

# Comments and Thoughts on Mosaic-Making in General and *Pietò* in Specific

## Tony Zinicola, Jr.

### June 21, 2006

Public displays of an art work often include some comments about or a description of the work for the viewer to read. These brief comments usually differ according to the interests of the expected audience. The following is a broad master document intended as a source from which short comments may be copied as needed.

### One Artist's Work

*Pietò* is a mosaic made from various granites (India), various marbles (India), quartzite (USA), Dolomite (USA), Smalti (Italy), Venetian Gold (Italy), Oregon Obsidian (USA), and Common Glass (China).

*Pietò* measures 36 inches by 49¼ inches.

*Pietò* is offered as a Joseph-centric Christian artwork, a masculine counterpoint to traditional *Pietà*s featuring Mary and produced by many artists since the thirteenth century. To my knowledge, it is the only such representation with Joseph as the central figure.

*Pietà* is the Italian word for *pity* or *mercy*, with *mercy* more emphasized in Italian than in the English cognate, *pity*. Traditional *Pietà*s are contemplative works depicting a non-biblical moment following Jesus' deposition from the Cross. His mother, Mary, is shown holding Jesus' deceased body. Additional figures of people or angels may be included, but only as secondary presences to those of Mary and Jesus. Mary is often, although not always, depicted as impossibly young when compared to the apparent age of her adult son. Perhaps this is intended to emphasize a central characteristic of all *Pietà*s and one which, I believe, is the best summary description of the *Pietà* as an artistic form, that *Pietà*s contemplate the whole of the Christian Incarnation story: Mary, young or old, reminds the viewer of the Nativity story and Jesus' lifeless body reminds the viewer of His Crucifixion and resurrection. The centrality of Mary within the *Pietà* and of Joseph within my *Pietò* embodies humanity's response of pity to the act of mercy offered by God in His sacrifice. Traditional *Pietà*s and my *Pietò* do not depict the sacrificial story of Jesus; they assume it and they invite the viewer to participate with Mary or Joseph in response to that sacrifice.

My interest in Joseph began around the age of three or four when my own father first described to me the basic elements of the Christmas story. I can recall thinking that Joseph was deprived of his full husbandship and his full fatherhood in this situation. Of course, at three or four, I certainly did not use this kind of vocabulary and I was hardly equipped to analyze the question with any sophistication, but I never forgot the depth of my first response to the story even if I did not dwell upon it, either.

Over the years, I encountered pictures of medieval frescoes and mosaics depicting the Nativity. Uniformly, these images presented Joseph as physically separate from Mary and Jesus, nearly always looking away from the pair alone within the natal cave, Joseph with his hand to his face, appearing confused, befuddled, ineffectual—not at all the image of *Joseph as Faithful Husband* or *Joseph as Stepfather* or *Joseph as Protector*. To the contrary, these artworks strongly hinted that their artists and patrons considered Joseph's role as embarrassingly close to that of cosmic cuckold of which the less

was said the better.

As I encountered images produced in the centuries following the medieval era, I saw that Joseph was eventually included within the Nativity scene, but only as one of three elemental constituents in a generic nuclear family: father, mother, and child. The use of halos along with a cave or stable and so on made it clear that this was the particular family of the Christmas story, but nothing about these images spoke to the spiritual significance of any of these three individuals or their relationships to each other. Those messages were to be found in separate images exclusive of Joseph, presenting Mary and Jesus together or apart.

I also found still later images placing Joseph, a carpenter, within a carpenter's workshop, usually contemporary with the artist's time. These varied in their inclusion of Mary, but always included depictions of father and son working together. What I never encountered were depictions of a Joseph in relation to his (literally) God-given son or a Joseph in relation to the Christian drama that produced a covenant that produced a faith.

