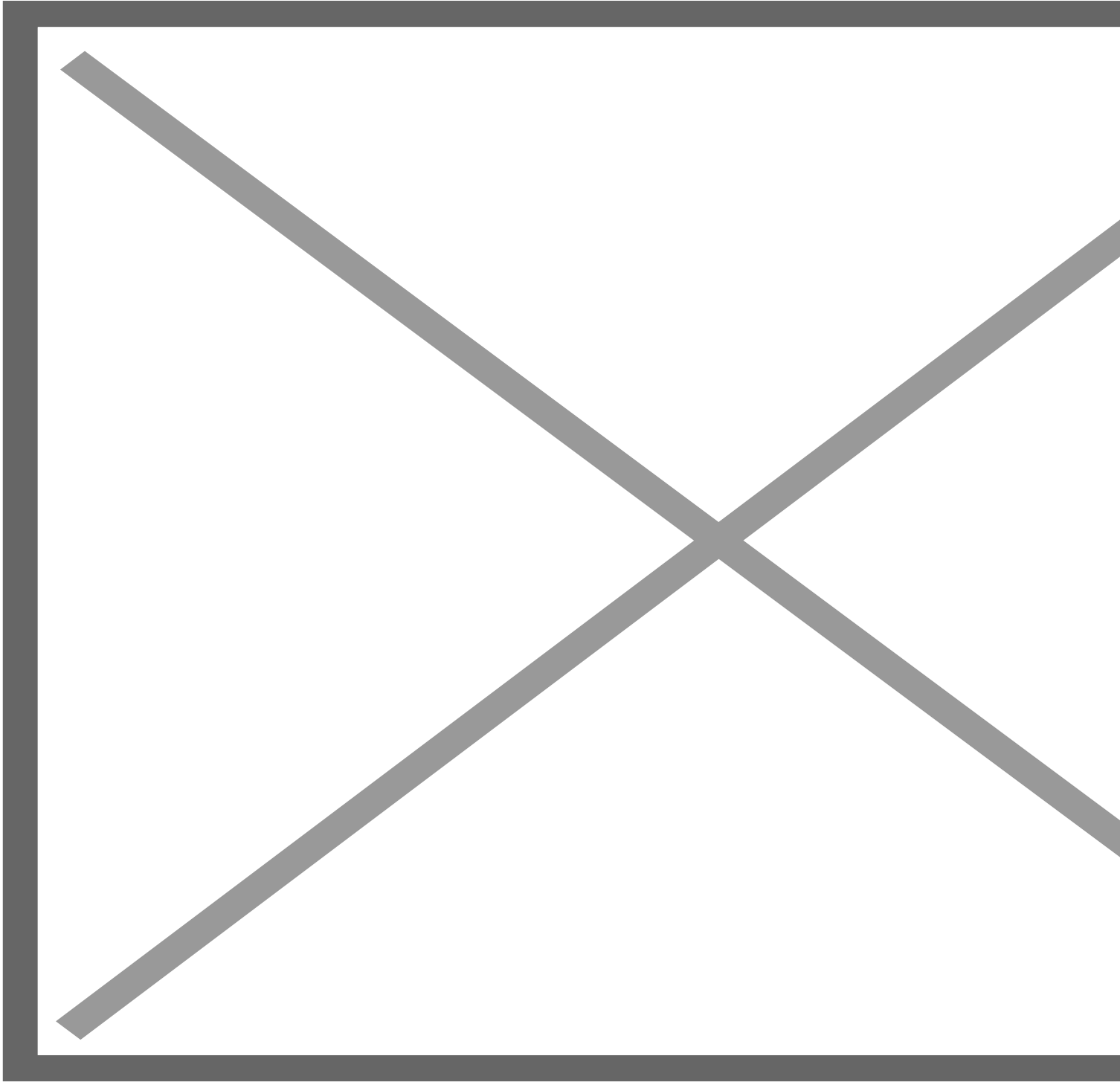


Mural unveiled at St. Patrick's Cathedral sends message on immigration

by [Fiona Murphy](#)

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People view a new mural painted by Adam Cvijanovic at St. Patrick's Cathedral on September 18 in New York (RNS photo/Fiona Murphy)

A 25-foot mural at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan, unveiled last week and blessed during Sunday mass on September 21, honors generations of immigrants to New York, taking on a new meaning in today's political climate.

"Some have asked me, are you trying to make a statement about immigration?" said Cardinal Timothy Dolan, archbishop of New York, during a press conference on Thursday. "Well, sure we are."

