

MEDITATIONS ON

Vatican

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Art

The Deposition of Christ
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
Vatican Museums' Pinacoteca
Circa 1600–1604



Presented to

By

On

MEDITATIONS ON Vatican Art

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MARK HAYDU, LC, STL



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DEDICATION



ON THIS YEAR of the thirtieth anniversary of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums, I dedicate this book to the patrons, who have not only embraced the responsibility of sustaining the restoration of the vast collection of sacred art under the Holy Father's care but have also supported me in my work and vocation. I am grateful to each and every one for allowing me to accompany you on a part of your journey and making mine that much more beautiful and full of grace.

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A very special thank you to the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums family, especially our chapter leaders and their boards. Your passion for the arts and love for your faith confirm me daily in the amazing opportunity we have to be preserving the most

uniquely spiritual collection in the world. Every time I see a person walking through our galleries in wonder, I witness the fruits of your generosity firsthand, and it brings me great joy. You have made this book possible, and I am infinitely grateful for each and every one of you. Msgr. Terry Hogan is always a particularly appreciated support as chaplain of our patrons in the United States, and Lorna Richardson keeps us all organized and growing! May God reward all of you for your kindness. As we all know, it is well beyond any human measure to repay.

These last years have been quite the challenge for my religious family, but with great suffering there can be great growth if it is a suffering with Jesus. I want to thank my legionary superiors and spiritual directors for introducing me into the beauty of the interior life. I followed my vocation with a strong desire to love and serve Christ and his flock as a generous and merciful priest. The Legion and Regnum Christi family has taught me how to do that more than I could have ever hoped. Thank you!

Finally, I first learned to love our Lord in my family. My vocation began with all of you, and if I am able to be faithful, it is thanks to your prayers and support.

INTRODUCTION



THE YEAR WAS 1991, and I found myself winding through the jungle vegetation growing on the mountains of Guatemala. The rickety school bus billowed out black puffs of diesel exhaust as it labored under the unforgiving weight of cargo and passengers heading from the ancient town of Antigua to the Central American metropolis of Guatemala City. I was aboard the bus with my brother, Keith, and a few other Catholic missionaries from Akron, Ohio, who had come to learn Spanish and experience the culture—something that happened much faster than I would have liked. After we'd had only one week of Spanish studies a Franciscan priest we had befriended convinced us to join his mini-medical mission to the trash dump in downtown Guatemala City. The job would be quite simple, he assured us, one we could surely handle. Our task was merely to direct the dump dwellers toward the medical station for a free medical exam. Upon arrival, armed with a pocket dictionary and some Sacred Heart prayer cards, he pointed my brother in one direction and me in another.

I had never been in a trash dump before, and certainly not one in the Third World. Mountains of trash and debris from the city's refuse service are regularly dropped in this vast empty space. The landfill at one time was outside the city, but as the expansion of buildings and neighborhoods took place it quickly became engulfed by them. Now it is a central area in the city, like Central Park is in New York, but it is anything but a park. The stench permeates the air.

Pools of stagnant rainwater form in the paths that wind around piles of plastic, metal, dirt, and organic waste. Makeshift houses are created from an assortment of cardboard, bedsprings, and pallets. Old pieces of carpet are repurposed as walls, and a patchwork of corrugated metal forms roofs. Pathways wind in no particular direction. On this day the sun was beginning to beat down while steam rose off the surface of the dingy chaotic landscape.

As I took in this desperate sight, I began to question what I was doing and what God had in store for me. Just a year out of high school, I was seriously thinking about the call to the priesthood. Did I have what it took to be a priest? I figured this would push me out of my comfort zone and test my spiritual strength. But after this test, I was beginning to hope I didn't have the call.

Thankfully, this wasn't the first time I had been asked to step out of my comfort zone. Blocking out the natural aversion to this place, I whispered a little prayer: "Lord, you brought me here, so please help me get through this." Armed with valor, I charged into the dump.

