

ALL MY EYES SEE

The Artistic Vocation of Fr. William Hart McNichols



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INTRODUCTION

Opening the Eyes of the Heart



Father William Hart McNichols (Fr. Bill) is widely known, admired, and sometimes scorned, as one of the world's most gifted living religious artists and iconographers. The icons of Fr. Bill, a former Jesuit and student of the famed Franciscan iconographer Br. Robert Lentz, have been honored with exhibitions in major U.S. cities, featured in many books, and the subject of a full-length documentary by filmmaker Christopher Summa. More recently, his years of ministry to the dying during the AIDS crisis in New York City in the 1980s were the focus of a podcast, and later a book, by journalist Michael O'Laughlin.¹ In letters published between author Robert Ellsberg and the late Sr. Wendy Beckett, the beloved British nun and art historian who hosted TV programs on religious art for many years, Sr. Wendy confesses that Fr. Bill's icons are "profoundly full of the presence of God for me. . . . When I look at [them] I fall into prayer, and that's it. . . . They're not 'works of art' in the worldly sense but functional, living theology, uniting us to Our Lord as we look at them."² In all of this, it is fair to conclude, as one Jesuit commentator noted several years ago, "At last, the art of Rev. William Hart McNichols is enjoying the treatment it deserves."³

What has not yet received sustained attention is the story of Bill's artistic journey in the decades prior to his work as an iconographer, when drawing was his primary means of expression as

a young, gay man, coming into his identity while growing up in a prominent political family—his father served as governor of Colorado from 1957 to 1963, and his uncle was mayor of Denver from 1968 to 1983. From the age of five, through his teenage years and during his AIDS ministry as a young Jesuit in the 1980s, Bill created hundreds of drawings and paintings that convey a vision of Christ-like compassion for the marginalized; many do so, arguably, in a more intimate and personal key than the icons for which he would become famous decades later. His drawings of the Holy Family, for example, often created for children's books, portray the "hidden years" of Jesus in tenderly familiar, down-to-earth scenes; the "AIDS drawings," by contrast, can still shock in their portrayal of Christ crucified, naked on the cross, covered in Kaposi sarcoma lesions.

These latter drawings still speak quite powerfully into our present-day social, political, and ecclesial atmosphere, where unspeakable suffering continues to afflict the most marginalized of God's people—including queer persons, who still face widespread isolation and discrimination in the church—and not only human beings, but the animals, waters, and trees, the suffering Earth itself. In Fr. Bill's art across some five decades, human beings and the natural world share a fluid, inextricable relationship, reflecting the "integral ecology" to which Pope Francis calls us

in his teaching, and which the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest, Bill's longtime spiritual home, have always embodied in their communal beliefs and religious practices. In Catholic art, the creativity of the artist is a response in faith to the overflowing creativity of God, who seeks to birth fresh possibility into landscapes of chaos and evident hopelessness. As Fr. Bill has written, "Art is praise of God with every stroke and movement."⁴

This book represents the fruition of a friendship with Fr. Bill and innumerable conversations that reach back some fifteen years. What previous explorations of Bill's life and work lack in biographical detail, this book offers in his own voice, prompted by my questionings, though the picture that emerges here does not claim to be complete.⁵ It is not a biography, autobiography, or memoir. If it were so, many more people close to Bill—family, close friends, and critical "life savers" along the way, people who came up often in our conversations—would have to be included. Fr. Bill and I dare to hope for something more modest: that through his art and in the natural dance of our conversations, something creative and perhaps unexpected will stir in the imagination of fellow pilgrims of all kinds—laypeople and religious, spiritual seekers, artists and scholars alike—anyone receptive to art's power to sustain the journey of faith, especially when the road descends into loneliness and hardship. This book seeks to give voice to experiences and insights that have gestated in Fr. Bill over a lifetime, while inviting the reader to contemplate a remarkable legacy of illustrations, paintings, and icons, some published here for the first time.

