and painted it; my meditation and prayer."

Doug J. McKenzie, CEO of The Voice of the Martyrs Canada, believes that the arts are useful to the persecuted church because it's cathartic in the ability to reveal a deeper meaning of suffering which eventually gives way to greater healing: "I am certain that a powerful and mystical union exists between the arts (visual, performance, and media) and our faith in Christ. In particular, as one who is privileged to serve those who are persecuted for Jesus, it appears to me that the expression of our faith through the lens of the arts can heal deep wounds of persistent suffering while blessing others experiencing similar pain." 🌐

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THE CROSS AND THE PERSECUTED

Description of Cross Painting



"Our Saviour Jesus lived a life true to the good Word of His Father. As He endeavoured to give us a lifeline...Jesus suffered the ultimate persecution by the empirical rulers on earth. His body was mocked and beaten publicly in the streets, and the cross on which He died became a symbol for all generations – a daily reminder [of our need] to be conscious of His persecution which still exists today in the lives of His followers – including those in our own neighbourhoods.

"From the viewer's perspective [looking upwards from the base of the cross], my painting depicts a towering cross – communicating its heightened power. The 'crown of thorns' painted on it establishes a visual significance to the persecuted Jesus, differentiating the cross from that of a trendy symbol. The exaggerated length of the thorns parallels the depth of agony Jesus had suffered during His crucifixion journey." ~ Artist Marty Umanetz

The paintings submitted for this year's Visual Arts Contest – including those of our winners – will be highlighted in VOMC's various future issues. We are so grateful for the participation of each artist whose art and talent clearly reveal a sincere dedication to our Lord Jesus and to the ministry of His suffering people. Marty's painting of the "Cross," which will be featured on the cover of an upcoming issue, reminds us of the ultimate sacrifice of our Risen Saviour, giving all of humanity – representing every tribe, tongue and nation of the world – the opportunity to be reconciled with their Creator. For only then is it possible for one to experience the great depths of love, hope and joy (despite suffering) that He alone can provide for life on this earth and in eternity.