Today, I can use the Internet to search combined terms such as *Jesus, Joseph, stepfather, Christmas, sermon, and homily* and I can find a long list of pastoral talks about Joseph published by clergy. These talks address Joseph in many roles: stepfather, protector, faithful servant of God, faithful husband. To my surprise, Joseph has become a part of American Father's Day sermons by offering an example from which to discuss the meaning of *father* and the various descriptions of father roles. Occasionally, these talks go so far as to examine the father within Joseph as compared with the Father of the Trinity. Still, these imaginative explorations have not found their way into the visual arts—to my observation.

My *Pietà* is, first, the result of years of casual and undirected reflection, and, second, the result of additional years of serious and intense fixation, upon all of these ideas. Through this composition I seek to depict Joseph's mental and emotional state as he contemplated his son's future as well as to depict Jesus' mental and emotional state as He considered how his future would affect his earthly father.

Joseph's introduction to his role as stepfather to Jesus is described briefly within the New Testament books of Matthew and Luke. There, Joseph seeks quietly to dismiss Mary from their engagement upon hearing that Mary is with child. A dream in which an angel informs him that the child is from God persuades Joseph against his plan and he takes Mary as his wife. After Jesus' birth, Joseph is again visited in a dream by an angel. This time, he is warned to take his family to Egypt, away from those who would threaten Jesus' life. Later, an angel would advise Joseph that it was safe to return. These events, combined with Luke's account of Simeon's temple declaration of Jesus as God's *Salvation, Revelation, and Glory*, must have deeply influenced Joseph's understanding of his relationship to his son. This understanding would have been reinforced by observing Jesus' character as He grew as well as His behavior during the trip to the temple at the age of twelve.

Modern readers of the New Testament can only speculate as to what Joseph thought and felt about these matters. We can draw upon our own experience of the aspirations men have for fatherhood and for their children and assume that these have not so changed over the millennia as to separate us from Joseph. We can also look to historical study to understand better the circumstances and the cultures of Joseph's time, but this effort affords us only so much, only *informed* speculation. It will have to do.

My belief is that Joseph loved his son as would most men, that Joseph knew, that as a stepfather unlike

any other, the course of Jesus' life would be determined by a Father-God and not by him, that Joseph knew that Jesus' God-given life would include threats to Jesus' safety and to Jesus' existence, and that Joseph felt this burden internally and alone. Abstracted only somewhat, Joseph's life stands as an example for modern stepfathers; and, abstracted only a little bit more, Joseph's life stands as an example for all modern fathers of any kind. Joseph's hopes, Joseph's plans, Joseph's fears, and Joseph's worries are all no different than those of a modern father. If he could, he would metaphorically extend his hand to guide Jesus where Joseph wanted Jesus to go and to clear a path through the crowd who would also be reaching to draw Jesus towards their plans and interests. Like any father who discovers that his power to command his son's allegiance can never be exclusive and that his ability to protect his son's well-being can never be absolute, Joseph could only do his best and pray. Regardless of the place or time, fathers raise sons to give them away, contemplating only in secret any fears they may have that they might lose them forever to the same world they were preparing them to enter.

As hidden from modern readers as Joseph is the young Jesus and what He thought and felt regarding his earthly father. My belief is that Jesus loved his earthly father as would most children, but Jesus knew, that as a stepson unlike any other, the course of Jesus' life would be determined by His heavenly Father and not by Joseph, that Jesus understood all or enough of his future to know that it included some kind of risk to his life, and that Jesus would wish to do whatever He could to protect Joseph from the grief within that future. Sons pray for their fathers, yet a son who could act with the power of a God could do more, but would He? How would He? And with what limits?

Without facts, imagery becomes difficult, but the depiction of *desire* is possible where it is understood by maker and viewer alike that what is depicted is not fact, but idea. My *Pietà* is a depiction of Joseph's desire to protect his son from a threatening fate and Jesus' desire to protect his earthly father from the emotional pain of that fate, neither with success.

*Pietà* can be read by focusing solely upon the central figures of Joseph and Jesus to understand its primary meaning as regards Joseph, but *Pietà's* larger Incarnation narrative begins with the bottom right image of Mary and the child Jesus. There, Mary stands just inside the mouth of a mountain cave like those used in common nativity scenes, facing the viewer in a traditional pose and struggling to hold her child. The cave is a place of security, rooted as it is to the mountains and hills which are, themselves, rooted deeply to the earth. A cave is a fortress against the wind and weather, and against animal or human threats. Within a cave, a mother and child can be safe yet Jesus struggles against the security of mother and of home to acknowledge and to address the life for which He was born.

