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## **BLACK BROKEN BEAUTIFUL: We need images of the dark Madonna now more than ever**

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For the last eight years of my pilgrim journey, I have lived at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden, N.J. My studio, where I spend my hours in creative bliss, free of the internet and a phone, is in South Camden at Sacred Heart Church. Across from my studio window stands Our Lady of Camden, a life-sized bronze sculpture of Mary as a black woman. Living in a city notorious for its violence has made me more aware of God as the source and summit of beauty--the beauty to be found at the margins, the beauty of black and brown, the beauty emerging from transformed brokenness.

Black Madonnas first entered my life about 25 years ago when I made an artist's pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. I was in grief following the death of my parents and seeking a change of life to suit my new identity as a middle-aged orphan. Our group of 12 pilgrims started out in Paris, following a popular medieval route southward to the Pyrenees and across northern Spain. It was a life-changing trip for me. Seeing some of the greatest art and architecture in Western church history illuminated the deep, dark recesses of my spirit with new and gentle light.

I am but one in a long line of seekers--many centuries' worth, actually--to have been smitten with the Black Madonnas one encounters along the pilgrim route. Since that initial trip, I have traveled twice to Montserrat, near Barcelona, where St. Ignatius Loyola had a conversion of heart and left his sword at her feet. She is covered in gold and silver mined by slaves in South America, which makes for a conflictingly poignant visit.

St. Francis de Sales said, "We pray best before beauty." Granted, he lived by a picturesque lake in the French Alps, so it was natural for him to reach that conclusion. But he was not speaking just about surface beauty. When he was a college student in Paris, suffering a crisis of faith that brought him deep anxiety, he visited the Black Madonna known as Our Lady of Good Deliverance and prayed the Memorare. She lifted his sagging spirit, brought him inner peace and changed his life forever. The very heart of Salesian spirituality is about living life in love, not fear; about not allowing worry and anxiety too much power over us; and about seeing darkness, no matter how it comes our way, as gift and grace.

Archetypally speaking, the blackness of Black Madonnas is symbolically linked to creativity and newness, to welcoming the darkness while seeking the light, to embracing mystery. Mary's blackness reminds us of the rich, fertile soil in which we scatter the seeds of new dreams and possibilities. Hers is the cosmic blackness of the night sky and the ever-expanding universe. It is the darkness of the womb, the "maternal womb of mercy," a term that Pope Francis has used to describe the church.

In the United States, it is difficult for us to see black or brown without racial connotations. As an artist of faith, I strive in all my work to honor the traditions and origins of our timeless religious symbols while seeing them with modern eyes and sensibilities. As an American Catholic deeply disturbed by the racial strife of our nation and dangling by the frayed but sacred threads of my faith, I find renewed hope and comfort in Mary the Black Madonna. For me, she remains the loving font of wisdom she was to saints like Francis de Sales and Ignatius Loyola. She is still the source of comfort she has always been for restless pilgrims who have crisscrossed Europe for centuries.

But in today's world, she means even more.

Lately, because of the pervasive divisiveness in our church and nation, I find myself painting more Black Madonnas as my morning meditations than ever before. In my lifetime of 60 years, I do not recall having so many reasons to cry and send up my sighs to Mary for help and hope: the sharp increase in hate crimes; the blatant homophobia and anti-Semitism; the anti-immigrant, anti-Latino, anti-Muslim fervor that poisons our air; the greed and selfishness that is destroying our common home; terrorism, gun violence and

disease; red pews and blue pews in our churches.

Last year, as my prayerful artistic response to the racial fears and tensions, I painted a "Black Lives Matter Madonna." I showed her for the first time at a retreat I was leading near Detroit last summer. When I returned to my seat, there was an unsigned message for me scrawled on a piece of loose leaf paper. It read, "All lives matter." Sadly, my anonymous friend, that is not true in this country and never has been. I could prove it by inviting you to Camden, where you would see for yourself. But I would invite you to look beneath the surface, with your other eyes, the ones in your heart where you will see darkness as beauty not fear, rich in mystery and promise and full of light.

Across the street from my bedroom window is a scene I have painted several times since I came to live in Camden: a Chinese restaurant and a dentist's office. It has been my humble little corner of the world for eight years, and I love it. I look at this familiar scene with pilgrim eyes--the eyes of the dark Madonna who has prayed for us sinners in this dark valley of tears from Bethlehem and Calvary through medieval France to the world today. I paint, and I pray: Hail Mary, full of grace, show unto us the blessed fruit of your womb, the Prince of Peace, the Light of the World, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

By Mickey McGrath

Brother Mickey McGrath, a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, is an award-winning artist and the author of 18 art and faith books. He is also a popular speaker and retreat leader around the United States; website: [bromickeymcgrath.com](http://bromickeymcgrath.com).

Caption: "Our Lady of Montserrat" [c]Bromickeymcgrath

Caption: "Cosmic Camden" [c]Bromickeymcgrath

Caption: "Baltimore Holy Family" [c]Bromickeymcgrath

Caption: "BLM Madonna" [c]Bromickeymcgrath

Caption: "Avila Garden" [c]Bromickeymcgrath

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