

Inside Story



Life of sacrifice honours God's call

After 10 years of collecting rejection slips, Michael D. O'Brien decided it was possible that God had called him to write simply as an act of obedience, rather than as a means of making a living. And since he was trying to support a family, he gave up.

He already had a legitimate outlet for his creativity as a world-class artist—not that he made much money painting, either. But along with his wife, Michael made a conscious decision to follow God's leading regardless of the consequences.

Because their father was a pilot, Michael and his three siblings led a varied life. Born in Ottawa, Michael grew up in places as unique as Los Angeles and a remote Inuit village. During his three years in the Canadian Arctic he learned to live without many of the things most people take for granted. Returning to Ottawa was a shock after being in the North, he says.

Michael may have inherited his creativity from his pilot father, a Saturday landscape painter who was also a writer. His strong faith, however, he received from his mother. But in his late teens he drifted from God. Wanting to get into the "real world," he left high school and found odd jobs, working in bookstores and lumber mills, even serving as a weather observer in the Rockies.

Heart of the soul

He rediscovered his faith at age 21 while going through a difficult time. "Since that time more than 35 years ago I have never for an instant doubted [God's] reality," Michael told the *Catholic Register* in a June interview. "This is not merely an intellectual assent to the faith, but a personal relationship with Christ...in the heart of the soul."

Michael began to paint landscapes and in 1970 had his first one-man show. He kept his day job for six more years but eventually quit and started to paint works with "overtly Christian themes." They were less lucrative than landscapes, but he felt it was what God wanted.

A few years later, he says, ideas for stories began bubbling up inside him. He had a few articles published in religious magazines, along with a non-fiction study, *A Landscape with Dragons: The Battle for Your Child's Mind*.

Two novels, *A Cry of Stone* and *Strangers and Sojourners*, did not meet with success, and he began to collect rejections. Michael was told the problem was not his writing, but his themes.

So he gave up writing, but continued to paint, barely supporting his family, which included his wife Sheila, who was home schooling six growing children.

New life



Michael D. O'Brien

One day in the mid-90s, Michael says, as he was feeling discouraged, weeping and praying for the condition of the Church in Canada and for his own situation as a Christian artist and father, peace suddenly washed over him. Despite his discouragement, he felt God was working. Immediately, another story began coming to him—about a priest at the end of the ages.

For eight months he wrote, trying to capture in words the impressions and scenes he had seen. And each day he prayed for God to help him—to send an angel to assist him.

He sent the book *Father Elijah* to Ignatius Press and it was published in 1996.

“I wouldn’t want to call it a divinely inspired novel, because it has lots of flaws, but perhaps it is inspired in the sense that every work of art created from a desire to serve God’s glory is a co-creative labour, grace building on nature,” Michael recently wrote on the Web journal *Ignatius Insight*.

Complementary works

Michael now has six books published, including his original two. The novels all are overtly Christian in theme, and three are apocalyptic. The foremost is *Father Elijah*, followed by *Eclipse of the Sun* and *Plague Journal*. *Sophia House*, his latest, is actually a prequel to *Father Elijah*, though either book can be read first.

“It’s never a tug-of-war,” Michael says of his two talents of writing and painting. “Each form of creation is a language which complements and strengthens the other. I alternate long periods of painting with long periods of writing—usually several months to a year for each book.”

Currently Michael is working on two books, working from 8 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m. six days a week. He feels these hours are “necessary for survival.” But, he says, he and Sheila are content to make sacrifices for the sake of following God’s call.

For more information, visit www.studiobrien.com

N.J. Lindquist is an award-winning Canadian author, columnist, speaker and writing teacher. Her website is www.njlindquist.com

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N.J. Lindquist
njlindquist@rogers.com

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