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Sister's calendar offers beauty, meditation

Sharon Abercrombie | Dec. 2, 2011 Eco Catholic

It began as a hand-drawn Christmas calendar for her brother in the 1970s. The following year, his friends asked if she'd make one for them, too. They loved the meditations from saints, poets and writers that went with each of the original 12 pieces piece of artwork. They loved the suggested daily actions to do each day to better the world.

A few years later, the calendar's creator, St. Joseph Sr. Mary Southard, a busy professional artist and retreat facilitator, found herself overwhelmed by all of the requests.

That's how Ministry of the Arts was born. Sr. Southard's religious community in La Grange Park, Ill., opened a little store on the motherhouse grounds and began offering their gifted colleague's calendars via mass printing to the general public. Today, those calendars, at $11.95 each, sell "in the thousands" each year.

"We have distributors in New Zealand, England and Ireland," said Flo Christiano, director of Ministry of the Arts. Christiano also serves on a team of four women who create the calendar's theme each year and who write the copy. Sr. Southard is still a major contributor, but she has been joined by a group of artists, each of who adds his or her unique talents to the mix.

The team has kept Sr. Southard's focus on Earth and the universe story as its main thread, Christiano said.

If *NCR* readers are unfamiliar with the Ministry of the Arts calendar, they might want to go online for a viewing [1].

For years, this Eco Catholic writer has been giving the calendar s as Christmas gifts. Friends and family look forward to receiving them. Waiting for each new calendar is like anticipating a favorite writer's next novel. What surprises await?

My particular all-time favorite is "Once Upon a Universe," the 2009 offering. St. Joseph Sr. Kathy Sherman, a well-known composer, wrote an accompanying CD around it titled "Songs of the Universe Story."

Christiano says the 2004 edition, featuring quotes and ideas from "The Earth Charter," has been the most popular.

The 2012 calendar is themed around "Transforming Love: Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart" and draws upon the Congregation of St. Joseph's Four Generous Promises, a covenant the 700 sisters from eight communities around the U.S. and Japan, drawn up in 2007 when the groups affiliated.

These promises are:

> "To take the risk to surrender our lives and resources to work for specific change in collaboration with others that the hungers of the world might be fed.
>
> To recognize the reality that Earth is dying, to claim our oneness with Earth and to take steps now to strengthen, heal and renew the face of Earth.
>
> To network with others across the world to bring about a shift in the global culture from institutionalized power and privilege to a culture of inclusivity and mutuality.
>
> To be mutually responsible and accountable for leadership in the congregation."

Christiano previewed some of this year's calendar quotes for Eco Catholic:

> "Each month we will be reminded that the path to transformation is pure Love, the love of one another, love of neighbor??When we view the world through the lens of our heart, there is a richness, an essence that flowers from our soul. In those moments we are transformed we notice the beauty of dew drops on petals, tall grasses waving in a breeze. We hear birds chirping in morning conversations, we listen with greater empathy to a co-worker's crisis. We feel a friend's pain or sadness more deeply; we are more patient and forgiving in family relationships. We weep when reading about a 10-year old girl abused and sold into marriage."

Daily actions give reflections on staying attuned to transformation, be it personal, community or of the world, Christiano said.

In recent years, print overruns have been donated to eight prison facilities -- small jails, correction centers and prisons. Feedback has been powerful. One woman from the federal prison camp at Danbury, Conn., wrote that the spiritual reflections "are wonderful and provide us with much needed daily refreshment."

Said another: "The loving gift of these calendars remind us each day to celebrate life in all its wondrous glory, no matter where we find ourselves."

"I was in prison and you came to me," a third reflected.

If you open your heart to this beautiful Ministry of the Arts calendar, be forewarned. Come next January, you will not want to recycle it. You will want to keep it, to feast upon the artwork, the meditations and to take up the daily actions. Some special art favorites have been framed and now hang on the walls of my apartment.

The clipped up remainders (I couldn't bear to recycle them, either) have gone to a now-13-year-old girl who loves to draw and paint. May this child continue to be inspired by the beauty created by Sr. Mary Southard and her cadre of artists.

Ministry of the Arts now offers greeting cards, bookmarks, daily planners, posters and small sculptures, too, Christiano said. The cards, bookmarks, planners and posters feature art from the calendar. All products can be purchased through their website, found here [1].

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Links:
[1] http://www.ministryofthearts.org/servlet/StoreFront