

Sarah Crow

Narrator

Kate Douglas

Loyola University Chicago

Interviewer

Sarah Crow: S

Kate Douglas: K

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Abstract: Sarah Crow was interviewed due to her connection to and position as the artist- in-residence at St. Gregory the Great parish in Chicago, IL. Crow is a Catholic artist and contributes to the parish in many ways such as conducting tours and holding art workshops. In this interview, she was asked primarily about her role at the church and how she contributes to the community. She was able to provide an abundance of information about the history of art and architecture of St. Gregory the Great. Additionally, she describes the continued tradition of art at the parish, St. Gregory being labeled the “arts and cultural center” of the three parishes affiliated with Mary, Mother of God. This interview was conducted over phone and was about twenty minutes in length, transcribing to about five pages. The interview took place as part of the Gathering Places project at Loyola University Chicago. For more information, see <https://archive.wherewegather.org/s/remember/page/home>.

Kate Douglas (K): Can you introduce yourself for me?

Sarah Crow (S): Mhm, my name is Sarah Crow and I am a working Catholic artist and artist- in-residence at St. Gregory the Great. I do commissions of sacred art for private clients, I do paintings for gallery exhibitions, and I do, as artist in residence, workshops of various art techniques for the community as well as tours of the churches of the Mary, Mother of God parish of art and architecture.

K: What brought you to St. Gregory?

S: The artist in residence opportunity. So I am a registered parishioner at St. John Cantius church in Chicago where I was baptized in twenty- seventeen and I have been doing sacred art for the last [*speaks hesitantly*] five years? I was actively looking for a studio and I had briefly been- had a working space at my parish and I definitely experienced that as the best work environment where I was connected to a church. And so I was actively looking for a studio, and ideally a studio connected to a parish, and I had heard that there had previously been some artists and writers who were here at St. Gregorys. And so I reached out and my- my inquiry corresponded to the previous pastor, Father Bob Cook, was just initiating St. Gregory Hall and looking for an artist for their programming. So, it was just the right timing.

K: Can you describe for me the most beautiful thing about St. Gregory?

S: St. Gregorys is part of Mary, Mother of God. It is one parish that includes St. Thomas of Canterbury and St. Ita's and the parish is staffed by the conventual Franciscans. The most beautiful thing about St. Gregorys and the whole pariah I would say is the- the life of the faithful. This is a [*pauses to think*] is a thriving parish community with- where people feel really connected with each other across these three churches and a part of the life and the spirituality of the Franciscans. So that's, you know, ultimately the most beautiful thing is the community. And then on the level of material things, St. Gregory the Great is one of the most beautiful churches in Chicago. It was designed with tremendous aesthetic integrity. When it was- when the founding pastor wanted to build a new church for the Luxembourger Catholic community in this neighborhood he went to the Cardinal and asked for permission. The Cardinal said, like, don't- I'm paraphrasing here- but, like, don't build just another, sort of, standard form church, like make something really beautiful and special. [*takes a deep inhale*] and so that Monsieur Klasen really took that to heart and he commissioned artisans and an architect and people to make really beautiful and special, unique works of art for that church; its entire design in the Norman Gothic style. So, we see in Chicago- we see in America churches that are very [*pauses to think*]

aggregate, you know, works that are from here and there and the other place that don't necessarily aesthetically fit together. But St. Gregory's has a lot of visual integrity.

K: And, maybe going off that question, what's the one thing you wished people outside St. Gregory knew about you?

S: [*starts answering the question with a laugh*] So, I'd like more people to know about St. Gregory's Hall. And, you know, the word is getting out, but I would like people to know about the programming that we have. Because, they might know about the parish but not know about St. Gregory Hall's program and that it is open to everyone in Chicagoland and beyond [*short laugh*]. It's not just for parishioners. So, I think the programming we have here is really special and I would like more people to know about it.

K: What would you say the role of St. Gregory is in the neighborhood?

S: Well, I don't live in the neighborhood, so I don't know exactly. I don't know how many of the people in the neighborhood come here, or how many come to mass at St. Gregory's. I have had people come to my classes who saw flyers in the neighborhood. Some of our advertising locally is attracting people who aren't parishioners but who live in the neighborhood but I don't have any statistics for you.

K: About your classes, who attends your art classes and who benefits from them the most?

S: Um, attendance I am not looking at a spreadsheet here but I would say generally, probably fifty percent or maybe a little less are connected to Mother of God parish [*takes a short pause*] maybe a little less, maybe like thirty five to forty percent are connected to the parish. Um, and others are just interested in art and faith and see our advertisements across other Catholic churches in Chicago or other arts and culture related sites in Chicago. Um, so, they appeal to people who want to deepen their faith through, you know, through beauty. And they appeal to people who, like, just want to learn certain skills or certain techniques or, you know, have a great reverence of beauty for art not necessarily in the Catholic church.

K: Now, can you recall a favorite memory or story involving your time as the artist in residence, perhaps teaching one of those classes?

