

## Artist's Statement: Unmercenary Paul, the Good Samaritan

Fr. Cristóbal Torres Iglesias, OP

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Several months ago, Jennie Block asked if I might create an icon of Dr. Paul Farmer for the cover of this book. Jennie did not want an image intended for veneration of a Catholic saint, nor would I have created one. Paul is not a canonized saint, blessed, or “Servant of God,” nor am I a formally trained writer of Byzantine icons, despite my profound debt as a Catholic artist and preacher to that sacramental art form. It was clear from the outset that what Jennie wanted was a theological image of the friend she knew and had worked so closely with for so many years, a man whose Catholic faith profoundly informed his life, poured out in imitation of Christ in service to God’s poor.

Jennie first introduced me to Paul in 2013, and thanks to them both, over the years I have been blessed with opportunities to create art for Partners In Health-related projects in Haiti. As I pondered and prayed how a visual image might speak an authentic word about Paul’s unique call to holiness, Jennie shared with me his special relationship with the parable of the Good Samaritan. This was an element of Paul’s religious imagination with which I had been unfamiliar, but our conversation made it immediately clear to me that the Good Samaritan would provide my theological point of entry.

Before I began working, I researched the iconographical history of the Church’s physician saints, and a number of elements stood out for me that I wanted to incorporate into Paul’s image. One of them was the beautiful theology of the healer saint as an “unmercenary,” or one who healed the poor without accepting payment. In the Byzantine iconographical tradition, physician saints like the sisters Zenaida and Philonella, or the more widely known Cosmas and Damian, are honored with the title of *anargyros*, a Greek word meaning “without silver” and usually translated

as “unmercenary,” owing to the gratuitous gift of their healing art to the poor.<sup>1</sup> These saints’ icons often describe them as “The Holy Unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian,” or “Holy Unmercenary Zenaida.”

In the image that eventually resulted *Unmercenary Paul* approaches us, not with a flask of healing ointment or an apothecary’s box—symbols traditionally associated with the holy *anargyroi*—but rather, holding up an icon of the Good Samaritan. This icon unveils the Christological form of Paul’s path to sanctification. Throughout his life, Paul met the Lord as the Outsider through, with, and in whom God healed and enlightened him, to then command him to “go and do likewise.” Paul is not interested in telling us about himself, but instead points us to Christ the Good Samaritan, who would heal and call us, as once he healed and called His servant Paul.

Byzantine icons of the Good Samaritan traditionally read the parable through the lens of Patristic exegesis, casting it as a typological allegory of the Incarnation. The icon visually narrates the story from beginning to end, highlighting key moments as the traveler begins his journey through the wilderness, is assaulted by robbers, left for dead by the priest and the Levite, and rescued by the mysterious Samaritan who pours healing ointment on his wounds, hoists him onto his back, and carries him to the inn, entrusting him to the innkeeper’s care with two silver denarii.<sup>2</sup>

In this version of the story the traveler is Adam, who embodies our human nature. The robbers are demons and the damage they inflict is the wounding of our human nature by sin. Most important of all, the Samaritan is Christ the Divine Physician who, moved to visceral com-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Icon of the Holy “*Anárgyroi*,” Sts. Cosmas and Damian, <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2022/11/01/103133-holy-wonderworkers-and-unmercenaries-cosmas-and-damian-of-mesopo>; and Icon of the Holy Unmercenaries Hermione, Philonella, and Zenaida (note the hagiographical symbols of the ointment flask and apothecary box): <https://www.uncutmountainsupply.com/icons/of-saints/by-name/h-i/icon-of-the-holy-unmercenary-physicians-sts-hermione-philonella-zenaida-1up10/>.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of a Byzantine Icon of the Good Samaritan, see [https://www.reddit.com/r/OrthodoxChristianity/comments/2sc2pa/icon\\_of\\_the\\_good\\_samaritan/](https://www.reddit.com/r/OrthodoxChristianity/comments/2sc2pa/icon_of_the_good_samaritan/) and <https://i.imgur.com/SnPtetZ.jpg>.

passion, assumes the frailty of our human nature to heal us with the ointment of his divine nature. Christ the Good Samaritan heals us by offering us a share in his divinity, represented by the divine likeness imprinted on the silver denarii. The inn is the Church, the hospital where wounded humanity receives the life-restoring therapy of the Incarnation.

The image on the cover of this book depicts Unmercenary Paul, enlightened and healed by Christ, the divine-human Outsider and brother who restores in him the divine likeness. Paul's response is to go and do likewise, so that he becomes a sacramental sign of the divine therapy of the Incarnation. Just as Christ the Good Samaritan nourished Paul with His own Body and Blood—the medicine of immortality—so too Paul the *anargyros* humbly and lavishly offered medicine to those without silver or gold. When I finished “Unmercenary Paul, the Good Samaritan,” I was surprised to learn that Susan Holman, one of the contributors to this volume, wrote a chapter titled “Paul the *Anargyros*.”

I am deeply grateful to be part of a project that honors Paul and his ministry to the poor, and cannot help but see in such unexpected synergies clear evidence of the presence and activity of grace. A less surprising but equally appropriate example of creative synergy is the stethoscope draped around Paul's shoulders, an emblematic personal detail that will not be lost on those who knew him. It was Jennie who, upon seeing an earlier iteration of the image, suggested this subtle addition. Looking at it after the fact, I see a fitting if unintended twenty-first century take on the holy *anargyroi*'s traditional ointment jar and apothecary box. May Unmercenary Paul, the Good Samaritan, intercede for us, and may the example of his life awaken in us a graced awareness of Christ the Divine Physician, restoring us to his divine likeness and calling *us* to “go and do likewise.”



**Fr. Cristóbal Torres Iglesias, OP**, is a Miami-based artist and friar of the Southern Dominican Province. His works include the painting *Dominican Last Supper* (2012); the design for the windows of St. Rose of

*Unmercenary Paul*

Lima Chapel at Zanmi Beni children's community in Port au Prince, Haiti (2013); the Cor Jesu Chapel icon cross at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida (2016); and various works featured in private collections. He is also one of the artists featured on the Scout Comics graphic novel series *The Shepherd* (2018). Cristóbal approaches art as visual theological storytelling that bears to others the fruits of contemplation.