

Disciplined Freedom

The Life and Art of Father Edward M. Catich

by Andrew Harvey

He was described as “a man of protean talent, boundless energy, and uncompromising adherence to principles—religious, moral, artistic, and professional.” But the childhood of Edward Catich—who would become a passionate, outspoken priest, artist, and professor at St. Ambrose College—held no hint of such a future.

The son of Croatian immigrants, Edward Catich (with his twin, Vincent) was born in Stevensville, Montana, on January 4, 1906. An older brother and sister had been born in Yugoslavia; yet another set of twins was born in 1915. Michell Catich and his wife had their hands full raising six children on the wages of a copper miner in Butte. Before Edward (or “Ned,” as he was called) reached adolescence, his mother had died and his father had returned to Croatia and brought back a new wife. Edward remembered her as “a wonderfully fine woman” and that he and his siblings “spoke nothing but Croatian in the house.”

His father developed “miner’s cough” and went to Fresno, California, to recuperate, taking his oldest son and leaving the others in the care of their stepmother, who soon fell ill and was hospitalized. Michell, still ailing, returned to Montana; he died within weeks. His wife followed him in death, at the age of 29.

Now orphaned, the Catich children were separated. Edward’s sister went to live in Fresno with his older brother, and the two sets of twins were sent to an orphanage run by his father’s fraternal association, the Loyal Order of Moose, in Mooseheart, Illinois.

At Mooseheart, Edward Catich received an educa-

tion and apprenticed with a sign-painter. He was also introduced to music; in later years he would become adept at playing the cello, trumpet, trombone, and harmonica. After graduating from Mooseheart in 1924, he moved to Chicago and managed to scrape by with jobs playing jazz in clubs and painting signs professionally. Many years later he recalled, “I had a job painting a sign with letters 20 feet tall on the side of a 28-story building. We were working on a scaffolding, and, with the Chicago wind in August it was a pretty scary experience. It seemed that the paint was dripping practically horizontally in the wind, and I thought, ‘Boy I’ve got to get away from this.’”

Catich found sign-painting an unforgiving business—“I lost my first two jobs because I was not ‘fast enough,’”—so he decided to matriculate at the Chicago Art Institute. “I learned that the people who designed the posters and did the layout for art work, those with inside jobs, always had training in the Chicago Art Institute.” There he studied art history, design, painting, and anatomy and graduated in 1929.

It was also about this time that he felt the spiritual calling to become a priest. He spoke to the chaplain at

Father Edward Catich, renowned calligrapher, inscribes a marble wall at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, c. 1965. A priest, artist, and professor at Davenport’s St. Ambrose College (now a university), Catich believed that “art is not freedom from discipline, but Disciplined Freedom.”

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Mooseheart about this, and it was recommended that he attend St. Ambrose College in Davenport, Iowa.

Enrolled at the Catholic college in 1931, Catich planted the seeds for its art department. "I got a job as the college bandmaster," he recounted. "It paid board, room and a small salary. There was no art department here then, and I liked the idea of teaching, so I was permitted to teach some art classes here when I was an undergraduate." He established a jazz orchestra called the Ambie Joy Boys and another musical group, the Royal Ambrosians. Earning his bachelor's degree in three years, he next completed his master's in art at the University of Iowa in 1935; his thesis was on "teaching calligraphy and lettering to high school students."

His studies did not end there. Right after graduation, he was admitted for study for the priesthood and was sent to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. While there, his earlier fascination with art history and paleography (the study of ancient writing systems) deepened, and he concentrated in particular on a historically significant inscription on an ancient Roman monument. His conclusions about this inscription and the formation of Roman capital letters were published in the 1960s, adding to his growing renown as a master calligrapher and inscriber.

Ordained in December 1938, Catich returned to Davenport at the request of the bishop to teach at St. Ambrose, where he would found the art department and teach for 40 years.

For a time he also resumed his responsibility of leading the college band, and, during World War II, he taught engineering and draftsmanship to the navy men on the campus. Outside of St. Ambrose, he taught drawing and painting at the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery.

