

From the Editor



Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY

Take a look at Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599–1600), painted for the Contarelli Chapel in the church of S. Luigi dei Francesi in Rome.¹ Jesus, with a barely discernible halo, stands at the right edge of the scene, pointing with a gesture that mimics that of Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation*, on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. He is somewhat obscured by Peter, whose own gesture mimics that of Jesus. The light that comes over and above Jesus and the Apostles from outside the scene not only creates the dramatic chiaroscuro effect for which Caravaggio is famous, but also symbolizes (as in all his religious canvases) the unprompted epiphany of divine grace in the midst of that situation.

¹ See a larger image at <http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/04/23contao.jpg>.

But to whom, exactly, is Jesus pointing? Caravaggio's contemporaries were unanimous in identifying the bearded gentleman at the middle of the table as Matthew the tax collector, pointing at himself with surprise. Over the past few decades, however, some have argued that the bearded gentleman is pointing away toward Matthew, the young man at the end of the table totally absorbed in counting the coins in front of him. Even more recently, it has been argued that Caravaggio left Matthew's identity purposely unresolved, destabilizing both the painting's narrative and the viewer's confidence in interpreting it. "Caravaggio's art of dissimulation not only stages the 'undecidability' of God's calling, but also overthrows the principle of 'dramatic irony' that granted the viewer the privilege of understanding the action's plot and the possibility of deducting meaning."² The painting's meaning is "dislocated," but so is the viewer, whose interpretive framework is knocked off balance in vacillating back and forth between the two possible Matthews. If one goal of Counter-Reformation and Baroque art is to erase the boundary between the artwork and the spectator, Caravaggio's "poetics of actualization" obliterates it further: as viewers we are caught up in the same surprising and destabilizing outpouring of divine grace as are the characters in the painting.

A similar dislocation is occurring now in Roman Catholicism. The ongoing narrative of Catholic faith and practice is clearly shifting from the way that story has been told over the previous thirty-seven years. Pope Francis' reform initiatives and pastoral style highlighting divine mercy are a major cause, and this has made some in the church quite uncomfortable. Take, for example, Ross Douthat's warning after discussions at the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family regarding the readmission of divorced and remarried Catholics to the Eucharist: if Pope Francis "seems to be choosing the more dangerous path" of "calling doctrine into question," then "conservative Catholics will need a clear-eyed understanding of the situation [and] might want to consider the possibility that they have a role to play, and that this pope may be preserved from error only if the church itself resists him."³

² Lorenzo Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Istorica in Early Modern Painting* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2011), 241. See also Victor I. Stoichita's review "Reading Caravaggio," *Art History* 36, no. 5 (2013): 1080–83.

³ Ross Douthat, "The Pope and the Precipice," *New York Times*, October 25, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-the-pope-and-the-precipice.html>. One US bishop even characterized aspects of the synod as being "rather Protestant" (<http://cnsnews.com/news/article/michael-w-chapman/catholic-bishop-pope-francis-fond-creating-mess-mission-accomplished>). Subsequently, Douthat characterized his own approach as "perhaps imprudent" ("Who Are Pope Francis's Critics," *New York*

Look at recent posts on the websites of the Vaticanologist Sandro Magister,⁴ who seems to have become the conduit for episcopal resistance to curial reforms. And when the pope has criticized the current economic situation and its effects on the poor (“We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market”),⁵ Catholic pundits have rushed in to tell us either that he doesn’t understand capitalism, that he is not saying anything different from his predecessors, or that this is merely social commentary without magisterial weight.

It is true that the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI remain complex events whose lasting meanings are not easily summarized. But that shouldn’t prevent us from discerning how the present pontificate differs from its predecessors and how the focus has shifted. The univocal, juridical interpretation of Catholic identity that has been encouraged over roughly the last four decades is slowly giving way to a more flexible and compassionate sensitivity to the struggles of believers striving to live as disciples of Jesus. Whatever the overt intentions of the two previous popes, in some circles the reception of their impulses for the practice of the faith has resulted in theologies that look more like paint-by-numbers sets or a series of catechetical check-boxes next to answers formulated before any spiritual discernment has been attempted. While they were reducing Catholicism to a brand, the mystery, indeed the adventure, were being drained from Catholic life.

