

Filipino Catholic has gift of making sacred images appear on rose petals

SANTA MARIA, Philippines - In the early afternoon on a recent Saturday, an endless line of believers gathered at the altar of the Shrine of the Mother of the Eucharist and Grace.

Heavy rain started to fall while a lay minister dressed in jeans and a T-shirt worked the line, carrying a metal bowl of freshly plucked white rose petals in one hand. The minister, Carmelo Cortez - or Brother Carmelo as he is called - pressed petals just below each person's collarbone. The hundreds of worshippers filed out, digging into the collars of their shirts to look at the petals intently.

"Here, we have new petals today. It's Mary again ... always Mary," said 32-year old Andrea, a regular at the first Saturday healing service at the shrine. Her petals bear images of the Mary, a profile of her wearing a crown of 12 stars or holding a rosary.

Other people's petals have images of the risen Jesus, Jesus on a cross, various saints, a heart surrounded by a crown of thorns, among others. These tiny imprints look scored onto the petals, and they only appear once Cortez places them on a person's chest - "near the heart," he explained.

For a little more than 20 years, Cortez has been praying over people in this manner.

"I wasn't focused on healing," said the 42-year-old. "But what happened was if a person believed in what I was sharing - like what happens with the rose petals and that I had seen the Blessed Virgin - they asked me to lay hands."

For a six-year period in the 1990s, he said, the Virgin Mary appeared to him 101 times and asked him each time to "pray for the priests." She also asked him to build a house of worship, which is now the shrine in Santa Maria, half paid for by Cortez and half by donations.

Cortez recalled the first time he had any contact with Mary. He said at 3 a.m. June 12, 1991, he woke up with an upset stomach and heard instrumental music. He looked around for the source of the music and found it came from a photo of one of St. Luke the Evangelist's paintings of the Blessed Virgin. Cortez said it became three dimensional, and he saw Mary crying tears of blood.

"I was scared," he said. "I asked the beloved Virgin, 'Why me? Why am I the only one seeing this?' I wanted to know why this was happening to me of all people ... I was just a regular Catholic."

Cortez immediately contacted a priest, who told him to pray continuously and said he should attend a spiritual retreat. Within a few months, word got out about his ability to cause sacred images to appear on rose petals, and Cortez said he was thrust into the spotlight.

"I never even dreamed or hoped to be a famous person," said Cortez. "I just wanted a simple life."

Instead, more and more people learned about his gifts, as they are called, and soon Filipino-American religious and clergy from the U.S. visited and started seeking him out. He has since received numerous invitations from high-ranking government officials and ordinary people in the Philippines and the U.S. and began traveling there on a regular basis. But he did it only with permission from his local bishop.

Bishop Jose Oliveros of Malolos has known Cortez for seven years and is now the third prelate to endorse him. He described Cortez as a simple and humble person who is "very helpful" to others.

"It's a gift," he said. "You have to be cautious, first of all, to explain it in an ordinary way or in a normal way. How could the petals bear such images? And when you cannot make a rational or normal explanation, at least you should thank God that he makes his presence known."

Bishop Oliveros said he has numerous testimonials from people who claim to have been healed by Brother Carmelo. The bishop and his predecessors follow guidelines of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, which include instructions for prayers

for healing.

The rules state “that whenever there’s a prayer for healing, explicit permission of the local bishop must be given to ensure purity of doctrine and also to ensure that the person is not somebody who is a fraud.” Bishop Oliveros said from his observations of Cortez’s gifts, “He’s no fraud.”

Juliet Cruz does not think Cortez is a fraud either, but she called herself “Doubting Thomas” and a Catholic with average faith before she first experienced the phenomenon of the petals. She said she cried when she first saw the images, “I said ‘God, I’m sorry!’ I call it a miracle. It’s a painting made in heaven.”

The question of whether this is indeed a miracle remains because the church is not so quick to confer such designations. Bishop Oliveros said he asked Cortez to write about his experiences so they could be officially investigated because the church will “have to certify” through a laborious process whether his gifts truly come from the supernatural.