In the classroom, Catich was an imposing figure, commanding respect. His survey of art was required of most St. Ambrose students. He was an excellent communicator who wanted his students to take art

seriously. Rick Calvette, a 1968 St. Ambrose graduate, recalled, "Lots of people were scared to death of him. But when you got to know him, you found out he was great." Leslie Bell, a former student and current art professor at St. Ambrose, commented, "He was riveting.

I tell people that if you walked by his classroom, you'd be nervous for the people inside because he always sounded like he was giving a fire and brimstone sermon. But you'd look in, and everyone had these blissful, intellectual smiles on their faces.

"Nothing was too theoretical or lofty that it couldn't be demonstrated to the class with paint and brush," Bell added. "He'd quote Thomas Aquinas as much as he quoted Picasso. . . . He always considered ethics and

morals an important part of art."

Tom Chouteau, student and later colleague, remembered how Catich sparked "intellectual excitement." "We art majors were a small group of men, some ex-GIs, intent on art studies, and perhaps only vaguely aware that our world of ideas was being forcibly opened up to the likes of Edvard Munch, Eric Gill, Thomas Aquinas, Dorothy Day, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Ade Bethune."

Catich inspired many of his students to continue in art. Like Bell and Chouteau, Paul Herrera and John Schmits became art professors at St. Ambrose; others, like letter designer Peter Noth and Jack Winne, applied his ideals and techniques in their own careers at Hallmark Cards.

Catich was a prolific artist in his own right. He designed and produced hundreds of works of art—watercolors and oils, wood and stone carving and inscription, stained glass, printing, sculpture, scratchboard, calligraphy. Most of his art was religious in nature. A late nighter and early riser, he often worked in his studio in Lewis Hall at all hours.

Despite his devotion to art, Catich insisted that "I



Catich's art was secular and religious, abstract and representational. In *Camelephant*, he applied paper to wet paint.

would rather give up my art than let it come ahead of my Christian vows," and that his "greatest satisfaction" was being a priest. His parish was in Atkinson, Illinois, less than an hour's drive from St. Ambrose. "It keeps me in contact not only with people but with what I'm ordained for. . . . I like being a priest there because it is a beautiful recall to reality, where I am confronted with life and death, with everyday people and their problems and their very real existence."

Although Catich was described as theologically conservative, he enjoyed shaking up his parishioners from the pulpit. In 1979 he recalled a service at which "I said something like, 'When God is displeased, she means what she says.' You better believe that perks up a congregation." Catich was not trying to be radical—only modern.

This approach applied to his art as well. "A basic principle of religious art is that we must express religious truths in contemporary terms," he contended. In 1950, he reportedly received a reprimand from the apostolic delegate, directing him to remove his painting *Theophora* from an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. *Theophora* (Greek for "the one who brings the light") depicts a black Jesus sitting on the lap of a white Madonna. Years later, Catich's colleague Paul Herrera said that the Vatican had objected to the painting probably not for racial reasons but because it was non-traditional: "The problem," Herrera said, "was portraying religious characters as modern characters."

In 1952, the Vatican issued its *Instruction on Holy Art*, which outlined acceptable portrayals of the sacred in modern art. "Every one is aware of the aberrations in vogue today with regard to matters of Sacred Art that have found ready acceptance in public and private art exhibitions," stated correspondence from the Holy Office in 1955 to the Vatican's representative in the United States. "Portrayal of sacred persons or objects borders on the shocking or ridiculous and, sad to say, in some instances have been introduced into churches, thereby profaning the house of God." The *Instruction on Holy Art* was not intended to "hinder progress towards lasting displays of

a truly sacred art," but rather to "[safeguard] faith and christian piety."

