Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



Mary Ann Connolly, a Sister of Charity, Halifax, and her grandniece, Kate Fiasconaro (Courtesy of Mary Ann Connolly)



by Sr. Mary Ann Connolly

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For almost seven decades, I have had great affection for the Virgin Mary. I grew up in a home where images of Mary were visibly present: the blessing at the front door, the Madonna as you entered the kitchen, the Miraculous Mary statue that adorned the corner shelf as you made your way upstairs to the bedrooms, and the beautiful medal of Mary that my dad wore most of his life.

So, it goes without saying that I felt great joy when my grandniece Kate Fiasconaro, a sophomore at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts, called to let me know the title of one of the classes she was taking was none other than: "The Virgin Mary."

I share a great relationship with Kate. As a matter of fact, Kate refers to me as "her person." She continues to amaze and astound me with her worldview, her strong convictions, her reflective manner and her unstoppable sense of humor.

Although Kate experienced a Catholic elementary education and now finds herself in a Catholic college, she does not see herself as embracing any one religion. Her worldview is expansive, inclusive and rich in curiosity. I am humbled by how much I have learned from her perspective on the social justice issues that permeate our society today: racism, gender identity, homelessness, poverty and climate change. It's hard to imagine any topic that she and I cannot easily converse about.

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Kate is pursuing a double major in education and art at Stonehill. She would love to pass along her love of art to elementary aged students. She is a self-taught artist, starting at a very young age and progressing from pencil sketches to watercolor to animation and, presently, to digital imaging.

Recently, she called to tell me that her religion class on the Virgin Mary would be taking a field trip to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The students would get to experience an exhibit of many images of the Virgin Mary. She was curious about what she would discover. She returned to her dorm that evening and began to reflect on many of the images she viewed.

Kate felt an urge to create an image of Mary that would be more historically accurate. She wanted an image that would capture her culture and speak to a broader base of people. She set her sights on finding out more about Mary: her ethnicity, features, skin tone and Palestinian dress. I was in awe when she forwarded

this amazing picture to me a few days later. The shift in Kate's new understanding of Mary immediately took place in me as well. The moment I opened the image on my computer, I felt a deep resonance. I knew this Mary, even though I was seeing her for the first time.



(Artwork by Kate Fiasconaro)

I was intrigued by many of the details, which prompted me to call Kate to inquire about them. I was fascinated by the dove that was sitting on Mary's shoulder. Kate said that in class they discussed how the angel appeared to Mary and told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and tell her she would conceive and bear a son.

Her artist's interpretation of Mary conceiving this message through her sense of hearing moved Kate to place the Holy Spirit next to Mary's ear on her shoulder.

I asked about the poppy flower on Mary's ear. In Kate's research, she read that the poppy flower is a sign of death and resurrection. This was a new learning for me. Since her work is digital, Kate told me to zoom in on Mary's red belt on my computer. Along the belt Kate embedded poppy flowers, recognizing that Jesus, now growing in her womb beneath her belt, would one day experience both death and Resurrection. The whole conversation was a "wow" for me!

I am deeply grateful to Stonehill College and, in particular, to Kate's professor, Mary-Joan Leith, who not only teaches the class on the Virgin Mary, but has published a book on Mary, which Kate is anxious for me to read. Leith's passion for Mary has certainly spilled over into Kate's heart, inspiring her to create a new image. It is my hope and prayer that one day Kate will have that same influence, expanding the hearts and minds of the students she will be privileged to teach.

I am so grateful that Kate, like me, has now experienced the Virgin Mary in a tangible way. I am reminded of how often I have thanked God for the gift of not just one Mary, but two Mary's in my life as my mom was also named Mary. My mom always told me; "If you find something precious or valuable be sure to share it."

I find Kate's image both precious and valuable. Thus, I share it with you. May this image of Mary speak into your ear and conceive in you something you have longed to bring to birth. And may we all be willing to live as Mary lived, birthing Christ wherever we go.