

also used a baseball bat and it worked well. Soon, I mastered it and could extract the whole kernel. Abba was not happy because his nuts were usually pretty much broken into small pieces. I was nice enough to share the shelled and unshelled nuts with the hermit. While my fingers got just a little discolored, his were always stained heavily! I always went after him to wash them well before he said Mass. Those were the good old days, which I enjoyed. I also taught my friend Debbie how to crack them. She thought I was crazy at first. Later, she too found it rewarding when she could extract a whole kernel (well, almost)

Hunting Asparagus

Then came the Asparagus season, which usually is from the end of April until early June. While I took walks on the Abbey land, I spotted new asparagus shoots in the spring. It was so rewarding and inspiring to see new signs of life as Abba often reminded me when we saw the baby geese. He too shared stories at his weekly conferences with retreatants and me about newborn fawns he saw on his walks in the woods. I really missed his weekly talks. He could talk about anything, and he could talk nonstop. Often I had to signal to him that it was time to stop lest the group miss Compline! I think I learned how to talk spontaneously from him, Lord. What a gift you gave him from which many of us benefited greatly. We thank You. There I go, going off track again just like my Abba! Anyhow, soon I remembered where the asparagus patches were. I checked on them in the early spring. They became my weekly vegetable during those weeks. I shared them with Abba and when there were more abundant, I gave them to Fr. Gerard to cook for the community so the brothers could taste fresh asparagus for a change. They often eat frozen food. Abba asked me to show him the patch in front of Bethlehem retreat house so he could pick them himself. Days later, he told me he found some and picked them. I was sure I had just picked them so there would not be any. I questioned him again lest he picked the wrong stuff. Sure enough, we laughed when I told him what he found were weeds! (Abba told me to leave this out, but I think it would add a little humor to our lives and yours who are reading this). Those wild asparagus were the best, most fresh and sweet. I know about ten locations where I can get them annually. Then there were edible weeds like Asian spinach and purslane which I could easily find and enjoy, but Abba and the brothers were not so fond of them. I guess they did not grow up being adventurous the way I did. As children, we ate plenty of greens we found in nature, and they were a great source of vitamins.

You give us, Lord plentiful food in the wild. You feed and clothe the birds. You provide with security everything for us humans. You told us not to worry about what to eat and what to wear. Our ancestors were much closer to You so they always gave thanks and made use of what You gave to this universe. Sadly, we, generations later, seem to be further away from You somehow for we think we can make better use of what You provided us with. Some of us think we do not need You, or worse yet, that You do not exist. What has become of this world? I remember hearing the prayer we made to You during the Lenten season, how we exploit and diminish the earth because of our greed and selfishness. Oh, forgive us and have mercy on us, sinners!

Study of Iconography with Vladislav Andrejev, the Founder of Prosopon School

I was quite active in promoting the spiritual group because I felt that was what You wanted me to do. I did not spend a lot of time writing icons. Many told me I was not using the artistic gift You gave me. I told them not to worry because I have a spiritual director! Strangely Lord, people

knew that but kept on advising me what to do. Some even questioned my faith. I could hear You telling the apostles that they had been with You for so long, and yet they did not know You. You also told the Pharisees that if they did not believe You, they should believe in the work of Your Heavenly Father. We often think we know it all, but we do not realize how much we do not know. Anyhow, I told them that I tried to please You, the Giver of all gifts instead of getting too attached to the gift itself. I heard a story about a husband who loved his wife so much that he made a sacrifice to buy her a diamond. Instead of giving him all the attention he deserved, the wife spent most of her time enjoying and showing off the diamond instead of appreciating her husband. If I made an act of faith to always try to please You, the Giver of all gifts, then I should never be afraid of losing any gift from You.

What is iconography?

Sure enough, when the time was right, I complained to the spiritual director that I did not feel I was good enough to continue to write icons. I really wanted to learn from a true master who writes icons from the Tradition. You, Lord, helped me perceive that iconography is the ultimate and most sacred form of art. An iconographer, like a religious, must be humble to trust and to follow the guidelines and rules handed down by the predecessors, holy iconographers, who had spent much time in prayer and doing penance to preserve the prototypes which other iconographers respect and follow. Icons take the viewers beyond what the naked eyes can see. One must not stop at the tangible wood board but rather must see the sacred images with the spiritual eyes and perceive them with faith. One learns the technique and brings forth the icon in a prayerful and humble manner, but only You, Lord, can give it life and make it holy. You allowed the icon to reveal the iconographer's maturity in spirit and holiness. Iconographers do not create true icons. You do!

