

Grace and Grit:

Mysticism and the Cross

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Recently a group of RSCJ sat around a table looking at photos of William Schickel's painting of Philippine. This noted American artist, Sr. Ruth Schickel's brother, created the painting in 1974. It isn't exactly a portrait, though a swift glance might give the impression it is. Some people at the table didn't like it. I found myself wondering why I like it so. It doesn't so much capture as conjure up her spirit. That is why I like it.

Can a painting shout and whisper? This one does. It shouts of grace and grit; it shouts of mysticism. It whispers about the cross.

The starkness of the black and white habit, the angular, almost ugly face expresses the austerity that characterized Philippine. Yet there is a softness that speaks, too. I think the quality communicated is gift. Her beatification process spoke of Philippine's "severe mortification" with all that connotes of Jansenism and masochism. The woman in this painting has all the grit and determination needed to follow through on her vision yet does not seem centered on self as the Jansenist and masochist must be. All through her life she had the grit to do what needed doing no matter what the cost. It was what needed doing that called forth that self-denying strength we identify with her. The painting has a mystical quality. The almost bizarre stance of the head - simultaneously facing in and out of the bonnet - says "the 'within' and 'without' are one." It is hard to tell which way she faces. The impression is of a woman worldly-wise and other-worldly. It is not hard to imagine her as "the woman who prays always."

The painting has a subtle message about the cross. Actually, there is no cross on this habit. Where it would be, over her heart, hangs an oak leaf. Muted in color and size, this cross does not focus our attention. Whether the artist intended it I don't know, but this treatment speaks to me. The cross is an oak leaf. In French, of course, Duchesne means "oak." The message is that her very self was her cross -as is the case, I suspect, with most of us. There is a subtle peace about this oak leaf over her heart. There is nothing startling about there being a leaf where a cross should be. The painting whispers a message to me. Accepting a nature -with all the flaws and flamboyance we know to be Philippine's -has transformed the very being into both the heart and cross of Christ.

This essay first appeared in *Philippine Duchesne, RSCJ, a Collection*, edited by Catherine Collins, RSCJ, Melanie Guste, RSCJ, Anna Thompson at the time of the canonization of St. Philippine in 1988, and published by the Center for Educational Design and Communication. Washington D.C. The writer, Anne O'Neil, RSCJ, was the first provincial superior of the United States Province of the Society of the Sacred Heart, following the unification of the former five provinces in 1982.