

An Artist's Journey

On the anniversary of St. Josemaría's birthday (9 January 1902) Ina Reyes-de Vera reflects on how ordinary material things and everyday life as a mother can be turned into works of art.

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As a kindergartener, I was excited by the possibilities of empty boxes. With tape and markers, they turned into houses, cars, robots, towns. I can easily say that my artist journey began at age 5 when I had full

autonomy over a tape dispenser. The idea that you could create something of your own imaginings out of ordinary things was exciting, and somehow instinctive to young children.

I can also tell you that this journey was not taken deliberately. When I was growing up, my banker mom was a weekend painter, and so I had access to an unlimited supply of paper and paint and the occasional summer art workshops that continued to feed my interest. At the time it felt like something to do on a Saturday if one didn't care to sweat it out on a tennis court or enjoy ballet lessons. It was just there. An option.

What I created reflected whatever mood or influence surrounded me at the time. Scenes from a garden, my pets, family, a visit to a zoo... everyday moments that were depicted over joyfully with colors

and floating shapes as though a picture could influence whatever difficulties were present in real life. In high school, with free rein to paint whatever I chose to deal with the darkest of teen angst, I still came away with a yellow cow, portraits of my best friends and a mural of the gate to heaven with retro tiles. The common theme in all my work when I wasn't deliberate about it, and even now when I am, is joy. I needed to capture it with colors, and eventually share it with someone I cared about.

So even when this journey was derailed, stalled, and occasionally abandoned throughout the course of school, a teaching profession and raising an increasingly growing, rambunctious family of 5 sons and a daughter, art was something I returned to and utilized as a medium to teach, decorate and entertain.

Then the day came when I had to end my 20-year teaching career and focus on raising the five kids left at home with us. My day was filled with ordinary little things: preparing breakfast, driving to school, grocery shopping, participating in parent council meetings, sports events and whatever varying interests my kids had. For the first time, parenting became my full-time job. It would be fair to say life got complicated in its simplicity for me, as I was trained to speak in a different kind of work language. I had to learn how to stay put, to pay attention to the six kids in my life, find meaning into the daily physical labor in front of me, navigate the emotional work that came with it, and find new ways to enjoy our parenting roles.

St Josemaria said, *“Let me stress this point: it is in the simplicity of your ordinary work, in the monotonous details of each day, that you have to*

find the secret, which is hidden from so many, of something great and new: Love.” (Furrow, no. 489)

It turns out I didn't have to change the work I was already doing. I just had to do every little thing with the kind of love and excitement you have when preparing something for someone you love. I wasn't short of purpose: I had 6 kids and an amazing partner to serve. It wasn't easy, but over time, with prayer, lots and lots of spiritual direction, some research and an entire community of co-parents as my guide, the daily tasks became something I planned for deliberately, like a lesson plan. Things like cooking, gardening and setting up the house according to its varying seasons and celebrations have become full-on activities with the kids. It is peppered with lessons in math, literacy and science embedded in the everyday, but most of all, an expression of deep

gratitude for the seemingly mundane things we participate in daily. I am excited! Sometimes a little more than their moods can take, but still! There is that joy again, the kind that inspired the painting of yellow cows and a garden of rainbows and flowers.

If I could instinctively take an ordinary box and turn it into something fun or even beautiful with a roll of tape when I was 5, today I have regained that same instinct. The ordinary tasks of each day, when enlightened by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, turn into something fun and beautiful.

I don't know what art to show you that speaks to this article. Because it's on our "tablescapes" in the way our dining table is themed and set up; it is in the art of every one of our kids that is allowed to be pinned up on every wall at home, the flowers and

seeds picked after a nature walk that was painted and assembled into a nativity scene in the middle of our Advent table, the pop-up card they all made for my husband and I on our 25th anniversary.... The art that I thought was my personal journey has been shared and elevated by six children.

Everything else I have made while prioritizing this role as mom and wife first and foremost, can be found on @inacolorfulworld on Instagram. I had one message when I started this account in 2020: to create and share joyful art that celebrates the ordinary, everyday things.

It is right out of St Josemaría's playbook for sure.

The art I create now still uses bright and playful colors and symbols from the childhoods that inspire me every single day, and a devotion to the Ultimate Mama I draw so much

inspiration from. It is from the stellar example of our Holy Mother that I find the motivation to do small tasks as though they were grand gestures. Her whole life as a mother and a wife, even if many years seemed hidden, is so easily accessed when you are confronted with children and daily chores. Whenever I have asked for her help, it comes in such a deluge of profundity and love, one cannot help but feel grateful, even moved to celebrate her with colorful strokes on a canvass.

Creating playful images of Our Lady and the Holy Family which I would gift to family and friends began as a personal project in 2016. This led to requests and eventual commissions from others. The Marian series successfully launched by a dear friend's Opus Dei circle group for their fundraising project gave birth to a second Marian series celebrating 500 years of Catholicism in the

Philippines, a St Joseph series for the Year of St Joseph, and other collaborations with Tahilan Study Center. It may seem like a lot, but the reality is that while I paint these images with gusto for brief time, dozens of others have taken on the hard work of printing, distributing and using the funds raised for something even greater. This work has spread like love-fire in ways I cannot fully describe.

During the pandemic, when all things seemed so dreary, a steady number of commissions and reprints were requested by new acquaintances who for some reason or another needed these images in their homes. The cheerfulness with which these artworks are created and received simultaneously fills me with pride and humility. It is an accidental apostolate. It is a privilege to continue this purposeful, joyful work in the years to come.

To fellow artist-moms out there, here's something from St Josemaria we can remember to live by through these uncertain times: "*The task for a Christian is to drown evil in an abundance of good. It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being anti anything. On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace.*" (Furrow, no. 864)

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