Encountering the Prosopon School

To respond to the urge to find an iconographer from whom I can learn, I tried to search on-line. Since I did not have a lot of money, I could not afford going to a weeklong workshop I had seen advertised. It could easily cost me \$2,000.00. So I gave up. For Your greater glory, one evening, as I responded to an e-mail, somehow, at the very bottom of the email, there was a link to an icon art store in Endicott, New York. Mysteriously, I do not remember who sent me that email. A friend would have told me about this art store, if he or she knew about it. I believe it was You, Lord, who put that link in the stranger's email to me! I used to get a lot of emails from people asking for prayers. I remember the link had nothing to do with the content of the email. I was interested in knowing what kind of art supplies the store carried so I went to the site. It belongs to a Russian couple. From their web site, I also found a link to a 3-day weekend icon workshop for intermediate students taught by Vladislav Andrejev, the founder of the Prosopon School of Iconography. I went to his web site, and Oh My Lord, I could see myself writing similar icons in twenty years from now. I could not explain, but I loved his style. So I hastened to call the phone number listed to find out more about the workshop. Elena, the owner of the art store picked up the phone. I did not expect to talk to a live person because it was almost midnight. I apologized to her. She kindly told me it was okay. I asked her whether I would benefit from the workshop because I had no knowledge about writing an icon from Tradition. She said yes, and that I would learn something.

I asked the spiritual father for advice for I knew I would have to invest a lot of money into this project. My hope was that after this 3-day class, I would be able to write an icon from the Tradition. Abba thought it would be a good thing. So I gathered all the money I had saved to pay for tuition, materials, car rental, food and hotel. The first day I learned how to do gold leafing. I learned well and almost finished the gold halos of the angels. The second day a teaching assistant told me to slow down. She said I did it too fast, and that I needed to be more prayerful. As I looked around, everyone worked on their icon, and I did not know what to do. I had to wait to be taught, and the teacher was busy answering others' questions. Oh how frustrated I felt. I learned a little but spent a lot of time waiting. Then the third day came. I experienced the same thing as on the second day. The class was almost over, and I hardly wrote anything. I only learned the first eight steps of the twenty-two steps of how to finish an icon. No one in the class, including the teacher, understood how upset I was. The students were either retirees, professors, professionals or were supported by benefactors (i. e. their husbands). They regularly attended these weekend classes regularly. I could just afford this one because I did not have a real paying job. Teacher Vladislav saw that I did not learn much after the workshop so he told me to come to his studio where he had weekly classes. I thanked him and drove home with great disappointment.

Going to the weekend workshop but learned very little

Abba felt sympathy for me and understood that I could not afford going to weekly icon classes. However, he advised that I should try. So You, Lord, put that determination in me. I began to save money and took trips to Whitney Point where the teacher's studio. It took me well over two hours and a half to drive there. That came to about \$130.00 per trip, with gas, car rental and car insurance. In addition, there was a tuition fee and costs for art supplies. Spencer Furbush, one of my two carpenters, gave me some left-over was cracked boards, which the Abbey was going to discard. I learned how to prepare gesso and made my own panels instead of spending \$60-\$70 to buy a board. I tried to apply for a Special Opportunity Stipend grant to help pay for a portion of either car rental, gas, materials or tuition, but I did not get it. With the money I had saved, I was able to attend the private lesson once every two or three months. Teacher Vladislav knew I did not have money so he did not ask for much. I offered to help him with his garden after every class. So we had a deal. Olga, his wife, is a dedicated and beautiful ballet dance teacher. She loves flowers and gardening so soon we got along well. At the same time, my 90 year old friend, Miss Keating, was also very helpful. Knowing I needed money for gas, and I would not just accept her money, she asked me to do little things for her so that I would not feel bad receiving financial help from her. I would thread her sewing machine, feed her earth worms in the compost pile and planted flowers for her. She used to be very independent. She took care of everything. Like all of us, when she got older, she had to depend on others to help her out. I watched and learned a lot from Abba and her, how they were at their best as they lost their freedom in their older years. It was hard to see the decline in both, but it helped me realize how fragile we are, dear Lord – and precious.