In an essay titled "Art as Witness" by the famous illustrator Fritz Eichenberg, whose striking wood engravings graced the pages of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, Eichenberg writes, "Creativity is potentially dormant in every human mind," yet creativity "needs nourishment and care."⁶ Just as Eichenberg's images have nourished the lives of countless pilgrims in a vision of faith that seeks justice, so have Fr. Bill's illustrations and icons. They do so

even more potently when contemplated against the backdrop of his life's story. "If we could only learn to approach everything we do with love . . .," says Eichenberg, "realize the joy of creating beauty in ourselves and around us, open our eyes to the grand design in all things living, we would be rewarded immeasurably." Few persons that I know have lived out this creed more faithfully over the course of a lifetime than Fr. Bill McNichols.

Yet I share with those who know Fr. Bill personally a certain reluctance, or inability, to claim that I truly know him. Of him it might fairly be said what one of Abraham Lincoln's numerous biographers said about his enigmatic subject. "The more fully Lincoln's varied career is traced . . . the more his genius grows and passes beyond each interpretation."⁷ One of Lincoln's contemporaries put it more succinctly: "He still smiles and remains impenetrable."⁸ Fr. Bill has been described as a mystic, and even a saint, by those whose lives he has touched. He has also been the object of public scorn from a vocal minority of Catholics who have denigrated his art as "profane," or who find the very thought of an uncloseted gay priest to be scandalous. Though Bill would never think to apply the term "saint" to himself—he resists even the title of "mystic"—Michael O'Laughlin in his book quotes one young man who regularly attended Fr. Bill's "Healing Masses for People with AIDS" in New York City. He said simply that Bill "is the most Christ-like man I have ever met."⁹ When a cynical editorial writer accused Lincoln's biographers of being "hagiographers," that is, "saint worshippers," one reader responded, "We could use a few real saints in this country now."¹⁰ Is this not also painfully true today?

During his Jesuit formation, Bill recalls one of his Jesuit theology professors saying bluntly to the class, "If you seek ordination, get ready for chaos. Your very brief life in the church will be a lonely journey. You will sow the seeds for the new church but you won't live to see it. If you can accept this, then get ordained. If not, it would be very wise not to." An all-encompassing "Ignatian

caution," as he describes it, "was drilled into us about false claims to vainglory." My aim in this introduction is not to lift Fr. Bill onto a pedestal. Rather, both as his friend and as a theologian, I have come to see Bill's art as a luminous thread in a vast and ancient tapestry, weaving together Eastern and Western spiritualities, and, as we shall see, the American Southwest, a lineage almost too wondrous, too mysterious, to write about. In what follows, my aim is to situate Fr. Bill's artistic vocation not in isolation (the lone artist-priest-hero-saint), but far more humbly, as he does: as one in a very long lineage who has been called to "take instruction" from the Spirit, regardless of personal cost, out of loving fidelity to a new church, a new creation, he will never live to see. As a friend and fellow pilgrim, I also wish to say a word about how our relationship has changed me.

Biographical and Spiritual Roots of McNichols's Artistic Vocation

As noted above, the atmosphere of Bill's childhood was thick with politics and religion. Born in Denver to Marjory Hart and Stephen McNichols on July 10, 1949, his father was elected governor of Colorado in 1957. Thus, in 1960, he and his four siblings (Steve, Bob, Mary, and Margie) found themselves living in the Governor's Mansion.¹¹ Five years later, his uncle, William Henry McNichols Jr., was elected mayor of Denver. His grandfather, William Henry McNichols Sr., was Denver city auditor for nearly twenty-five years. These were no small accomplishments in a state rife with anti-Catholic sentiment. For much of the first half of the century, Colorado politics was controlled by the Ku Klux Klan, which frequently targeted Catholics and Catholic institutions. It was an often-hostile climate that undoubtedly still shapes the way Fr. Bill moves in the world as artist, gay man, and priest, now "out" for almost fifty years. While that particular choice has made many uncomfortable, including some of his fellow religious, it has also and always been a

tremendous struggle for Bill. "Some people want to be subversive," he once said to me. "They try to be subversive. For gay people, just being born, just being alive, is already subversive. I've spent my whole life trying not to be subversive, trying to fit in."

