

Sacred and secular unite on Basque church's walls

by [Rosanne Skirble](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

The Iglesia de San Miguel is the pride of Antezana de Foronda, a tiny town in Spain's Basque Country. Yet the 16th-century church, with its spectacular wooden carvings and baroque altarpiece, had fallen on hard times.

Residents had saved the church once, decades ago, when they mobilized to fight an airport extension steps away from the sanctuary. In recent years, forces of nature and the passage of time were taking their toll on the town shrine.

"We saw our cultural identity slipping away," said Diego Bermejo, a philosophy and ethics professor at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, who lives in the town of 100 people, which has no public buildings other than the church. "A town that lets its past die kills its future."

Bermejo, mayor José Luis Alonso, and others wanted to revive and strengthen the cultural history of the town, preserving a space where church rituals would be observed, while welcoming people for concerts, dance performances, and theater.

Once again the town pooled its resources, stabilized the church walls, sealed the cracks, and repaired the roof. But the townspeople were hardly finished.

A 68-year-old former Franciscan monk and fine artist stepped into the church for the first time in 2011, and the bare walls and gilded baroque altarpiece spoke to him.

"I knew I was on a journey but had no idea where it would lead," said Xabier Egana.

Egana had painted murals in the Basilica of Arantzazu, an example of Spanish religious art and architecture from the second half of the 20th century.

The mural project linked Egana with artists in the Basque Vanguard, a movement that arose out of the Spanish Civil War and the rejection of dictator Francisco Franco.

Now largely retired, Egana offered to create paintings on the walls of the San Miguel church for free.

“The town wanted their church back, and I could help realize that dream and earn their gratitude,” he said. “That’s payment enough.”

Egana filled the church’s gateway with images familiar to the town’s residents: the nearby airport control tower, upside-down flying airplanes, and a protest march leading to the airport. Neighbors were also pictured singing and dancing under a deep blue sky in a *romería*, a popular outdoor religious festival.

The town was captivated. “We showed what was possible,” Bermejo said. Support from the diocese followed shortly after that.

Egana began to map out the cavernous space for what would become *Pinturas Para La Vida* or “Paintings for Life.”

His idea was to join 50-foot-high by 25-foot-wide walls into a single narrative, stitching together biblical stories with historic events and literary allusions. The choir walls are a massive triptych that covers the final moments in the life of Jesus with the Last Supper, Judas’s betrayal, Jesus praying in Gethsemane, and his death and resurrection under a tormented reddish sky. Larger-than-life looming black shapes represent Roman soldiers who have come to take Jesus prisoner. Drawings on the sidewalls chronicle Adam and Eve and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Other parts of the mural are drawn from contemporary times: five labor organizers killed in church during Franco’s dictatorship, an Ottoman era bridge destroyed (and now rebuilt) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a nuclear power plant, tombstones from the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague.

“His work expresses what it means to be human confronting the meaning of existence, in the drama of life and death, hopes and dreams,” Bermejo said.

Edorta Kortadi, director of the Religious Art Museum at the Santa Maria del Coro Basilica in San Sebastian, said the Iglesia de San Miguel murals remain faithful to biblical storytelling while calling attention to human rights and social justice.

“As life became more secular, so did church art,” Kortadi said. “During the 20th century the subject matter becomes thematically less religious in the hands of great masters like Picasso, Chagall, Matisse, or Americans like Rothko, Pollock. Egana is

clearly influenced by them.”

Egana has become a town treasure, with a crew of devoted fans who follow his daily work, helping to lug paint jugs up and down scaffolding and doing other chores that allow the work to go smoothly.

“The murals not only celebrate our cultural identity, but transcend it,” said Alonso, the town mayor.

Egana, now 73, expects to complete the work by next summer.

“My intent was not to preach, but to inspire reflection,” he said. “I hope this becomes a spiritual space where anyone of any religion or any faith can contemplate the mysteries of life.” —Religion News Service