

Art and Spirituality: Stitched Together by the Holy Spirit

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Six short years ago, popular artist, Fr. Emanuel "Manu" Franco-Gomez, O.Carm., was still widely unknown to the Catholic art world. However, in that time, Fr. Manu has produced art for major national projects, earned a Masters of Fine Arts, and made a splash on social media for his beautiful style of sacred art.

Art has always been part of the priest's life. Born and raised in Jalisco, Mexico, Fr. Manu started drawing before he learned to write. His first memory was drawing in a sketchbook that he filled with cartoon characters. As a teen, people started saying his skills were above average, but he never believed them.

Mistaking their appreciation as mere courtesy, Fr. Manu thought art always belonged as a hobby. Instead, he considered music as a career path because it came easily to him and he knew other musicians who had studied music. Music is what introduced the teenage Mexican to the Carmelite spirituality.

"My vocation came along the way, so I went to study philosophy with the Carmelites," said Fr. Manu. While in college, he took classes in art and worked with an artist to develop his skills and to understand the materials. "Back then, I really pursued style, which is key to where I am now. I'm not going to spend my time copying. What really spoke to me was developing a defined, clear style. If I was going to spend time doing art, I needed to find something that spoke to me."

"There is something special in the intersection of symbols, images, and storytelling that always struck a chord with me," he said. "All of that speaks to me," which is why he has pursued songwriting, creative writing, painting, illustration and animation.



“However, I thought if I was a priest there wouldn’t be room for formal studies in art, until I heard about priests or monks who are artists.” A favorite is Fray Gabriel Chavez, a Mexican architect, artist, and Benedictine monk who has designed many churches in Mexico. “It was the first time I found something that really appealed to me,” said Fr. Manu. “It was through his art that I went back to drawing and painting.”

At that time, however, the Carmelite Province was skeptical of Fr. Manu studying art, because most priests pursue theological degrees to aid in priestly ministry. “To me, pursuing art was not at all a hinderance to becoming a priest.” Fr. Manu said he would’ve still chosen to be a priest even if it meant he could not study art. “Other Carmelites started advocating that I should study art. You know that God is speaking to you when the community supports it; that’s how religious life works.”

While in formation with the Carmelite Order, more and more people started asking Fr. Manu for digital copies of his art. He started posting some of his works on social media @manuocarm.



In 2017, Liturgical Press found Fr. Manu online and contacted him with a commission. “I thought it was a joke that a publishing company would reach out to me,” he recalled. Fr. Manu showed the contract to his formator, who later supported the pursuit of an art degree. The following year, Liturgical Press published the Spanish language Roman Missal, adorned with illustrations by Fr. Manu. The Roman Missal is the main book used in all churches around the world. The Missal illustrated by Fr. Manu is used across the United States at Spanish Masses.

At the same time that this work was published in 2018, Fr. Manu was ordained a priest in the Carmelites of the Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary.

In 2020, he was accepted to the University of Arizona’s Master of Fine Arts program. Because he already had a Master of Theology, Fr. Manu was able to apply his spirituality to the arts as he studied composition, medium, and style. Simultaneous to completing his thesis and graduating in 2023, Fr. Manu was working in three other ministries: as the Director of Youth Ministry for the Diocese of Tucson, parish work and youth minister at St. Cyril of Alexandria Catholic Church in Tucson, and teaching a theology course for Catholic University of America-Tucson. Fr. Manu has worked in education and youth ministry for over 20 years.

Last autumn, Fr. Manu accepted another commission with the National Catholic Youth Conference. This annual event for 12,000 teens offers three days of fellowship, spiritual growth, fun, and nationally renowned speakers. Throughout the conference, a storyline is revealed in five unique moments: creation of the world, creation of humankind, the coming of Christ, his death and resurrection, and the Eucharist. “My illustrations were very symbolic and not literal,” said Fr. Manu. “All of them need explanation so you understand what’s going on. Christ is present in them, but there are no human figures.”

Now, Fr. Manu has developed a routine of morning prayer and painting expressions of the scriptures. “Part of my art is also reading scriptures and paying attention to see how I can represent those things,” he said. “I’ve reached a very satisfying point in my career in which I am able to bring together theology and art.”

As a Carmelite priest, Fr. Manu took a vow of poverty. While he signs the art contracts, money goes directly to his Province. “They manage a budget for me,” he explained, “but I also have everything I need, including materials, technology, and art supplies. I know I don’t have to worry.” Encouraged by his religious community, Fr. Manu is free to express the Catholic spirituality through beautiful drawings, paintings, and illustrations.

“The Church is having a crisis when it comes to beauty. We have sacrificed real beauty,” said Fr. Manu. By encouraging young artists and young theologians, the Church has an opportunity to reclaim the undeniable transcendence of truth, goodness, and beauty.

To find and purchase Fr. Manu's work:

Instagram: [@ManuOCarm](https://www.instagram.com/ManuOCarm)

Website: www.manuocarm.org

Order Prints: [FineArtAmerica](https://www.fineartamerica.com/works/artists/view.php?id=ManuOCarm)

