



Bronze 'Christ' in need of home

Catholic charity group would like to place Jesus the Homeless statue among city's public art



A life-size version of Jesus the Homeless, a sculpture cast in 2012 by Canadian artist Tim Schmalz, will be coming to Chicago soon. The original is seen here with Pope Francis in Rome. (The Vatican / January 14, 2014)

By Manya Brachear Pashman, Tribune reporter
7:30 a.m. CST, January 15, 2014

The life-size sculpture of a homeless man on a bench, with all but his feet shrouded by a blanket, is intended to get the attention of anyone who takes a seat there.

But closer examination reveals the most striking detail in the figure's exposed feet — holes from when Christians believe the man depicted under the blanket was nailed to the cross some 2,000 years ago.

Titled Jesus the Homeless, the sculpture cast in 2012 by Canadian artist Tim Schmalz has captured the imagination of Roman Catholic leaders around the world since the election of Pope Francis. In fact, the statue even attracted the attention of the pope himself.

Now, sometime this spring, Chicago's Catholic Charities wants to place a version of the statue either on its own property or among the assortment of outdoor sculptures on display around the city's central business district to keep Chicago's poor and homeless always in the public eye.

"Since March, we've heard from Pope Francis about the importance of lifting up the poor and identifying with them and trying to see if we can find ways to help them," said Monsignor Michael Boland, president and CEO of Catholic Charities. "A lot of the things the pope is talking about are embodied in this piece."

The only thing that stands in the charity's way is any substantial cost associated with installing and maintaining the work in a public space. Boland said his group's money is primarily spent on food, clothing and shelter for the poor.

Schmalz, who met and had a model of the original work blessed by the pope, appreciates that the group wants to give his work a prominent place in a major city.

"I never thought that costs would be a concern, said Schmalz, 44, of Toronto. "I'd like to see the piece placed in, basically, a spot that the visual message is needed."

Getting people to appreciate the artist's unconventional portrayals of Jesus has been a challenge for a while, he said. About seven years ago, Schmalz produced a similar series involving a shrouded beggar — its outstretched hand also revealing a nail wound. Boland commissioned a copy of that statue, which was inspired by a verse in the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." It now sits at Catholic Charities' headquarters on North LaSalle Street.

Schmalz said the figure on the park bench aims to convey the same message, just an octave higher.

"It's a raw representation of this message of Christianity," Schmalz said. "In the one sculpture of the panhandler, Jesus is asking something of you. The homeless figure on the park bench is asking nothing of you. It becomes more haunting."

In 2012, he met with the rectors of St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Both clergymen fell in love with the sculpture, Schmalz said. But neither archdiocese agreed to purchase a copy for \$35,000.

For about seven months the sculpture had no home, then Regis College, a Jesuit institution in Toronto, raised enough money to install it near the school's entrance. Two weeks later, cardinals elected the first Jesuit pope, who chose the name Francis to emphasize the church's focus on poverty.

With help from an anonymous donor, Boland also commissioned a version of the sculpture for Chicago's Catholic Charities. He also found another way to raise the profile of the artist and his piece. He put in a call to Rome.

Last month, Schmalz met the Holy Father, who prayed in front of a scaled-down model of the sculpture before blessing it. He then commissioned another, life-size version for Rome. The artwork will be installed on a high-traffic street corner where a homeless woman died last year, just blocks from St Peter's Square.

Schmalz hopes Chicago will be able to drive home the message of the piece by installing it in a commercial district, joining a number of the city's other outdoor sculptures by Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Marc Chagall and Alexander Calder.

A spokeswoman for Catholic Charities said requests for food and clothing have overwhelmed the agency during this early harsh winter and made securing a public place for the statue less of a priority.

"It's still up for consideration," said spokeswoman Kristine Kappel.

But for the time being, Boland tentatively plans to place the sculpture at the entrance of Catholic Charities' headquarters, behind the wrought iron fence that separates the entrance from the sidewalk.

"To me, it would be great to be in front of our building, where people come in and out," Boland said. "When you see a homeless person, do you see Christ in that person? This is the way we treat our clients. Even though some people (in the neighborhood) don't like the line out in front, we like to treat them with dignity and respect and compassion. This image from the artist's perspective fits so well into what we already do."

But greater public access matters to Schmalz, who said that the sculpture offers an interactive element — room for passers-by to take a seat.

"To actually merge with the piece and sit down on the sculpture is very important," he said. "I want someone to be able to uncomfortably sit right there at the feet of the homeless person."

mbrachear@tribune.com

Twitter @TribSeeker

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