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## Life Calling

**Peru sculptor Antonio Olave is inspired by faith and passion.**

*By Richard Varr*

Antonio Olave Palomino is surrounded by angels.

He sits amid paint-splattered carving knives and a bevy of brushes alongside open jars of muted and earthen-toned pigments. Four unfinished, slender wooden sculptures sit on his workbench – precisely shaped figurines soon to look like the shiny, gold-leafed saints, virgins, and angels on the shelves around him.

He works quietly and seemingly contented in his studio and gallery along a narrow street in the San Blas Quarter, a popular neighborhood of artists and craftsmen centered by the San Blas Church (Cusco's oldest) with its gilded silver altar and massive biblical and conquistador-inspired oil paintings from the Cuzco School art tradition.

Olave's workbench is caked in plaster and paint – testament to his more than 60 years as a sculptor, driven by his faith and passion to create imaginary religious figurines. With a sliver of sandpaper, he gently smooths the hand of a sad Jesus child, the one he calls "El Niño Manuelito." It's a sculpture he carves over and over again – a work that has made him one of the most famous artists in all of Peru.

"This is my original creation," affirms the 86-year-old Olave, his throaty voice still strong and assertive. "Religion inspires me, and in my gallery there are many works of Niño Manuelito."

While there are many images of a young savior, Manuelito is unique because the boy is seated with hands at his foot, stemming from a tale the artist heard back in 1975. As the story goes, Olave had traveled three...