After some time I had lost the group, so I decided to climb to the crest of a trash pile to look for them from a higher vantage point. After a few moments I reached the top, but no one was in sight. A little nervous, I started to pray and ask God to help me find the others. Descending from the trash peak, I jogged in another direction and then climbed a little knoll. But again, no one was nearby. After several failed attempts



to find my group, I began to worry. Suddenly I heard a voice next to me say, "If I asked you to stay here, would you stay?" I quickly turned to my right, but no one was there. It was odd to hear a voice speak English so clearly in this primarily Spanish-speaking place, where I found myself quite alone. Though a little curious, my attention turned back to scan the landscape, when once again the same questioning voice jolted me: "If I asked you to stay here, would you stay?" This second time was a bit more disturbing, for I knew there was no one physically present around me. Was God speaking to me? Though I had never heard a voice come from the Lord before, I had often felt the Spirit's gentle nudge in my soul. So I quieted myself and whispered a prayer when the question was posed for a third time, this time with a little different wording: "If I asked you to stay here and serve these people, would you stay?" Though my defenses went up and my call was fresh, through prayer I responded as the prophet had with all the generosity and idealism of a nineteen-year-old: "Here I am Lord, send me."

Although I first thought I was meant to stay in the dump, God led me to finish my missionary year and then to set off on a seminary search to find out where I could be formed as a missionary priest. My parish priest led me to visit the Legionaries of Christ, and it was there I discovered God's place for me. Formation in the seminary was grace-filled, but even so it came with crosses. In time, I was ordained a priest and began my mission work in the Vatican Museums. My desire to help people discover the beauty of hearing God's voice, even amidst the noise and rugged spiritual terrain of this very busy world, has never left me. Wandering the halls of the museums and carrying out my responsibilities as the international coordinator of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums makes me ever more

aware of my calling as a missionary. Now I feel I am a missionary of God's beauty within the halls of the Vatican Museums. As I stroll the frescoed galleries and vast collections here, it leads me to question the best method for sharing this loveliness with you.

Meditations on Vatican Art will enable you to experience masterpieces from the Vatican while meditating upon them, for most of these sacred art pieces were created for the faithful to pray with more fluidly. Though a priest, my days are spent conserving the vast collections of the Vatican Museums. Taking into account the world population, relatively few people have the chance to visit the Vatican. But even if you have been one of the five million people who visits the Vatican each year, or will be soon, this book will enable you to experience these masterworks in a new light. As you pray each day, find a sacred space to meditate and experience the beauty of these treasured masterpieces.

The Purpose of This Book

There are hundreds of thousands of art pieces collected within the twelve museums that make up the Vatican Museums. How might one select the proper artworks to share? Instead of choosing an author or a medium, I decided to select a spiritual theme and opt for some of the more well-known pieces.

All of us are surrounded by beauty, but learning to see the glory all around us is a real art. Our world is always going, and as we busy ourselves with family life, work, and play, the noises keep us from praying and soaking up the magnificence that God offers us.

In this book, I would like to assist your prayer by directing you to see the beauty that surrounds you. By taking just a few minutes each day to reflect on the

day's meditation, you will slowly learn to raise yourself to God, opening yourself to the good things the Lord has in store for you.

Beauty surrounds us in nature, in the people we serve, in the smallest details shared by someone who loves us, and in the architecture of our cities, towns, and villages. If we learn to look with the eyes of an artist—the eyes of a prayerful wonderer—we can learn to see the love of our Creator at every turn. Let us travel down the simple path of what the ancients called the *Via Pulchritudinis* (Way of Beauty). The whole world can become a pathway to God. Both our interior and exterior senses are often in need of purification, and there is no better way than through the fire of divine beauty.

The Spiritual Exercises

At the end of the first summer spent in the seminary, my fellow seminarians and I spent eight days in silence and reflection with a retreat method called the Spiritual Exercises. St. Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish saint, founded the Jesuits, an order in the Catholic Church also known as the Society of Jesus. This retreat that I now repeat every year has been a source of great peace and interior freedom that always deepens my prayer life.

But the Spiritual Exercises do take time to experience. Many lay people do not have the time to break away for thirty days to enter into silence and prayer, for St. Ignatius originally intended the exercises to be thirty days of complete silence. Still, over the years these exercises have broken into other more manageable forms that now allow one to attend eight-, five-, or even three-day retreats. The experience can be quite transformative, so seize the moment if

ever you have a chance to participate in the Spiritual Exercises.

Meditations on Vatican Art will enable the faithful to experience the Spiritual Exercises for fifteen to thirty minutes each day as participants pray with sacred works of art from the Vatican Museums. Taking time to meditate or reflect upon a piece of sacred art while focusing on the Spiritual Exercises will grace and transform your day.

