

Sculptor's dreams come true

A refugee five years ago, Roberto Perez is now making a living as an artist

ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO
of the Florida Catholic staff

MIAMI SHORES — The statue of Jesus that soon will welcome St. Martha parishioners to their church is more than a work of art: For sculptor Roberto Perez, it is a tangible sign of God's favor.

Perez, 39, left Cuba via Portugal and made his way to Miami in 2003, leaving his wife and daughter on the island. Although he had little formal training, he felt the need to sculpt.

One of his first pieces was a marble hand pierced by a nail, which he presented to Archbishop John C. Favalora. For Perez, the hand was a way of saying thanks for the help he and other refugees had received from the Catholic Church.

But the life of an artist would have to wait. He began working with his brother at a company that made granite countertops. As soon as he could, he rented a small storage space where he could sculpt. He started searching for blocks of marble to work on.

Two years ago, he took a risk and quit his day job. At times it was extremely difficult to make a living. But "you can't combine production with creation," Perez said.

Little by little, he began getting commissions. Bob Brown, an architect who directs the archdiocesan Building Department, saw Perez's work and began recommending him. In 2007, Perez completed a baptismal font for the newly renovated interior of St. Martha.

"He read my mind," said Father Federico Capdepón, St. Martha's pastor. "It's a work of art."

A year earlier, Perez had come across a 7-foot-tall block of Carrara marble — the same stone Michelangelo sculpted. Perez held onto it because he knew what figure would emerge from it: a life-size image of Christ with rays of light seeming to emanate from his chest, "like the Sacred Heart."

But it was not until January of this year that he began working on it. The owner of FAB Construction commissioned Perez to sculpt it for St. Martha, the church adjacent to the Pastoral Center, where the archdiocese's central offices are located.

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He described Perez's depiction of Christ, arms outstretched, eyes looking downward, as "virile yet tender." Despite the lack of formal training, the priest said, Perez's work demonstrates "an extraordinary sensibility."

For his part, Perez said he created a clay model just so Father Capdepón could get an idea of what the statue would look like. He does not need a model to sculpt, preferring, like Michelangelo, to chip away at the image inside the stone.

"If I make a model, I no longer have a desire to make the piece," said Perez, a man of few words and great humility.

He cannot explain why he works the way he does. "I didn't study. I feel the need to do this."

He also cannot explain what moves him to create religious art. Growing up in a communist country, he never learned about the Catholic faith. "But I do feel it," he said. "And when you feel overwhelmed, you seek God's help."

Sculpting the image he envisioned has fulfilled Perez as an

artist. But the commission also helped in another way. It provided the funding he needed to bring his wife and 8-year-old daughter to Miami.

This October, just as he was putting the final touches on the statue, he got word that they had been granted permission to leave Cuba. They arrived in Miami in mid-November and will be at St. Martha to see the statue dedicated on the last Sunday of Advent.

Perez's next commission is a bigger-than-life sculpture of the Bible for St. Coleman Parish in Pompano Beach.

And he still hopes to do something with seven massive blocks of Roman travertine marble that he acquired a while back for \$5,000. Not only was that a good price, Perez said, but the fact that they were available at all was "a miracle" because the quarry shut down some time ago.

He knows exactly what he wants to do with those pieces: create a 21-foot-tall image of Christ, one inspired by the massive statues that overlook the bays in Rio de Janeiro and Havana and the river in Lisbon, Portugal.

"I hope I will be able to do that," Perez said, noting that all his other dreams have come true. In addition to being reunited with his family, "I was able to sculpt the Christ and make a living as a sculptor. What remains now is that 21-foot sculpture of Christ." ■



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Sculptor Roberto Perez puts the finishing touches on a statue of Christ that will grace the entrance of St. Martha Church in Miami Shores. He says when he saw the 7-foot-tall piece of marble, he knew it would become an image of Christ.



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