As a child, Bill's love of art was nourished by a Catholic parochial school education in Denver. He credits the Sisters of the Precious Blood with encouraging his artistic gifts and infusing his elementary school years with a deep spirituality. "In my own life, especially in childhood, art was the primary way I was introduced to the two thousand years of Christianity."¹² Though he endured years of bullying through grade school and high school, art and humor became ways to express, and mask, his suffering. It was during his teenage years, among the Jesuits at Regis High School in Denver, that Bill would find his lifelong home and refuge in the atmosphere of Ignatian spirituality.

From the age of nineteen I was brought into the life of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, which consist of four weeks of prayer and meditation on the life of Christ. The retreat culminates with a glorious burst of light, which launches the retreatant into a life of ministry of "finding God in all things." Once these words settle in your heart, they never leave you. They become the way you live in the world with its great variety of people, as well as the creation, both damaged and abundant.¹³

Here is the key to Fr. Bill's twin vocation as an artist and priest, and perhaps the golden thread that unites our wide-ranging conversations below. In life and in art, he seems most at home in the darkly liminal passage between the Third and Fourth Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius. Though people continue to be crucified across the world (the Christ whose passion is the focus of the First and Third Week meditations), an Ignatian sensibility perceives that *another world is possible* because God, in Christ,

has planted in history the seeds of all creation's transformation in love, in resurrection hope, our joyful participation in the very life of God (the risen Christ of the Fourth Week). Activating all the senses and powers of imagination through the Four Weeks of the Exercises, the humanity of Jesus whom we encounter in the Gospels (Week Two) refracts that same glorious "burst of light" in all of us.

Imbibing the inner dynamism of Ignatian spirituality, Fr. Bill sums up his philosophy of art in six words: "What you gaze upon, you become." "You gaze on the icon," he says, "but it gazes on you too. We need to gaze on truly conversational, truly loving images, images that will return our love."¹⁴ Implicit here is a call to fully participate in the co-creative labor of beloved community, God's dream for the world. We are not beholden to "reality" as mediated by the prevailing culture. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, the pattern of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection continues to birth an amazing "cloud of witnesses," saints both ordinary and extraordinary, from whom we can learn what it means to be fully human. Indeed, much like the art of his teacher Robert Lentz, the sheer diversity of subjects across Bill's corpus is staggering.¹⁵ It proclaims that there are no cookie-cutter saints; there is no single, perfect way to be authentically human, to be holy, to embody the divine.

To gaze on "images that return our love," then, far from binding us to some dead thing of the past called "the church," is for many believers a subversive spiritual practice, a disciplined "spiritual exercise" that aims to get the heart into its best, most divine-human, shape. Each must discover our own particular gifts, and for every pilgrim and every community the path will be unique. The sacred image or icon, in other words, always turns back upon the viewer. If images tell stories, and those stories attach themselves to our hearts, *what kind of images and life stories do we choose to inhabit?* Are they helping us become the persons and community God calls us to be?

To Reinforce or Resist the Prevailing Order

Nearly a hundred years ago, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School drew a critical distinction between authentic art and art refracted through popular, political, and mass culture, or what they (derisively) called the "culture industry."¹⁶ What happens to art, they famously asked, when it is suddenly produced on a mass scale for the consumption of everybody?¹⁷ The question takes on heightened urgency in the age of the Internet, the smartphone, and artificial intelligence, as we find ourselves awash in a chaos of images. How does one distinguish what is good, true, and beautiful from the barrage of messages that aim solely to provoke, to stimulate, to sell us something? In simplified terms, for the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, authentic art is something that's elevating and challenges the existing social, political, and economic order, whereas mass culture does precisely the opposite. "Culture, or the culture industry, uses art in a conservative way, which is to say it uses art to uphold the existing order."¹⁸ In this context, I wish to suggest, Fr. Bill's art is prophetically Christian, authentically Catholic, and frequently subversive, or interruptive of mass culture, in the best sense of these terms.