The Spiritual Exercises were composed in the context of chivalry, kings, castles, and battles to be fought and won. Essentially they were inspired by the circumstances surrounding St. Ignatius' life (1491–1556). Yet they have a universal appeal, as they relate well to the experiences that surround the life of all human beings. They particularly relate to our spiritual lives, for there is always a battle to be fought in the world—but we can be comforted to know that God is fighting for us.

In the middle of the third century, St. Anthony fled into the desert to become holy and avoid the temptations of city life. But the temptations followed him into the desert. In fact, there is a lovely fresco painting in the Borgia Apartments created by Pinturicchio where the artist depicts St. Anthony being tempted in the desert. The obvious message to the pope was that St. Anthony, just like the pope and each of us, couldn't run from the battle, for it follows us wherever we go.

There is something beautiful about the battle that should inspire us, though, for it allows us a chance at heroism, chivalry, and the truest form of happiness, namely, holiness. The point of the exercises is just that: to help us as we learn the path of holiness. Even if you are just beginning to tap into life in the Spirit, the simplicity of these exercises will enable you to feel confident that God is with you and wants you to be a



part of his eternal family. By progressively reflecting on the truths St. Ignatius proposes in his exercises, we are led onto the path of conversion.

Spiritual Truths and the Beauty of Art

Beauty makes the truth more palatable, as honey might help us take our medicine properly. Following the structure of the Spiritual Exercises, these meditations are intended to draw us closer to Jesus.

The first section focuses on foundational truths sustained by the Creator, who gives us all good things. In section two we will look at our response to God's creative love. The third section reflects upon the life of Christ and the supreme example of his love for us. This love culminates in the fourth section with Jesus' passion and death. The first section and last day of this retreat enables us to enter the new and eternal day of resurrection—the hope of all who believe Jesus is the way to God.

How to Use This Book

Find a time within your daily routine that will enable you spend fifteen to thirty minutes with God. Consider going to your local adoration chapel or parish, find a prayer chair in your own home, or select an outdoor nature setting that leads you to prayer easily.

Each reflection is intended to lead you into prayer and meditation. Begin by placing yourself in the presence of God, asking the Lord to be with you and speak to you. Praise, bless, and thank the Lord for all the good you have been blessed to receive. Focus on God, an action that will release you from your daily concerns and activities and draw you to contemplate

the beauty of the Blessed Trinity, tuning you toward what the Lord is speaking to your heart.

Each day features the work of art, its name, the artist, where the piece is located, and when it was created. The meditations begin with a brief explanation on the piece of art and the artist in order to familiarize you with the period and context wherein the masterpiece originated. It is not intended to be a full art history lesson but rather a springboard for understanding the piece of art along with the meditation for the day.

On each day, a theme and a focus for the meditation are provided. The focus will help you assimilate the motif of that day's prayer while connecting it to the whole retreat. This focus also relates to the Scripture passage and work of art, and so will be a natural preparation for reflecting on both.

Scripture is provided to focus your prayer, allowing the word of God to nurture your heart as you prepare to reflect on it. Furthermore, the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises were built around God's progressive self-revelation through Scripture. Read through each Scripture passage with an open heart and mind. Composition of place in the Spiritual Exercises is a method that enables those praying to imagine the scene by using the senses of sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. If you are touched by a word, passage, or your imagination of the scene, spend some time in conversation with the Lord about it.

The notion of sacred artwork and contemplation is often lost on us in a digital age where images constantly bombard our cultures. However, traditional Catholic mental prayer focuses our senses to enable us to see what is beyond the physical realm. In fact, liturgical and sacred art were intended to lead the soul to contemplate the spiritual truths that were painted or sculpted therein. Still, distractions challenge our prayer, often

invading our hearts and minds when we set aside time to pray. Allowing our eyes to see the beauty created by each artist will assist our prayer by engaging our sense of sight, a powerful gift for understanding the goodness of God. As our culture is animated by the senses, we must fine-tune them to know the things of God.

