

GOD & I: Ruben Ferreira

A Portuguese artist living in London talks about his ardent Catholic faith and how it inspires his artwork

By Mario Conte, OFM Conv.

WHAT can you tell us about the religious education you received during your childhood in Lisbon, Portugal?

I was not raised a Catholic. As we were only Catholics by tradition, I was only baptized. When I was about 14, I saw a movie about Saint Mother Teresa on TV. That movie made me

perceive, for the very first time, how God was so close to me. That was the first call. I understood that God was calling me to an intimate relationship with Him. Through Mother Teresa, and by exploring churches with their paintings and sculptures, I grew interested in the saints' lives, and gradually the saints led me to Jesus.

Then, one day, when I was sitting in the back of a church observing Mass, I was spotted by a nun. Now, nuns are good at spotting potential people to bring to Christ! This nun, today my godmother, asked me if I wanted to do a reading at Mass. I felt nervous, mainly because I was only starting to know what the Church was all about, but I took that as a commitment. Sunday after Sunday, I started attending Mass to do the readings, and eventually, my mom and dad started going to see me read. Then we realized that I still had to receive my first Holy Communion!

So, when I was about 16, I started attending catechism lessons at my local parish, and then I received my first Holy Communion. From that moment the parish priest invited me to serve at the altar, and I've been serving at the altar ever since. I also serve as a minister of Holy Communion, and as a catechist, visiting the sick and the poor. What a wonderful journey!

Was there a moment when you understood you wanted to become an artist, in particular a painter?

I felt I wasn't particularly good at anything in school apart from arts. I didn't enjoy school that much. Despite suffering bullying, art was always a safe place; it was my comfort zone. My dad was also a self-taught



Ruben Ferreira surrounded by some of his works in his atelier in London

artist. I remember seeing him painting at home and growing up with the smell of oil paint. Nevertheless, I was never encouraged to follow art as a profession due to the lack of life prospects, so (because I'm good connecting with people!) I eventually became a social worker. But guess what? Ultimately, I didn't get a job as a social worker either! Art was in my soul like those gifts that God entrusts to each and everyone of us. I felt that painting was leading me closer and closer to this ever-loving God. Deep inside I knew He was calling me to bring beauty to the world, building a bridge with His loving Heart.

Why did you move from Lisbon to London?

About two years before moving to London, my best friend Teresa challenged me to look into my art skills again. She introduced me to the artist Isabel Favila, and this artist looked at my art and said, "Well, this is okay, but you can do much better!" That was a wake-up call for me. By working with this artist I realized I had the potential to be a greater artist. So, moving to London allowed me to seek self-development by attending several master-classes and improving my skills and knowledge. Following God's call, I left my comfort zone behind and started my mission as an artist.

What is your definition of a painter?

Artists are called to make an invisible reality visible to the world. I listen to God's inspiration in prayer, meditating on the Bible and through the life of the saints.

BORN IN Lisbon, Portugal, in 1987, Ruben Ferreira is a self-taught artist who lives and paints in London. Ruben sees himself as a modern missionary, spreading the Gospel through his art, talks and social media. His studio is his 'convent cell' where each painting becomes part of his prayers and communion with the saints, Mother Mary and God. For him, painting is a relationship.

When he moved to London, he enrolled in several master classes at the Art Academy of London, developing his technique and knowledge.

Ruben has collaborated with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and several Causes of Canonization, promoting the lives of saints through his paintings.

His figures are contemporary and, at the same time, appropriate to the biblical or sacred context, and help the viewer enter the scenes imaginatively. Ruben profoundly believes that his mission as an artist is to make Sacred Art a place of dialogue and encounter for all.

In 2021 Ruben was invited by Yale University to present a webinar about his faith, art, good humor and humanity in his works.



I have so many paintings in my heart. I just need time to show them to the world. We are all called to be apostles of beauty, co-creators with God, who is the ultimate Artist. So, we are not here to serve ourselves, but to serve Him.

Thomas Merton says, "Hurry ruins saints as well as artists," so I have learnt that artists should be contemplatives, listeners and attentive to the signs of the times, bringing the world closer to God. That is the most beautiful vocation God could ever call me to.

You have written that your "mis-

sion as an artist is to make Sacred Art a place of dialogue and encounter for all." How do you try to achieve this in practice?

I discovered that mission a few years ago through the *Black Lives Matter* movement. We have people from all over the world in my parish, and I realised that many people lack representation in the Church, feeling that they are still outsiders. And to some degree, I can also relate to that.

We live in a time where images are very powerful. Bringing to Sacred Art contemporary, lesser-known saints from all cultural backgrounds and life circumstances will spark curiosity. By telling their stories through paintings, people will stop and wonder who they are. Everyone will start understanding that God makes no exclusions and acts on everyone's lives today. People who still feel on the margins of society and the Church can start a conversation with Jesus. It is



Through Mother Teresa and other saints Ruben was gradually led to Jesus

Cover Feature

about celebrating diversity. Catholic means, in fact, universal.

I have seen several of your works on the internet, and I have noticed your great passion for painting saints. Can you explain why you are particularly interested in them?