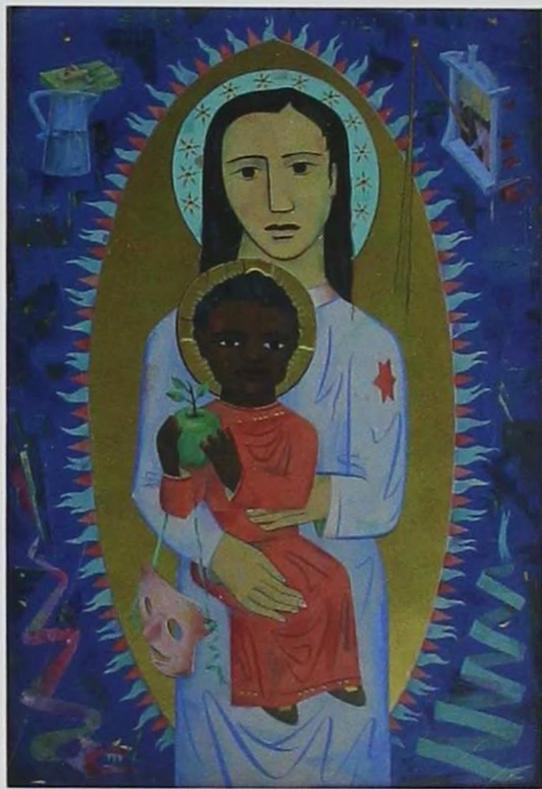
Catich's creative work in relation to the Vatican's *Instruction on Holy Art* was the subject of a letter in 1961 from the Vatican's U.S. representative to the bishop of the Davenport Diocese (in which Catich served). Bishop Ralph L. Hayes was informed that the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office had rendered a decision dealing "with a series of 'holy cards' that were designed by a priest from the Diocese of Davenport."

The letter instructed Hayes to "caution the priest in question so that in his artistic activity he exercise more discipline in accord with the norms of the Holy Office" and "observe the precepts" of the *Instruction on Holy Art*. Within four days, Hayes replied that Catich had "promised to observe the precept set forth . . . and in proof of his sincerity he is withdrawing from circulation the series of 'holy cards'" (small devotional cards bearing images of Jesus, saints, and biblical scenes).

Six months later Hayes was contacted again by the Vatican representative: "It has come to attention that The Catholic Messenger of December 21, 1961, carried an article by the same priest with illustrations" similar to those on the holy cards.

"The illustrations in question are indeed modern," Hayes countered, "but, in my opinion, they are not undignified nor grotesque; neither do they tend to diminish the piety and the devotion of the faithful. I have talked with many of our priests regarding this type of illustration produced by Father Catich. Some do not agree with his basic ideas of art; I have met none who considered the illustrations a source of scandal."

These were not the first times that Catich came under fire for his holy cards or illustrations. According to the *Catholic Messenger*, the priest had printed holy cards in the late 1940s in which Jesus was represented as black. "The truth of theology is that the artist must represent the age in which he lives. Christ to a Negro must be a Negro for him to be meaningful. For a Chinese person, Christ must be Chinese," he said years later. "The Vatican stepped down on me for the Negro Christ, but now I've kind of disregarded that. I think we've come



In Catich's *Theophora*, a black Jesus sits on a white Madonna's lap, against a backdrop of gold leaf and symbols



Above: St. Joseph wears modern work clothes and a carpenter's apron on this holy card, one of dozens designed and printed by Catich.

Right: He depicted the events surrounding the Crucifixion as modern-day events to remind Christians that the meaning applies to today. In this Station of the Cross, a press photographer snaps a picture of Jesus as he falls for the first time. This series hangs in the St. Ambrose chapel.



to a point in our Church where they're beginning to recognize that this is the right approach."

Catich operated his own press on which he printed the holy cards and other materials. He chose the name Catfish Press not because of its similarity to his own name. Rather, he wanted the name to reflect his mission, "a pictorial theology proportioned to our age." Because the fish is an august symbol in Christianity, he adapted it to the Mississippi region: "Had the early Christians lived in the Mississippi valley and had they elected to choose the fish as symbolic of their Eucharist and of Christ, son of God and redeemer, they would have chosen a fish characteristic of and indigenous to that valley—the catfish."

He had no use for sentimentality—"the overdoing of any emotional effect." Reason was paramount. The "view of a long-hair[ed], bearded and gowned Christ is not appropriate for our time," he stated. "Our age is loaded down with millions of reproductions, all too familiar, of a sweetly sentimental portrait-type that calls to mind, not the God-made-Man of better ages, but a bearded lady fit for the circus." "If, on the contrary," he said on another occasion, "Christ is portrayed as a member of our household, and our city, a person of our land and language, we are thrust uncomfortably close to truths

we perhaps would rather not examine for fear of their personal implications in our lives."

