



DENVER CATHOLIC REGISTER

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Art gallery marks 25 years, new doctor of Church with exhibit

By Julie Filby



Photo by Julie Filby/DCR

Founder and owner of Creator Mundi, Hildegard Letbetter, poses with sacred art in the gallery located in Denver's Cherry Creek North shopping district.

Though growing up in Cologne, Germany, during a period when the city was bombed repeatedly during World War II—the first time when she was only 6 months old—Hildegard Letbetter's 72 years have been filled with unexpected blessings and beauty.

Letbetter studied at the University of Cologne at the same time Professor Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, was teaching 20 miles south in Bonn. During her senior year, she just happened to be in Rome at the start of the Second Vatican Council, and stood 2 feet from Pope John XXIII while he preached.

She fulfilled a lifelong dream of coming to America, immigrating to the United States in the 1960s with the help of family friends. Once here, she married and had three daughters. Then one day in 1997, she drove by a retail space in Cherry Creek North that she had had her eye on—and suddenly it had a "For Rent" sign in the window.

That space, 2910 E. Third Ave., became home to Creator Mundi ("Creator of the World"), a sacred art gallery she had founded 10 years earlier in her home.

"I call it my contribution to my new home," she said of the distinctive gallery that serves as a source of inspiration for the faithful, and a welcoming center of evangelization for passers-by.

"We want to make a difference in our culture," she

said.

As the gallery celebrates 25 years, Letbetter, a parishioner of Most Precious Blood Church in Denver, sat down with the *Denver Catholic Register* to share some of her experiences and her devotion to her patron saint, Hildegard of Bingen. St. Hildegard, a Benedictine nun who lived in medieval Germany, was elevated to doctor of the Church Oct. 7 by Pope Benedict—also a native of Germany.

Faith and beauty

Though there was "not much to eat or drink" while growing up in the rubble of Cologne, Letbetter's mother Anna Kleff helped instill in her a love for beauty and "anything good."

"For her beauty was something very good," said Letbetter serenely, with a soft-spoken German accent. "She was very particular about her environment even though means were limited.

"Her life was a celebration."

Letbetter has that same eye for beauty, and for 25 years has been selecting beautiful works of sacred art for the gallery.

After arriving in the United States, she became aware of the limited availability of quality sacred art that she had "treasured so much in Germany." During visits back, she began to gather pieces from monasteries and artists she had visited when she was young.

This collection led to the founding of Precious Gifts in her home in 1987. Later renamed Creator Mundi, she moved the gallery to Main Street in Littleton for five years, before settling in the current location.

Creator Mundi serves individual and institutional clients, offering unique collections from some 75 artists, including bronze art from Germany, carved wood statuary from France, nativities from Lithuania, and original works from the United States. Several of the European studios are connected with monasteries.

"Our mission and ministry is to provide sacred symbols bespeaking the abundance of faith, and the stories, parables and transforming power of religion," she said. "We focus on symbols, literature and music that are biblically based and of the finest artistic quality."

She strives to provide art that "speaks to people."

"I try to carry artists who 'walk the talk'... who have a faith life," she said. "I look for a marriage between good art and good theology."

Devotion to St. Hildegard

Letbetter was named for Hildegard of Bingen who was very popular among the people of Germany.

"Her reputation was she was a very kind, loving person," she said. "She had outreach to everybody especially the poor and people in need."

Described as "an authentic teacher of theology and a profound scholar of natural science and music" by Pope Benedict earlier this year, the saint was known to be well educated and multi-talented.

"She was good at many, many things," said Letbetter, an avid reader of theology, faith traditions and meditation. "And that is a blessing that came with the name."

When asked about Hildegard's elevation to doctor of the Church, Letbetter's enthusiasm was clear: "It's about time!"

"I think (Pope Benedict) is in love with Hildegard and the harvest of her life," she said, adding that it's a wonderful affirmation for women. St. Hildegard is the fourth woman doctor of the Church, after St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

Now through Oct. 20, the gallery is hosting "Hildegard's Journey Through the Senses: A Traveling Exhibit." It features the saint's own designs and images, as well as statuary and bronze plaques. All are welcome.

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Creator Mundi Gallery Church

What: Sacred art and gifts

Where: 2910 E. Third Ave., Denver (Cherry Creek North)

Phone: 303-322-1901

Website:
www.creatormundi.com

Special exhibit:
"Hildegard's Journey Through the Senses: A Traveling Exhibit"

When: Now through Oct. 20, during business hours