

Park Heights painting highlights saint

It looks more than a little bit like a Picasso, the nun's painting of St. Ambrose baptizing St. Augustine.

St. Ambrose in Park Heights, just unveiled the 4-by-12-foot painting depicting St. Augustine as the African man he was. He is bathed in a font of water, represented by slices of blue, about to be baptized by St. Ambrose.

St. Augustine's mother, St. Monica, looks on as her son clutches his arms and hands close to his chest.

Above that, another image of St. Augustine shows him with arms open, freed from sin after his baptism, rising toward the Holy Trinity, as the face of Jesus looks upon him.

Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden blessed the painting at a Mass at St. Ambrose on Dec. 7, the feast of St. Ambrose.

In the fourth century, St. Monica pursued her wayward son from North Africa to Milan, praying and fasting for his conversion. In Milan, he met St. Ambrose, who became the spiritual director who would baptize him.

"God invites us to follow him, and God also invites us to do something else," Bishop Madden said. "He says, 'Not only do I want you to follow me, but I want you to be like an Ambrose in your community because I am going to let people see you. People are going to be led to you, and you are going to baptize them, bring them to the full light of the spirit.' "

Father Paul Zaborowski, the St. Ambrose pastor, chose Sister Mary Thomas, of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration in Cleveland, to do the painting for the gothic cruciform church.

He has known Sister Mary since spending a summer two decades ago as a student at St. Paul's Shrine, which is attached to the Poor Clares cloistered monastery.

Sister Mary, an accomplished artist and graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, blends influences from El Greco to Picasso in her contemporary monastic work.

The artist strived to convey the power of St. Augustine's baptism. "Once he was baptized, he was a changed man completely," she said. "I have him reaching up to heaven."

Sister Mary reviewed photos of St. Ambrose sent by Father Paul Zaborowski so she could pick up on and complement the mauve, light blues, salmon and beige colors. He wanted an African figure, as the church is in a black neighborhood, but features white holy figures.

Sister Mary sent back pencil sketches as she worked on the painting for a year.

"Usually, there's just a painting of a saint standing there," Father Zaborowski said. "But we wanted to put it into some kind of action. And the fact that this is an African-American parish, and [St. Ambrose] baptized one of the most prominent African saints, who is Augustine, got us talking and created this idea."

Many mothers in Park Heights could identify with Saint Monica, Father Zaborowski said.

"I wanted especially Monica because I have so many mothers who have children in prison, who have children who are addicted, who have children who are constantly

crying and running about,” Father Zaborowski said.

The painting - and the story of St. Augustine - offer hope.

“It’s just the power of baptism and conversion, the power of prayer, especially in a neighborhood where moms are terribly worried,” Father Zaborowski said, “and many of my mothers have buried children already.”