

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Feast of Saint Matthew; Deacon Convocation

Feast of Saint Matthew

Deacon Convocation

Turf Valley

Sept. 21, 2019

Introduction

In Rome, not far from the Pantheon, there is a church called San Luigi dei Francesi. There is always a crowd in there, converged in front of the side chapel closest to the sanctuary on the left-hand side of the church. That chapel is known as the Contarelli Chapel. In it are three masterpieces by the artist Caravaggio, all having to do with Saint Matthew, the Apostle and Evangelist. So on this, his feast day, convoked as we are in a spirit of faith and unity, come with me, for a moment, on a little walk into the Contarelli Chapel.

If we were to walk into the church and make our way up to the chapel, we would first come upon The Calling of St. Matthew. which could be said to correspond to the call to holiness of all the Baptized, as well as the call to a personal encounter with the Person of Christ, and indeed the call to diakonia which you have received. Next, our eye would fall on Caravaggio's painting, The Inspiration of St. Matthew, which could be said to correspond to the movement of grace, in your soul and mine, through which we not only come to know and love the Lord Jesus, but are strengthened and inspired to live the calling we have received in the gift of his Person, in the truth of his Revelation, and in our unity in him. And then, we would gaze upon the third painting, The Martyrdom of St. Matthew, which speaks of the demanding nature of the Christian witness, as we bear witness throughout our lives to Christ in the vocations God has given us. Bearing witness to Christ requires of us death to self and even death by the sword.

So, with Caravaggio as our artistic director and St. Matthew as our guide, let us ask the light of God's Holy Word to come upon us all as we prayerfully reflect our life

and ministry during this convocation. And let us begin with The Calling of St. Matthew.

The Calling of St. Matthew

The Calling of Saint Matthew is one of the most famous paintings in the world. In fact, Pope Francis himself mentioned it in one of his wide-ranging interviews. Looking back on his visits to Rome prior to his election as Pope, the Holy Father said, "I often visited the Church of St. Louis of France, and I went there to contemplate the painting of The Calling of Saint Matthew by Caravaggio."

This painting is a meditation on the scene depicted in today's Gospel. Jesus walks into the customs post and points directly at Matthew. Gazing at Caravaggio's masterpiece, we can almost hear the words from Jesus' mouth... "Follow me." But in the painting Matthew seems to respond with surprise, and in a gesture which is perhaps deliberately ambiguous, he points quizzically to himself - as if to say, "Who - me?" Or maybe he's pointing to the fellow sitting next to him, as if to say to Jesus, "You must mean this guy!"

As the Holy Father said in his interview, "That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That's me. I feel like him. Like Matthew" ... "miserando et eligendo!"... words which come from the pen of St. Bede the Venerable, "Because [Christ] saw him [Matthew] through the eyes of mercy, he chose him!" And with the Holy Father, all of us can see ourselves in Matthew in this scene. The call of Christ to discipleship and ministry should fill us with humility. The Lord did not call us because we are inherently righteous or better than others. Rather, the Lord looks at us with the eyes of mercy through which he sees our strengths and good will but also our weaknesses, our sins, our foibles. Nonetheless, or better perhaps, because of his mercy, he chooses us! All the more reason for us to be humble, meek, and patient, as St. Paul urges us to be in this morning's reading from Ephesians.

The Inspiration of St. Matthew

We move now to the second painting, The Inspiration of Saint Matthew. Indeed, it was Caravaggio's second attempt to depict how Matthew was inspired to write the Gospel that bears his name. Even if you don't have an image of this painting in your

mind's eye, you won't be surprised to learn that an angel swirls over Matthew's shoulder. Matthew, for his part, seems to have rushed to the writing table, not taking time to sit down on the stool in front of it. Rather, he is kneeling on it in such a way that it is in danger of tipping while looking over his shoulder at the angel who has been sent by God to inspire that which he was about to write.

But just as today's Gospel is, in its way, a self-portrait of Matthew's calling, so too we find tucked into the Gospel of St. Matthew a self-portrait of his inspiration. St. Matthew appears, Alfred Hitchcock style, in his own Gospel at Ch. 13, vs. 52: "Every scribe who is a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven, is like a man who is master of his house, who brings from his storeroom both new things and old." There is Matthew – the former tax collector, now an apostle and evangelist — showing how Jesus has brought to fulfillment all that God had promised. It was not enough for Matthew to follow Jesus, he also wanted to make him known, and did so by drawing from the treasure of Scripture "what is new and what is old."

In the same way, the inspiration of God's grace must be at work in our souls, especially as we prepare to preach God's Word, and to instruct and form others in the ways of faith and discipleship. Through prayer which, in the Spirit opens our minds and hearts to the voice of Christ, we must find necessary 'inspiration' before we presume to preach to God's People. We must learn to pray the Scriptures, to search them diligently, to apply them first to our own lives before we apply them to the lives of others, and then we must ask for the grace to preach with such love, truth, and conviction, that the image of Christ, found on every page of Scripture, comes alive in the hearts of those who listen to us, such that they encounter Christ and live the Gospel message in their daily lives. Thus do we bring forth from the storehouse of our hearts 'what is new and what is old'. Thus are we 'equipped for ministry' and thus do we in God's grace 'equip' others.

The Martyrdom of St. Matthew

And now, we find ourselves standing before Caravaggio's masterpiece, The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew. This painting is set in Ethiopia where, legend has it, St. Matthew suffered death for his witness to Christ and to the Gospel. Amid lights and shadows, we see Matthew just moments before his execution and in the

foreground are those who are awaiting Baptism. For all the violence and drama of this scene, it is pervaded by hope.

Thus we're reminded that it never was and never will be easy to bear witness to Christ, especially in this difficult time in the Church's life and in the life of our society. The faith of the Church which you've been charged to preach is sometimes welcome; at other times it is greeted with the skeptically or with thinly disguised hostility. In those moments, remember the words spoken to you at your ordination: "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach!" Anyone who wishes to engage in diakonia must be ready to give a costly witness!

Conclusion

To sum up, the three paintings of Carravaggio depict the trajectories of our lives and ministries: first we are called in a personal way by Christ; then our hearts burn with love and knowledge of the truth; then we go forth to bear witness to the Gospel not waiting for others to come to us but rather bringing it to them; . . . not seeing the Gospel as a disjointed series of truths but rather as healing for the wounds of our human existence; . . . bringing the Gospel that gives rise not merely to new thoughts but rather to an inward transformation that leads to a whole new way of life in which following the commandments is not a duty but rather the path to joy.

In words set before us in today's liturgy, let us beg the intercession of St. Matthew as we seek to deepen our faith and prepare ourselves for the New Evangelization: O God, who with untold mercy were pleased to choose as an Apostle Saint Matthew, the tax collector, grant that, sustained by his example and intercession, we may merit to hold firm in following you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen