

Fabric of Faith: A Q&A with Theresa Conlan of Happy Nest Home Goods



I first spotted Theresa Conlan's embroidery work on Instagram more than two years ago. At the time Theresa was participating in a giveaway with beautifully stitched keepsake ornaments for parents who had experienced miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant loss.

I didn't win the giveaway, but I jumped at the chance to put in my own order for an ornament for my nephew Georgie. When the ornament arrived, I was so touched by the thoughtful note Theresa included.

I was also pleasantly surprised to find that she and her husband, Richard, and two young sons live not far away in Anne Arundel County, Md. And, as it turns out, Theresa was the manager of Our Lady's Center in Ellicott City, Md., from August 2011 - March 2015.

These days Theresa and I are planning a conference together with our friend Julie in our spare time. I continue to be in awe of the art she creates through her business, Happy Nest Home Goods, and I love seeing her latest creations, as well as those of her fellow artisans in Zelig and Co.

But Theresa's big news this week is that she is releasing her first embroidery patterns! So we found a few minutes to chat about her art, her business, and her faith.

How did you develop your interest in embroidery?



The first time I touched embroidery was when I was engaged and planning for my wedding, and I was trying to think of a gift for my mom and his mom. I stumbled on these beautiful little vintage handkerchiefs in a little vintage store on Main Street in Ellicott City. I thought, "Wouldn't this be nice if I could personalize them?"

I really wanted to do it, and it was a total disaster. I loved mine, and I'm sure they loved theirs. But I was trying to teach myself, and that's not the way I learn. The embroideries came out kind of thick and chunky.

But you didn't give up. How did you finally find your way?

A while later I found a tutorial on being able to do French knots, and suddenly it clicked and made sense. I learned about separating the strands of the embroidery thread. It was like a lightbulb.

Our son at that point was maybe 6 to 8 months old, and I was really happy to be staying at home with him, but I was also coming out of the exhaustion and the trauma of his early birth and time in the NICU and really needing to have some kind of creative outlet again. I had kind of given up, but I feel like God put those things in front of me. I felt the itch to create again.



What is it about embroidery that you enjoy?

There is something so cathartic and meditative. It's like painting with thread a little bitty bit at a time.

And you can work on your projects even while raising two little boys.

One of my favorite things about the embroidery is how portable it is and how easy it is to pick up and put down.

Before I started doing embroidery, I had started a little bit of sewing. And every time I tried to work on my sewing projects, I had to wait for naptime. Then I had to clear off the entire kitchen table, wipe it down, lay the fabric out, and then start to cut and work and pin and iron. And just as I had everything in place, the baby would wake up.

With embroidery, I could sit there and do it on the couch. If the baby woke up from his nap, I could be very quickly put my needle in the fabric and put it on the back on the couch and put it down in just a split second.

Before you told me about finding the handkerchiefs, I thought maybe your mother or grandmother had taught you to embroider.



No, but when I was visiting my mom recently, she showed me a book she had

learned to embroider with. She started pulling all of these fabrics out, linens that she and my grandmother had embroidered, maybe even my great grandmother. I had no idea that anyone else in my family had learned to embroider.

It is really cool to think that this beautiful art form that has been around for so, so long. It has to be one of the oldest art forms around, and then you can see all of the things that people do with it now. There are some Instagrams I follow with modern embroiderers, and the things that they do are just unbelievable—these works of art that come right off the page. Some of them are three-dimensional, or they look like photograph realism.

And now you're making your patterns available! Why did you decide to offer them in your shop?

Some of my absolute favorite patterns, I got so much feedback from people who loved them, but who couldn't afford to buy it for what I needed to sell it. When I finally started to price my pieces where they really needed to be to make it worth the time I put into them, I was so sad that that price that the piece wasn't going to be in some budgets. I thought maybe I can meet people at another price point—and invite them to learn embroidery, too.



How does it feel to see people creating your patterns as their own work?

It's amazing to see people getting excited about it and to see them sharing their pictures of what they're working on—and to know that I was able to communicate how to do it. One of my fears was that I wouldn't be able to give people the information they need to replicate it, but I was.

Some of them are doing it a little differently from the pattern, right?

They'll use their own skills and techniques, and that makes it more exciting. They are getting this sense of ownership. I've seen people using different colors thread. It is really special.

How did you choose the patterns to release now?



These three in this first release are really special and kind of personal to me, especially the ship hoop. My husband actually drew that one. He used to sail on the historical tall ships the year after college, and so he's quite the expert, and so when I knew I wanted to do "The world is thy ship and not thy home," I asked him to draw it.

My hope is to continue to release new patterns as I go, probably in small batches every few months.

How does your husband help you with your shop?

Richard has just been so amazing and supportive. He's been my sounding board for everything. I've been talking through every single piece of it. Every night he says, "What do you have to do to get ready for your launch? Do you just need me to take the baby?" One night I had him go through every single link on the pages to make sure it went where I was saying it went.



Many of your pieces reflect your Catholic faith. Why is that?

What I want to create has always centered on my faith. With these patterns, I deliberately chose three very Catholic pieces.

With the patterns, I wanted to find a way to connect this authentically Catholic heart for artwork with this fun, beautiful, modern aesthetic that I see a lot in graphic design prints. But I wanted some Catholic embroidery patterns to offer people that had that kind of excitement and newness to them. I wanted something that modern Catholic women could connect to.

Why Happy Nest Home Goods? Where did you come up with the name?

My husband and I were brainstorming, and when we got to happy nest, I started Googling to see if it was taken. It's cozy, and it's content, and it's peaceful, and it's this feeling in my heart of being right where I'm supposed to be, right where God put me.

You can see Theresa's creations and her patterns here at Happy Nest Home Goods.