It is striking that Pope Francis recognizes the current dislocation and promotes it, as his famous quip about wanting a “messy” church shows.⁶ And he sees it as a deeper spiritual issue. He has emphasized that Christian life is a journey, and points to the dislocation portrayed in the post-Resurrection Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35) as a key to interpreting the future of the church. The disillusioned disciples travel back to what is probably their home village after the utter collapse of the narrative they had embraced about Jesus of Nazareth (“but we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” [24:21]). As the pope notes, they appear “utterly vanquished,

Times, March 3, 2015, <http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/who-are-pope-franciss-critics/>).

⁴ <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/?eng=y>; <http://magister.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/>.

⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [EG], http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, §204.

⁶ See the pope’s speech to young Argentinian pilgrims during the 2013 World Youth Day celebrations in Rio de Janeiro (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130725_gmg-argentini-rio.html). Where the Spanish has “*Espero lío*” (I hope for a mess), the English translation has “I hope there will be noise.”

humiliated, even after the third day.” Their situation also reflects “the difficult mystery of those people who leave the Church” because for various reasons their expectations of the church collapsed. They now “set off on the road alone, with their disappointment.” In order to be “a Church capable of warming hearts” just as “Jesus warmed the hearts of the disciples of Emmaus,” the church must accompany those “disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning,” to be “a Church unafraid of going forth into their night.” That night is an experience of dislocation, even “an exodus.”⁷

But the Emmaus pilgrims’ return to the supposed certainty of a known past takes an unexpected turn: when accompanied by the risen Jesus, it becomes a journey into a surprising salvific future commencing with an interpretation of Scripture and the shared breaking of bread (Luke 24:27, 30–31). The pope urges all in the church to learn this “art of accompaniment” (EG §169), one that “must lead others ever closer to God, in whom we attain true freedom” (EG §170). To do so, it is necessary to share in the dislocation of those accompanied. “We need a Church . . . which accompanies them on their journey; a Church able to make sense of the ‘night’ contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem.”⁸

In an era of shifting narratives, what is theology’s task? Theologians are uniquely positioned to practice the art of accompaniment in a time of dislocation if they remember two things. First, the essence of the theological task is both to give a reason for our present hope (1 Peter 3:15) and to practice “faith seeking understanding” (Anselm) for the long-haul future. Both entail making sense of our faith commitments in the midst of changing and challenging contexts, even those saturated with undecidability. The second thing to remember is that the Incarnation changes everything: grace is available in every fiber of embodied human life (or, as Thomas puts it, grace perfects nature [ST Ia, a. 8, ad 2]). A commitment to and analysis of the deep and rich ensemble of confessions, practices, and reflections that constitute the Christian tradition keep theology’s reflections on track, while at the same time, as a thoroughly interdisciplinary discipline, theology focuses its critical acumen on all aspects of contemporary culture (social, political, economic, aesthetic, etc.) to discover the presence of grace and new possibilities of divine life in the world. Presenting those hopes and justifying discipleship despite the risks and disappointments—showing, in other words, that we can be saved because of our

⁷ The quotations come from the pope’s address to the Brazilian bishops on World Youth Day in 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130727_gmg-episcopato-brasile.html, §3.

⁸ Pope Francis, address to the Brazilian bishops, §3.

lives, rather than in spite of our lives—is theology’s task. In this way theology can disclose the surprising flood of God’s grace within the dislocation and show that Jesus is pointing to everyone, everywhere, all the time.

STAFF NOTE

Amid the work of preparing the December 2014 issue for the publisher, I forgot to mention in the editorial that Sarah Glaser, who faithfully served as the journal’s editorial assistant for two years, left in the summer of 2014 for a position with a New York City publisher. Christine Bucher joined the journal as editorial assistant in August 2014. Christine has been a stellar addition to our staff, and *Horizons* has already reaped the benefits of her experience in the magazine-publishing field, her managerial skills, her sharp editorial eye, and her calm good humor. We are thrilled to have her on board.