In ways resonant with the teaching and pastoral witness of Pope Francis, Fr. Bill's interpretation of the biblical and Christian mystical tradition reflects a "mysticism of open eyes,"¹⁹ reminding the viewer that contemplation of the Gospels and the lives of the martyrs and saints is no aesthetic or disembodied escape from reality. To paraphrase German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, the stories Bill tells through his images are "subversive" and "dangerous" insofar as they seek to make visible "all invisible and inconvenient suffering," and, convenient or not, to pay attention to it and take responsibility for it, "for the sake of a God who is a friend to human beings."²⁰ No doubt the creation of such images can be threatening to the prevailing powers of

society and church, and at once a vital source of hope for the “little,” the poor and marginalized across the world.²¹ The 1960s folk singer Phil Ochs, a fierce critic of American hubris, once said of his music, “Ah, but in such an ugly time, the true protest is beauty.”²² Fr. Bill’s protest, we might say, is the good news, the truth, the beauty, of the gospel itself, and in lives of holiness across the ages.

In sum, if being subversive means to threaten or tear down the tradition, then Fr. Bill’s art can hardly be described as subversive. As even a cursory glance across his body of work makes clear, the artist himself disappears behind the illuminated faces of the prophets, saints, and martyrs of the Christian tradition and well beyond. While his subjects are not always Christian, his vocation is profoundly “traditional,” even theologically conservative, at the meeting point between Western and Eastern Christianity. If by subversive, on the other hand, we mean radical (as in “returning to the roots”), challenging in the way that the prophets and saints shatter our complacency, then his work is rightly called subversive—though Bill himself shudders at the word. The more fitting term may be *anima ecclesia*. Fr. Bill is a *church soul*, though his vision of “church” cannot be confined to a building. Though the “precious blood” is everywhere in his work, so is the “burst of light” that characterizes the joy of the gospel: the call to live and labor together as resurrected beings.

Bringing Nativity into the Apocalypse

“The Kingdom of God,” says Russian Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov, writing in Paris under the shadow of World War II, “is accessible only through the chaos of this world. It is not an alien transplant, but rather the revelation of the hidden depth of this very world.”²³ In a world that despairs of God, the artist’s vocation, says Evdokimov, is both priestly and prophetic: she “creates the transcendental and attests to its presence.” “A little dust of this world, a board, a

few colors, a few lines—and there is beauty . . . a vision of things which cannot be seen.” Likewise, the poet, “attuned to the beginning of things,” helps us remember that “beauty is the fulfillment of truth, and that moment when ‘all is fulfilled’ is always marked by glory.”²⁴ To say it more soberly, as was once said of a young Abraham Joshua Heschel, the poet, the theologian, the artist “must speak for a silent God.”²⁵

Growing up as a Roman Catholic in the United States, I am far more accustomed to sacred spaces filled with sculptures and stained glass than with icons, which are often described as “windows to the sacred.” Much later in my life I would experience this mystagogical sense of iconography, but as a younger man, I would have found it difficult to pray before icons. The faces gazing back at me from their gold-leafed surfaces seemed to me strange and exotic, somewhat rigid, not quite people; to my eyes they were otherworldly, not “realistic,” seeming to come, as it were, from the other side. Later I would understand that this visual dissonance is precisely the point, that by their very nature icons attempt to do what is logically impossible: to unite at once the unportrayability and portrayability of God, whose presence is both hidden and manifest in the world, shining, as it were, from within all things.²⁶

To say it in terms of eschatology, that realm of Christian faith and theology most saturated with paradox, icons presume that another world is possible because the seeds of transformation, of divinization, of participation in the divine Energy, which is Love, are *already present in this world*, in history, if painfully hidden.²⁷ Much more than a painting, then, the icon is best described as a *theology* laid down in lines and colors. Thus, icons are not said to be “painted” but “written,” and the art of writing icons is passed down methodically and prayerfully from teacher to student. As Henri Nouwen writes in his classic meditation on the Russian tradition, icons are not easy to “see” because they “speak more to our inner than to our outer senses. They speak to the heart that searches for God.”²⁸ Prayer before the icon facilitates the re-centering of subjectivity from oneself

to the divine, no longer related to as an object of self-fulfillment, but rather related to as a Person and Presence.²⁹