This is clearly seen in Catich's creations in the 1950s of Stations of the Cross—series of 14 carvings, pictures, or scriptures depicting the final hours of Jesus and used by Christians to meditate on the meaning of the Crucifixion. For St. Wenceslaus Church in Iowa City, Catich created Stations of the Cross that portrayed Christ and his contemporaries as modern-day figures "because," he explained, "[the stations] are to be used by people living *today*, not in the Medieval, Renaissance or early Christian era. . . . I wish people to see themselves in these Stations and so in the Stations there are laborers, appeasers, intellectuals, and even little children—and all dressed in present day clothing." He pushed to dispel the notion "that Christ's Passion in 33 A.D. has no relationship to the sins committed in 1952 A.D."

For Regina High School in Iowa City, he designed Stations of the Cross with similar modern characters. "We have Pontius Pilate on a swivel chair, glasses on his forehead and reading his legal documents. The soldier guarding Christ holds a left-handed Browning five-shot automatic." He also designed slate Stations of the Cross for a chapel at St. Ambrose College in the 1950s, but because they were deemed controversial, they were not installed until the 1970s.

Catich (left) examines the Trajan Inscription in Rome.



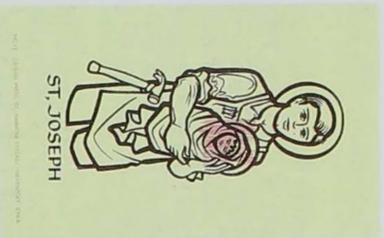
Perhaps Edward Catich's greatest contributions were his scholarly study of lettering and his superb inscriptions and calligraphy. While studying in Rome in the 1930s, he had meticulously examined the Trajan Inscription on the towering Trajan's Column, completed in 113 A.D. to commemorate military campaigns of Roman emperor Trajan. The Trajan Inscription, a single sentence carved at the base of column, is "generally considered the fin-

est example of chisel-cut lettering of the best period of Roman inscription making" and the original model of Roman capital letterforms still used today.

