

Imagining Jesus in the Modern Age

Constantine authors "Jesus of New York"

[Agenda](#) | Posted on February 25, 2015



Constantine talks about his book at an exhibition of its art in Romania late last year.

During his 43-year tenure at Andrews University, Greg Constantine taught a class titled “The Life of Christ in Great Art” for 22 of those years. In the class he revealed to his students works by famous artists like Rembrandt and Michelangelo, showing how they had portrayed incidents from the life of Christ.

“Some of these artists brought Jesus to their own time instead of transporting them 2,000 years back so audiences could relate better,” explains Constantine. “I liked that and I think my students appreciated it, too.”

In 1990, Constantine wanted to do something in his own art dealing with the life of Jesus that his 18- to 21-year-old students could relate to. Though, as Constantine points out, we know nothing of what happened between the ages of 12 and 30, it’s generally understood that Jesus ‘grew in wisdom and stature and approval of the people around him.’

“I didn’t know exactly how I was going to create a book about it,” he says. “But my book of drawings titled ‘Vincent van Gogh Visits New York’ published in 1983, showing a kind of innocent artist in this sophisticated and unforgiving city, constituted a precedent and an inspiration for what I titled ‘Jesus of New York: Premonitions of a New York Teenager.’ I took

many things we know about Jesus during his ministry and approached the events as if he had premonitions of them, or like he would use the memories of his experiences as a 19-year-old observing hypocrisy and injustice later in one of his sermons.”

For example, one of the 43 drawings includes a 12-year-old Jesus—abandoned by his parents in Manhattan—as a contestant on a quiz show. This drawing is based on the banter we know happened between the boy and the theologians in the synagogue. In another, he drew Jesus as a young man choosing a despised tax collector as a friend, and eating a meal in a tavern with what some considered questionable characters. Everything was based on biblical accounts, cleverly modernized to our time.

A big challenge came when Constantine approached the crucifixion. It was difficult to consider what would lead to something that dramatic and violent in such a public venue in today’s culture. He finally settled on a sequence of drawings leading up to the Main Event: His friends (disciples) convince Jesus to enter the Golden Gloves competition in New York. Constantine even had his friend and neighbor Muhammad Ali pose for the climactic scene of a battered Jesus, arms outstretched on the ropes resembling the cross.

Although Constantine was unable to publish this particular story in the U.S., 14 years ago he was interviewed by Humberto Rasi for an article in Dialog magazine, which was published along with seven of his drawings. Then, a year later, Adrian Bocaneanu, the president of the Romanian Union of Seventh-day Adventists saw the article, had it translated and republished it in his union magazine.

In 2014, a pastor who had witnessed the exhibition of the drawings from the book in Bucharest emailed Constantine. He wanted to publish the entire book for his prison ministries there. Constantine agreed, and after several meetings among church officials in Romania it was decided that they would not use it for prison ministries, but instead for youth ministries as the main missionary tool for 2015, focusing on students attending public universities, and adding it to the collection to be sold by book salesmen.

Late in 2014, the Romanian version of the 90-page book was published. They invited Constantine to Romania for the book launching, and to present his material and host three exhibitions of the book’s artwork, which he did in late November and early December.

“The Adventist students have a vision that their friends will be thus determined to grab a New Testament and read the Gospels to discover for themselves the rich meaning of the life of Jesus,” said Bocaneanu, who attended the book’s launch with Constantine and 700 other people at a recent conference of AMiCUS, or Adventist Ministry to College and University Students, in the city of Braşov.*

“I created ‘Jesus of New York’ for my students,” says Constantine. “My mission was to bring Jesus to them at a new level they could better relate to. Though it hasn’t yet been published here, I’m so glad my work is being used to further the Gospel in my parents’ homeland of Romania. I really take very little credit, because all of this was due to God’s inspiration and an answer to my prayers. It’s a project I very much enjoyed putting together, and I’m excited to see what else God

has in store for me.”

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Read the full Adventist Review Article [here](#).