

GOD & I: Don Matis Jr.

An eclectic American artist describes his past travails and the salvation he found through his Catholic faith

By Mario Conte, OFM Conv.

YOU WERE born in Cleveland and have a brother and three sisters. What memories do you have of your childhood?

My first childhood memory was when I was 6 years old and walking to first grade, at Corpus Christi Catholic school, I had my first experience of violence; I saw these two older students beat up a kid in front of the school, and what they did to him was nasty. At that time I said to myself, "What a crazy world we live in!"

When it comes to my family, unfortunately my life was filled with the mental illness of my parents and besides my father was an alcoholic. Even though I went to a Catholic school, my life was filled with uncertainty, fear and anxiety. However, we were a creative family in the sense that my sisters, brother and I participated in plays with people in the neighborhood, but we were also a rather crazy family.

When you were about 10, something really dreadful happened to you. Can you tell our readers what took place, and how this event impacted your life?

At the age of 10 I was a paperboy for the *Sun News* so naturally I got to know a lot of people on the streets. One of these people befriended me years before the dreadful thing happened, just like pedophiles do.

Don with one of his favourite paintings, *The Holy Eucharist*; he is signing "I Love You" in American Sign Language: a raised pinky (little) finger, index finger, and an extended thumb



One springtime Saturday when I was collecting money for my paper route, this man in my neighborhood, who worked in a pet store, invited and lured me down into his basement to see his fish tank. Sensing that something was not in order, I turned around, and he made me perform a sex act and then he raped me.

As a 10 year old boy, the impact was psychologically devastating for me. During this experience, as well as afterwards, I cut myself off from reality, I just wanted to die. Unfortunately, because my parents were unreliable, I could not trust them for psychological help, so I kept the experience to myself.

This rape had taken my dignity as a man away from me. I did not know if I was a man or a woman until I was some 17 years old. To this day, I am still experiencing painful consequences from this rape.

At the age of 15 you moved to Hudson, Ohio. Why did your family move? And were your parents still living together?

Despite the fact that my alcoholic father was violent to my mother, my parents never got divorced, and they are still living together. We moved to Hudson because my father worked in a car factory, he was an engineer draftsman. He wanted us to have a good education because the Hudson school system was very highly rated in the country.

This move was a culture shock for me because Hudson was a very affluent city. We came from West Cleveland, a low income area. It was a culture shock for me, and when I met the principal of Hudson High School, Arch McDonald, I spit in his hand and told him I didn't want to be in this Disney Land. I was definitely a wild child.

You had barely finished high school when you began a very disorderly lifestyle: drug dealing, jail, and street life... However, at a certain

DON MATIS JR. is an artist, a BCA pool instructor, a Catholic lay-evangelist, and an all out positive laid-back guy. Don was born in West Cleveland, Ohio, and attended Hudson High School in Hudson, Ohio. A victim of rape at the age of 10, he started at 11 years old on a whirlwind of alcohol and drug abuse for 17 years.

In early 1980's, he met his future wife Crystal Lynn, got married in 1985 and she bore him a son Trey. However, Don and Crystal were divorced in 1987 and Don lost custody of his son.

On 10 December 1998 Crystal was brutally murdered and since then Don has vowed to keep his beard long until this still unsolved murder is closed and brought to justice.

Shortly after Don became a father he experienced a powerful conversion, and since then he has renounced drugs and alcohol and has dedicated his life to serving God through the Catholic Church.

He loves his Catholic faith and shares the reason for his sobriety with all who want to know in his Catholic healing ministry, United Hearts.

Don's artwork and lay ministry may be appreciated through his website: www.StonedOnHappiness.com



Don says that before he starts each painting he prays and asks Jesus what colors to use



point you met a woman, Crystal, whom you married. What was special about Crystal, and what did this marriage mean to you?

As soon as I got out of high school, I continued dealing drugs, living the wild life of drugs, booze and promiscuity which continued for many years. Eventually I went off to Tucson, Arizona where I met Crystal. She used to date my friend, Ray. She was a dancer and rode with a gang of bikers called the 'Banditos'. She was involved in a bike crash and I nursed her back to health. Eventually we "hooked up".

Crystal was a reflection of me; she was just as crazy as I was, and I soon found out she was born on March 8, and I was born March 7. We had a lot in common, she was creative, she was intelligent, and she was a beautiful woman.

Back then I never actually thought about marriage as a sacrament, I married her, in 1985, just because I loved her, but unfortunately I was still in the drug and alcohol world when I married her.

Your marriage with Crystal, however, did not last long, and you divorced in 1987, losing custody of your son in the process. What did not work out between you?

Those years together were very intense; they were an emotional roller-



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Don says that his beard is purple because it stands for prayer, penance and fasting for America and the whole world

coaster. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment, and we had no God in our lives. Crystal had a cocaine addiction, and she even stabbed me once. Later after our divorce, I found out she was a manic-depressive. We really led a very wild life; you never knew what was going to happen, and all this eventually led to our divorce. I loved her because of her creativity, her beauty, her intelligence and her humor, but we could not live together.

Your conversion began around this time. Could you describe how God came into your life?

I was in Houston, Texas on January 25, 1986, just before the space shuttle Challenger disaster which killed the seven crew members on January 28.