Jesus does so by offering a blessing that radiates from his effort to imperfectly surround his earthly father. I use the words, *blessing* and *radiance*, interchangeably when considering this form. It is Jesus' desire to protect His father. The figures of Joseph and the adult Jesus do not represent a moment in time, but their relationship to each other. Jesus is represented with His traditional wounds and Joseph is represented with traditional tools as well as stone tesserae suggestive of his older physique in addition to the glass used for the majority of Joseph and Jesus.

Opposite the child Jesus and against His act of blessing follows the pull of the Cross. It defeats Jesus' desire by breaking the uniformity of the blessing and by presenting the consequence of the Crucifixion, Jesus' blood, upon the ground below it. Beyond the radiance, the imperative force of the Crucifixion tumbles downstream (and up-image) like the flow of a frozen river beneath the thawing heat of a springtime sun. It crashes against the picture boundary and redirects its energy to pierce the tranquil sky of the Father's heaven, prompting His response in the form of an earthquake and the splitting of

rocks (Matthew 27:51–53) depicted by the granite slab broken by the energy of Heaven's reply to the act of Crucifixion.

## **Pietà's Place Within Liturgical Art History**

Although *Pietà* includes features common both to Orthodox (Eastern) and to Catholic (along with Protestant, Western) religious compositions, as a new work, *Pietà* would not be recognized at all as an image to be included within their tradition by Orthodox viewers. Catholic and Protestant viewers, however, would only partially understand *Pietà* as an image within their own traditions.

Orthodox icons are integral within the Orthodox Church along with biblical documents and Church tradition. This springs from a belief that embraces the corporeal fact of an incarnated God as justification for physical depictions of that transcendent God and that also rejects the distinction between word and image: images and texts are, both, *written*. All Orthodox icons are based upon fixed patterns from which the artist may not diverge. Years of formal training and subsequent formal authorization required to write an icon to be recognized by the Orthodox Church exist to enforce boundaries around the iconographer to prevent the creation of anything but the forms sanctioned by the church. Pattern books have been used for centuries to guide iconographers and modern publications provide more examples of traditional icons for additional guidance. Within this closed set of images, *Pietà* easily stands out as foreign, but other characteristics also isolate it.

*Pietà's* Joseph and Jesus gaze directly upon the viewer—they are *frontal*. This *is* characteristic of Orthodox icons, but Joseph cries toward the viewer in anguish. This expression of emotion is considered carnal by the Orthodox viewer and contrary to the purpose of Orthodox icons to embody the transcendent victory over carnal passions and carnal drama. Likewise, the depiction of Jesus as merely dead and not calmly triumphant over the circumstances of His Crucifixion would be seen as a rejection of belief or, at least, as the forgetfulness of a deeply immature believer. The Madonna and child would, at first glance, appear acceptable to the Orthodox, but *Pietà's* child Jesus is turned away from the viewer, a direct contradiction to the Orthodox opinion that icons must engage the viewer directly.

Catholics and their Protestant brethren do not share Orthodox doctrinal beliefs about images and would easily recognize as familiar the Madonna, the child Jesus, the adult Jesus, and the Cross. The figure holding the adult Jesus would be less recognizable. Perhaps the carpenter's mallet and carpenter's square (despite its being broken) would be recognized by the Western viewer as symbols of Joseph used since the Renaissance, but depictions of Joseph alone are rare enough that these symbols, like the traditional lily, might not be understood. The mountains, hills, and cave might be recognized as images common within medieval art, but the entire composition would be seen as something new: a religious picture—yes—but one the complete meaning of which was unknown to them.