One time, she gave me a generous check of \$200.00. I refused. She told me if I did not want it, to give it to someone else who needed it more than I do. At the time a friend got into trouble because someone found out about his sinful past. The local and city Press got the story, and the news spread like fire. Years ago, an official person of the law contacted Abbot John Eudes and asked him to give a prisoner a second chance for he had repented. Abba was not told how bad his

crime was. Being a man of the merciful God, Abba agreed. The man served his sentence and came to the Abbey to work. The county deputies were aware of this person's past and his presence in this county as well. Anyhow, everyone was against this man, except for his Methodist pastor and her church. I truly admired her when she said in the news that she would trust him being around her teenage daughter. Abba, in the meantime, was criticized for hiring him many years ago. You, dear Lord, gave us a chance to see how much faith we had in dealing with a repentant sinner. Most of us fell short! Abba did not say much, but when I asked, he told me he would do it again – to forgive and to give a repentant sinner a second chance. I was saddened when I heard the story about Mac's past, but You gave me the grace to treat him the same as I did before. On a snowy winter day, I stopped the car and offered him a ride when I saw him on the highway. He refused. Later he told a friend that he would do anything for me. When he saw that I treated him the same after I knew about his past, he was very touched. I would share some Monk's Bread with him if I saw him riding his bike in town. One day, he made an effort to find me at the retreat house, and offered me two special tickets to the Harvest Dinner at his church. I was very grateful even though I could not go. You, Lord inspired me to invite him to my consecration. He did show up. It meant very much to me for I know You wanted him to come, and he responded to Your unconditional love for him. May you help heal and grant special graces to all whom he hurt in the past. May he continue to trust in Your merciful love for him, a repentant sinner.

There I go, getting off track again. So, knowing no one hired him, when I spotted him on the highway, I stopped the car and offered him the \$200 Miss Keating gave me. He smiled and thanked me saying that his mother just passed away, and he happened to inherit some money so he would not need mine. He eventually got a job at his church. The congregation was very kind to him. They had proved to be good Christians in standing by him while other Christians looked down on him even though he served prison time and was released. It is much harder for us to forgive sin than for You who went so far as to die for our redemption. So, I humbly accepted the \$200 for gas to go to icon classes. Olympia (the wife of Dr. Towsley, my Math advisor while I was in college) was also kind enough to make a deal with me saying that she would pay for my car rentals until the icon I wrote (as I studied with the teacher) was finished. Then she would own the icon. That was fair. So that was how I could afford to learn how to write a whole icon. Thank You Pia! Both Dr. Towsley and she let me use one of the rooms in their rented apartment as my studio for a few years. But again, somehow I was not drawn to be there as often as I should. I was not inspired and got distracted easily. There were tenants downstairs and the walls were not soundproofed so I could not concentrate and be as prayerful as I needed to be. May You continue to bless the Towsleys and their family, Lord. I thank You!

Humility and perseverance in learning iconography

You, Lord, always made sure that You gave me just enough resources and finances to live and do Your will and no more, lest I should be tempted and fall. Because of my rather humble circumstance, I appreciated very much the grace You gave me, for I knew not many could afford to learn and write an icon well. So I took nothing for granted. I took the icon lessons seriously and worked very hard during and after classes. At home, I would spend hours applying what I had learned. Ironically, when I came to class, instead of seeing how hard I worked on it, the teacher would tell me to erase what I did at home because I wrote "so much like the Greek". Russian icon technique is much different. So there I was sitting in class undoing what I worked

for hours at home. Then I would write accordingly with the teacher's input, one color and one layer at a time. Then at times, the teacher would make comments like, "You should know better" and "You should write better". What he did not realize was I never took a week-long workshop at which one learns how to write an icon step by step, from the beginning to the end. At first, I got very discouraged and felt humiliated. I cried and told Abba that I did not want to go back to the class anymore. I was the only Catholic among the Orthodox Christians there. Abba told me writing icons is an important part of my vocation. Therefore, humbly, I must learn how to persevere. Not being able to afford to attend classes regularly was my problem, and so was my pride. You, Lord, gave me the grace to trust Abba. So I listened and continued to embrace my cross while learning how to write icons and learning how to be an icon myself. You are writing the icon of my life. You inspired Spencer Furbush to tell me, "Why not be an icon yourself?" At the time, I did not know what he meant, but as I made progress both on writing icons and purifying my soul, I began to perceive what a true icon is about. I thank you teacher Vladislav for being such a good and caring teacher to me. Please bless him and his family dear Lord. Abba reminded me often that "a tough mother makes a good monk" as he referred to his mother's way of bringing him up. He also tried to tell me that disciplining me is good for my growth in holiness and love for You. I totally agreed. Just like You allowed my father to be the way he was, to toughen us up. My siblings are not as forgiving and I do not blame them. For me, however, that is how I see it.

