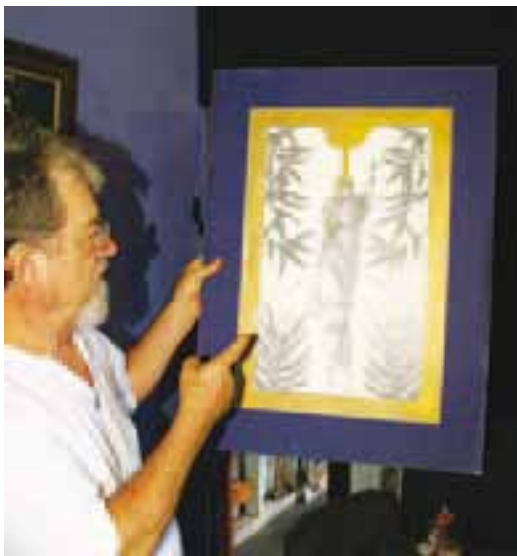




Official portrait of Blessed Carlos Manuel at the Vatican



Sketch of "retablo" for San Francisco Javier Church in Cupey, Puerto Rico



Wood sculpture "Our Lady of Sorrows" (photos Ricardo Rivera)

An artist with a MISSION

Jessica M. Muñoz Carrero
Para El Visitante

Divine inspiration. This and a little talent are sufficient to create magnificent works of art which enclose symbolisms of faith and spirituality. And, according to the artist Arturo Vonn Hartung, creator of the painting, "La Mirada de Charlie", a portrait of Blessed Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, it is God who inspires him and his hands are responsible for creating.

We find in the rural zone of Guaynabo, where one appreciates the beauty of nature, a piece of paradise which Vonn possesses. A humble home, but with a beautiful scenic view of Guaynabo, Caguas, San Juan, and even a part of El Yunque (the rainforest). Surrounded by Puerto Rican nature, he lives with his wife Patricia and their three dogs. His house, according to Patricia, is his greatest work of art, literally because he himself, designed and constructed it, with the help of the community. He and his wife both enjoy that space and, for not having been born in Puerto Rico, they have felt part of this island for more than twenty years.

Arturo Vonn Hartung is a native of Hartford, Connecticut. Since he was a child he showed a great passion for painting. His inspirations: Michelangelo and two churches near his childhood home. He remembers visiting these churches and feeling overwhelmed with so much sacred art. "The masses were in Latin and I didn't understand anything but my eyes understood the art," commented Vonn who envisioned the churches as art museums.

As an adult he came to Puerto Rico by himself in 1961, knowing only two words of Spanish, and according to Vonn, he would pronounce one incorrectly. Unable to find a job, he enrolled in the University of Puerto Rico with Professor Felix Bonilla Norat, a person who means a great deal to him. "Looking at my portfolio,

he said, 'you speak the language fluently, the language of art.' It was the first time that someone acknowledged my talent," Vonn commented with a smile. Since that moment he decided to put into practice the gift he had received.

After a couple of months he left Puerto Rico and returned to the United States, where he headed for Canada with the purpose of reaching Alaska to work in the gold mines. On the way to Alaska, he had a bad accident, ending up in a Catholic hospital. "Looking for gold he found the real gold" comments Patricia, because while hospitalized Vonn took the opportunity to study the Bible, the Saints and the Catholic religion. "There was no doubt that God had other plans for me," Vonn affirms. And in spite of the fact that afterwards he worked at a ranch and at one point he was a sailor, his real vocation always remained present.

In 1984, fate brought him back to Puerto Rico, which he appreciated because he felt he had many things to do for God on the island. His love for this country is very evident in his works. Flamboyanes, plantain leaves, jíbaros and taíno Indians appear in them. His work is mainly divided between silk screen prints, murals, sculptures, landscapes, engravings, and portraits.

A painting he created and which became very popular is precisely of a Puerto Rican. The first time he arrived on the island, Vonn petitioned unsuccessfully to Archbishop Davis to do paintings in the churches. Forty years later he received a call from the Archbishop of San Juan, Monsignor Roberto González, requesting a portrait of Blessed Charlie. Now, this work of art appears in the Hall of Saints of the Pontifical North American College at the Vatican. With this event he achieved his goal, and what an achievement!

Utilizing symbols is essential in Vonn's works. For example, the plantain

leaf present in "Las Espinas de Cristo" represents "God's first language, nature". An intriguing work of art which does not go unnoticed is "Hágase tu voluntad" ("Thy Will Be Done"), not only for its size but for the number of symbolisms it encloses. It represents two options for the future: one part shows the harmony that is possible to attain while being one with God, the other a destructive imbalance of a materialistic, selfish and cruel world. Upon observing it, it's impossible not to meditate. "When I look at it I ask myself on what side am I on," Vonn comments.

This is precisely one of the objectives of art, to provoke meditation and to stir the conscience. Vonn is a faithful believer in art as a means of evangelization. "On one occasion, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the artists, 'The artist needs the Church and the Church needs the artist.' We need to create art as in the 14th century," Vonn commented. He continued, "I only do what I can, and that's what I intend to do." Upon asking him what his favorite work of art is, he responded, "The piece that I am working on. Any one is my favorite as long as I am working with it."

Vonn has works in churches, public buildings and private collections in the United States, Europe and Australia. On the island some of his works are found in San Juan Bautista and San Juan Bosco parishes in Orocovis, the chapel of the Manuel Fernández Juncos Home for Boys, the San Juan Bosco Parish and Maria Auxiliadora School, both in Santurce. One can also appreciate his work in Santa Rosa de Lima Parish and Buen Pastor Parish of Guaynabo, San Francisco Javier in Cupey, and Dulce Nombre de Jesús Parish in Caguas. On his web page, www.artsofine.com/vonn, one can fully enjoy other works of this artist, an adopted son of our island. We can summarize that the work that Vonn has done is a true example of how one can fulfill God's will through that which gives us passion and that God's ways, in spite of their mysteries, enable us to attain our goal.