

Saints alive!

Artist shows human face of holiness

By JILL BODACH
Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — Saints are human, too.

If that seems like a contradiction of terms, just ask Brother Michael O'Neill McGrath to explain.

McGrath, a member of the Oblates St. Francis De Sales order in Washington, D.C., has spent the majority of his career making the lives of saints more accessible to the average person through art.

The final lecture in his three-part series "Journey" will be given at 7:30 tonight at St. Philip Church.

In his painting of St. Ann, the patron saint of housekeeping, she is pictured sitting at a kitchen table with a cup of tea between her hands. She is dressed in a sweatshirt, and her halo is made of magnets placed in a circular pattern on the refrigerator behind her.

St. Agatha, the patron saint of breast cancer, is pictured among a group of runners and walkers at a breast cancer fund-raising walk.

St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost things, is displayed on his hands and knees looking for a lost set of keys, which the baby Jesus is holding in his hands as he sits on Joseph's back.

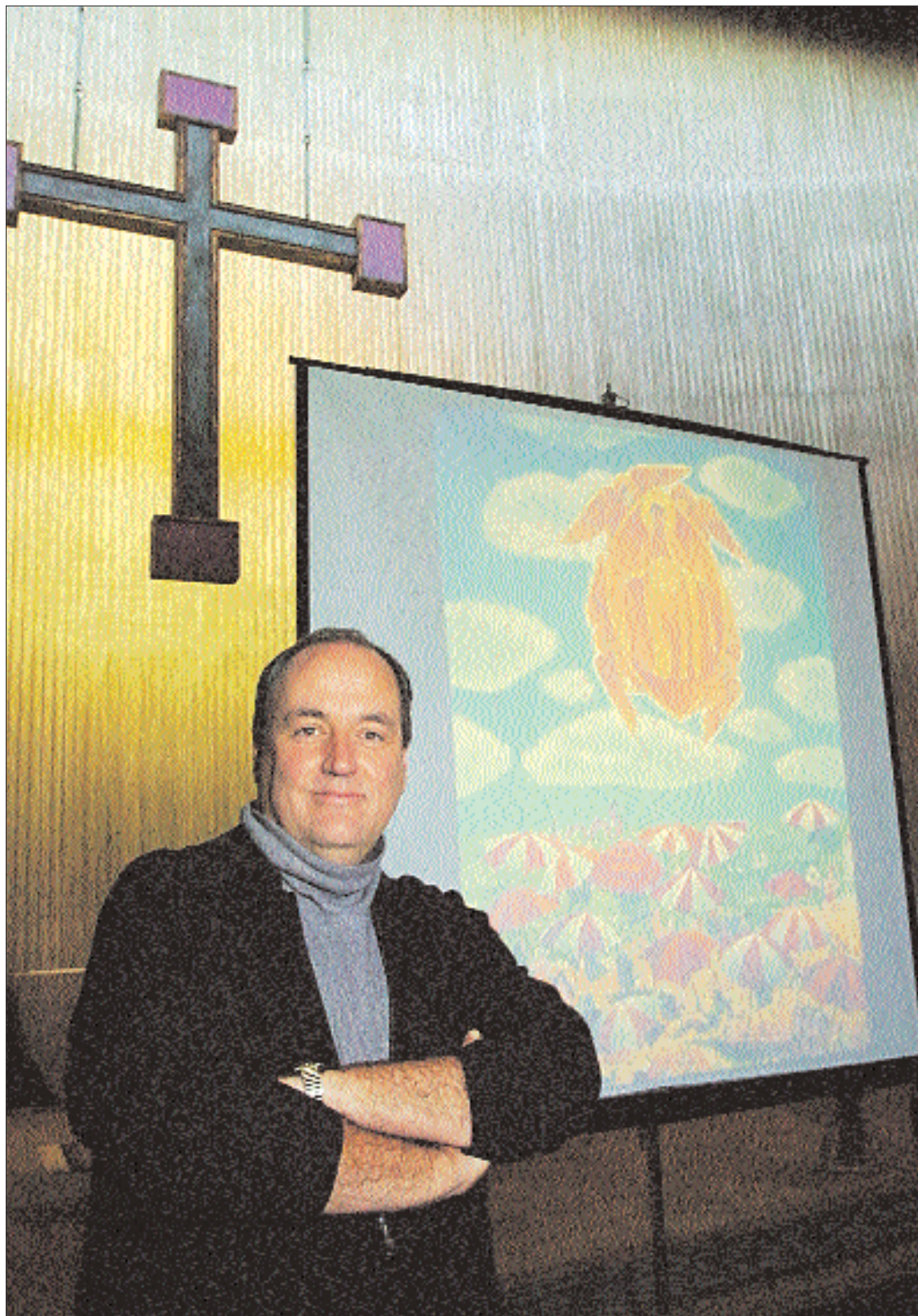
St. Brigid, the patron saint of blacksmiths and others of similar trades, is drawn lounging in a lake of Guinness beer, based on an Irish poem in which Brigid said that she envisioned Heaven with a big lake of beer where all the saints would drink and the King of Kings would sit in the center.

Some might not agree with making saints so human, but to McGrath it is a way for Catholics and non-Catholics to connect with these saintly beings.

"I like to take the saints off the shelves and make them mean something today by placing them in contemporary settings," McGrath said. "I like to show the humanity in the saints. I think that today they are made out to be so pious and unapproachable that people forget they have failures and struggles just like the rest of us."

McGrath said he was drawn to the images of saints after both of his parents passed away.

"I remember trying to copy the pictures of saints from my children's Bible when I was a child, but I wasn't really drawn to paint them until I lost my parents," McGrath said. "I figured when I lost them, I knew two saints, so why not paint



Hour photo/ERIK TRAUTMANN

Brother Michael McGrath, a member of the Oblates St. Francis de Sales order, uses his art to make saints more accessible to lay people.

others? I was drawn to the saints out of the loss and heartbreak I felt at that time. It was like I was seeing the saints again for the first time."

McGrath's artwork created a sense of peace in him, and he tries to instill that same peace in others who view his paintings and hear his presentations.

"Art, or any creative medium, allows you to go into yourself and see what's going on in your heart," McGrath said. "It puts you in a place to feel good about yourself, despite whatever hurts you might have. Art puts you in direct contact with God. To me, it is a different form of prayer. It is a form of meditation. I think art provides this because most people are afraid to be alone, but artists crave that time alone."

Through his art, McGrath is hoping to unite people together through a common theme of community.

"When I am painting, I feel a sense of connection to something else outside of myself," McGrath said. "There is a definite spiritual compo-

nent to me. So, when I share my work with others, that is the next step in my mission. We all have hurts and we all have baggage, but when we see that in artwork, we see that we are not alone."

But perhaps it is his painting of Mary entitled "Queen of Peace," that best describes what McGrath hopes to convey through his art.

In his painting, Mary is pictured sitting in front of the Western Wall of Jerusalem, wearing a Jewish prayer shawl on one shoulder, and a Palestinian scarf on the other. Behind Mary's head, in place of a halo, is a hole in the wall that illuminates the blue sky behind her, giving a glimpse of something beyond the strife.

"I think this proves that Heaven is already here on Earth," McGrath said. "Most people are raised in the church to believe that they have to work to get to Heaven, but we all have moments where we catch glimpses of Heaven."

His lecture is open to the public.