S: The classes are really fulfilling in different ways. But, uh, most recently we had a retreat for Lent which was [*recalling*] a collaboration where we had a visiting Byzantine Catholic Priest, Father Thomas Loya, and gave a talk at St. Gregory the Great about the theology of icons and how, uh, and how to pray with icons and what they reveal about Christianity. And then after his talk we did icon writing in the studio and it was a fitting image for the season, it is what's called a Bride-Groom icon in the Orthodox tradition and the Man of Sorrows. And, that was really special, I mean, I love the different audiences that I do the art programming with, you know, whether they're Catholic or not it's a great- it's a great point of interaction, right, around art and beauty and connected with the church. But this one was very special because everyone came for a really spiritual retreat while doing art, so we all along understood the, as we were learning the technique and preparing the materials and doing the painting, that this was an act of prayer. And, it was just an incredibly meditative intensive space and it was [*she gets excited with her passion*] there is a lot of wonderful analogies that, kind of, the art process making and growth in one's spiritual life that really came to the forefront in the process of icon writing. Um, in the iconographic tradition they call the process of writing an icon, like, like bringing up the light. Because you start on a really dark, kind of muddy colored ground and then you [*takes an insightful pause*] increasingly paint the light and the brighter colors on top- and, just as one point of analogy between the artistic and spiritual process- you know, a lot of the people who had never done technique before really, like, were having a hard time trusting that it will look good in the end, you know, like, 'I don't know, this looks a little dirty, this looks a little messy, is this really going to be beautiful?' And then it's an act of faith in art making that you persevere and trust in the process and then they're really delighted with the finished images. And as this was a kind of retreat and we were really praying and meditating on, you know, salvation through the passion of Christ, it was all like, yes, this is what happens in our souls and we have to trust the process.

K: How do you feel connected to the rich history of art at the church and how do you feel that you have most notably contributed to this?

S: My sense of connection to the patrimony of art is more universal. That is to say, as a Catholic artist, I conceive of myself as participating in a living tradition. Just like the church teaches, like, there is scripture and tradition, and the little T, you know, in the Catholic faith [*continues her answer through a laugh*], our artwork- our artwork is a part of that tradition; something that's alive. So, we have, you know, two thousand years of resources [*takes a slight pause*], of different beautiful articulations of the faith in visual art. And as a Catholic artist today we get to draw on all of that and we get to immerse ourselves into it and we get to do something new that is informed by it. So I'm constantly aware of that connection to that inheritance and the way that I am participating in it in my small way, you know, like shaping it for the future. And, that's all something that's really wonderful and really special about Catholicism- it's just this treasury of art that we have that we get to participate in, be in conversation with. At St. Gregory the Great there is immediate inspiration within the church itself with artworks that are there. When I came to Chicago to go to graduate school I went to the school of the art history of Chicago primarily because of its close connection to the museum. Right, so I had access to all of this incredible art as inspiration for my own making. And similarly, having my studio so close to St. Gregs, I have inspiration of the art that's there in my making, [*pauses to think*] and more significantly Jesus is there so there's the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a very concrete way. In terms of my contribution, that's a very interesting question, definitely I would say my biggest contribution has been in my teaching at St. Gregs. Helping others to- helping others to [*take a reflective pause*] learn how to spend time looking and praying with art. And, you know, learning techniques, and ideally encountering God through his aspect of beauty, um, his beauty incarnate with Jesus. Teaching has been the main contribution here. I had done a painting for St. Thomas of Canterbury's soup kitchen of a beloved parishioner and long- time director of the soup kitchen, Jim. That was really beautiful because it was a memorial portrait because he had recently passed away and he had served that soup kitchen for a very long time, I can't remember the years right now, but over twenty years. So making a portrait of him for the people who are a part of that Ministry and receive that Ministry is really special.

K: If you could change one thing about St. Gregory, what would you change?

S: Um, so right now Mary, Mother of God has three churches, St. Gregory is one of those churches. To answer the question specifically for St. Gregory, I'd like to see there be daily Mass here. Right now there is only weekend Mass.

K: Is there anything you would want to change about Mary, Mother of God?

S: [*laughs while pondering the question*] Um, no, I don't have anything- and also it would be rather presumptuous if I did- since I've only been connected to the parish for two years. But, rather than wanting to change what we have at our parish, I would say [*takes a pause*] I would like to reproduce what we have at our parish at all other parishes in Chicago and have an artist connected to every parish as well as a composer and a scholar [*laughs*].

K: That's an amazing insight! Could you maybe speak on what you would like Mary, Mother of God to look like in five years?

S: Again [*laughs*] that seems presumptive since I haven't been here that long and, you know, people have been baptized at the church as babies and are an active part of the community and I still am a registered parishioner at another parish. But, I can speak to the universal church and just express that prayer for Mary, Mother of God, as well, which is the increased outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the giving to the Holy Spirit in the community so that we are all so filled with love for the Holy Spirit that people just find the Catholic church irresistible [*laughs at her last statement*].

K: Yeah, so maybe going back, after answering all of these questions, can you tell me one thing that you will never forget about your first visit to St. Gregory?

S: So, the first time going into the church, just being so impressed with the beauty of this church building and the art in it, like I said, it has a really tremendous integrity and, you know, a somewhat small, intimate, peaceful place to pray. And, on my first visit I also saw this, which is

now my working space and teaching space, and I was like- ‘oh my gosh! This would be a dream!’ [*laughs with joy*], you know, as an artist it can often be very difficult to find a good working studio, which is why I was like ‘this is perfect!’ [*laughs*]. I’m glad that it came to pass.