Still, the dissonance I felt in viewing icons as a younger Catholic was not so much cognitive or theological as it was cultural and aesthetic. Accustomed to the more “realistic” style of Western religious art, iconography to my eyes seemed to *paint over* the messiness of life as it really is in favor of highly idealized representations of the human world and of the church. It smelled to me of Gnosticism, a suspicion of matter and the flesh, an escape from history, rather than its illumination.³⁰ Thanks in no small part to Fr. Bill’s work, I have since come to see that I was mistaken, that my reticence before icons was misplaced. The dilemma could only be resolved when I began to see them not through my own culturally conditioned eyes but rather as they are meant to be seen, as “the presencing of the divine in and through the material form.”³¹ This required a fundamental shift in my default manner of seeing, a pedagogy, as it were, of seeing through the eyes of the heart. And to effect this shift I needed a teacher. Fr. Bill has been that teacher.

In her meditation on his iconography, spiritual writer Mirabai Starr underscores the “apocalyptic” or revelatory power of Bill’s work to open urgently, if gently, the eyes of the heart.

In the book of Revelation, Fr. Bill points out, the dragon goes after the pregnant woman to eat her child. We are all her children, he says. And, in the lineage of the prophets, *we are bringing nativity into the apocalypse*. . . . Fr. Bill’s icons are beacons in the darkness, beckoning us home to love.³²

To “engage with Fr. Bill’s offerings is a subversive act,” Starr concludes. “It quietly overthrows the patriarchy and gently reinstates the feminine values of mercy and connection.”³³ Theologian John Dadosky recalls that when he first began to explore Bill’s art, he “was struck by how much of his work was devoted to the divine feminine. I became convinced that much of Western Chris-

tianity suffers from this lack.” Dadosky describes the feminine aspect of God as “a gaping wound” and “one of the most neglected dimensions” of Western religious life, even while many Christians remain “unaware of the ramifications of its absence in our collective psyche.”³⁴

While feminist theologians have long sought to restore the divine feminine in Christian spirituality, Bill’s work has done so as well, if from a very different direction. He has, as it were, “put a face” on the divine feminine with his icons of Mary, and with his explicitly “sophianic icons,” or images of Divine Sophia and the Shekhinah—in the rabbinic tradition, the divine Presence who accompanies and sustains her people in exile.³⁵ We are seeing “the last gasp of the dark side of masculinity,” he says. “We are moving beyond viewing the struggle strictly as between the masculine and the feminine, to seeing the struggle as between light and darkness. Both sexes can be equally light or dark.”³⁶ The point recalls for me the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who speaks of a “great motherhood over all, as common longing,” and who observes that “even in the man there is motherhood.”³⁷ And as well, the writings of Thomas Merton, whose remembrance of God as Father and Mother, as Child and Sister, as Proverb and Wisdom-Sophia, has done perhaps as much as any Western spiritual writer to reclaim an experiential, felt knowledge of the living God in a feminine key.³⁸

The task of the poet, the prophet, the contemplative, says Rowan Williams, is to interrogate the repetition of “old words for God, safe words for God, lazy words for God, useful words for God.”³⁹ In like manner, the vocation of the prophetic *visual artist* is to interrogate the complacent repetition of old images, safe images, lazy images, useful images, of God. Theologian Wendy Wright beautifully drives the point home on the role of images and imagination in Christian spirituality down through the ages:

[Images] are not only the products of our imagination but they give form and content to our imaginations. Repeated focus, as in

practices of meditation or contemplative gazing on religious images, facilitates this transformative process. The visual contemplative or meditative arts cultivated in the great religious traditions are vastly different from ordinary sight. Indeed, they are uniquely designed to deconstruct habituated imaginative constructs and allow visual imagery to reconstruct *a new imaginative lens through which reality is interpreted and possible worlds perceived*.⁴⁰

Perhaps this is what it means to “bring nativity into the apocalypse.” Both in life and through his art, Fr. Bill stands quietly at the threshold—often in the midst of evident chaos, as during the AIDS hospice ministry—midwifing our encounter with “possible worlds” that both do and do not yet exist. Though I was initially resistant to icons, the eyes of my heart have been opened by Fr. Bill’s work to the illumination of the world—“finding God in all things”—and of human beings as ever-potential sacraments of the living God.