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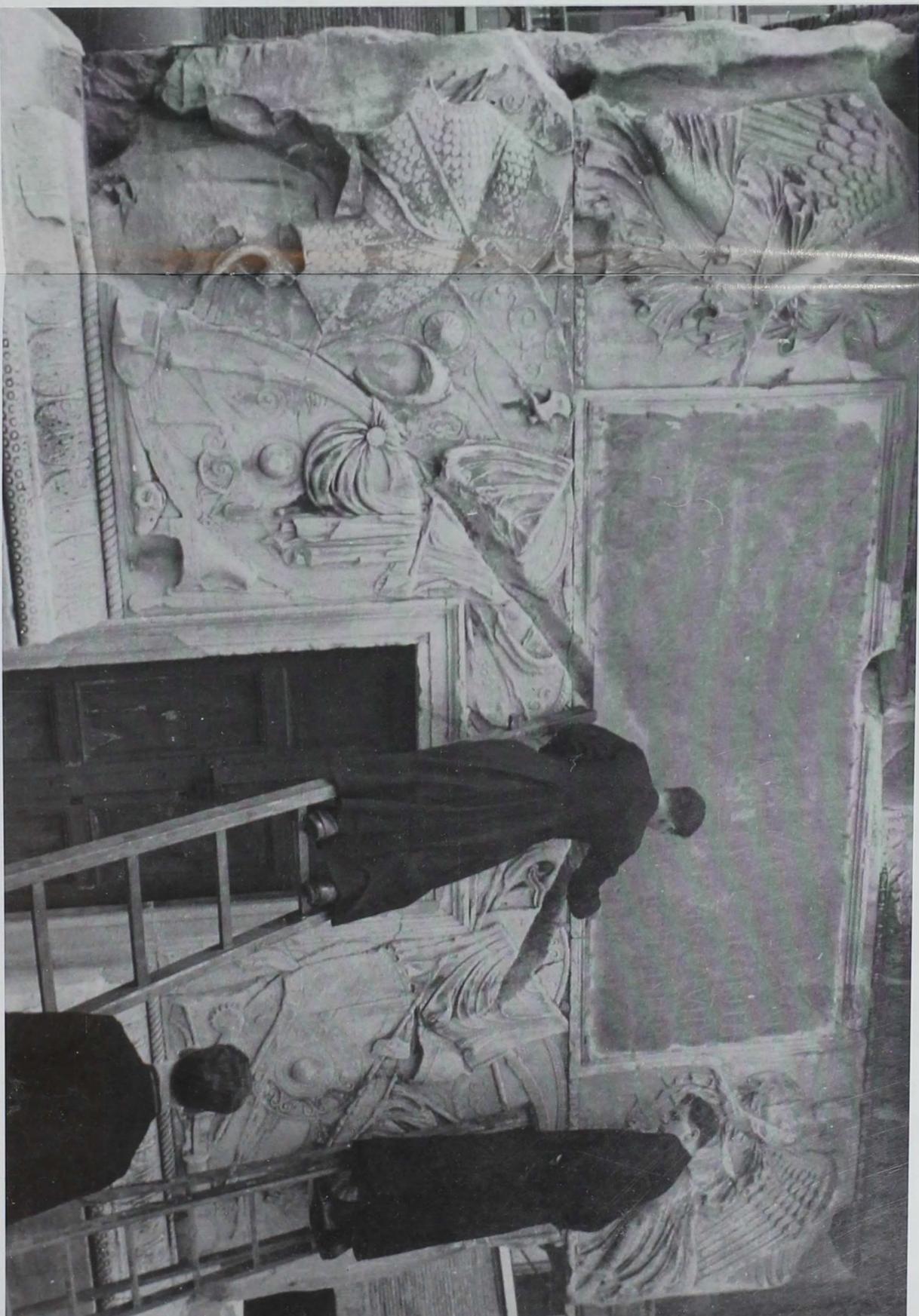
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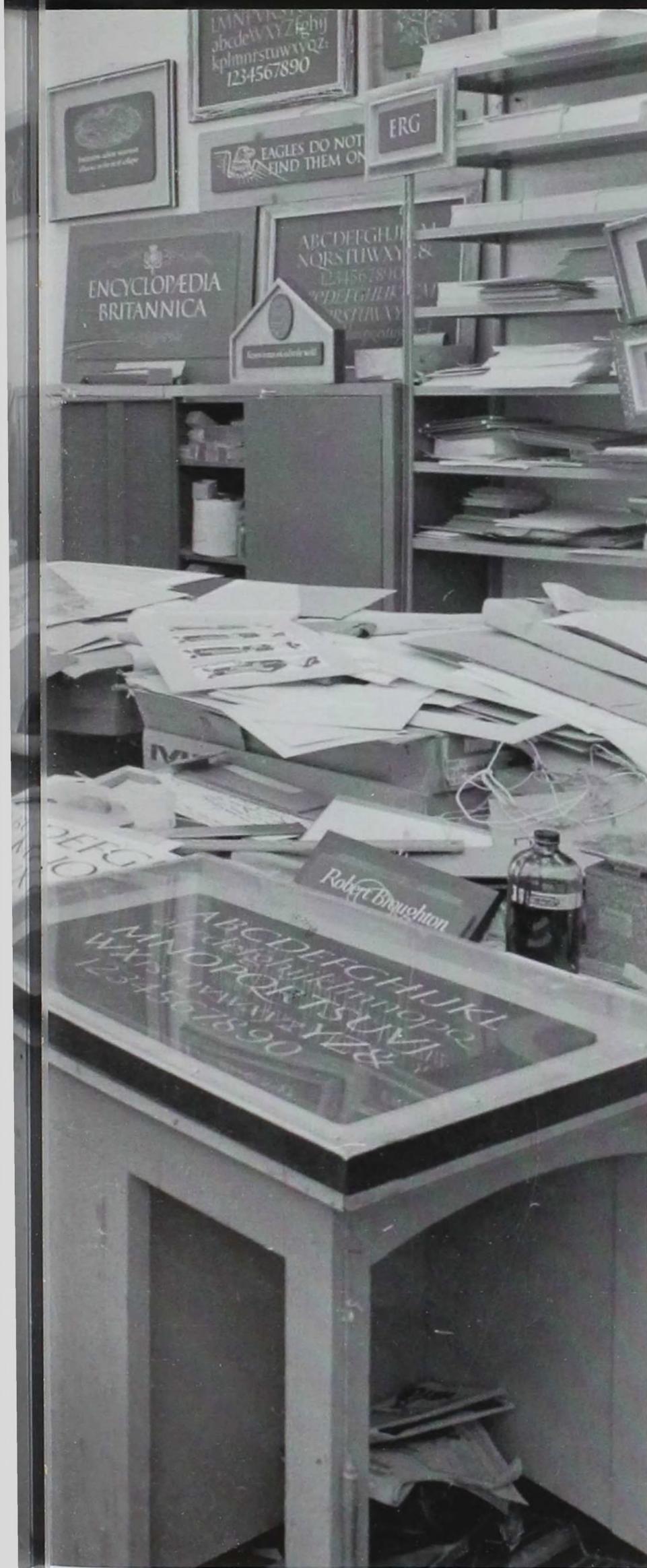
“The reason for fast letter-production in Chicago at this time is readily understood. Trade unions were strong and wages high. . . . Accordingly the fast worker who could turn out a commercially acceptable product was highly prized by his wage-and-price conscious employer, and, in times of stress and unemployment, was the man likely to hold his job.

