

Interview with Mark Dukes

Mark Dukes, the iconographer for the Dancing Saints Icon, is a member of Saint Gregory's. Before Saint Gregory's built its church, the empty lot had several sheds on it which were used by Father Tom, a Russian Orthodox priest, to store supplies for a program that fed homeless people. One of Father Tom's volunteers was Mark Dukes—a man he introduced to the congregation as “someone who really ought to be spending his time painting icons.” The interview below with Mark Dukes was done in 1997 by Michael Barger.

Barger: Mark, when did you first encounter icons?

Dukes: In art school. I took art history and saw some icons, but at that time I wasn't a Christian, I wasn't spiritual. It was later on that I had a conversion experience. It was years after that that I saw icons and it started registering within me. I started seeing something in the icon that I felt in states of prayer, in states of being close to God like in church, or in personal devotion time. You feel something and you just can sense that this is what they were portraying in those icons. I really see icons as being portraits of prayer.

Barger: Did you discover icons by reading books or by visiting churches? When did the whole thing really begin to grab hold of you?

Dukes: When I really started searching for the truth in Christianity. I went through a time where there was a lot of confusion in my life concerning Christianity because there are so many denominations and so many people saying so many different things about what the truth of Christ is. When I first had my conversion experience I just read the Bible to tell you the truth and the Bible is very powerful. I didn't come from a background that is very religious at all.

Barger: At all?

Dukes: At all. I think I had been to church only a few times in my whole life. The only thing I knew about Jesus Christ was that there was this guy called the “King of Kings”. When I went to art school I read the Bible for the first time -isn't that amazing -when I was about 22 or 23. I feel blessed that I wasn't filled to the brim with all these stories when I was young and then got so used to them that they had no effect on me or that they lost their power to touch my heart. I started off with the New Testament and read about this guy, Jesus, and I said “Whoa! this is great! If there was ever a good man he was a good man.” And then he died, right? And you see I really didn't know about the resurrection.

Barger: Really?

Dukes: Seriously.

Barger: How great to be a 23 year old young man and come to this completely fresh. And you didn't know how the story ended?

Dukes: Not really. The scene of the ascent to heaven was really exciting and I said, “Hey, I believe, I believe.” And I had a conversion experience where I felt the presence of God for the first time. Though I think God had dealt with me before. One time when I was eight years old, I had an anxiety attack thinking that the world is a dangerous place and, gosh, anything could happen to me. And then this voice said to me, “Have faith.” It wasn't like a voice from heaven or anything but it was a kind of distinct overlaying of information. I didn't feel that it just came from me or that it came totally not from me. It made total sense, and I said, “Oh, yes, everyone has to have faith because you don't know everything.” And then I went back to playing. It set me up to realize the importance of faith when I came to Christ.

Barger: You had this conversion experience when you were 23. I know you have had experiences of a lot of different Christian denominations and other religions too. When you had your conversion experience did you feel you wanted to explore religion because it wasn't in your background?

Dukes: No not really, because you see I thought that everyone believed the same thing and it was just very simple. I didn't know about denominations. I had heard about Catholics and Methodists and stuff like that but I really didn't put it together because I wasn't a Christian then. But then I went through the frightening experience of realizing that there are all these denominations saying all these different things. I was new to the faith and I didn't know hardly anything except that Jesus has faith in me and I have faith in him and that is good enough. I had my experience of being close to God and I came back to the person who had witnessed to me, who had encouraged me to read the Bible and I said "I am saved." And she looked at me and said, "Are you saved? How do you know you are saved?" I said, "I believe in Jesus." And she said, "Well, did you speak in tongues?" and I said, "What are tongues?" She said, "If you haven't spoken in tongues you are not saved." So I said, "Oh." and went away because I didn't know. So that was the beginning of my seeking because there is a lot of foolishness. And I didn't know what was foolishness and what wasn't. My anchor was the word of God and because of that I really studied the Bible a lot. I went back about a week later and said "1 Corinthians 12 talks about gifts and it says not everyone speaks in tongues." And then I came up against for the first time the attitude I would come against many times after that, of people who were set in their ways and would not listen to truth even plainly set out before them. That was frightening and I thought, "Who can I really rely on?" She was my first teacher and I felt betrayed.

Barger: Looking back on the journey of your life, what have you drawn from the various denominations? There is a lot of foolishness out there, but there is also a lot of goodness, of beauty.

Dukes: I feel that I am in a unique position to see things like that. Anything of beauty, anything of truth from anywhere it is, God is there and I don't think that is inconsistent with Christ. Like iconography -I am not really Eastern Orthodox. I have been baptized I don't know how many times. I was baptized Russian Orthodox. I was baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. I was baptized in the name of Jesus. I have been baptized by immersion, by sprinkling and all this good stuff. I am not Eastern Orthodox, yet I feel I am doing something that is very Eastern Orthodox. I really feel the Spirit speaks in iconography and it speaks in me.