Describing what I intended *Pietà* to say and to mean requires a discussion of the imagemaker's problem in choosing between frontality and narrative. As a word, *frontality* may seem awkward, but it is commonly used to describe figures within Christian imagery that gaze directly upon the viewer. *Narrative*, of course in this context, refers to story-telling through the presentation of a static image. In their purest expressions, frontality and narrative are mutually exclusive. The frontally oriented image engages the viewer while ignoring figures and features within the image, but the image depicting a narrative presents figures involved with other figures and features within the image. The frontally oriented image attracts the viewer both by its physical primacy within the image and by the figure's gaze directly upon the viewer. The latter effect can be experienced by entering a room of a few dozen

people and selecting one individual within the group to gaze upon without a break. Eventually the subject will recognize her or his being observed and alter her or his behavior in response to that gaze.

The characteristics of frontality and narrative are not limited to art of a particular time—say, the Middle Ages—or of a particular culture—say, European. A favorite example of mine is Kabuki Theater, a highly stylized art form practiced in Japan since the early seventeenth century and characterized by elaborate costumes, mask-like facial makeup, and dramatic plots. By themselves, these characteristics do not suggest Christian imagery of any kind, but Kabuki includes, as an integral element, the *mie* (mee-ay) pose. The *mie* pose occurs as a break in the narrative action when the character turns directly to the audience and affects a dramatic facial display and bodily pose. In a manner akin to that of an aria in European opera, narrative action ceases with all other characters freezing in position; but, more than merely stopping the narrative, the *mie* pose *requires* an immediate response from the viewers. During the *mie* pose, experienced Kabuki patrons will shout towards the character posing in front of them. Often, the vocal audience member will shout the actor's name. When Kabuki is performed outside of Japan, experienced patrons sometimes are seeded within the audience to provide the inexperienced majority a complete example of Kabuki's rich qualities. After many slow seconds, the *mie* pose concludes and the narrative action resumes.

Modern film and television programming use similar techniques in the form of the close-up, the freeze-frame, and the zoom freeze. These techniques are seldom consciously noticed by viewers as techniques, so absorbed are they in the storyline presented; nevertheless, viewers have become so unconsciously accustomed to these techniques that modern comedies routinely take advantage of the viewer's awareness for comedic effect. This takes the form of “breaking the fourth wall,” looking and speaking directly at the camera, or parody by using close-up, freeze-frame, and zoom freeze, normally intended to highlight significant dialog or a character's profound reaction, instead to highlight intentionally banal dialog or events. Contemporary examples of “breaking the fourth wall” include the Fox Network's the *Bernie Mac Show* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. Examples of a freeze-frame can be seen applied to a young character immediately *prior to* the character's death in an automobile crash in the 1982 film *The World According to Garp*; and, the use of a frontally oriented photograph of the main female character as a key plot device to motivate characters' actions within the 1984 film *The Terminator*. A recent example of a zoom freeze used for comedic effect can be seen in the February 4, 2006 *Saturday Night Live* sketch *Quick Zoom Theater*. These are each obviously non-religious examples, contemporary and mostly trivial, drawn from my personal memory only, but they allow me to emphasize that, by understanding the psychological power of frontally oriented images in contemporary, everyday experiences, the viewer can better understand why they are used in religious imagery. Readers are encouraged to study their own viewing behavior, noting their own reactions when viewing films and television.

Traditional frontally oriented religious images are *not* portraits in which the image itself is its own reason to exist. These icons are intended to draw the viewer into the reality of the depicted individual's Christian life: his or her relationship to God, to other Christians, and to the world. Whatever clothing or objects are included within a frontally oriented religious image are intended to guide the viewer toward contemplation of the depicted individual's religious significance. Indeed, within the Orthodox perspective, the image itself *is* the presence of the saint depicted.

***Pietò*** enters this preexisting world of religious imagery with two problems to solve: how to convey a narrative unfamiliar to its viewers and how to prevent the telling of the narrative from breaking the frontal communication between the viewer and the saint. To do this, ***Pietò*** uses four separate images

juxtaposed within a single panel. These images communicate with one another to convey the narrative of the Incarnation story, first, through the infant Jesus' extending his hand in a blessing, and second, by continuing that communication by way of symbolic mosaic techniques (more of these, below). The result is a mosaic panel that functions as a composite of individual images as well as a complete image conveying a complex thought comprising the ideas conveyed within those separate images—and the Christian Incarnation story is nothing if it is not a complex thought.