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Fiercely opinionated about religious art, Catrich spoke out frequently in interviews and lectures, and he wrote more than 50 papers dealing with Christian art. In his 1951 work, *A Priest Speaks on Chalice-Design*, he laid out the ideal design for a chalice in terms of meaning, function, and

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Catich's broadsides joined movement, color, composition, and lettering. Right: He often intertwined animals and letterforms.

design, and decried the then-popular practice of selecting chalices based on their showiness.

When the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was searching for a master carver to inscribe its donor recognition wall, 38 gallery slates, and other graphic designations, "three of the four experts told the search team that if they wanted to get decent letters inscribed, they'd have to go to Iowa and hire Father Catich," according to a *Des Moines Register* reporter. Catich was appointed the museum's permanent consultant in 1964.

For Wichita State University, he designed and inscribed 28 slates identifying the campus buildings. Encyclopedia Britannica commissioned him to design their corporate identity symbol and bicentennial medal. For the Rensselaer Foundation in Troy, New York, he designed and painted alphabets in Hebrew, Greek, and Roman for its auditorium.

Praise followed. Paul F. Gehl, from Chicago's Newberry Library, described him as "a crucial figure in the revival of calligraphy in the U.S. after the second World War" and "unquestionably one of this century's greatest masters of the chisel. . . . What clearly distinguishes him from the merely craft-cutters of stone was his eye for overall composition and especially for the letter forms themselves."

A 2007 exhibit of Catich's work in Davenport included smaller tablets that "spell out entire alphabets, bear Latin inscriptions or amuse with original Catich quips," according to curator Elisabeth Foxley Leach. "There is the whimsy of his organic, and at times gymnastic, alphabets in pen and ink, the devotional aspect of a glittering mosaic, an oil or a gouache, the jewel-like precision of a silver chalice." Exhibit reviewer Bruce Carter described one example of Catich calligra-

phy as "a set of dancing uppercase letters overlapping and touching on slate, like dancers on a stage before an audience of golden lowercase letters."

Edward Catich was found dead in his studio on Good Friday, April 14, 1979, at age 73. The *Catholic Messenger*, which had published so many of his expositions on religious art, commented that "to the ordinary, he seemed a recluse of sorts," yet "the mark of talent is everywhere."

Catich did not seek fame; it found him. He was "such an extremely modest man" who "could be quite ignored in his own town," said Kenneth Donahue of the Los Angeles County Museum. "But in Los Angeles, he's a famous man."

In spite of his renown, Catich chose to remain at St. Ambrose. "Being in Iowa is a real godsend to me, because it means being near to the earth. It's where I want to be. Oh, I've been offered positions elsewhere, but where else could I do the things I want to do, and still teach, and not be bothered by too much publicity, and an invasion of privacy, you see? I like the comparative anonymity. A lot of people like to be publicized, but I am not interested in that." ❖

Author Andrew Harvey graduated from St. Ambrose University in 2007 with bachelor's degrees in theatre and history, and he worked there as the assistant director of alumni and parent relations. He is now a graduate student at Michigan State University, earning his master of fine arts in acting.



