

Evolution of the Christian Culture Series



The Gold Medal

Five people were involved in the history of the design and execution of the Christian Culture Gold Medal. In chronological order of their participation, they were Adelaide de Bethune of Newport, Rhode Island, Graham Carey of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sister Helene O'Connor, O.P. of Adrian, Michigan, Carlos W. Cotton of Collegeville, Minnesota and Ferenc Varga of Windsor and Detroit. For the first ten years or so, the medal was struck anew each year and remained unchanged in its design. The only new information added was the name of the winner and the year in which the medal was given. Changes in the design and the means by which the medal was produced did not come until 1952.

Father Stan Murphy contacted Adelaide de Bethune in a letter

dated 1 December 1940, asking her to design a gold medal that would be awarded each year in conjunction with the Christian Culture Series "to some distinguished lay person who has contributed greatly to the furtherance of Christian ideas in art, literature, philosophy, or science." Permission to issue this invitation had been granted by Father Vincent J. Guinan, C.S.B., the local superior and president of Assumption College. Father Murphy convinced him that the gold medal would be a wonderful way to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the college and that it would bring enormous publicity to Assumption as the only college in Canada to award a medal similar in prestige to Notre Dame's Laetare Medal or St. Bonaventure's Catholic Action Medal. Guinan readily agreed and was always considered by Father Murphy as a co-founder of the Christian Culture Award.

What brought Bethune to Father Murphy's notice? A native of Belgium, Bethune emigrated with her family to the United States in 1925. She studied at the National Academy of Design and Cooper Union in New York City, after which she trained in the making of stained glass windows at the workshops of Charles J. Connisk of Boston. It was probably her woodcuts of worker saints for Dorothy Day's *The Catholic Worker* that initially attracted Father Murphy's attention. In his opening letter to Bethune, he wrote that he liked her "simple and beautiful art" as exemplified in the *St. Francis Picture Book*.

Their ensuing correspondence makes clear that Bethune designed the original gold medal, but it also reveals that she immediately turned to Graham Carey for advice and suggested that he be the one to strike the medal. Father Murphy had no qualms about this. Bethune's medal featured on the obverse a mustard tree surrounded by a circle of lettering and on the reverse the name of the winner and the date surrounded by a circle of lettering. On the obverse, the words were in Latin: "Simile Est Regnum Caelorum Grano Sinapis." They are from Our Lord's parable of the mustard seed, which can be found in

Matthew 13:31, Mark 4:31 and Luke 13:19. In English, the text reads "The Kingdom of Heaven is Like unto a Grain of Mustard." On the reverse, the words Christian Culture Series are on the top and Assumption College on the bottom. The final product was an 18K gold medal, 1N chain, #11 gauge. Total cost was \$100.

A friend and colleague of both Carey and Bethune assumed production of the medal, commencing in 1942. She was Sister Helene O'Connor, O.P. of Studio Angelico, which was located at the Dominican Siena Heights College in nearby Adrian, Michigan. Carey's suggestion of her was highly fortuitous for Father Murphy. Sister Helene was a highly gifted artist and a wonderful person with whom to work. In 1939, she and Bethune worked together to produce the murals at Siena Heights depicting St. Catherine of Siena doing domestic tasks in the Benincasa household. Sister Helene was in charge of the medal until 1948, when a change in her circumstances at the college deprived her of a studio. She had also taught a session of the Assumption College Summer School and gave a lecture for the series, on 7 April 1946. The title of her lengthy and erudite talk was "On the Art of Christian Culture."

Carlos Cotton was the next to be involved. He came into the picture on the recommendation of Sister Helene, who told Father Murphy that Cotton had done other designs by Graham Carey and therefore could be trusted to execute the medal to Carey's specifications. Although Cotton needed the work, he seems to have lasted only three or four years. In 1949, a prolonged illness delayed the production of the medal beyond the hoped-for date in November. It was intended for Etienne Gilson. Fortunately for Father Murphy, Gilson was in no hurry to receive it, and its non-existence was no bother to him.

It was obvious that the medal had to be produced in a more consistent and timely fashion. The solution came in the person of the renowned sculptor Ferenc Varga (1906-1989). A native of Székesfehérvár, Hungary, and a former student at the Academy

of Fine Arts in Budapest, Varga settled in Windsor in 1950 after leaving his native country in protest against the communist regime. He is responsible for the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary erected in 1950 in front of Assumption Church. Varga altered the obverse of the medal by adding a human hand holding the mustard tree, as a sign of our cooperation with God in building the Kingdom of Heaven. He also changed the reverse of the medal, from Assumption College to Assumption University, and created a permanent matrix from which future copies of the medal would be struck.