



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE RESTORED 15th-CENTURY FRESCO CYCLE IN THE
SISTINE CHAPEL**

Saturday 11 December 1999

1. *"Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house" (1 Pt 2: 5).*

It would be difficult to find a more eloquent visual commentary on this biblical image than the Sistine Chapel, whose full splendour we can enjoy today thanks to the recently completed restoration. Our joy is shared by the faithful throughout the world, who not only cherish this place because of the masterpieces it contains, but also for the role it plays in the Church's life. Indeed, it is here - I recall with deep feeling - that the Successor of Peter is elected.

Five years ago, on 8 April 1994, I was able to comment on the works of Michelangelo which, with the restoration of their original colours, undoubtedly give this hall its tone and, in a certain sense, absorb it, such is their magnificence. They extend to the ultimate horizon of Christian theology, pointing to the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the final judgement, the mystery of creation and of history, making everything converge on Christ, the Saviour and Judge of the world.

Today, however, we are asked to turn our gaze to a humbler, but important cycle of murals which gave the Sistine Chapel, commissioned by Sixtus IV, its original appearance. Great Florentine and Umbrian artists contributed to these frescos, from Perugino to Botticelli, from Pinturicchio to Ghirlandaio, from Rosselli to Signorelli. They were inspired by a precise plan and created a unified work, which is well integrated into the architectural and pictorial whole that was gradually developed, making it unusually powerful and evocative.

I am pleased to be able to return it today to new aesthetic enjoyment. I warmly thank Cardinal Edmund Casimir Szoka, President of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State, Dr Francesco Buranelli and all those responsible for the General Administration of the Pontifical

Monuments, Museums and Galleries, the workers, and all who in their various capacities deserve praise for this latest artistic restoration.

2. Looking over the double series of murals, it is not hard to grasp their symmetry, which is also indicated by the "titles" above them. On one side we see the image of Moses, while the other is dominated by Christ. The iconography is a sort of *lectio divina* in which, even prior to the individual biblical episodes, the unity of Scripture, of the Old and New Testaments, emerges in the events of salvation history from the Exodus to the fullness of revelation in Christ.

The parallelism effectively illustrates the hermeneutic principle formulated by St Augustine: "*Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet, Vetus in Novo patet*" (cf. *Quaest. in Hept. 2, 73*). And, in fact, the very arrangement of the frescoes, whether seen in their progressive historical order or in their specific thematic relationships, show that everything revolves around Christ. His Baptism, wonderfully depicted by Perugino, expresses the fullness of what the Mosaic circumcision merely foreshadowed. Botticelli set the temptations that Christ overcame in symmetry with the trials endured by Moses. The assembly of the new people, expressed by Ghirlandaio in the calling of the first Apostles by the Lake of Gennesaret, corresponds to the gathering of the ancient people depicted against the dramatic background of the crossing of the Red Sea. Christ, portrayed by Roselli in the solemnity of his sermon on the mount, appears, in comparison to Moses, as the new legislator who has come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it (cf. *Mt 5: 17*). Again, the frescoes show Christ conferring the keys and at the Last Supper, which are also depicted in corresponding scenes from the Old Testament.

3. These decorations are a hymn to Christ. Everything leads to him. Everything finds its fullness in him. However, it is important to realize that he is never alone in these paintings: like Moses, he is surrounded by the faces of men and women, the elderly and children. They are the pilgrim People of God; they are the Church, the "spiritual building" made of living stones that adhere to Christ, "that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious" (1 *Pt 2: 4*).

One accent however distinguishes the whole theological and iconographical design, that is, the attention shown to the leaders of this pilgrim people. If for the Old Testament our gaze is focused on Moses, accompanied by the priest Aaron in Botticelli's animated painting which is meant to show his vainly challenged authority, for the New Testament the absolute centrality of Christ is not obscured but highlighted by the role which he himself assigns to the Apostles and especially to Peter.

This is particularly apparent in Perugino's masterpiece, centred on the conferral of the keys. In this painting, through the symbol of the enormous key, the artist stresses the breadth of authority conferred on the first of the Apostles. On the other hand, as if to balance this, Peter's face is depicted with a moving expression of humility as he receives the symbol of his ministry, on his knees and almost drawing back from his Master. One could describe him as a Peter who is

crouched in his smallness, taken aback by such immense trust, and eager, as it were, to disappear so that only the Master will remain visible in his person. His rapt expression prompts us to imagine on his lips not only the confession of Caesarea Philippi - "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (*Mt* 16: 16) - but also the declaration of love he made to the risen Christ after the sorrowful experience of his denial: "You know that I love you" (*Jn* 21: 15). It is the face of one who is well aware of being a sinner (cf. *Lk* 5: 8) and is in constant need of repentance if he is to strengthen his brethren (cf. *Lk* 22: 31). It is a face which expresses his total dependence on the Saviour's eyes and lips, thus wonderfully portraying the meaning of the universal service of Peter, placed in the Church, with the Apostles of whom he is the head, visibly to represent Christ, the "great Shepherd of the sheep" (*Heb* 13: 20), ever present among his people.

4. Beginning with this original cycle, then, the art in the chapel is presented as a mature fruit of biblical spirituality. It is an art which has the ability - as is typical of authentic sacred art - "to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colours, shapes ... without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery" (*Letter to Artists*, n. 12).

We therefore have good reason to rejoice if today so significant an expression of 15th-century art can once again shine with the brilliance of its original colours, recovered by diligent and modern restoration techniques. It continues to communicate the vibrance of the mystery in a language that never ages because it embraces all that is universal in man.

My hope, recently expressed also in the *Letter to Artists* (cf. n. 10), is that, in the wake of what has been demonstrated in this "shrine", unique in all the world, the fruitful alliance of faith and art will be re-established in our time so that the "beautiful", the epiphany of God's supreme beauty, can illuminate the horizon of the dawning millennium.

As I thank the Lord who has given me the opportunity to preside at today's celebration in which this jewel of art is presented perfectly restored to the world, I invoke God's constant protection on you, on those who work in the Vatican Museums and on the countless visitors who continually come here from all over the world to admire these masterpieces.

My Blessing to all.