

OUR LADY OF THE PRAIRIE



Artist Damien Walker
The Studio of Saint Philomena
Commissioned by the Diocese of New Ulm
Made possible through the generosity of individual donors
June 22, 2025

From Bishop Chad W. Zielinski

When I arrived in the diocese in 2022, during my installation homily, I invited all the faithful of this diocese to join me in “Hearing God, Handing Him Your Heart, and Having Hope.” Mary herself is a beacon of Hope, leading us to her Son, Jesus, in the Eucharist.

One of my first tasks as your new shepherd was to drive to all four corners of this rural diocese, visiting you in your parishes and Catholic schools. I could not help but notice the loveliness of the thousands of acres of prairie land. From this experience, a desire flowed in me to rededicate the Diocese of New Ulm to Mary under the title *Our Lady of the Prairie*.

Therefore, early last year, I commissioned Damien Walker, founder and director of The Studio of Saint Philomena in New Zealand, to paint a life-size image of *Our Lady of the Prairie*. When an iconographer paints an icon, there’s a tradition that goes with it. What I saw in Damien’s work is that he understands the theology behind colors, proportions, and the way that Jesus holds his hands – it’s not just a piece of art. The whole theology behind architecture and art is that you’re entering into an encounter with Christ that is sacred.

The image of Our Lady of the Prairie is meant to represent all the faithful in the Diocese of New Ulm - a symbol of Hope, Evangelization, and Mother to all of God’s people.

As one gazes at the beautiful image of *Our Lady of the Prairie*, there is a profound depth. In the weeks, months, and years to come, we will discover something new each time we gaze upon her, which is filled with inexhaustible meaning. This depth invites us to delve deeper into our faith and the role of Mary in our salvation history, sparking our curiosity and eagerness to explore the profound layers of this image.

It is my hope that this artwork of *Our Lady of the Prairie* will serve as a powerful visual catechesis, inspiring us with an intimate relationship we have between Christ and His Church and Mary’s pivotal role as our advocate and intercessor.



OUR LADY OF THE PRAIRIE,
our Mother, come to the aid of your
children. You of whom it was proclaimed
by Elizabeth, "Blessed is the fruit of your
womb!" make our hearts now fertile
ground for the Holy Spirit to bring Divine
Life through us to every soul in our
diocese. Reveal to us your loving face
and motherly care and lead us always to
the Eucharistic Heart of your Son: the
wellspring of our hope and our food for
our pilgrim journey.
Amen.

Mary, Beacon of Hope

At the center, *Our Lady of the Prairie* stands radiant in white. She is clothed in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception - not just symbolically, but as a bold, visual truth: untouched by sin, made ready to bear Christ. She stands before a darkness that represents the brokenness of the world - sin, death, despair - but she is not afraid of it. She stands firm, victorious, and luminous as the Beacon of Hope.



The Gaze that Leads

Her gaze meets yours as you approach, but as you move directly in front of her, she gently hands you over. Her eyes shift. She leads you to Christ.

Christ: The Seated Word

Christ is seated on her left arm, not fragile, but enthroned in the “Seat of Wisdom”- *Sedes Sapientiae*. His gaze is wise and merciful. He lifts his right hand in blessing. From his right hand, he shall save. On his left rests the Gospel, which is oversized and adorned with royal purple beadwork, a traditional style of the Dakota people who first settled this land. It is not just a book. It is the Word made flesh. The presence of the beadwork honors the native American culture. It doesn't erase it. It fulfills it.



Flowers on the Gospel Cover

Brown-eyed Susans (deep golden) symbolize Christ's divinity - God's glory shining into creation. The purple Gentians affirm Christ's royal lineage from the house of David. Red prairie blooms recall the Passion, Christ's poured-out blood, and the suffering Mary shares in, as foreseen in *Luke 2:35*.



Ties to Our Lady of Guadalupe



Around Mary's waist is a sash reflecting the floral patterns of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The flowers serve as a powerful symbol of both cultural continuity and religious transformation. In the original "tilma" or cloak of Juan Diego on which the image of Our Lady is imprinted, the black ribbon signified that she carried the Christ child in her womb. Here, she wears it not as a sign of waiting but of fulfillment. Christ is no longer hidden within her but rather revealed, enthroned, and held in her arms. The sash remains and declares that this is the same Mother who appeared at Tepeyac, the one who came for the peoples of the Americas. She is not only the Mother of Christ; she is the Mother of the Americas.

Her Robe like a River

Mary's robe flows with movement like a river. It starts with Christ on Calvary in the upper left of the painting and spills out through her. In *Ezekiel 47*, we hear him describe a river flowing from the East side of the temple that is alive and increases with width and depth. It is the river of Sacramental grace that flowed from Christ's pierced side. Her garment pours onto churches and cathedrals, tipis, rivers, fields, barns, and homes, representing that grace does not stay distant. It touches everything by refreshing and healing—it gives it new life.



The Rosary: Her Weapon of Peace

The rosary wrapped around Mary's arm is her spiritual weapon, a quiet yet powerful tool of grace. This image began on the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary (formerly Our Lady of Victory), and that is not by chance. The rosary has always been a weapon of peace and intercession, and it still is.