But how, exactly? In a passage I have long treasured, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel speaks of the “powerlessness” that we often feel in prayer, the gap between our desire to pray and the means to express what we yearn to say. “Should we feel ashamed,” he asks, “by our inability to utter what we bear in our hearts?” No, he says, we should not feel ashamed. “God loves what is left over at the bottom of the heart and cannot be expressed in words. . . . The unutterable surplus of what we feel, the sentiments that we are unable to put into words are our payment in kind to God.”⁴¹ What I, like so many others, have discovered in Fr. Bill’s images and icons is that sacred images, much like music or liturgy, can help us bridge the distance we feel between ourselves and God. Both in his life and in his art—these, we shall see, are quite inseparable—Bill reminds me that it is possible to be a human being and to strive each day to be a follower of Christ: that is, to hold the fragility of the world and of our own lives with loving tenderness, and therein to discover, perhaps to our great sur-

prise, that the world, charged everywhere with ineffable mystery, is loving us back.

As Heschel encourages me, so does Fr. Bill. When we bring our poverty back to prayer, God affirms our longing and our inability and mysteriously fills the gap. Jesus encouraged his followers to pray, to pray *boldly*, for the Reign of God to come “on earth as it is in heaven.” Perhaps the distance is far smaller than we could ever imagine.

“All My Eyes See”: On Nurturing the Spiritual Senses

In his classic study of 1923, *The Art Spirit*, the American painter Robert Henri offered an assessment of Western society that seems to me highly prescient of the present-day climate in America—and the hyperpolarized U.S. Catholic Church—now a hundred years later.

We are living in a strange civilization. Our minds and souls are so overlaid with fear, with artificiality, that often we do not even recognize beauty. It is this fear, this lack of direct vision of truth that brings about all the disaster the world holds, and how little opportunity we give any people for casting off fear, for living simply and naturally. When they do, first of all we fear them, then we condemn them. It is only if they are great enough to outlive our condemnation that we accept them.⁴²

Now nearing the end of my sixth decade, I’ve learned to pay attention especially to those religious thinkers, artists, and writers who get attacked or dismissed by the “defenders of orthodoxy,” whether because they are perceived as too naïve or childish or because they seem to live from a posture of love and mercy that others suspect is too profane, too open, too vulnerable to the world’s manifold diversity. Or perhaps, for lack of empirical evidence of the sacred realm they labor to defend, we simply deem them “impenetrable.”

Like a great many intellectuals, artists, and visionaries in the history of the church, the categorical labels that would fix a person on one side of an absolutized binary (e.g., liberal/conservative; progressive/traditional) do not hold in the case of Fr. Bill. His work “contains multitudes,”⁴³ equally at home with the mystical theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr, the prophetic voices of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Daniel Berrigan, and a growing litany of unsung witnesses both within and beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Thus Fr. Bill stands both within and outside the margins of an institution that hasn’t always welcomed him, giving new form and new content to the radical capaciousness of Catholicism, and vital expressions of Christian faith from East to West. Today you can often find him wearing a black T-shirt emblazoned with “Glory to Ukraine” in the language of that country, and in the bright yellow and blue colors of its flag. To a fault, some might say, his heart is torn open again and again by the pain of the world.

Initially unsettled by the “strangeness” of certain pieces of Fr. Bill’s work, I learned to open myself to these images especially. I learned to trust the revelatory nature of our long, often meandering conversations about life’s difficulties; the question of God’s presence amid terrible suffering and violence on the world stage; or simply as one of us was yearning for hints of grace in situations of prolonged personal difficulty. (We’ve shared a great deal of laughter and silliness, too, not easily transferable to the page.) I’ve incorporated his art into my classes, alongside others not “at home” in the dominant culture, especially African American writers and artists. Their testimony, like Fr. Bill’s, often gestures to the presence of the divine, not in some distant heaven but immanently, often painfully, “in the valley of the shadow of death.” And like these others, I find Bill’s work not only compelling in its piercing honesty, but trustworthy. Why? Because he has lingered in that valley much of his life, accompanying others in hope against hope, witnessing to God’s concern for the least.