NOTE ON SOURCES

The quotation that begins this article ("a man of protean talent . . .") is by Donald McDonald, editor of the *Catholic Messenger* from 1949 to 1959.

The Rev. E. M. Catich Papers are housed in Special Collections & Archives, St. Ambrose University. These include correspondence; the 1950 letter regarding Catich's painting *Theophora* has not been found, either by St. Ambrose archivists or by the chancery office in the Diocese of Davenport.

St. Ambrose owns hundreds of pieces of Catich's artwork across several mediums: slate, calligraphic broadsides, sketches, and oil and watercolor paintings. Many were bequeathed by John Schmits, a former student of Catich's. For electronic access, visit <http://catich.sau.edu>.

Catich expressed his views on religious art in the *Catholic Messenger*, published weekly by the Davenport Diocese. For articles by or about him, see 6-19-1952, 5-17-1956, 3-27-1958, 12-2-1961, 12-21-1961, 4-19-1979, 5-3-1979, 10-19-2006.

Among publications and material by Catich, these were used for this article: *Letters Redrawn from the Trajan Inscription in Rome* (Davenport: Catfish Press, St. Ambrose College, 1961); *Eric Gill: His Social and Artistic Roots* (Iowa City: Prairie Press, 1964); *The Origin of the Serif: Brush Writing & Roman Letters* (Davenport: Catfish Press, St. Ambrose College, [1968]); *Reed, Pen, & Brush Alphabets for Writing and Lettering* (Davenport: Catfish Press, St. Ambrose College, c. 1972); Edward M. Catich, "Address by Fr. Edward M. Catich, Mooseheart Graduate, Class of 1924, Professor, St. Ambrose College, Davenport, Iowa," 61st Annual International Convention of the Supreme Lodge of the World, Loyal Order of Moose, San Francisco, CA, Aug. 1949.

Sources on Catich include *Acorns & Oaks*, St. Ambrose College (Jan. and April 1962); Leslie Bell, "One Facet of Fr. Edward Catich," *Arts Counselor*

(Winter 1979-80); "The Calligraphy of Fr. Catich Distinguishes the Campus Scene," *Wichita State University Alumni Report* (Jan.-Feb. 1980); Carroll Coleman Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa; Bruce Carter, "No Compromise, and Nothing Haphazard," *River Cities' Reader*, 3-21-2007, www.rcreader.com/art/no-compromise-and-nothing-haphazard (accessed 8-27-2009); "Father Catich: Calligrapher," *Iowan* (Spring 1977); Alma Gaul, "A Painting for This Time," "Catich Was a Giant, a Titan, a Genius," and "Why Did the Vatican Object?" *Quad-City Times*, 12-21-2003; articles by Paul Herrera and James Kelleher in *Edward M. Catich, 1906-1979* (Davenport: Davenport Municipal Art Gallery, 1983); "Iowan Shows Christ in Modern Clothing," *Des Moines Register*, 11-24-1959; Elisabeth Foxley Leach, *Edward M. Catich: Rock, Paper, Scissors, Glass*, exhibit catalog, Figge Art Museum, March 17-May 13, 2007; George William McDaniel, *A Great and Lasting Beginning: The First 125 Years of St. Ambrose University* (Davenport: St. Ambrose University, 2006); James Ney, "Iowa's Master of Ancient Arts," *Des Moines Register*, 8-18-1974; Rensselaer Newman Foundation, "Rensselaer Newman Foundation Tour," <http://www.chapelandculturalcenter.org> (accessed 4-2-2009); and "Selected Chronology" and Thomas F. Chouteau, "Memories of Catich the Teacher," in *Father Edward Catich: The Liturgical Work* (Davenport: St. Ambrose University, 1998).

In Iowa, Catich's religious art appears in Pella (St. Mary Catholic Church), Iowa City (Regina High School and St. Wenceslaus Church), and Davenport (St. Ambrose University).

Annotations to the original manuscript are kept in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).