The mural, *What's So Funny About Peace, Love and Understanding*, was two years in the making and spans the three-wall entrance of the 146-year-old cathedral. Created by Brooklyn-based painter Adam Cvijanovic, it features life-sized, realistic portraits of Irish immigrants fleeing famine in the 19th century, alongside contemporary Latino, Asian, and Black immigrants, shown with backpacks and determined expressions. Mother Frances Cabrini, the first US citizen to be canonized and the patron saint of immigrants, is depicted among them.

Reporters from across New York and the United States crowded into St. Patrick's on September 18 to snap photos of the new mural, a rare art commission for the historic cathedral. It comes as [crackdowns](#) on immigration and deportation raids have swept across the country as ordered by the Trump administration. Many people living in New York, a city home to millions of immigrants, [wonder about](#) the future of their communities.

Dolan's mother, Shirley Jean Radcliffe Dolan, is captured in the painting among the Irish immigrants, though it was Dolan's great-grandparents who arrived to New York from Ireland.

"That was a surprise to me," Dolan said to reporters. "If you can't pick her out, she's the one with the Saks Fifth Avenue bag and the bottle of Jameson in the bag."

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One of the panels on the Fifth Avenue side wall portrays five New York City first responders with an angel holding a firefighter's helmet above them. Another shows historic Catholic leaders such as Archbishop John Joseph Hughes, the first Archbishop of New York, who initiated the construction of St. Patrick's Cathedral; Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement; Pierre Toussaint, the formerly enslaved Haiti-born philanthropist buried in the cathedral's crypt; and Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American saint.

Dolan said the commission was inspired by the apparition at Knock, an appearance of Mary reported in County Mayo, Ireland, in 1879, a location the archbishop has visited numerous times.

"Immigrants are children of God," Dolan said during the press conference. "The people of Israel in the Old Testament and the people formed by Jesus Christ have been challenged to always be warm and embracing for the immigrants. So, the fact that the church would mirror that, no surprise at all."

Dolan has [criticized anti-immigrant rhetoric](#) and echoed support of the Catholic Church's ministry to migrants, although he has seemingly maintained a cordial relationship with President Donald Trump. The cardinal sits on the national Religious Liberty Commission, [which Trump established](#) earlier this year.

"If we look at the people in the pews in daily mass, most people are immigrants," said Enrique Salvo, the rector of St. Patrick's Cathedral. "Therefore, we have to see the dignity of the human person in everyone. No matter what the political viewpoints are, that we put (them) aside when we are encountering one on one."

Cvijanovic, a self-taught painter from Massachusetts known for creating large historical landscapes, said that although the mural's concept predates today's political battles over migration, he is glad it speaks to the present moment.

“We didn’t know that this was going to happen quite like this,” Cvijanovic said. “But now, I feel truly grateful to be able to take a stand about it, and to give a place where people who are being told that they don’t belong, that they belong.”

In the mural, streams of gold leaf oil paint fall down from the heavenly realm onto those below, all of whom were modeled from real people. Even the Lamb of God, painted as a small lamb on the south wall to depict Jesus, was drawn based on a lamb in New Jersey, Cvijanovic said.

Raised in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Cvijanovic was inspired by his own religious background for the mural’s style, he said. Golden icon screens from the Byzantine church, which separated altars from congregations, have a clear influence on the piece.

“The Eastern Church influence is there, buried in it, translated into my interpretation of Catholic tradition and my interpretation of what New York needed right at the moment,” Cvijanovic said. The mural incorporates more than 5,000 sheets of gold.

Cvijanovic said that today, he practices his faith through his art. “The painting is a devotional act,” he said. “That’s how I pray, through paint.”

Kevin Conway, vice chairman of a global equity firm and the principal donor behind the mural, said he hopes New Yorkers see themselves reflected in the cathedral’s entrance.

“On a very pedestrian level, it is a wild improvement over what was here before,” Conway said. “I could spend a day looking at that panel. My great-grandparents were immigrants. Came over with nothing.”

In response to one of the final questions at the press conference, Dolan emphasized the ambition of the cathedral’s new entrance. “It’s a city, a nation, a world that seems to be tortured by violence and vitriol and misunderstanding and death that’s going on,” he said. “And so, many people have said, ‘Hey, we really needed this, some light on the situation.’”

That light, Salvo said, is also a road map of the immigrant journey in New York.

“We have that gift and that legacy from the generations of the past that lived suffering and made the best out of it,” Salvo said in an interview. “Now, we in present generations have the same invitation and responsibility to do the same.” —Religion News Service