In his 1948 book, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, Otto Demus describes the development of standard compositional forms from those in classical Byzantine iconography, with rules similar to that of Orthodox iconography described above, to compositional forms that allowed for emotional expression. Demus went further to argue that these new forms, developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, included separate images set within a single picture-space. These separate images corresponded to the individual icons of saints within the classical architecture of Byzantine churches. The classical church functioned as the mystical venues of the Holy Land and Heaven within which worshipers could meet and interact with the saints. The single picture-space described by Demus, then, corresponded with the classical church itself.

According to Demus, just as the worshiper was to enter into and participate within the classical Byzantine church, so too was the viewer to enter imaginatively into and participate within this new picture-space. Demus described four characteristics of the picture-space that tied it to the history of classical Byzantine church architecture: first, the use of background coulisses to suggest depth without actually portraying it; second, the use of sloped terraces upon which figures and features could stand; third, architectural motifs arranged in such a way as to function as a framing niche and as a substitute for actual wall niches into which icons would be placed; and, fourth, the conveyance of “spatial impressions” that suggest an opening-up of the image's physical space in front of and below the picture plane. Demus considered the third and fourth characteristics to be the stronger ties to classical Byzantine decoration, but all four were important.

*Pietà* includes all four of these characteristics. First, the *coulisse* is a term more commonly applied to the background screens of stage sets. These screens depict background features but can also be “stacked” in a front-to-back fashion with the rearward screen slightly offset to allow it to be seen behind the others. Natural terrain or city buildings can be painted on these screens to suggest depth and distance that the actors must traverse as they enter the mainstage from behind the particular screen depicting the appropriate distance. The rolling lowland hills of *Pietà* function in this way against the two mountains behind them. Similarly, the two mountains act to suggest a greater distance between the viewer and the figures of Joseph and the adult Jesus. Second, the rolling lowland hills provide the “sloped terraces” upon which Mary must stand. Third, the cave and the blessing radiance (black and gold glass) surround Mary, Joseph, and the adult Jesus, respectively, as a mock niche for these figures. Fourth, the stacking of the rolling lowland hills suggests a continuation of their space below the frame of the mosaic. This effect is even amplified by the rightmost hill that descends below Mary's feet and which seems to project from its unseen whole to the right of the mosaic.

Despite the fact that the figures of Joseph and the adult Jesus do not themselves resemble traditional representations, *Pietà's* composition is an example of this particular form of picture-space developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but it is executed by a contemporary artist with contemporary concerns who believes that, just as old ideas can be expressed with new forms, new ideas can be expressed with old forms as a continuation of the process of thinking across generations about these ideas.

## Mosaic Features and Techniques Within *Pietà*

Mosaic as an art form includes so broad a list of expressions that I could never fully describe them within these few pages. Such an effort can be left for another. My heart races when I encounter a figurative mosaic expressed with tesserae, the pieces, sufficiently small that no one tessera represents a single depicted feature: a tessera is not an arm, or a hand, or a finger. The tesserae comprise the feature as anonymous elements only. Often, circumstances fight against this ideal. Figurative mosaic is at its best when it is a monumental art, at a minimum as large as life, a visual space into which the viewer might, in fact, enter, were the mosaic made in three dimensions. Unfortunately, mosaics of this scale are too expensive to be commonly made. Just as the architect's model and plans are poor substitutes for the completed building, so too is a mosaic made to less than architectural scale often less than what it could be. A harsher criticism, I do not offer. The exceptional architect with ideas, perhaps even plans, for ten world-class buildings could hardly be faulted for having a bank account inadequate for constructing even one. The same is true for the mosaicist.