“There are moments in our lives, there are moments in a day,” says Henri, “when we seem to see beyond the usual. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. If one could but recall [this] vision by some sort of sign. It was in this hope that the arts were invented. Sign-posts on the way to what may be. Sign-posts toward greater knowledge.”⁴⁴ New Testament scholar N. T. Wright puts the question of art and its relationship to hope in more explicitly Christian language: “When art comes to terms with both the wounds of the world and the promise of resurrection, and learns how to express and respond to both at once, we will be on the way to a fresh vision, a fresh mission.”⁴⁵ Following what he calls the “slender threads,” letting himself be led by the Spirit—“to hear, to find, to take instruction”—Bill’s work bears us through the world’s wounds and toward the gospel promise of resurrection.⁴⁶ In bursts of light and sometimes in terrible shadows, he shows the way to a fresh vision, a fresh mission.

It is in this spirit of promise—the vision of the Fourth Week—that we have taken our title, *All My Eyes See*, from a poem by the great English Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins—“Not of all my eyes see, wandering on the world,” writes Hopkins.⁴⁷ Bill has described Hopkins’s meaning to me in terms of intuition, a sixth sense, a capacity to see and feel beneath the surface of things. “We don’t always see the suffering in people, the beauty in people, but as you grow near to God that sensibility opens up. As a hospice chaplain, *a lot of my eyes opened up*. And they never shut down, that’s the problem!” There’s a profound vulnerability, in other words, along with inexplicable joy, intensity, and depth, that comes with opening all of one’s senses to the world. “In New York, on the subway, you learn that you’ve got to pay attention to everything, heighten your antennae, your sense for who and what’s happening around you.” More positively, he says, “It’s like the communion of saints, this palpable knowing that those who have died are really present to us. You try to talk about it and people think you’re

crazy. But it's a way of talking about a deep truth of human experience that's difficult to explain. We didn't just make up this stuff."

For me, the notion of perceiving with "all my eyes" shares something of Eichenberg's wonder that creativity "is potentially dormant in every human mind." In the language of the Christian mystical tradition, we all bear innate "spiritual senses," dormant "seeds of contemplation," *more than just two physical eyes*, by virtue of our source and destiny in God.⁴⁸ Yet these seeds of awareness, the bud of creativity, as Eichenberg observes, require "nourishment and care." Robert Henri calls this inner sensibility "the art spirit," and like Eichenberg—like Hopkins, like Fr. Bill—Henri insists that this capacity for sensing the holy, the beautiful, the sacred in all things is "the province of every human being." It "is not an outside, extra thing. When the artist is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressive creature."⁴⁹

However you might define it, whatever your experience of this heightened sensibility may be, it is our fervent wish that this book will nourish your own art spirit, your innate spiritual senses. "Let those who have eyes to see, see," says Jesus. It is the image that leads to insight, and the artist who opens the door to such a faith.

An Unexpected Friendship

This introduction would be incomplete without a brief recounting of my friendship with Fr. Bill, the backstory for our conversations in these chapters. It was almost fifteen years ago, some months after my first book on Thomas Merton was published, that I received a handwritten letter bearing a name and address I didn't recognize: Fr. Bill McNichols, Taos, New Mexico. The sender described himself as someone who "did not like Thomas Merton very much" until he had read my book; that to his great surprise, I had helped him "discover a side of Merton completely unknown to me," namely, Merton's encounter

with Wisdom-Sophia, the divine feminine, and his translation of her voice into the West. He went on to explain that he had first encountered the divine feminine some forty years ago in the liturgy and iconography of the Christian East, and that he had portrayed her in several of his works as an iconographer. He concluded, rather matter-of-factly, that one of the drawings in my book had inspired him to create a new icon of Sophia, and would I be interested in seeing it?

Little could I have imagined that the person who wrote this kind letter would become a dear friend. It was the first of several written exchanges that merged into phone calls and eventually several pilgrimages I would make to Fr. Bill's studio in Taos. The first of these I undertook with our eldest daughter, Isabell, then fifteen, who was keen to meet him, and who I secretly hoped would fall in love with the high desert landscape that I had come to love decades earlier. (A hike through the Chama River Canyon to Christ in the Desert Monastery near Abiquiu sealed her own bond with this sacred geography.) The second involved our whole family traveling to Taos to visit with Fr. Bill. Our daughter Grace, a budding artist, watched in wonder and utter delight in Bill's studio as he showed her how to apply gold-leaf to an unfinished icon. We shared many meals, Mass around a small coffee table, and a back-entrance journey into Taos Pueblo, where he introduced me to several artist friends from the Native American community. Since his move to Albuquerque in 2013, I have visited him there several times, and he has stayed with us when visiting with his siblings or passing through the Denver area. In short, Fr. Bill has become a beloved part of our family.