As you contemplate each piece of art, let your eyes wander naturally to where the color and form take them. If you find that too much is happening in a piece of art and it is distracting, allow yourself to focus on just one aspect or detail. At times fixing on one element can anchor you in the whole piece, allowing you to then assimilate the whole work little by little. This same practice can also be applied to reading the Scripture passage. By reading slowly and letting each word speak to you, the whole passage can take on greater meaning.

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The Meditation

The written meditations will help you focus on details portrayed by the artist while pulling out a spiritual aspect of the art piece or Scripture passage selected for that day. Let the meditation guide your thoughts and prayers. Read it calmly and take time to reflect as the Spirit moves your heart. Like art, prayer has its own rhythm. Open your heart and let the Holy Spirit lead you.

A short prayer, questions for reflection, and a Spiritual Exercise at the end of the meditation will

enable one to move spiritually. Athletes know that preparing for competition includes exercise, stretching, practice, and training for the event to come. The spiritual life is no different, for our prayer should draw us closer to God and one another. If we do not train and prepare, are we really able to live the life that God has called us into—one of peace, joy, and fullness?

Setting Sail

The effort we put into our prayer can be likened to that of a sailor who takes his sail boat out to sea. The sailor raises the mast, directs it toward the wind, and applies the rules of sailing. Yet can the sailor produce the wind? Even the most advanced sailor will not go far without a breeze. The power to be moved in prayer comes from the grace of God. We must will God to move in us by doing our part, but the Spirit is the one who enlivens our prayer.

So now let us raise our sails and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us through these Spiritual Exercises. God wants to move us, open our minds, soften our wills, and enthuse our spirits. Therefore, the art, Scripture, and meditations that follow serve as a point of departure each day. As you pray and talk with God, allow the Spirit to inspire you with certain thoughts of praise, thanksgiving, intercession, repentance, abandonment, and trust. And may the images and meditations enable the Spirit to move and lead you on your own journey to God.



SECTION I

ENCOUNTERING GOD'S LOVE

IN EVERY NEW BEGINNING there is a goal in mind, that is, something we wish to attain. The goal for this first phase of our Spiritual Exercises is to guide us deeper into the personal conviction that we are God's creatures, immensely loved by our Creator and Father.

This truth becomes a foundational principle on which to build our lives. We are often so governed by fear that we group God among those persons or experiences to be feared. We generally prefer to control our lives by offering God the wonderful (or maybe not so attractive) results of our efforts.

And so we begin our retreat today by meditating on the nature of our triune God's supreme authority and providence. We will also consider the fact that we are creatures who God freely chose to bring into existence. Our lives have meaning, purpose, and value because God Almighty loves us and has willed us from all eternity. Not only did God create us, but as our meditations will reflect upon during this section, our Lord did so with a concrete mission in mind.

God has a plan for our lives, and our happiness depends on our willingness to fulfill this mission by doing the best we can to follow the will of the Lord in small and great ways. *Go forth, go into the world and realize something beautiful for yourself and for me*, God tells us. And he offers us his will and his constant presence to guide us on our way. For God's love is like that of a parent who finds joy when his or her child flourishes.

As any parent knows, we are not alone in this walk through life. There are plenty of distractions along the way. Still, God has created many creatures—both material and spiritual, and they can aid us on our path to our Creator. Learn to marvel at the beauty of creatures and respect their power. Inasmuch as each creature helps us to reach our final heavenly destination, we can use them to help us on our journey.

Life is a unique gift granted to us once. Our freedom is beautifully powerful. The most difficult and amazing challenge for us is to surrender ourselves to God's love, willing ourselves to choose his will every moment until we are finally united to the Lord in a loving embrace.

We have now come full circle, for God was in heaven before creation, but then he created you and me. Out of love, God created us in order to love him in this life and eventually return, wholly his children, back to the house of the Father. So let's begin and encounter God through beauty.



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DAY 1

VISION OF ST. HELENA

Paolo Veronese
Vatican Museums' Pinacoteca
Circa 1580



THEME: Treasures that last

FOCUS OF THIS MEDITATION: Every moment is an invitation to allow God to enter our lives more fully. In this meditation we will prepare our hearts to let God enter us in a new way as we divert our sight from the treasures of this world to treasures that never perish.

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◀ In *Vision of St. Helena*, the Venetian painter Paolo Veronese captures the recently converted St. Helena. Veronese depicts St. Helena with a vision of the cross presented to her by a delicate putti. Helena was the mother of Roman Emperor Constantine. She was said to have followed this vision to Palestine where she was able to locate the relic and return home with it.

