

Feast of St. Matthew - Knights of Columbus Board Meeting 2015

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, come with me on a little walk into the Contarelli Chapel.

As we make our way toward the chapel, we first come upon The Calling of St. Matthew. It corresponds, I think, to the call to holiness of all the baptized and the call to a personal encounter with the living Person of Christ. Next, our eye would fall on Caravaggio's painting, The Inspiration of St. Matthew, which corresponds to the movement of the grace of the Holy Spirit in our souls through which we come to know and love the Lord Jesus, and grasp something of the truth, beauty, and goodness of his Revelation. And then, we would gaze upon a third painting, The Martyrdom of St. Matthew, which speaks of the demanding nature of the Christian witness and that death to self which we are called to undergo as the Lord's disciples, as members of the Church, as citizens, and as the family of the Knights of Columbus. So we proceed, with Caravaggio as our artistic director and St. Matthew as our guide, beginning with The Calling of St. Matthew.

The Calling of St. Matthew

The Calling of Saint Matthew, one of the most famous paintings in the world, received renewed attention when Pope Francis mentioned it a few years ago during an interview. 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 in today's Gospel. Jesus walks into the customs post and points directly at Matthew. We can almost hear the words from his mouth... "Follow me." But in Caravaggio's painting, Matthew responds with surprise, and in a gesture which is perhaps deliberately ambiguous, he points quizzically to himself - as if to say, "Who - me?", or perhaps he is pointing to the fellow sitting next to him, as if to say to Jesus, "You must mean this guy here!"

This is what Holy Father said about this painting in his interview: "That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That's me. I feel like him. Like Matthew!" And along with the Holy Father, can't we all see ourselves in Matthew? Christ calls us in many ways but what he asks of us is always the same: he asks of us all that we have and all that we are. Like Matthew, we are surprised that the Lord calls us by name and personally asks us to forsake even our favorite sins so as to be his disciples. But conversion of life made possible by divine mercy is precisely what authentic discipleship demands.

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. One thing we notice is an angel swirling 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, Matthew is kneeling on it, such that it's in danger of tipping while looking over his shoulder at the angel who has been sent by God to inspire what he was about to write.

But just as today's Gospel is a kind of 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 a scribe and a disciple— showing how Jesus has brought to fulfillment everything that God had promised. It wasn’t enough for Matthew to follow Jesus; Matthew also wanted him to be better known, drawing from the treasure of Scripture “what is new and what is old.”

In the same way, the grace of the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work in our souls, inspiring us to live the Gospel principles of charity, unity, and fraternity. Indeed, as Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical letter LUMEN FIDEI, “Faith becomes operative in the Christian on the basis of the gift received, the love which attracts our hearts to Christ ... For those who have been transformed in this way,” he says, “a new way of seeing opens up, and faith becomes light for their eyes” (Lumen Fidei, 52). And thus we pray to be inwardly transformed and inspired by the light of faith and by the working of God’s grace so that we might be as members of the Knights of Columbus, those missionary disciples the world needs.

The Martyrdom of St. Matthew

At length 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 drama and violence of this scene, it is pervaded by hope.

The martyrdom of St. Matthew links us to the many Christians in the Middle East who, in these days, are being persecuted and martyred. How deep is our solidarity with these, our sisters and brothers! This solidarity helps us find renewed strength in the martyrdom of St. Matthew to defend religious freedom here at home where it

is under attack on many fronts. The courage of our persecuted brothers and sisters abroad gives us courage to defend the faith and religious freedom here at home; may our defense of religious freedom at home be a sign of hope to those who are suffering what Pope Francis has called “genocide”. Let me add that Old St. Joseph’s Church here in Philadelphia is a most poignant place for us, as Knights, to focus laser-like on our principle of patriotism as a witness to human dignity and religious freedom. Founded in 1733, St. Joseph’s was a haven for Catholics in a sea of intolerance. At the time, it was the only place where Mass could be celebrated legally and openly in the 13 colonies and indeed in the entire English-speaking world. In 1908 the Knights gathered here with the Apostolic Delegate, Archbp. Falconio, to acknowledge St. Joseph’s as a monument to the triumph of religious freedom. May we have the courage to defend religious freedom as fundamental right, so that we may freely embrace the truth and bear witness to it in every facet of our lives.

Conclusion

In a sense, Pope Francis’ encyclical, *The Joy of the Gospel*, follows the trajectory of these three paintings of Caravaggio: 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; as healing for the wounds inflicted amid the harshness of a culture that permits everything and forgives nothing; bringing the Gospel that gives rise to a new way of life in which following the commandments becomes, not a duty but rather the path to joy.

It is in that spirit, the spirit of Evangelization, that we are to live our vocation to love, defend our freedoms, and take up our responsibilities of leadership in our beloved Order. St. Matthew, pray for us!

Vivat Jesus!