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Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), CALLING OF ST. MATTHEW, 1600. Oil on canvas, 11'1" x 11'5". Contarelli Chapel, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Not the Righteous, But Sinners

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Michelangelo de Merisi took the name of his family's hometown, Caravaggio, when he moved to Rome in 1592. Believing that the Renaissance masters had not been entirely successful in depicting nature realistically in painting, he became one of the founders of the Baroque style. Caravaggio's pursuit of a way of painting based in nature incorporated dramatic spotlight lighting, or tenebrism, and a sense of the momentary.

His personal calling to paint occurred at an early age. In addition to his religious training (he certainly knew the catechism), Caravaggio could read, write, and do basic math, and possibly he had a working knowledge of Latin. He had received some formal training in various painting studios in Milan.

Caravaggio's career was launched by a commission in 1599 from San Luigi dei Francesi, the French church in Rome, to complete the Contarelli chapel decoration. The chapel had been purchased by the French cardinal Matthieu Cointrel in 1565 and completed before his death in 1585. The cardinal, who Italianized his name to Contarelli, left specific instructions indicating that the subjects of the paintings should portray scenes from the life of Matthew, his patron saint. Caravaggio painted the *Calling of St. Matthew*, the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, and the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* from left to right on three walls of the chapel. These works, completed in 1600, gave Caravaggio extensive exposure and notoriety. After the success of this commission, his career changed dramatically and he no longer painted the small, inexpensive still-life and genre scenes that he was selling earlier.

Though much of Caravaggio's work is religious in theme, he placed details within the paintings that reveal his unconventional, and at times conflicted, life. *Calling of St. Matthew*, for example, shows Matthew counting money in a tavern setting; the artist frequented such establishments, and the tavern details and the garments of the seated figures are contemporary Roman. Jesus and Peter, however, wear robes associated in the visual tradition with the ancient times. The tenebrist light, from a source external to the painting, echoes the diagonal of Jesus' gesture and leads us to the bearded face of Matthew. Only Matthew seems to notice their presence and points to himself to ask "Who me?" as Jesus speaks. This mystical

experience of revelation is internal and spontaneous.

The Gospel account of Matthew's call is succinct: "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him" (Matthew 9:9-13; cf. Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32). The next verses identify Matthew indirectly as a sinner, emphasizing that Jesus came "to call not the righteous but the sinners."

About Caravaggio placing Matthew in a tavern rather than a customs post, it would not be an over-interpretation to say that the artist could relate well to Matthew, the sinner. Both Matthew and Caravaggio are called to do God's work and both struggle with earthly temptations. We know much about the details of Caravaggio's life from police records: he had several violent offenses, including accusations of assault and murder. Though he lived the restless, tormented life of a wanderer, he produced a large number of religious masterpieces.

Because of Caravaggio's association with the low classes and outcasts, he often depicted great Christian themes in unglorified and unfashionable ways. Yet this indifference to Renaissance ideals of beauty and decorum found a place in counter-reformatory Rome: the Catholic Church recognized his unconventional interpretations to be in line with the teachings of the newly founded Jesuit order, the Council of Trent, and other Catholic reform movements of the day.

Matthew and Caravaggio help us reflect upon our personal vocation, or calling. Like them, we are sinners with a divine call and gifts to serve God and one another. We, too, often struggle to live out this vocation in God's world.



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