Figurative mosaics, then, are made relatively small, leaving the maker of mosaic figures to choose what sacrifices in artistic effect will be made because of the size of the mosaic. Some general rules for guiding these decisions are possible. First, the size of the tesserae must be determined by the relationship of the viewer to the primary figure or figures or by the relationship of the primary figure to the other figures within the mosaic, whichever is more important. This rule is what determined the making of *Pietà*. Second, the material used as tesserae must have a granular or crystalline structure that allows for cutting the pieces to the desired size.

An example of the application of the second rule (dispensing with it first) is found in the use of the same granite for Joseph's face, hands, and legs within *Pietà*. This particular stone possessed coarse grains and shattered at sizes much larger than with those of other stones and the smalti (glass) used for the majority of Joseph. This property forced a nondescript, almost abstract, representation of Joseph's hands and legs. Were it not for the fact that these properties suggested a leathery skin, worn by exertion, weather, and time, this otherwise beautiful material could not have been accepted for the figure of Joseph.

The first rule is dependent upon both the size of the tesserae and the distance of the viewer from the mosaic. The standard "A" cut smalti tessera is about 5/8 inch long and about 3/8 inch wide. "A" cut smalti and similarly sized tesserae are discernible as discrete pieces at a distance of many tens of feet. At closer distances, however, features made from size "A" smalti look coarse and the blending of distinct colors that occurs within an eye looking at a great distance fails within an eye looking at only ten or twenty feet. A natural adjustment to the "A" cut would be to cut it smaller for mosaics intended to be viewed at closer distances.

The figures of Joseph and the adult Jesus within *Pietà* use smalti cut to one quarter of the standard "A" cut, producing a visual effect at distances ranging from about five feet to about twenty feet that is comparable to "A" cut tesserae at larger distances. The largest tesserae for Mary and the child Jesus, however, use smalti and stone cut to a length of about 3/16 inch and a width roughly half that. At these sizes, figures made from these tesserae begin to function more as the micro-mosaics of furniture and jewelry where viewing ceases to be a shared, public activity and becomes more private. At these scales, the mosaic functions less as a picture-space into which the viewer may enter and more as an object a viewer may hold and possess. As an alternative, these side figures could have been presented more

abstractly than the central figures, but *Pietò's* subject matter risks viewers' misinterpretation of *Pietò* as an image acting more as a diminishment of Mary than as an affirmation of Joseph. Not providing comparable detail in depicting Mary as was used in depicting Joseph could have fueled a rejection of the composition for reasons based upon a misunderstanding of the mosaic's intent. The small-sized tesserae for Mary and the child Jesus provided sufficient detail to remove a potential impediment to acceptance by viewers of *Pietò* as a new composition.

It can be pointed out, as a footnote, that the fingers of the child Jesus are made of single tesserae. Given the actual size of this figure, smaller tesserae applied to each finger would have been indiscernible without the viewer placing his or her face almost against the mosaic surface. The effort would have been a token one only.

This attention to viewers' reactions to the degree of detail offered within a mosaic can also be compared with the traditional use of tesserae within the faces of historic, church mosaic figures much smaller than the tesserae used within the remainder of their bodies or the backgrounds. Human beings pay close attention to faces and the expressions faces make. Apart from the issue of tesserae size representing thematic importance, Mary's frontal presentation draws the viewer's gaze into what is expected to be a complete and expressive face. An interesting contrast can be made with Verdiano Marzi's mosaic triptych in marble and smalti *St. George with Blue and Red Angels*, a work of three pieces individually roughly the size of *Pietò*. Each of the greatly abstracted figures within Marzi's mosaic have faces made from a solid slab of material, with no facial features at all. This beautiful work succeeds for many reasons, but its failure to distract the viewer with its solid faces may be ascribed to the fact that these figures are *not* frontal. St. George and the angels all present in full profile. Since the viewer is not being viewed by the figure, the viewer does not expect to find facial features to be read.