Barger: Now Mark, you weren't always an iconographer.

Dukes: Yes, I was.

Barger: Oh, excellent answer! How wonderful!

Dukes: At one point I discovered I was an iconographer, but I believe that I was always an iconographer.

Barger: Tell me about looking back on your life. When you were a kid were there experiences you had about which you can say "Oops, it was popping out even then."?

Dukes: Oh absolutely. I always felt that art could somehow convey truth. I was always interested in people and just a certain look in their eye. I didn't really know what was so infatuating to me about people until I discovered iconography and then it fell into place, and I said "Oh! yes! I want to speak about that inner world, that inner witness, that light that is within, the Kingdom of God. The inner truth, all these things that somehow I sensed in the visage of a person.

Barger: Now when you were a child you weren't religious.

Dukes: No, no, not at all. But I think I sensed something even though I didn't have the knowledge of what I was yearning to portray in my art, it was still there. Then when the knowledge came I said, "Aha, that's what I was really searching for, that is what I was getting reflections of, glimpses of, and this is what attracted me to art. I felt that somehow art could enrich. Because I have had experiences of being rich with art. Even with something as mundane as a television show -when you are young and you say, "Batman is on!" -it's bringing you to this realm of beauty that you are excited about and wish you could enter into all the time. A book, a science fiction novel, whatever, you say "Oh yeah, a comic book! I am going to go to this world. And it is going to be good, it is going to be exciting, it is going to be really what life is all about." Ultimately that is what the Kingdom of God is about. It's what life is really about, and it is absolutely good.

Barger: Can you remember the first time it came into your head to do an icon?

Dukes: It was in Field's bookstore on Polk St. [in San Francisco]. It has a lot of metaphysical books and I was getting off on Orthodox spirituality at the time - the Philokalia and the sayings of the Fathers. Anytime you deal with Orthodoxy you are going to come across icons. I was getting a book on the life of Anthony. And I said, "Hey, I could do this. I think I really understand what they are doing here. It looks like they are in prayer reflecting the light of God."

Part of my journey is that I stopped doing art for three years. I wanted to experience not being an artist for a while because it was such a crutch. I would show people my art so that they would see that I was special. There was a lot of ego in this. I wanted to try to just be a regular Joe. As a consequence of that I really appreciate my art so much more. This is who I am and this is a blessing from God. And I think that as part of my journey, God was calling me to be more in contact with myself and other people.

Barger: What were those three years like for you? Were they puzzling, exciting? A struggle?

Dukes: All those things. Before I came back to Christianity I was going through a lot of spiritual expressions, particularly, Hinduism. The reason I went to other religions was really the confusion I found in Christianity. I got fed up. I think I was blessed by checking out these other religions because I know that much more what I believe. I have read the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao Te Ching, the Upanishads, the Dhammapada, the Koran, all these things, but the most beautiful story I have read is the story of the birth of God, his crucifixion, his resurrection, his ascension, and his offer of the free gift of salvation.

Barger: Were you back in Christianity when you had stopped painting?

Dukes: I was at the end of my journey away from Christianity. I came to San Francisco to join a meditation group centered around the teachings of Shri Ramana Maharshi. I clearly felt in my heart that Jesus was my way. I told the people "You have your guru, but Jesus is my guru," and they kicked me out immediately. Soon after that, I made a decision which I think God has blessed. I felt I want to do art again and I want it to be something that will glorify God. I decided "I am going to do icons." I wasn't sure how I was going to make any money. I envisioned myself sitting in the corner in rags doing little icons. I called up a monastery and said I want to do some icons for you. And that's when I started to do it.

Barger: Which monastery?

Dukes: Christ of the Hills Monastery in Texas. I was there maybe six or seven months and I did two icons. Sister Vladimira taught me to do icons on ostrich eggs with scratch carving. I didn't have a formal education in iconography. I felt God blessed me and gave me to understand iconography. The true teaching of icons is in the iconographic records themselves. Just looking at icons you see just what the iconographer is about. You may not know how they achieved a certain effect, like with egg tempera, but you can learn these things. The hardest thing is to have the spirit of iconography. If you have the spirit of iconography then the rest is just technical. I learned as I could. I studied with Christopher Castle at Fort Mason for a

little while and read a lot of books. I got this great book from Michael Barger at Christmas!-The Image of the Invisible by Egon Sendler.

Barger: I saw that book in the Camaldolese monastery and thought of you, Mark. I love icons and I love people who are attempting the unconventional and want to encourage them.

Dukes: It has been a helpful book. In it I saw an icon of two angels holding a veil above the Mother of God and lifted that idea to connect the two towers of St. Gregory's church in the icon I am working on.

Barger: Mark, how do you meditate when you do icons? I know that is part of the tradition. First the painter meditates on the text or the scene. Some have also fasted as well and maybe do forty days of preparatory fasting and prayer before they even begin to paint. What's your own practice?

