



# The Holy See

---

## CELEBRATION OF THE THE UNVEILING OF THE RESTORATIONS OF MICHELANGELO'S FRESCOS IN THE SISTINE CHAPEL

### *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II*

*8 April 1994*

*"We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen."*

1. Today we are entering the *Sistine Chapel* to admire the marvellously restored frescoes. They are the works of the greatest Renaissance masters: first and foremost Michelangelo, but also Perugino, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Pinturicchio and others. At the end of this delicate work of restoration, I would like to thank all of you present, and particularly those who in various ways have contributed to such a noble undertaking. This is a *priceless cultural and universal heritage*. This is confirmed by the countless pilgrims from every nation in the world who come to admire the work of the supreme masters and to recognize in this Chapel a sort of *wonderful synthesis* of painting.

Lovers of art and beauty have then given proof of their sensitivity by their concrete and remarkable contribution towards the restoration of the Chapel's original bright colours. It was also possible to rely on the work of experts with a thorough knowledge of art restoration work, who made use of the most advanced and reliable technologies in order to carry out their interventions. *The Holy See expresses to all of them its cordial gratitude for the splendid results they have achieved.*

2. The frescoes that we contemplate here introduce us to the *world of Revelation*. The truths of our faith speak to us here from all sides. From them the human genius has drawn its inspiration, committing itself to portraying them in forms of unparalleled beauty. This is why the *Last Judgement above all awakens within us the keen desire to profess our faith* in God, Creator of all things *seen and unseen*. And at the same time, it stimulates us to reassert our adherence to the

risen Christ, who will come again on the Last Day as the supreme Judge of the living and the dead. Before this masterpiece we confess Christ, King of the ages, whose kingdom will have no end.

It is precisely this eternal Son to whom the Father has entrusted the cause of human redemption, who speaks to us in the dramatic *setting of the Last Judgement*. We are in front of an *extraordinary Christ*. He is endowed with an ancient beauty that is somehow detached from the traditional pictorial model. In the great fresco he strikingly reveals the whole mystery of his glory linked to the Resurrection. To be gathered here during the Easter Octave is extremely propitious. More especially *we stand before the glory of Christ's humanity*. In fact, he will return in his humanity to judge the living and the dead, penetrating the depths of the human conscience and revealing the power of his redemption. For this reason we find his Mother, the "Alma socia Redemptoris" next to him. Christ in the history of humanity is the true cornerstone, of whom the Psalmist says: "the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps 117 [118]:22). This stone therefore cannot be rejected. As the only Mediator between God and men, *from the Sistine Chapel Christ expresses in himself the whole mystery of the visibility of the Invisible*.

3. The frescoes therefore are *at the centre of the theological question*. The Old Testament excluded any kind of representational image of the invisible Creator. Such in fact, was the command Moses received from God on Mount Sinai (cf Ex 20:4), since there was the risk that the people, who were inclined to idolatry, might choose to worship an image of God who is unimaginable, since he surpasses all human imagination and understanding. The Old Testament was faithful to this tradition, not allowing any image of the Living God either in the houses of prayer or in the Temple of Jerusalem. The members of the Muslim religion who believe in an invisible, omnipotent and merciful Creator and judge of every creature are inspired by a similar tradition.

But *God himself meets the needs of man who nurtures in his heart an ardent desire to be able to see him*. Did not Abraham welcome the same invisible God in the wonderful visit of the three mysterious personages? "Tres vidit et Unum adoravit" (cf. Gn 18:1-14). Before these three people, Abraham, the father of our faith, had a deep experience of the presence of the One and Only. This meeting was to become the subject of the superb *icon by Andrei Rublev*, the apex of Russian painting. Rublev was one of those holy artists whose creativity was the fruit of profound contemplation, prayer and fasting. *The soul's gratitude to the invisible God who grants man the power to represent him in a visible way was expressed through their work*.

4. All this was assimilated by the *Second Council of Nicea*, the last council of the undivided Church, which definitively rejected the position of the iconoclasts, confirming the legitimacy of the tradition of expressing the faith through artistic works. Consequently the icon is not only a work of pictorial art. It is, in a certain sense, like *a sacrament of Christian life, since in it the mystery of the incarnation becomes present*. In it the Mystery of the Word made flesh is reflected in a way that is

ever new, and man - the author and at the same time participant - is gladdened by the sight of the Invisible.