Veronese depicts the saint as he would depict a great mythical beauty—a woman who serenely received her divine vision. Portrayed in a secular space and draped in heavy, luxurious fabrics, the faith of the saint is illustrated in a very personal way, directing all attention to the holy revelation she is experiencing.



SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

MATTHEW 6:19–21

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal.*

*But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys,
nor thieves break in and steal.*

For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.

MATTHEW 13:44–46

*The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a man finds and hides again,
and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls.

When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.

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This richly decorated portrait of St. Helena immediately draws us into a very personal and intimate experience of prayer. St. Helena, a woman of humble background from Moesia, near the Black Sea, became the wife of the Roman Emperor Constantius. Historically, her conversion was a rags-to-riches experience as she went from being an innkeeper's daughter to catching the eye of the most powerful man on earth—so sublime was her beauty.

We know St. Helena was a fervent Christian, and history assures us she was active in building churches in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Tradition holds that, while clearing the hill of the Holy Sepulchre, she found the relics of the cross on which our Lord was crucified. And Veronese captures St. Helena by portraying her like a Roman goddess in the majestic moment that she received her vision of the cross.

Notice and regard the beauty of the rich Eastern fabrics with woven prints and royal colors along with the gold and blue details of her dress. Likewise, the colour of her crimson cape broached under her chin denotes the luxury and wealth that her position afforded. She sits on a high-backed throne while the two armrests provide a comfortable support on which to lean her right hand and left elbow. An elegant textile wall covering provides a background from floor to ceiling.

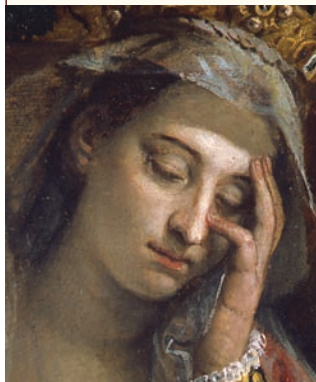
The softly flowing fabrics and her serene posture invite a certain calm in us and focus our attention on her tranquil face and spirit of prayerful contemplation. No matter the power, wealth, and beauty of the imperial world that surrounds her, she has forsaken all to contemplate the love of Jesus in the mystery of the cross. This painting offers a whole interpretation of what the life of St. Helena exuded and what our moments of prayer in these Spiritual Exercises are intended to be.

Carving out some quiet time each day to be with Jesus amidst the busyness of our lives is necessary if we wish to discover divine treasures. Our hearts can so easily be distracted by the alluring riches of this world. As Christians, we need alone time with Christ to contemplate the value of all things in the light of his redemptive love on the cross. Contact with God in prayer helps us remember that our treasure is not found in the trappings of the upper class but in the glorious vestment of baptismal grace that Jesus won for us. God has adopted us as sons and daughters of the king through our baptism. Like St. Helena, we have become poor commoners raised to



royalty. Spend time thanking God for the gift of life in Christ and allow your heart to follow the inspirations that our Lord shares with you.

Shift your attention to the face of St. Helena. Aside from her prayerful spirit, we can also see a tinge of sadness or dissatisfaction on her brow. What might be weighing on her, leaving her empty



in some way? What might Veronese be hiding in that mysterious distant look? It could be that the young putti represents her child Constantine, who some day will embrace the power of the cross but as yet has not. Perhaps she suffers knowing that her child's empire is far from the love of Christ on the cross. Or might it be a reflection of the interior struggle one often finds in prayer, though at the same time we experience great graces. No matter the cause, Helena's face records the notion that prayer and the Christian life always have an element of effort, of ideals not fully realized. Though prayer

nourishes in us a taste of heaven on earth—it is merely that, only a taste. We are not yet in our celestial home, and we long for that kingdom in the distance.

Now regard the placement of the cross in the lower right-hand corner. It almost seems as if Helena is leaning on the cross. Love and mercy, depicted here by the cross, give us a firm foundation on which to build. Can you lean on these truths and rest in them? It is the cross that sustains us when we are weak and can lead us to consolation when we are weary.