Dukes: My own practice is the life of faith. I think that is the most important thing, as the Scriptures say : "from faith to faith." I'm not really into the asceticism of some of the original iconographers. My meditation is more of a mystical nature. It doesn't have to do with the body but with the heart. There are certain things that are happening in the icon that bring it forth. You have to make choices without complete knowledge, and that is something you have to do out of the spirit of faith-filled prayer, recognizing that God is honoring faith and prayer with His grace.

Barger: I know you are immersed now in the St. Gregory's projects but are there certain subjects you like to paint, certain saints, certain scenes from the Gospels or the Scriptures you would like to paint.

Dukes: I want someone to say "This is a need we have and how would this look in an icon?" I find that exciting. The St. Gregory's project is something that I would not have come up with by myself.

Barger: It sounds like missionary activity. The true missionary goes to where there are needs.

Dukes: That's right. It has to be about service, it has to be about letting the Holy Spirit have access to your life. The Scripture says "God gives grace to the humble and resists the proud." When a person says, "I have this great vision and it is for you and I want to do this for you," I don't know how much place the Holy Spirit has there. There may be a church in Iowa or somewhere that hears about my work and wants something from me and that's all God.

There is a particular image I feel that God has anointed me to paint and that is black Christs. Actually at the very beginning of discovering icons, I had the urge to do black Christs. And eventually I was commissioned by St. John's African Orthodox Church to do an icon of a black Christ. I started drawing a person with dreadlocks who was rather fierce and who really looked more like John the Baptist. And I thought, "that isn't it." I didn't want an image that would make people think "that is a black man portrayed as Christ." What I wanted was something people would look at and think "Yes, that is Christ and he happens to be black." And I thought about what image do I relate to that speaks of Christ? The Shroud of Turin is a very powerful image that really reverberates for me. So I went to the library and got all the material I could find of the Shroud of Turin. And I used those proportions to create my black Christ. And now the Shroud is the basis for all my Christs, though not all of them are black.

I see the black Christ as service for what is needed in the black community which is spiritual renewal. I believe that Satan is having access to the people because if you speak eloquently people are attracted to that eloquence. For instance, in hip hop and gansta rap there are so-called eloquent speakers. And what are they speaking about? About things of a low order. I want to speak eloquently about things of a high order. About the divine in one's self, yearning for union with God. I want to express that divinity, the highest ideals, instead of just swaggering and bragging and saying how big my muscles are. There is something greater that we are supposed to be about as human beings. And I think that comes together in the Christ icons.

Barger: And particularly Christ as a male figure. When I hear you talk about gansta rap, I think you're saying "I want to show young men that their lives can be transformed in another way."

Dukes: Right. There is another way of strength, another expression of masculinity and that can be seen in Christ, in the gentleness of Christ who is the creator of all, all-powerful. How did the someone who is all powerful, who is the most important man in history conduct himself? Does he go around like a gangster? No. There is a great message in these icons.

Barger: One thing that interests me about icons is that black religious culture in this country has been largely Protestant and therefore basically iconoclastic. Its creative artistic expression has been largely in music and speech and not in painting. I wonder about people who come from a black religious background, say a Southern Baptist, how do they react when they encounter your religious work and your black Christs?

Dukes: There is a movement toward seeing the blackness of God, the blackness of Christ. There was an interview in Emerge magazine with Archbishop George Augustus Stallings, a Catholic priest who broke away from the church. He holds that Christ was a person of color and most people would agree. There is a relationship between Christ as yourself. He said that in the headquarters of one of the largest black denominations they have a figure of Christ and he is white. What does that say about our opinion of ourselves? There is such a search for identity and self-worth and self-love in the black community. Does this cater to really finding those things? Stallings wants to be unabashedly Christian and black at the same time. There is a great need for this. A lot of people in the black community believe that Christianity is the white man's religion. And that hurts evangelism. I feel that I am an evangelist because I know the beauty of the Gospel and I know that in Christ there is healing, strength, revitalization, love. Not in working hard, but by becoming the workmanship of God in the grace of God that transforms us. I am interested in people looking at Jesus Christ and accepting him in their lives.

Barger: Do you see a black Christ for St. Gregory's icon?

Dukes: No, not really because St. John's and St. Gregory's are different churches with different needs. St. John's is about exaltation and spiritual strength. And St. Gregory's is about the divine in humanity. There is a gentleness here. Some St. Gregory's members have told me they don't want a European Christ, but I don't envision an African Christ here. I want an image that won't polarize people. I think the Christ I paint for this church will look like the dark-skinned people who live in the Holy Land now.

Barger: In the icon you are now finishing, St. Gregory and the Marriage of Christ and the Soul, what are you trying to portray in the face of St. Gregory?

Dukes: That's a good question. Alleluia, Amen, Praise God! I'm really so glad that you asked that question because the way I portray him reflects my feeling about St. Gregory's as a church. I want him to look a little bit whimsical. Very human and humble in a way. He is very slightly bowing down. I want him to look intelligent, but also like a person you can approach..