Bill and I share an obsessive love of music, perhaps nobody more than Stevie Wonder and Joni Mitchell, who, in her wondrous renaissance of recent years, is a frequent topic of conversation. I have stacks of CDs in my study that he has sent me, from Barbra Streisand and k. d. lang to Bach, Pergolesi, and Gershwin, with scribbled notes about each for my edification. I receive almost daily texts and emails from Bill with links to



*Write What You See and Send It to the Seven Churches:
The Apocalypse 1:11
WHM, 1982*

YouTube interviews or performances by various artists, both popular and obscure. Of course, it is impossible to sum up a friendship in a few lines. I can only hope that hints of Bill's personal qualities come through in our conversations below: his eye for beauty, both childlike and sophisticated; his lively sense of humor and quickness to laugh; a deep love for his parents and each of his four siblings, for the Jesuits, his Jesuit mentors, and enduring friends in the Society of Jesus; and perhaps above all, his vulnerability and sensitivity to others, including his insecurities, oft-repeated to me, about revealing so much of himself in this book.

In light of the latter, it has been a tremendous privilege and grace to "listen in" and try as best I can to convey to the reader something of the gift that Fr. Bill has been to so many. In the language

of St. Ignatius, Bill is a "helper of souls," not least because the "pilot light" of his faith, as he calls it, an early gift from the church and its artistic riches, burns so fiercely in his heart, through periods of loneliness, joy, and trial, warming others in its glow. I know that Bill's wish for this book is that the flame of your faith may be kindled by his art.



In preparing this book for publication, Bill and I recorded weekly phone conversations for the better part of a year to talk about his life, his art, and his ministry. Our conversations were then edited into manuscript form, alongside a wide range of drawings, paintings, and icons laid out in such a way as to facilitate contemplation. The twelve chapters are grouped into three major

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periods of Bill's life: Part I: Childhood and Jesuit Beginnings; Part II: Illustrator, Hospice Minister, and Priest; and Part III: Iconographer: Friend of Prophets, Pilgrims, and Saints. As a Postscript, we've included a meditation on the vocation of the artist that Bill wrote during his AIDS ministry; as an Afterword, a tribute to Fr. Bill penned by his teacher, the master iconographer Br. Robert Lentz, after Bill had completed his studies.

Though he is no longer a Jesuit, a story we touch on below, Ignatian spirituality remains Fr. Bill's spiritual homeland while he lives and serves as a Catholic priest in Albuquerque. He continues to write icons under commission from patrons across the country and world, including many Jesuit institutions. His icon *Our Sister Thea Bowman*, for example, a subject of chapter 11 and a constant presence to us both as he was painting her, now resides in a chapel that bears her name at Georgetown University. A number of Bill's original artworks reside very happily at Regis University in Denver, where I teach, and where Bill served as artist-in-residence during his early formation as a Jesuit.

For their expert help in providing high quality images of Fr. Bill's art and numerous photographs, we are indebted to Bill's sister, artist Marjory McNichols Wilson of Castle Rock, Colorado, photographer Sarah McIntyre of Albuquerque, and everyone at Barry Norris Photography Studio in Taos, New Mexico.

We are deeply grateful to Robert Ellsberg and Orbis Books, to Robert's wife, Monica, to my wife, Lauri, and to so many other dear friends and colleagues who have believed in and supported this project enthusiastically from the beginning. In what follows, Dear Reader, we invite you to gaze patiently and listen receptively with the eyes and ears of your heart. *Let those who have eyes to see, see.* Perhaps above all, I pray that this book brings you into the presence of a Love and Mercy beyond all names, yet nearer still than we are to ourselves.

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