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NEWS RELEASE

AWARD-WINNING, CONTROVERSIAL 'JESUS OF THE PEOPLE' TO BE FEATURED IN EXHIBIT BY JANET MCKENZIE AT UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

DAYTON, Ohio — The dark-skinned image of Jesus Christ stirred up anger among those who would shoehorn the son of God into a traditional white mold. But criticism has been overwhelmed by ringing support and endorsement for the painting, which brought purchase offers from churches around the world, art collectors and celebrities such as Whoopi Goldberg.

Janet McKenzie's "Jesus of the People," an oil on canvas that won the *National Catholic Reporter's* "Jesus 2000" contest, will be featured in an exhibit of work by the Vermont artist in the University of Dayton's Marian Library gallery.

Along with "Jesus of the People," McKenzie's exhibit, "Mary and Women, Imagery of the Heart," includes a dozen pieces featuring racially diverse representations of Christ, the holy family and other Christian and spiritually themed images. The exhibit will open May 21 and run through July 27.

Hours at the gallery, located on the seventh floor of Roesch Library on campus, are from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and by special arrangement by calling (937) 229-4214. Admission is free and open to the public. The exhibit will also be viewable online at <http://www.udayton.edu/mary/current-exhibit.html>.

McKenzie said she traditionally uses women to convey a celebration of and reverence for the sacred gift of life. "I see women as timeless and iconic symbols representing the foundation of life and the ongoing, holy nature of existence," she said.

Until about 10 years ago, her subjects were predominantly white women, as the artist is herself. It was then that she realized her nephew, who is biracial, would not be able to recognize himself directly in her work. "I determined to be more varied, to make a racially inclusive statement," she said.

"Jesus of the People," whose dark figure features elements depicting diverse cultures and traits of the masculine and feminine, was selected as best representing Christ at the time of the new millennium. A panel of three art experts narrowed down the field of 1,678 entries —

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submitted by artists in 19 countries on six continents — to only 10 finalists. Sister Wendy Beckett, an art scholar best known around the world for her British Broadcasting Corporation art documentaries, selected McKenzie's portrait as the first-place entry.

The painting "is a haunting image of a peasant Jesus" who looks back at viewers "with ineffable dignity, with sadness but confidence," Beckett wrote in the *National Catholic Reporter* supplement that featured the winning entries. "Over his white robe he draws the darkness of our lack of love, holding it to himself, prepared to transform all sorrows if we let him."

The painting includes a yin and yang symbol to represent perfect harmony, McKenzie said, as well as a feather connoting transcendent knowledge and homage to Native Americans and the Great Spirit.

McKenzie used an African-American female model for the painting to give a feminine aspect to the masculine Jesus. The essence of the work is simply that Jesus is all of us, she said.

"I created this painting with the hope of opening people's minds to the fact that we are all created in God's image," McKenzie said. "I use racially and culturally diverse images in my work to get people to think beyond color, beyond gender and beyond limitations and differences to the essence of what these icons of Christianity represent — love, courage and the best in life."

When the winning entries were publicized on Christmas Eve 1999, McKenzie and her Jesus made global news. The pair were featured in newspapers, news magazines and television shows around the world.

The portrait evoked strong public response, both positive and negative. While some who wrote to McKenzie warned of hell or offered prayers that God would show her the "error of (her) ways," the majority response has been and continues to be extremely supportive and favorable, she said.

The Rev. Johann Roten, S.M., director of the Marian Library-International Marian Research Institute, said McKenzie's exhibit is important because it honors the virgin Mary and women. "It is a hymn to life," he said.

"Jesus is part of this exhibit because he is life eternal, made flesh and blood through Mary," Roten added. "Janet McKenzie painted 'Jesus of the People' as a spiritual portrait rather than an historical portrait of Jesus, whose photo ID, by the way, is unknown. The message of the painting is theological, indicating that Jesus is life offered to all people, races and cultures. I would change its title to 'Jesus for all People.'"

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For media interviews, contact the **Rev. Johann Roten** at (937) 229-4214 or via e-mail at johann.roten@notes.udayton.edu and **Janet McKenzie** at (802) 723-4122 or at jmckenzie2000@hotmail.com.