I had a painting business with a guy named Joel who knew that my wife wasn't with me, she and my son were at my parents' house in Hudson, so he invited me to come over to his house for a wild party of cocaine and women. I went there wanting to party 100 percent but strangely I only drank a few beers and then went home. The next morning it was Saturday and I got up at 11 am and started

smoking a few cigarettes in a rocking chair. All of a sudden I felt I was having a nervous breakdown: I saw my whole past life flashing in front of my eyes, every experience I ever had. I felt as though I was dying. I was about to call 911 and, while I was putting my cigarette out in a golden ashtray, I heard a voice above me saying, "My son go to the church and get a most holy rosary." I felt in a timeless dimension, in a kind of ecstasy of peace and love of God. I had the sensation that the Blessed Mother was showering seeds of grace upon me. So I got up and walked to St John Vianney's Catholic Church, which was about 2 and ½ miles from my home. By the time I got there the Mass had just finished, and there was this priest there talking with an older couple. So I had to wait and be patient before speaking to the priest. While I was waiting, Jesus spoke inwardly to me, and showed me a three-storied house with a dark background implode upon itself, and while I was seeing this I heard Jesus saying to me, "My son, I'm going to rebuild you." I had no idea what that meant at the time.

After the couple left I said to the priest, "Do you have a rosary for a

poor soul?" He marched me back to the sacristy and gave me a black-beaded rosary. I was brought up Catholic, but never remember ever praying the rosary, but now I started praying the rosary around the clock.

I was quite struck when I met you. It was not only your extravagant way of dressing and your purple beard that surprised me, but also the fact that you describe yourself as: Jester for Jesus. Why do you call yourself in this way?

This Jester look evolved from a Jester hat given to me as a birthday present from my friend Susie. After she gave it to me I started adding to the hat. I have noticed how God uses people to get his message across. The jester is a unique character in history. He was like a fool, but also reported to the king and queen. I hang out with Jesus and the Blessed Mother every day – the king and queen of heaven, and I am their jester.

Other things done in symbolism are my beard. My beard is purple: it stands for prayer, penance and fasting for America and the whole world, as reparation for sin. I wear a crucifix because I love Jesus in his Catholic Church and it was given to me by a Carmelite friar in 1990.

I wear an old pair of jeans patched over with pieces of ripped American flags. The patches of the American

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Don wears an old pair of jeans with pieces of ripped American flags

flag are there because America is very torn apart and divided. My jeans are also an advertisement for God and how we can all heal, and bring peace to this world. We are all unique and vastly different, but it's also a great gift from God to be in America and to be able to help others, so let's unite and be one.

In the late 1980's, God called me to be a sign to his people and to live in a van for two years. God taught me how to rely totally on Him. The experiences I had in the van are a long story in itself meant for another day. Needless to say, I went to two Masses a day. A Mass in Stow is where I met my platonic best friend, Monica Baird. Paradoxically, she saw what my mission was and how I helped people and at the same time was homeless – living in a van. Instead of just praying for the homeless, after 3 months of prayer, she asked me to move into her one bedroom apartment. In July of 1992, I moved into Monica's living room. We have been sharing in the lay-evangelist healing ministry of United Hearts and started our "Stoned On Happiness" company of selling my artwork and brining people to the Catholic faith for over 26 years. Who takes in a homeless person like that? There are many stories that could be told of how God has worked in our life – passing out over



Youtube

Don met our editor, Fr. Mario, last June at the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon, North Jackson, OH

10,000 miraculous medals to individuals and sharing Christ's graces in the sacramentals, to my bar ministry, to praying with people for healing spiritually, mentally, and emotionally, to our aspirations of Catholic 12 step meetings for those in recovery and their families.

Who is God for you? How would you define him?

God is pure love. God is infinite mercy and, in the Catholic Church, which is 100 percent the true Church, we can feel the gratitude to be in his kingdom and in his presence.

God is an enormous creative mind and power that has created this beautiful world and the enormous galaxies with the whole universe, and it's amazing how humble he is that he comes to us in a piece of consecrated bread. I've been going to confession once a week for the last 32 years, and I go to Mass as often as possible. For the last 7 years, I have enjoyed attending the Latin Tridentine Mass.

At Crystal's murder in 1998 you struck a covenant with God. You decided to grow a beard until her murder was solved. The case is still unsolved, and you use your beard as a paint brush to create paintings. What message are you trying to get across through your art?

Crystal was murdered on December 10, 1998, in Tucson, Arizona; she was 41. She had become a prostitute and someone picked her up and murdered her so brutally she was dismembered. My son was 13 at the time, and unfortunately, I only got to spend a minute with him during the service. Later, I asked God out of love for her, that I would grow my beard out of solidarity, and pray that her killer would be apprehended. In March, celebrating the feast day of St Joseph the Worker, in 2002, Jesus inspired me to paint using my beard, and it went on from there. This poem expresses the meaning and purpose of my art:



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*My art is a silent spoken language
To the mind, the soul and the body.
To move people's thoughts,
To enlighten passions and thoughts,
To inspire people to think, to react, to create
and to see the beauty of God.*

When you look at my artwork it seems that it's just various colors on paper, randomly distributed with no rhyme or reason, just different colors of expression of emotion applied through my natural brush, my beard. Before I start each painting, I pray and ask Jesus what colors to use. I have no idea what I'm going to paint; I just feel free during the whole procedure.

My art hopefully inspires people to think and connect with other people. There are three priests, in the Cleveland Diocese, who use my paintings in their confessional to inspire penitents to change and become better Catholics.

What would you like to say to those who have no faith? Or to those whose faith has become lukewarm?

If you don't believe in Jesus, get on your knees and ask him if he is real. I guarantee that he will reveal himself to you, no doubt about it. Just ask Jesus through this simple prayer: "Jesus, are you real?" And if you're angry with God tell him you are angry with him. God was able to change my life in an instant, called grace from God, and he will surely be able to change yours too in an instant. ♦