On the Cover

The wood carvings of founding faculty member Gilbert Osdiek, O.F.M., have graced Catholic Theological Union’s buildings, been used for all school liturgies, shown in galleries outside of CTU, and inspired students to combine their passions for many years. Many remember the intricate pumpkin carvings Gil would create around Halloween and showcase at the front desk where Harrietta Holloway, longtime friend and CTU Receptionist, would make sure everyone had a chance to enjoy the beauty of his work.

If you have prayed in the chapel on the eighth floor of 5401, you’ve seen part of what was once the processional cross that was used for all school liturgies. The cross had to be constructed in pieces to be transported easily as the all-school liturgies were originally held at Hyde Park Union Church on 53rd Street. “The cross is not meant to be a ‘resurrection’ cross. Rather, it was meant to suggest the entrance of Christ coming down the aisle through the assembly as the one who is ‘always living to make intercession for us.’” Gil had two inspirations for this processional cross; “One came from the ancient Christian posture of the orans, the one who prays. The other was suggested by the toes of ballet dancers and gymnasts. The cross was intended to be a praying, dancing Christ entering to lead the assembly. It occurred to me later that the song, ‘The Lord of the Dance,’ captures much of what I had in mind.”

As this is the inaugural issue of Theophilus, the editorial team thought the best way to help explain what we wanted this publication to be, would be using original artwork by someone in the CTU community on our covers. What better way to begin this tradition than with the memorable work of one of our own esteemed professors? The title of the work on the cover is “He Emptied Himself,” inspired by Philippians 2:6-11. Those who have taken courses with Gil will see many connections between his teaching style, his theology, spirituality, and his art. Gil describes the piece:

Many years ago I was looking for a way to express that self-emptying. I’ve seen some crucifixes with a large hole through the body of Christ, but that didn’t appeal to me. I found an intriguing alternative when I came across an image of a sculpture by a German artist, whose name I’ve forgotten. They style the sculptor used is what can be called negative sculpture, with a hollowing out of the normal volume a figure would have, leaving only the back of the empty volume. That was just what I wanted.

Gil carved another piece that goes with the cross above, this second one is called “Hands to the Face in Grief,” the inspiration came from T.S. Elliot’s Murder in the Cathedral. Inspiration came especially from the choral interludes in the work by the people of Canterbury which are performed in the style of the chorus in Greek theatre. The last of these choral verse reads “The back bent under toil,/the knee bent under sin,/the hands to the face under fear,/the head bent under grief.”
Conflating some of the lines together, Gil rendered this piece so that one can think of Mary at the cross, but also “I wanted it to be open enough to be the ‘Everyone’ standing before the cross.” Both “He Emptied Himself” and “Hands to the Face in Grief” are hand-carved of mahogany. These pieces were created before Gil owned proper carving chisels and were made using a pen knife.

Bernadette Raspante
Co-Editor