



Torin Halsey/Times Record News

Mildred Lee Bozeman looks over her collection of holy cards bearing images of Christ, Mary and saints. Bozeman began collecting the traditionally Catholic cards about a year ago.

Expressions of faith

Catholic cards have told stories since 17th century

Mildred Lee Bozeman wants to bring a little piece of Heaven down to Earth. Through her collection of holy cards, Bozeman is doing just that.

The cards are simple expressions of faith that have been popular in the Roman Catholic Church for hundreds of years. The cards have been Bozeman's passion for only one year.

"They're not just for Catholics, however. They are for everyone," Bozeman said. "I call the holy cards 'precious little reminders of heaven.'"



SARAH JOHNSON

View from the Pew

Her 500-plus collection features images of Jesus or the saints - all on cards as small as a playing card. Some are saturated with color, others are die cut, gold embossed or

outlined in hand-cut lace. Some have a prayer or other inscription printed on the back, but they all have a story to tell.

There's the card depicting St. Augustine,



Most holy cards are about the size of a standard playing card, but can feature ornate die-cut ornamentation and serene scenes



the doctor of the church, whose mother prayed for 30 years for her son to change his evil ways. When he finally converted, he became a priest. Another card features St. Rita of Cascia. She wanted to feel what it was like to suffer like Jesus, so she asked God to inflict a wound on her body. Soon, she had a sore in her head that she had to carry around her whole life.

The cards were manufactured in the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Belgium, France, Austria and the United Kingdom starting in the 1600s. Several cards come from Canada, whose residents are primarily Catholic. They were made for several reasons, ranging from nuns who would hand-cut lace cards for orphans to children who received the cards for their first communion.

Bozeman shares her new obsession with a handful of eclectic collectors across the country. Her close friend in California, Julie Ann Brown, has 40,000 holy cards in her possession.

The cards were like a window into the world of religion, Bozeman said, making biblical stories more accessible to the illiterate masses.

"In the 1600s, a lot of people didn't know how to read," she said. "So the cards helped them visualize the story of Jesus in pictures. It was a visual faith."

Bozeman's passion for the portable religious art started with one simple card her mother showed her when she was 8 years old.

"I have a copy of the card,



This die-cut antique holy card is from Mildred Lee Bozeman's collection. While most holy cards have only nominal values, rarer old cards can be highly collectible and cost upwards of \$100.

which shows baby Jesus holding his sacred heart," she said, holding the framed keepsake. "My mother received it when she was in the convent at 15 years old in 1953. It's over 50 years old."

Now, Bozeman scours antique shops or e-bay for cards to add to her growing collection. Her first card was purchased at Jennifer's Antique shop in Wichita Falls. Sometimes the cards are sold in packets, or even tucked away in old Bibles.

But Bozeman's collection is not tucked away for only her to enjoy. She shares the miniature masterpieces with people all over the world through her Web site at www.holyreflections.com

The black background of the homepage is a stark contrast to the web site's simple, but powerful message: Holy reflections — Images of Christ that reflect the soul. The sound of chanting Monks

provides a soothing backdrop to a slide show of the holy cards, along with the story of how Bozeman got started as a collector.

Along with the Web site, Bozeman's collection of holy cards acts as a ministry of sorts. She scans the items into her computer to design her own cards with a prayer on the reverse side. She also leaves the cards out at churches and finds them snapped up by the end of Mass.

"My mission is to minister to people," she said "I'm spreading God's word through God's art. I really feel it's my vocation and something God called me to do."

Bozeman finds comfort flipping through her collections of cards, neatly slipped into acid-free pages originally meant for baseball cards.

One of Bozeman's rarest finds is a holy card featuring Jesus at the last supper. The



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Mildred Lee Bozeman thumbs through her collection of more than 500 holy cards, which she began amassing about a year ago. She found some locally, but purchased the majority online.

card is dated 1888. Another prized possession is a card dating back to the late 1880s in Belgium that has a colorful picture of St. Mildred on it.

"That one is worth about \$75," she said.

Some enthusiasts pay top dollar for the religious relics, but Bozeman usually buys the cards for \$1 each.

As she builds her collection, Bozeman said she can't resist certain cards.

"I have to buy any cards showing Jesus and his sacred heart," she said. "There are so (many) negative images on TV and in the world. They say images — good or bad — stay with you. I'm replacing negative images like murder and nudity with images of God."

"They're my precious little reminders of heaven."