

Homeless Jesus statue gets audience with an admiring Pope Francis

Sculpture depicting Jesus as a homeless man was rejected by cathedrals in Toronto and New York, but could end up near the Vatican after Pope Francis expressed his admiration.

For two years, it was the sculpture nobody would take: a life-sized Jesus sleeping on a park bench with his bare feet, wounded from his crucifixion, poking out from under a blanket.

But now Jesus the Homeless and its Canadian sculptor have a new fan in the Vatican: Pope Francis.

Timothy Schmalz brought the original wooden model of his sculpture to St. Peter's Square last Wednesday to present to the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. After his weekly general audience, the Pope prayed over the statue and blessed it, Schmalz said.

"It is very, very amazing for a sculptor to have that," he said.

"After, the Vatican officials introduced me to Pope Francis and he said he thought Jesus the Homeless was a beautiful sculpture. So needless to say, I'm very excited about that."

The model is going to stay in one of the Vatican houses, he said, and he is working to find an outdoor location near St. Peter's for the full-sized bronze version.

Schmalz, 44, is a sculptor of Christian-themed works who lives in St. Jacobs, near Waterloo. For about two years after he created his 2 1/2-metre-long sculpture, he couldn't find a location to display it, he said. It was turned down by both St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

Jesus the Homeless eventually found its way to Regis College, the Jesuit school of theology at the University of Toronto. Since it was installed in April, two of its admirers in the Catholic Church recommended Schmalz's work to the Vatican, he said. A few weeks ago, he got the invitation to last Wednesday's papal audience.

Schmalz says his vision of Jesus as a homeless person was inspired by a passage in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus tells his followers that whenever they help a person in need — "the least of my brothers and sisters" — they do it to him.

"If you go to Rome and go to all the beautiful cathedrals, you will not see a representation (of Jesus) that shows him so close to the marginalized people," he said. "I'd say it's one of the most important messages of the Gospels."

It's also a message Pope Francis has embraced since his election in March. He has become known for reaching out to people on the margins of society — from visiting slums in Brazil, to washing the feet of criminal offenders, to embracing a severely disfigured man in St. Peter's Square.

In a document released Tuesday that set out the vision for his papacy, Francis put particular emphasis on fighting inequality and social exclusion.

"He would like to see all people who are followers of Christ, and other people of goodwill, too, reaching out to people who are, as he says, on the margins," said Fr. Michael Czerny, a Canadian Jesuit priest who works at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in the Vatican, and who helped set up Schmalz's visit.

The message is that "these people who feel like they're the last and the least and the most forgotten in fact are the centre of our concern," Czerny said. "Tim Schmalz's sculpture says that in a tangible way, in a beautiful way."

Schmalz said he is working with lawyers and experts at the Vatican to have another Jesus the Homeless sculpture installed near St. Peter's Square so pilgrims from all over the world can see it. As it would be on land owned by the City of Rome, they need approval from the city first.

Schmalz has sent one Jesus the Homeless sculpture to Chicago, where it is awaiting a permanent home. Another copy is on its way to Perth, Australia, he said.