The art of mosaic is rich with complexities like this. My observation of my own reactions to various mosaics persuades me that mosaic, an art of many pieces, when it is best expressed is paradoxically dependent upon line—line broken always by those pieces and, sometimes, line only partially suggested. This assertion argues against the appeal of modern pixelated mosaics and even against an excessive use of pointillist techniques for these both dilute the force of line. Line can be expressed with color or the sequential placement and orientation of tesserae, the *andamento*. The line depicted with color need not correspond to the line depicted with the *andamento*, just as the “quilting” of a traditional quilt does not correspond to the stitch line of the quilt blocks (and the colors they bound). Different expressions of *andamento* can create a dynamism or a quietude within a field of identical tesserae. An exceptional example of the varied expressions of line is found in the work of the 1960s and 1970s team of Hans Unger and Eberhard Schulze, specifically, their work entitled *Horses*.

*Pietò* uses *andamento* in ordinary ways in presenting mountains and hills, but it goes further to use *andamento* to portray a dynamism that moves from the bottom right of the mosaic to the top left, then to the top right, and then back to the center. This dynamism is experienced emotionally and *in addition to* the narrative images depicted and described above. It begins with the horizontal calm of the black smalti of the cave interior. Within this quietude is the vertical form of Mary with a tunic whose tesserae flow in a stylized undulating manner from bottom to top. This flow continues through the flow of cape toward her Child whose own tunic and extended arm direct it towards His act of blessing. This flow continues towards the point of breach where the horizontal calm of the background stone tesserae is disrupted by the imperative of the Cross drawing all material toward it and the Crucifixion it represents. The rush of tesserae continues to the upper corner, across the top, and then back to the center. Once at the center, the location of the primary image, the *andamento* follows the

contours of the two human forms in an ordinary manner but contributes a final flourish within Joseph's tunic. There, the pattern of tesserae offer, depending upon a viewer's inclination, a pleasing geometric solution to the joining of two contrarily curved forms or the image of a drop of liquid, be it of tears or of blood.

The materials used for the tesserae in *Pietà* include granite, marble, Italian smalti, obsidian, and common glass. There is a natural affinity between glass and stone regardless of whether the pairing comes in the form of a dead volcano revealing cooled silicon lying against clumps of pumice, a seaside beach with once broken bottles transformed into smoothed bits of glass sprinkled amid the pebbles, or a Dale Chihuly sculpture set against a backdrop of the ancient stones of Venice or Jerusalem. Many mosaicists have combined these two materials to great effect. *Pietà* does so with the glass intentionally reserved for the primary features of the individual images within the panel; the glass was intended to stand as polished jewels against a natural background. Unplanned by me was the like comparison made by Otto Demus (see above) when he also described the mosaics of classical Byzantine churches as jewels set against the building's stone walls. These he contrasted with the later churches of Ravenna, Sicily, and elsewhere that filled every exposed wall, ceiling, and niche with unending mosaics.

The number of colors used in *Pietà* were intentionally kept to a few. The predominate shades of black expressed the grief inherent in an earthly life dedicated to an end with a crucifixion. The remaining colors also express emotion appropriate for the figures depicted. One use of color and material does warrant detailed comment. The distinction between God's Spirit and a human's spirit has never been described with any detail. Primary Christian documents offer little information on either, yet these documents assume the existence of both. From the fact that God's Spirit is eternal and a human's spirit, along with the human's body, is created, little can be asserted except that the Creator's Spirit is greater than the created spirit. I chose glass to represent spirit, gold glass for the Spirit of God in Heaven and black glass for the spirit of humanity on earth. This choice allowed *Pietà* to suggest, without offering a rigid doctrine, the relationship between humanity and the earth as each the result of a common creation. It also allows for the depiction of the one nature of Jesus marshaling the other nature to His own purpose in the form of His blessing.