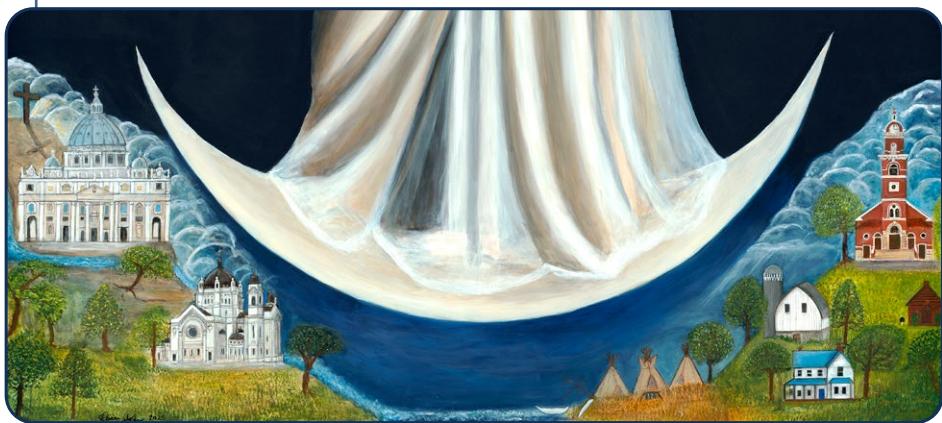
The Moon Under Her Feet

Mary's feet rest on the moon, recalling *Revelation 12:1*. She is above time but fully present in it.



The Foundations of the Church

At the base, Saint Peter's Basilica appears under the Cross, its shadow falling as a sign of Peter's martyrdom and the roots of the Church. Just below sits the Cathedral of Saint Paul in Saint Paul, Minnesota, marking the missionary spread of the Gospel. It is from this church that the Diocese of New Ulm was formed in 1957. Between them, the Mississippi River flows, beginning from beneath the Cross, like the water from Christ's side, and moving through the whole world. Along its banks, we see tipis, canoes, and three fish, which recall the indigenous peoples who saw this land as sacred ground. The symbol of three fish is reflected in the Coat of Arms of the Diocese of New Ulm and reflects the Holy Trinity. Just as this flowing river provides food, so too does the flowing river of grace emanating from the Holy Trinity provide renewed grace for all people.



Saint Peter's Basilica
Rome, Italy

Cathedral of Saint Paul
Saint Paul, MN

Mississippi River



**Three fish
symbolizing the
Holy Trinity**

**Cathedral of the
Holy Trinity**
New Ulm, MN

The Domestic Church and the Cathedral

A house and barn reflect the domestic Church and the sanctification of daily labor. Beside them, the Church of Saint Joseph - the first Catholic parish in the Brown County - symbolizes humility, quiet faith, and deep roots. All of these lead upward to the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, the visible center of the Diocese of New Ulm today.



Twelve Stalks of Wheat

On Mary's right arm, she firmly but gently holds a sheaf of twelve stalks of wheat, a symbol of the Apostles but also of the prairies. Her hand is directed toward her Son, seated. Wheat is the lifeblood of the land and becomes the Eucharist. Here, grace and soil meet. Mary is shown as the Queen of the Apostles and the first tabernacle. She carries both Christ and the beginnings of his Church.

From East to West

The sun rises above Rome and sets over New Ulm. From east to west, the name of the Lord is praised (*Psalm 113:3*). It's one Church, one mission, and one endless movement of grace.



History of Our Lady in the Diocese of New Ulm

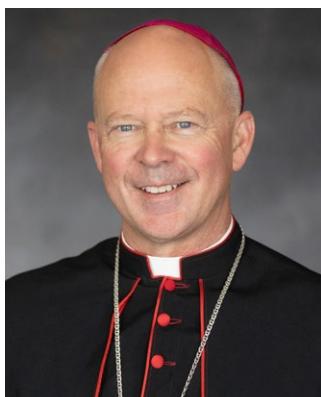


c. 1957

After the Diocese of New Ulm was formed in 1957, one of Bishop Alphonse J. Schladweiler's first official acts as bishop was to dedicate the diocese to Mary, the Mother of God.

1992

In December 1992, Bishop Schladweiler's successor, Bishop Raymond A. Lucker, officially decreed that the patronal feast of the Diocese of New Ulm is the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, which is celebrated each year on January 1.



2025

The Diocese of New Ulm is rededicated to *Our Lady of the Prairie* on June 22, 2025 by Bishop Chad W. Zielinski. All parishes in the diocese were dedicated to Our Lady on June 29, 2025.

About the Artist Damien Walker



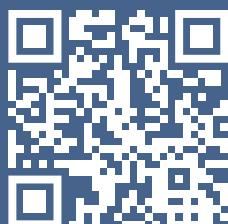
Damien Walker, the artist and founder of The Studio of Saint Philomena in New Zealand painted *Our Lady of the Prairie*. His painting technique is reminiscent to iconography in that he prayed and fasted as he worked. Similar to Michaelangelo and other Italian Renaissance masters, Damien used thin layers called glazes, to develop the image.

Before beginning the artwork, he visited the Diocese of New Ulm in 2024 to learn about the diocese and the area's rich history. "I visited a lot of the sites of the big historic battles. It gave me a beautiful perspective on the area. It's given me the opportunity to understand the essence of what Our Lady should be for your culture."

The painting reflects both the Native American and Western European heritage of the Diocese of New Ulm. "There's a lot of hope with this image," Walker said about *Our Lady of the Prairie*. "There's a lot of strength because she's very strong, but there's a gentleness, too."

Learn more about Damien Walker's work at
www.thestudioofsaintphilomena.com.

Our Lady of the Prairie:
www.dnu.org/ourladyoftheprairie



OUR LADY OF THE PRAIRIE



Patroness of the Diocese of New Ulm



DIOCESE
of NEW ULM