Imitate the prayerful spirit of St. Helena communicated by Veronese and turn to Christ in your heart, leaning upon him for respite. Silence your interior world, your memory, your thoughts, and your passions. This is a time for silent contemplation as you let the light of Christ into your heart and soul.

Veronese wished to express the symbol that marked St. Helena's life. If an artist were to paint you, what symbol would he or she use to sketch a portrait of your life? Take a few moments to consider some images that connect and convey your life in relationship to our Lord Jesus.

How do you want others to see your life in Christ? Your life is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Inspired by the Spirit, you can direct the movements of your soul and choose actions in this life, painting a portrait for others to see.



PRAYER AND REFLECTION

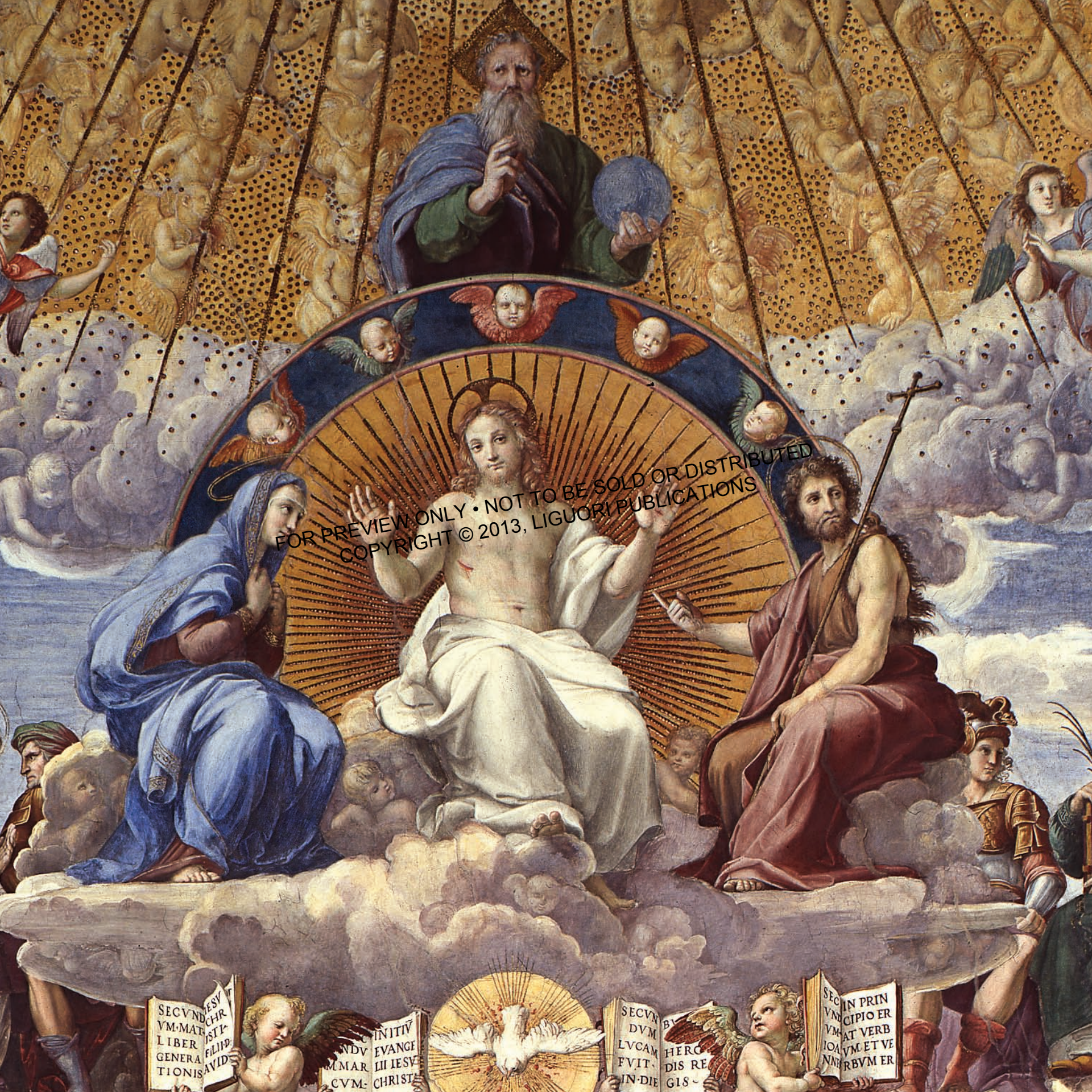
Lord Jesus, it is not easy to endure the cross in our day-to-day lives. We are often weighed down by tragedy, the humdrum of life, injustices large and small, and a multitude of distractions that keep us from seeing you clearly. Help us to meet you today, Lord, as we seek the treasure only you can give. Gift us with wisdom while we make this retreat to embrace you more fully as we learn to trust in your divine love for us. Amen.