Saints are friends in heaven, with whom I cultivate a personal relationship as much as I do with my friends on earth. Saints were the ones who led me to Christ and the Catholic Faith. They are the ones who keep pushing me to challenge myself to be a better person every day.

In some cases, the Church has not done them any favors by sugar-coating their stories to the point that we can barely relate to them. The saints are just as human as you and I are, and it is precisely in their humanity and struggles on the path to sainthood that they have something to tell us.

Ruben holding his portrait of Blessed Franz Jägerstätter, the Austrian conscientious objector who was executed for his refusal to fight for the Nazis



Among your works I noticed a painting dedicated to the Venerable Placido Cortese, a friar of St. Anthony's Basilica who was tortured and killed by the Nazis during WWII for helping Jews and disbanded Allied soldiers escape. How did you get to know his story?

Painting, for me, is a relationship, a prayer. I struggle to paint someone I don't feel connected with. So, every painting tells a different story containing a part of my soul.

I visited the Basilica of Saint Anthony in October last year. My traveling companion called my attention to the Venerable Father Placido's confessional. I do not believe in coincidences, so if a saint crosses my path, we have a mission together. When I started reading the story of Father Placido I was moved by his incredible humility and geniality. He was not physically strong; he was small and fragile, but inwardly, he was a giant. He was a bright star in a dark time – the Second World War, with the Nazis in power. And he sure did not think he would become a member of the resistance movement when he felt the calling to be a Franciscan friar!

I asked myself, "How can I portray him in a way that will draw people to want to know more about him?" So I painted him with a member of the Gestapo and a Nazi soldier behind him, shouting at him. In contrast, Father Placido looks at us with a very serene look, with peace in his heart, because he's absolutely sure that he has fulfilled God's will to the very end. With his index finger on his lips, he points to silence because he was courageous up until death, enduring terrible torture, never betraying the group of young people who helped him.

How do you view life? As a pilgrimage towards a goal, as a con-



tinuous struggle or as something else?

Life is definitely a pilgrimage towards God. It is a challenging journey, but that's what makes it fascinating!

Behind each painting there is always a big mess: oils everywhere, dirty brushes, wobbly sketches, stains, frustration... and all of that is a valuable part of the creative process to achieve something unique. Our lives are just like that. Life is sometimes messy and confusing, but when we surrender to and trust in the ultimate Artist, He will bring everything together to create a beautiful and unique masterpiece – our lives according to His love and dreams. May we become everything He dreams for us.

How would you paint God?

I don't see God as just an old white man with a long beard. I see God as all forms and expressions of beauty! I contemplate a glimpse of God when I feel mesmerized with all of His Creation: wildflowers in a field, a sunset, or just the



The Coronation of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary; Ruben's studio is his 'convent cell', where each painting becomes part of his prayers to the saints

blue sky. This beauty leads me to prayer, making me feel more connected with God. God is also in every human being we encounter, from our family members to the perfect stranger on the street. So I feel I paint God in every human being I portray and in the beauty I try to bring to the world.

The biggest mistake we can make is to try to fit Him in a tiny box or believe He is too big for us and that, therefore, we cannot perceive Him. I paint God as very close to us in every moment of our lives.

What implication does your concept of God have in your life?

Dorothy Day, the American journalist who founded the Catholic Worker Movement and is on the path to sainthood, once said, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." So we cannot love God if we don't love our brothers and sisters and all Creation.

Art must be a place of encounter. Therefore, I cannot be contained in my studio away from the world if

I want to bring the world to God. I am here to serve.

This year we celebrate the 800th anniversary of the first nativity scene created by Saint Francis in Greccio. Have you ever painted a nativity scene?

I have painted a nativity scene, which I regard as one of the most moving paintings I ever did. I was inspired by Helen Thomas Robson's photo that I saw on the Internet. The painting shows Jesus as a very fragile, tender, peaceful baby in the arms of Mary. Joseph leans towards him in profound adoration. I called the painting *Silent Night* because it calls us to an inner silent realizing that God is amongst us.

Christmas is special for me because it is when God came to make himself one of us. I always say to people in my talks and workshops, "If I was God, Earth would be the last place I would go to! Instead, God chose to come here to be with us. He came to be our friend, to be close to us."

Saint Francis has an extraordinary place in my heart. I have painted the Little Brother three times, and it seems I am not destined to keep one! Someone always buys it! This proves that Francis is indeed a universal brother who speaks to everyone.

What does Saint Anthony of Padua mean to you?

I was born in Anthony's home town, Lisbon, so I have a natural connection to him. There practically isn't a church in the world that doesn't have an image of him, yet he is at the same time the world's best-

loved and less-known saint. Realizing this, I decided to learn more about Anthony, and so I discovered a fascinating man. Only by knowing each other can we grow in friendship. This is not different from all the saints in Heaven - get to know these amazing people!

I know that Saint Anthony is very effective in helping people find faith in God. So, I trust that one day, the Holy Spirit will open a path for me to work on a painting of him. **MSA**



Above: While visiting the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua Ruben became interested in the figure of Father Placido Cortese; Below: Ruben's painting *Silent Night* calls us to an inner silent realizing that God is amongst us