As I became more at peace about my weakness and dependency on Your grace, I was able to attend icon classes more often. A typical day when I studied iconography was to set out after the early morning Mass at Genesee, and drive for about two to three hours to Whitney Point. I studied for about six hours. I then spent the next two hours helping the teacher with his garden. Then there were the four months before Frances Verna's passing. You, Lord, allowed me to be with her during her last days. She did not have close relatives around her. A good priest friend made sure she was well taken care of but because she loved the Abbey, being with me helped her stay connected with the brothers spiritually. She always treasured the time we spent together during her last months, since she missed the Abbey very much. May she rest in your peace dear Lord! Anyhow, it took me about two hours to get home from Frances'. So I would get home about midnight. You kept me safe and also gave me tremendous energy to endure and be gracious as I dealt with everyone I encountered during those long days, instead of being grumpy. I remember once going through a tollbooth at about midnight during Advent. I had so much compassion for the lady who worked there during that time of the year and during the late hour that I handed her a twenty dollar bill. "Merry Christmas" I greeted her. She was surprised and touched. She looked straight at me and said, "Oh you don't have to, but thank you!" "Please take it. You are very welcome and thank you for working for us." I smiled and drove away. You made our day, dear Lord – for both of us.

Similarly, You often gave me the grace to appreciate people, and what they do. Every time someone does something for me, even though I pay the person, I feel very grateful. I try to make an effort whenever I can to bring food to the people who work on my cars, at the bank and sometimes at work. One time, my friends and I attended a wedding at a different state so we had to stay in a hotel. When it was time to pack and check out, I tried to clean as much as I could even though we did not make such a mess. A friend got annoyed with me and said to leave things the way it was because the cleaner got paid to do her job. Oh, how I thought it was uncharitable

to think that way. “What if the cleaning lady were your mother?”, I corrected my friend. Somehow, some of us get the wrong idea about how to treat one another. That people get paid for their work does not mean that we can treat them lightly. We depend so much on the power of money that we forget who is working to help us. Money does not pay for everything. I too have seen rich people suffer even though they have so much money. What goes around comes around. So as You say Lord, we ought to treat others as we want to be treated.

Learning and working in the old way from the Master

In dealing with the icon teacher and his wife, You gave me the grace to see that learning how to be a good iconographer is not just about learning technique. It is about my relationship with them, too. When I was there, sometimes I spent time working in the garden instead of writing icons. The teacher appreciated that but told me to focus more on my studying. I knew that, but I could not just come to learn from him and not care about him and his wife who were so kind and generous to me. They were in their 70's so they needed some extra help. Being a holy person is more important than writing icons. Besides, how can we produce what we do not have? Love pleases You and gives You honor and glory. If one loves, then everything else will follow. At least that was how I saw it. So I did not mind helping the teacher instead of learning the whole time that I was there. Soon, I became humble enough that I neither got offended nor upset when the teacher criticized me. One day when he was not around, one of the priests who studied with me asked whether I knew why the teacher picked on me or tended to be difficult with me. I said because I deserved it. He responded saying that the teacher saw that I had the gift, so he pressured me to make me work even harder. He wanted me to apply myself as hard as I could. As I paid more attention, I could tell the master did what the priest said. Only when I was humble enough, could I see with the eye of faith. Thank you, teacher!

Blessed Mother appeared in the Abbey church

The next chapter in Your book of life would prove to be more serious as, You gave me a new mission, the Marian Children ministry. In 2004, I made a retreat at the Abbey during Easter week. One late morning, I went to church to pray. It was usually quiet because the brothers went to work, and the retreatants took walks in gorgeous early-spring weather. I kneeled on the floor resting my head on the stall, and before long, I fell asleep, or someone could say that I fell into a trance. There she was, floating above the stone altar where I had seen the stream of water pouring on me back in 1999 in the dream I had at Wrentham. Looking down at me, she smiled and stretched out her left hand holding a string of beads. It was as long as a rosary but not a rosary. The beads appeared to be like pearls. For some reasons, I could see them closely even though she was up high and far away from where I was knelling. Then I woke up and hastened to try to contact the Abbot. I recited my encounter with Our Lady to him who, as always, asked what the dream/vision meant to me. “I think she wants me to work with children”, I responded. After our prayerful conversation (Rev. Father used to remind me that whenever we met, especially for spiritual direction, we were always in the presence of God, and that the Holy Spirit was in our midst), Rev. Father listened to my envisioning how the ministry would work. I would bring a big icon of hers that I just painted to churches and have the rosary said. Together, adults and children would pray the rosary and present flowers to the Blessed Mother and the Baby Jesus. Each generation, adults, youth and children would have a different role. With the Holy Mother of God, we could contribute whatever gift we are given as we contemplated on Christ's life. I would also give a talk as a separate event if a parish was interested. Rev. Father approved.