- ✠ What do you expect to glean from these days of prayer? Concretely name a few needs (spiritual, physical, emotional, etc.) God can assist you with on this retreat.
- ✠ Where is your heart today? Do you desire God's kingdom above earthly riches? What heavenly treasures can you be watching for in these upcoming days and weeks?
- ✠ Regard *Vision of St. Helena*. How does her contemplation help you see the face of God? In what way does her glimpse of God's beauty invite you into prayer?
- ✠ What are some blessings that God has given you today? How might you use these blessings, whether large or small, to build God's kingdom on earth today?

Spiritual Exercise

- ✠ Spend time in silence while reflecting on God's presence and Christ's abundant spiritual treasures during the gaps in your day rather than filling them with noise (smart phones, music, television, and the like).





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DAY 2

THE DISPUTATION OF THE HOLY SACRAMENT (*LA DISPUTA*)

Raphael Sanzio
Room of the Signature, Raphael Rooms
Circa 1508



THEME: The nature of God

FOCUS OF THIS MEDITATION: God is the beginning and the end and holds all things in his providential and loving embrace. We desire to acknowledge, honor, and rest in God's love and authority.

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◀ The Room of the Signature was one of the four rooms Raphael painted for Julius II. This urbanite painter illustrates on four walls the great fields of study comprehended during the Renaissance: theology, philosophy, the arts, and the moral virtues. This room was originally a study that housed the library of Julius II. It was also where the Signatura of Grace tribunal, the council chamber for the Apostolic Signatura, took place. At the time, most of the important papal documents were signed and sealed in the Room of the Signature. The overarching themes of this piece demonstrate the unity of antiquity and Christianity, and at the same time they show philosophy and theology coexisting peacefully.

The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament is the first of the sixteen frescoed walls completed by Raphael in the Papal Apartments. In this painting dedicated to theology, Raphael

visualizes a theological conversation around the theme of the Eucharist. The heavenly court is shown seated upon the clouds, while theologians and pastors talk on earth below. In the heavens, Raphael captures the essence of our peaceful, omnipotent God, who reigns over all of human history.

In descending order, the artist features the triune God. God the Father is seen crowning the composition. The Son, who was sent by the Father, is clothed in regal white and enthroned upon the clouds. And the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and Son, leads us into all truth. Here Raphael employs the muted colors typical of the late sixteenth century, giving a certain sense of peace and solemnity to God who sits as judge and Father—all fitting themes for a room where the popes exercised their temporal authority in a particular way.



SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

GENESIS 1:1-2

*In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth—
and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and
a mighty wind sweeping over the waters—*

JOHN 1:1-5

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.*

*All things came to be through him,
and without him nothing came to be.*

What came to be

*through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race;*

*the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.*

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As you begin to enter into prayer, place yourself in God's presence and let your mind and heart focus on the triune Godhead—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Offer prayers of faith, hope, love, gratitude, and humility as a way to enter more deeply into the presence of God. Once your soul is in God's presence, try to imagine what the world was like before anything was created, when God was alone as the Blessed Trinity, before the first days of creation.

Although all things change, God never changes. Our Lord is a rock—solid, faithful, and still—the point of the pendulum from which all things hang and are supported. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all human history.

The serene and wise countenance of the Holy Trinity oversees all things. God justly controls the whole universe, wisely governing authoritatively with his mighty hand to assure purpose for all. God is who is, and therefore his decisions are neither arbitrary nor swayed by public opinion. The Lord is not in need of our affirmation, but he desires our worship, for he knows that we need him to be fully human and happy.

Regard how God holds the sphere of the world in this painting, how it rests secure. Yet God does not exercise his absolute authority with disinterest or indifference. On the contrary, the Lord lovingly takes interest in everything. Nothing is unimportant—from the greatest events on earth to the smallest minutia of our day. If it is important to us, it is important to God, who keeps all in balance with a providential hand.