I have already mentioned how Verdiano Marzi successfully used slabs of material in addition to small tesserae within his mosaics. I was unsure as to whether and how I might include slab material in *Pietà* until I decided on the top right corner of the composition. This is much less an abstract use of large stone than is expressed in works by others, but it also allowed for an unusual application of *accidentals* directly upon the face of the stone. *Accidentals* are individual tesserae placed within a field of uniform tesserae. *Accidentals* are usually strikingly different in color than the majority of tesserae surrounding them. These pieces attract the viewer's eye and provide it a place to focus and to rest while examining the larger field. *Pietà's* use of *accidentals* relies not upon color differences, but on the textural differences of tesserae placed upon polished granite. From a narrative point of view, these tesserae function as ejecta from the forceful spirit of human wrongdoing piercing the serenity of a polished granite sky.

Although small mosaics suffer a loss of monumentality, they do offer opportunities in the presentation of texture. Up close, tesserae can be examined in detail. The rougher the material the more interesting the possibilities in using texture in a composition. *Pietà* includes features that may be described as *relief*. I am not fond of this characterization, but it is a natural option for the typical viewer wishing to describe what is seen. I see mosaic as an energetic medium that desires to move within the picture-plane and even *to reach out of it* toward the viewer. Mine is a conception that places mosaic

just inside the boundary between picture and sculptural relief. The naturally broken obsidian in the bottom right and the opposing smalti and mortar in the top left each highlights the mosaic's desire to move which is found in every tessera with a viewing face set contrary to the plane of the picture.

### **Another Artist; Another Joseph**

Sometime when *Pietà* was about half done, I discovered Arno Lehmann's book, *Christian Art in Africa and Asia*, published in English in 1969 by Concordia Publishing House. This book was originally published in German in 1966 under the title *Afroasiatische christliche Kunst* by Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH, Berlin. Within this book is a single picture of a sculpture entitled *Joseph and the Child Jesus*. The artist is identified only as an African nun, Sister Ancilla of Southern Rhodesia (now, the Republic of Zimbabwe). The image appears to have been taken from a copy of a report in *Die Katholischen Missionen*, number IV, published in 1959. Just as the peace or majesty of traditional depictions of Madonna and Child act as a counterpoint to the drama of a *Pietà*, so too does Sister Ancilla's *Joseph and the Child Jesus* act as a counterpoint to my *Pietà*. Carved from clay, Sister Ancilla's sculpture stands as the embodiment of a deep serenity.

The sole photograph of Sister Ancilla's Joseph is taken from the front. Joseph possesses elongated hands and an elongated face as with El Greco's paintings, but the comparison ends there. Sister Ancilla's Joseph and Jesus are unambiguously African figures, with tightly curled hair and facial structure to convey this information. Each wears a tunic without noticeable ornament. As with a traditional Madonna and Child, Joseph holds Jesus at his left side. Jesus, depicted at about three years old, sits completely within Joseph's left hand, which bears his weight without effort. Jesus faces to Joseph's right, the viewer's left. His right arm and shoulder are hidden from view so there is no way to confirm whether He is using them to cling to his father, but the whole of the image strongly suggests that Jesus is sitting upright entirely within his father's one hand. Jesus' own left arm drops against His side from his shoulder to the elbow, with his hand drawn up and across His own chest as if to cover His heart. Joseph's right arm also drops to the elbow, but his hand descends as it reaches delicately across his lower torso to touch Jesus' toes, which rest, in turn, against Joseph's fingers—not as against a heavy footstool, but more as a playful gesture or simply to maintain balance. Both Joseph and Jesus bow their head slightly with their eyes closed. Are they in prayer? Perhaps. Certainly, they are quiet in this moment of togetherness. Joseph, a mere man, bears the whole of a God in a single hand. Jesus, a God, settles within the strength and the control expressed within the reach of a single hand.

My intention in creating *Pietà* was to display the complex relationship between this distinct father/son pair in the context of the Incarnation and Crucifixion, but it did not preclude my considering other expressions. I wanted to portray in other works other aspects of this relationship, but I did not know in what manner I might design such additional works. Sister Ancilla, whoever she was (is?) resolved this question for herself fifty years ago. Her accomplishment provides me a plan and an inspiration to make more mosaics of which the best may only be a copy.

Mosaic Artist: Tony Zinicola, Jr.  
Portland, Oregon  
USA