

Altar of Peace

A Collaborative Installation by Geraldine Wojno Kiefer and the people of Trinity
Cathedral
West Transept, Trinity Cathedral, Advent 2001

This is a place for becoming centered and re-centered.

This is a place for remembering.

This is a place for making offerings—prayers, drawings, poems, songs, Psalms.

This is a place for praying.

*This is a place for making peace—with ourselves, with our friends and neighbors,
with our associates, with our enemies, with God.*

“In peace, we pray to you, Lord Jesus.” Advent is a time of preparation, prayer, and remembrance. During this Advent season, we prepare for Jesus’ birth and for the regeneration of our souls. We pray that we might become spiritually ready for the feast of the Nativity and for a vision of the Star of the East, blazing in a clear, cold, midnight sky. We also remember September eleventh, the day the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and the Pennsylvania earth blazed under a clear, warm, early-morning sky. Lord, have mercy upon us.

“In peace, we pray to you, Lord Jesus.” This Altar of Peace also recalls the “Ara Pacis Augustae” (Augustan Altar of Peace, 13-9 B.C.), created and constructed in Rome in honor of Augustus, the Roman emperor who reigned at the time of Jesus’ birth. By means of wise administration and rule, Augustus brought an end to conflict in the Roman empire and initiated the “Pax Augusta,” a long period of peace. The Augustan altar was consecrated on January 30, 9 B.C. Annual sacrifices to Pax Augusta were offered thereafter.

“In peace, we pray to you, Lord Jesus.” We pray for the regeneration of our souls, that we ourselves may be a holy and living sacrifice, offered to you. We pray for the regeneration of our love, that we may love others—our friends and also our enemies—as ourselves. We pray also for the regeneration of our world.

This Altar of Peace brings together a variety of art works created by artist Gerry Kiefer over the past year. They are shrines, sanctuaries, and testaments to the beauty of nature. In making these collages, Gerry has synthesized significant personal events and memories with her ever-deepening commitment to spirituality and to godly revelation. There are three major sources for the Altar: Isaiah, the Tree of Life, and “collage as celebration.”

The Book of Isaiah is full of powerful visual metaphors concerning nature. In Isaiah’s “sculptural” prose—actually a form of free-verse poetry—landscapes rise, fall, and are ultimately molded for good through the omnipotent will of God.

Isaiah writes that “the age of the Spirit will see the transformation of all creation.” First, Judah will suffer exile and desolation. Then, God will bring deliverance. Amid fruitful crops and climax forests—themselves prophecies of the restoration of the Garden of Eden—the Chosen People will be restored, to live in holiness and

righteousness in the lands they were promised. Deep gorges and impassable mountains will be filled and leveled, respectively, to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God. . . . Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (40:3-5).

The Tree of Life is a constantly recurring theme in Gerry’s art. It is intimately related to the Garden of Paradise, the place where the Tree grows and the title of the main altarpiece in this installation. The Tree of Life is also related to the “Mary Garden.” In the medieval Mary Garden, pictured in Gothic-style cathedral windows (such as the one directly above this altar), nature grows beautiful and wild. As in Gerry’s altarpiece, altar cloths, shrines, and icons, no space of Mary’s garden is left unclustered, no plot micro-tilled, no space untouched by flowers and herbs and other growing things. “[B]efore [Mary] knew grief, on this sunny hill and side slope, her feet being for ever among the daisies, poppies and anemones, which grow everywhere about, we have made her the patroness of all our flowers. . . . the whole bloom and coloring of the fields and hedges.”

Gerry takes the “whole bloom and coloring” of her photographs as the primary sensations for her art. She cuts and mounts the photographic prints onto multiple layers of handmade paper, overlaying them with glazes, glitter, paint, beads, shells, pebbles, seeds, dried plants (potpourri mix), and even resistors and other electronic parts. At some point a landscape emerges and then the piece begins to thrive. Collage becomes celebration.

Gerry makes her constructions on her back porch, which overlooks small seasonal plots of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. She considers herself something of a gardener who facilitates their growth by means of her practiced eye, well-honed technique, and knowledge of materials. She makes things fit without cutting away their soul. She makes what looks to be intractable look natural. She cuts and clips, then plants and grafts. She puts it all together in a little performance. But she lets each “player” speak her piece. Even more importantly, she lets God direct the play. What results is a panoply of voices singing from colorful and textured garden plots, which, together, bring to mind a garden of paradise.

As the Garden of Paradise incarnates the origin of humankind, collage incarnates our narratives, bringing life, energy and zest to the mix of ideas we wish to convey. The ideas can, and should, range across the spectrum of our direct engagements and experience. The crucial thing is *bringing them together in real physical form, and giving that form life*. It’s a spiritual thing, collage. It recovers, it protects, it enshrines, it sustains. It provides opportunities for celebration, for prayer, for offering to God the fruits of our labors.

Please add your prayers to the Altar. Be renewed in spirit. Depart in peace.
Thanks be to God.

Geraldine Wojno Kiefer
November eleventh, 2001