Was it not Christ himself who laid the foundations of this spiritual joy? "Master, show us the Father and that will be enough for us" Philip asked in the Upper Room, on the eve of Christ's Passion. And Jesus replied.: "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father ...* Do you not believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me?" (Jn 14:8-10). *Christ is the visible sign of the invisible God.* Through him the Father penetrates the whole of creation and the invisible God makes himself present among us and communicates with us, just as the three Figures described in the Bible sat at table and ate with Abraham.

5. Did not Michelangelo draw precise conclusions from Christ's words: "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father?*". He had the courage to admire this Father with his own eyes at the very moment when he offered his creating "fiat" and called the first man into existence. Adam was created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gn 1:26). While the eternal Word is the invisible icon of the Father, the man Adam is his visible icon. Michelangelo strove in every way *to restore to Adam's presence his corporeity, the features of ancient beauty.* With great daring he even *transferred this visible and corporal beauty to the Creator himself.* We are probably witnesses to an extraordinary piece of artistic audacity, since it is impossible to impose the likeness proper to man on the invisible God. Would this not be blasphemy? It is difficult however, not to recognize *in the visible and humanized Creator, God clad in infinite majesty.* Indeed, as far as the image with its intrinsic limits permits, everything which could be expressed has been expressed here. The majesty of the Creator, like that of the Judge, speaks of divine grandeur: a moving and univocal word just as, in a different way, the Pietà in St Peter's Basilica and the Moses in the Basilica of St Peter in Chains are univocal.

6. In the human expression of the divine mysteries is not the "kenosis" necessary as a consummation of what is corporeal and visible? Such a consummation has forcefully entered the tradition of the Eastern Christian icons. *The body is certainly the "kenosis" of God.* In fact we read in St Paul that Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:7). If it is true that the body represents the kenosis of God and that in the artistic representation of the divine mysteries *the great humility of the body must be expressed so that what is divine can be revealed,* it is also true that *God is the source of the integral beauty of the body.*

It seems that Michelangelo, in his own way, allowed himself to be guided by the evocative words of the Book of Genesis which, as regards the creation of the human being, male and female, reveals: "The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame" (Gn 2:25). *The Sistine Chapel* is precisely - if one may say so - *the sanctuary of the theology of the human body.* In witnessing to the beauty of man created by God as male and female, it also expresses in a certain way, the hope of a world transfigured, the world inaugurated by the Risen Christ, and even before

by Christ on Mount Tabor. We know that the Transfiguration is one of the main sources of Eastern devotion; it is an eloquent book for mystics, just as for St Francis Christ crucified contemplated on the mountain of La Verna was an open book.

*If we are dazzled as we contemplate the Last Judgement by its splendour and its terror, admiring on the one hand the glorified bodies and on the other those condemned to eternal damnation, we understand too that the whole composition is deeply penetrated by a unique light and by a single artistic logic: the light and the logic of faith that the Church proclaims, confessing: "We believe in one God... maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen".* On the basis of this logic in the context of the light that comes from God, the human body also keeps its splendour and its dignity. If it is removed from this dimension, it becomes in some way an object, which depreciates very easily, since only before the eyes of God can the human body remain naked and unclothed, and keep its splendour and its beauty intact.

7. The Sistine Chapel is the place which contains *the memory of a particular day* in the life of every Pope. For me, it was *October 16, 1978*. Precisely here, in this holy place, the Cardinals gather to await the manifestation of God's will as regards the Successor of St Peter. Here I heard from the mouth of my former Rector, Maximilien de Furstenberg, the significant words: "Magister adest et vocat te". In this place, Stefan Wyszynski, the Cardinal Primate of Poland, said to me: "If they elect you, I beg you not to refuse". And here, in a spirit of obedience to Christ and entrusting myself to his Mother, I accepted the election that issued from the Conclave, declaring to the Cardinal Camerlengo, Jean Villot, my availability to serve the Church. Thus once again the Sistine Chapel became for the entire Catholic community the place for the action of the Holy Spirit who appoints the Bishops in the Church, and in particular the one who is to become Bishop of Rome and Successor of Peter.

Celebrating the sacrifice of the Mass today in this very Chapel, in the 16th year of my service to the Apostolic See, *I pray the Spirit of the Lord to be ever present and active within the Church.* I pray that he may conduct her joyously into the third millennium.

I invoke Christ, the Lord of history, so that he may be with every one of us to the end of the world, as he himself promised.- "Ego vobiscum sum omnibus diebus usque ad consummationem saeculi" (Mt 28:20).

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana