

Little Rock priest gives Paschal candle personal touch

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



In the weeks leading up to Easter, things are busier than usual for our priests and clergy as they finalize plans and prepare for one of the biggest liturgical celebrations of the year.

But despite the busy-ness of Lent, Father Juan Manjarrez, pastor of St. Edward Church and the Shrine of Divine Mercy in Little Rock, always makes the time to finish a project he has embraced for years now — painting his parish’s Paschal candle by hand.

“I began painting the Paschal candle approximately six years ago,” he said. “It began with the desire to add to the beauty of the celebration with a candle that is more personable.”

Father Manjarrez begins preparing for the Easter celebration in the fall of the previous year to ensure that he has enough time to plan and create the design for the coming year.

“I aim to start in the fall and complete it by Lent; however, the timeline varies based on the year and my available free time,” Father Manjarrez said. “Currently, I’m still finishing this year’s candle.”

In spite of his dedication to this artistic tradition, Father Manjarrez didn’t have much of an artistic background growing up.

“I enjoyed doodling in middle school and took an art class in high school, but that’s the extent

of my formal artistic experience,” Father Manjarrez said.

For Father Manjarrez, one of the biggest challenges isn’t necessarily in the materials or tools he uses — it’s deciding on a design fit for adorning a Paschal candle for an entire year.

“I pray about the design and its symbolism,” Father Manjarrez said. “I often seek inspiration from other candle makers or renowned paintings.”

Father Manjarrez begins looking for references and images with elements that he likes.

“I just look for different pictures of Jesus, and I’d been thinking of doing the Sacred Heart, so I’ve been looking online and looking for different pictures of the Sacred Heart,” he said. “So I stumbled on one that I liked, and that’s where I got the reference.”

Father Manjarrez’s process is a meticulous one. He layers the area of the Paschal candle that he’ll be painting with gesso, which is a mixture of chalk, glue made from rabbit skin and water. Father Manjarrez adds several layers of gesso to the candle, and once they’ve dried, he sketches the design that he has decided on for the year. Once the sketch is on the gesso and provides an outline, Father Manjarrez creates the design using colorful acrylic paints.

Another challenge Father Manjarrez faces is finding the time to work on the design, which takes months due to his busy schedule.



The Paschal Candle painted by Fr. Juan Manjarrez depicts the Sacred Heart of Jesus. (Katie Zakrzewski)

“Time management is the main challenge,” he said. “I typically paint for a couple of hours at a time. I work on it on my days off and also when I have time in the evenings if I have them free and have the energy to paint.”

This year’s candle depicts the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with gesso layered and painted so that the Sacred Heart itself is three-dimensional. Radiant light shines around Christ, while the Sacred Heart is bathed in a deep crimson red.

Father Manjarrez also painted additional altar candles with robed angels surrounded by light, praising and rejoicing. These candles will adorn the altar after Easter.



In spite of all of the time it takes and the challenges that he faces each year throughout the process, Father Manjarrez finds peace and beauty every year in the hours he spends in the quiet, laboring over the Paschal candle.

“Painting the candle, which represents our Lord in the liturgy, is a wonderful honor that allows me to emulate beauty itself,” he said. “Engaging in painting, especially the candle, helps me connect with beauty. Approaching God through beauty has enhanced my ability to see it in every moment of my day.”

“I often wonder how an artist views the world, and I come to believe that they see it with the eyes of a child. As Scripture suggests, we must become like children to enter the kingdom of God. Painting is a way of embracing childlike wonder, allowing me to become enraptured by the beauty of color.”

But the art of creating doesn't just deepen his own spirituality — Father Manjarrez said art and other forms of creativity can deepen our faith and draw us closer to God — especially as we draw closer to the Easter season.

“Creating art allows us to imitate God, the ultimate artist,” he said. “Being made in his image and likeness, engaging in artistic endeavors helps us connect with both creation and the Creator. This practice isn't limited to ‘artists’ but is accessible to all, as we are all made in his image. Such creative expressions can deepen one's relationship with our Heavenly Father.”

Father Manjarrez said that painting the Paschal candle is an opportunity to “share a little bit of art and a little bit of Jesus' love.”

“This art will burn,” he said, gently touching the candle, noting the places that need just a few final touches. “It will die, just like Jesus — he died for us. The art will never last, but Jesus lasts.”