

MY ENCOUNTERS WITH AN ARTIST



Bernie Mullen

My first encounter and introduction to priest and artist Wilfried Joye, happened in 2008. Sisters Ann Wigley OP and Brigid Rose Tiernan SND had paid him a visit. Biddy (as I call her) could not wait to tell me about her exciting conversation with him and of the impact his art made on her! She insisted that I accompany her to meet him as she knew of my interest in art and writing. So began my blessed relationship with Wilfried and his works.

What impressed me when I was introduced to Wilfried, was his openness and friendly way of welcoming strangers. He has a gift for immediately making one feel at home and his friendly manner invites all to relax and to enjoy his company. On that first visit, Wilfried took me on a tour of his home. Being confronted by a number of his paintings that hang in most rooms, is like being in the presence of profound and prayerful Silence that speaks to one visually. What immediately struck me was that all the works have similarities in that they portray with reverence and poignancy all the emotions of the human heart. The rural settings which lend colourful background to the central figures add a sense of sacredness and integration of all creation.

Wilfried Joye's style speaks of traditional icon artistry in that the figures have small mouths, large and usually wide open eyes, straight lined and small noses and very delicate gesturing hands. They, as do icons, draw the observer into contemplation and deeply prayerful attentiveness. His works are however, impressionistic. The combination of these styles captures the simplicity, generosity and openness of spirit that African rural people share in their daily lives. Furthermore, the viewer is profoundly affected by vulnerability and poignancy of the human condition that Wilfried manages to so sensitively portray. Yet, in each work there is underlying and unmistakable joy. One grasps the idea, through bright and earthy colours and the sweep of generous lines in the art, that God lives in all creation and in every creature. God's home is in us.



There are also connotations of Claerhout's style and subject matter in Joye's works. Bright and vibrant colours, rural landscapes, farm animals, birds, flowers and donkeys often feature. The unique symbol of the fish is often found in Joye's portraits, depictions of the psalms and scripture passages. This is because the fish represents insight; it never closes its eyes, these remain open for the reception of Life and Truth. The mouth of the fish is always open and this symbolises capacity for the 'Food of Life' in its purity and fullness. The paintings of Joye are often religious and he presents to the world a journey of deep faith, the sacredness of life and the joy of hope.



Like his paintings, I describe Wilfried Joye as a contemplative whose spirituality influences all those he meets. His wisdom shines through his openness to ideas, his search for Truth and his sense of humour. His love for the poor is evident in his relationship with them and in his fight for justice in a world that is materialistic and discriminatory. He, as a person, and as a serving priest is one who is compassionate, accepting of all that is human and one who seriously strives to be fully Jesus in his art and in his way of life. I enjoy very much such a relationship!

I have recently had the pleasure of writing poetry for some of Wilfried's art works. We entitled the book 'Art for Prayer' and teamed up with Sarah McGregor who helped us with the presentation and layout. Here is a sample of the content:



You sing within

*You sing within
The deep well
Of my being.
You yellow-shine me
Into music of my own.
You give me your silent
Verdant life to ponder,
To cherish,
To seed and plant
In fertile thoughts of Love
That makes my opened
Eyes and soul and heart
Your own...*

Joye's art is also a means to draw us deeply into scripture. He depicts with insight the psalms and some of the Gospel writings. In such paintings one is always aware that God

accompanies us, loves us into Love and never forsakes us. We are cherished just as we are; in our human frailty, blindness and struggle for fulfilment. The figures are usually twinned with other eyes as though to emphasise that we do not see ourselves as God sees us. We are incapable of unconditional love and yet we experience it all through our lives. We need just to remain available for such life and love! An example of what I am saying is aptly portrayed in this recent painting called 'The woman of Samaria'. She does not respect, love nor see herself as God calls her to do. She encounters Jesus at the well. She is exposed to his gaze, to his heart. She becomes in Jesus, a worthy and beautiful receptacle for absolute love and Grace. I think this painting that hangs on my wall is one of the most moving of all Joye's works.

WOMAN OF SAMARIA

*My darkness thirsts
For your eye lit day
My hands in pleading ask
For your pure, free,
Life Waters:*

*You flood
My deep desire.
You wash my shadowed being
And grace me
With your healing faith.*

*You bring to birth in me
Unfolding love.
You cleanse me
In the waters
Of your insight...*



Joye has painted a number of biblical themes in series that elaborate and draw one deeper into a profound relationship with the subject. His series such as 'Blessed are the Pure in Heart,' 'The Wise and Foolish Virgins,' 'Unless You Become like a Child', come to mind. I think it is often the simple and uncluttered lines of the works that help us to be honestly vulnerable and willing to expose ourselves to unfathomable Truth. We encounter Mystery that affects our visual language, our emotional language and our spiritual expression.

Wilfried Joye's gift of painting has been a challenge for my personal journey. We live in a time of real and devastating cataclysm in all the aspects of life; environmental, social, economic, political and religious. We are confronted with the possibility of irreversible destruction through our own human behaviour and failure to respond to love-in-all-things. It is the art of hope and joy that Wilfried gives to the world that helps us to recognise our humanity and to trust that it is safely in God's hands no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Wilfried and I are currently working on a series of portraits for which I am writing short commentaries and poems. We hope to entitle the book 'Portraits for Prayer' Here is a snippet for your contemplation. I hope you are moved to prayerfully contemplate it!



*In celebration
of the Sacred Unity
I sing in silence
I listen with the open ears of all
The wonder of creation
I see with eyes of little truth;
You lure me with Your Eye of Truth
Where I can wave my being in praise
For your gracious gifts
Of cosmic, living earth...*

Bernie Mullen July 2015