

Feast of St. Matthew - Year of Faith

I. Introduction

Father Hurst, brother priests, seminarians, and dear friends in Christ, 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, as we observe together this day of prayer and study for the Year of Faith, 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, the call to a personal encounter with the living person of Christ, and the call of each of you to discernment and priestly formation. 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 in mine, through which we come to know and love the Lord Jesus, and, guided by the light of faith, to understand more deeply the gift of his Person and the truth of his Revelation. And then, we would gaze upon the third painting, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, which speaks of the demanding nature of the Christian witness and even the death to self which you are called to undergo as you prepare - and as you *are prepared* - for a lifetime of celebrating the Eucharistic Sacrifice and preaching the Gospel of salvation.

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 on the meaning and importance of the Year of Faith. And let us begin with *The Calling of St. Matthew*.

II. The Calling of St. Matthew

The Calling of Saint Matthew is one of the most famous paintings in the world, and it has received new attention in recent days since Pope Francis mentioned it in his wide-ranging 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 we heard 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 Matthew (in the painting) responds with surprise, and in a gesture which is perhaps deliberately ambiguous, points quizzically to himself – as if to say, “Who – me?” or 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!*” And with the Holy Father, all of us can see ourselves in Matthew in this scene. The call of Christ comes in many ways – but it always demands all that we have and all that we are. Sometimes, that’s scary, and we’d rather hold on to our sins and our security, rather than run the risk of leaving them behind for Christ. But we know that this is precisely what authentic discipleship demands.

III. 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 a scribe and a disciple— showing how Jesus has

brought to fulfillment all that God had promised. It was not enough for Matthew to follow Jesus; he 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 God has been powerfully at work in your soul, especially as you undertake the work of priestly discernment and formation. 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 do all of us pray to continue to be inwardly transformed and inspired by the light of faith and by the working of grace so that we might be ‘equipped for the work of ministry’.

IV. 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 today we remind ourselves that it never was and never will be easy to bear witness to Christ, and this is especially true in a world in which what we believe becomes increasingly countercultural. The presence of priests and their witness to Christ is sometimes welcomed; at other times it is greeted with the skepticism of the Athenians toward the preaching of Saint Paul; sometimes it is greeted with thinly disguised hostility.

Anyone preparing for priestly ministry must be ready to give a costly witness. Remember the words of the ordaining Bishop to a newly ordained priest when he hands over the paten and chalice for the celebration of the Eucharist: The Bishop says: “Receive the oblation of the holy people, to be offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s cross.”

Put another way, Franciscan Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal household, once said, “In the morning, at Mass, I am the priest and Christ is the victim. For the rest of the day, Christ is the priest, and I am the victim.” Indeed, priests are called to live the words of Saint Paul to the Galatians: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

V. Conclusion

In a sense, the interview of the Holy Father 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; not seeing the Gospel as a disjointed series of truths but rather as healing for the wounds inflicted amid the harshness of a culture that permits everything and forgives nothing; 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.