Notice the title of this painting by Raphael is the *Disputa* (*Discussion*). In the lower register, a virtual theological hall of fame is viewed discussing the eucharistic doctrine on earth while their biblical counterparts of prophets and patriarchs chime in from heaven. Horizontal dramas of earth are balanced by the horizon of heaven while the divine vertically aligns and inspires all in order to unite each part to the whole—the Blessed Trinity.

What arguments or disputes do you have with God and the people of God? Take a moment to pray about the dramas present in your life and meditate on how God the Father, Son, and Holy



Spirit are present in difficult moments to assist and guide you. Then ask for the grace to see God's divine hand more clearly.

God rules all that is seen and unseen. Every human discussion and all truths that God speaks and shares are made one in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of the Father. It is this same Christ who is present on the altar of sacrifice at every Mass. Though all may seem like discord, there is harmony. God's plan is emerging in what may seem like chaos to us. For God is the Lord of history—and the Lord of history has made each of us a part of the story.

It was common in Christian iconography to represent the Godhead as a triangle with the all-seeing eye in the center, often with rays of glory shining forth. Yet in this painting Raphael



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chooses to make it much more personal—more real—by depicting the three persons of the Trinity. The triune God is an eternal relationship of love, a divine family where the Father is over all and in all. The Son is sent from the Father into the world through the Virgin Mary who adores him among the heavenly hosts in this fresco. Likewise in this image, John the Baptist, the precursor who announced Jesus’ ministry, gestures toward Jesus as if to proclaim to us, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” The Holy Spirit is represented here as the dove, the peacemaker and Sanctifier who leads us into all truth.

God is personal, not merely an idea or a mental criterion for moral choosing. God is one, and yet there are three divine persons, each of them active in each of our lives. Though the Trinity is always with us in moments of prayer such as this one, God is particularly active in helping us understand his ways. God is leading us, Christ is saving us, and the Holy Spirit inspires and sanctifies us when we allow the Lord to move us through prayer.

God the Father has sent the Son, a meditation topic we will focus on later in these Spiritual Exercises, but it is still important for us to recall even now. Scripture tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Jesus is the eternal Word of the Father, the one who has triumphed over all things. The darkness has not overcome the light, though it appears as if all is dreary. The powers of this world still try to thwart God’s glory, as Jesus’ “overcoming” came at a price. The wounds of Jesus’ hands, depicted in this piece of art, are held up as signs of conquest and of victory. Likewise, the crosses—or the struggles in each of our lives—do not escape God’s sight. Though we sometimes feel defeated by loss and sorrow, God stands victorious over human history and can change our lot—deriving victory from agony.

In these few remaining moments of prayer, consider the movement of your heart and the ideas related in this meditation that most moved you. Feel free to return to the words that gave you the most peace and led to the strongest convictions.

Now ask God to illumine and remedy the situations in your life that are most in need of our Lord’s presence and healing touch so that his personal plan for you will continue to take shape. Spend a few moments thanking God for these moments of prayer as well as the blessings in your life, and then make a resolution today to allow God to enter more deeply into your heart.





PRAYER AND REFLECTION

God you are all powerful. All things belong to you and nothing escapes your dominion or knowledge. Every aspect of our lives is known to you. You care for and govern over all. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we abandon ourselves to your power and providence. Amen.

- ✠ How do you relate to the Blessed Trinity? Consider the role of each person—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in your daily life and thank God for their eternal love for you.
- ✠ What arguments, or disputes, are taking place in your prayer and active life today? Ask God to illumine these struggles, bringing clarity so you might glimpse God's victory through the cross into resurrected glory.
- ✠ Meditate on *The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament*. What is most striking to you? Can you see yourself and all of salvation history being transformed by the light of God?
- ✠ How has God been victorious in your life? Make a list of instances where, over time, God has helped you heal in relationship to others, resolving struggles that you endured for a time.
- ✠ What areas of your life still need clarity and prayer? Pray once more an act of faith, that God might help you trust in his divine will for you today.

Spiritual Exercise

- ✠ Offer your concerns and stresses to God in order to find clarity and peace. Take control of these moments by letting them go to the Lord. Frequently repeat these words: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I trust in you!



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DAY 3

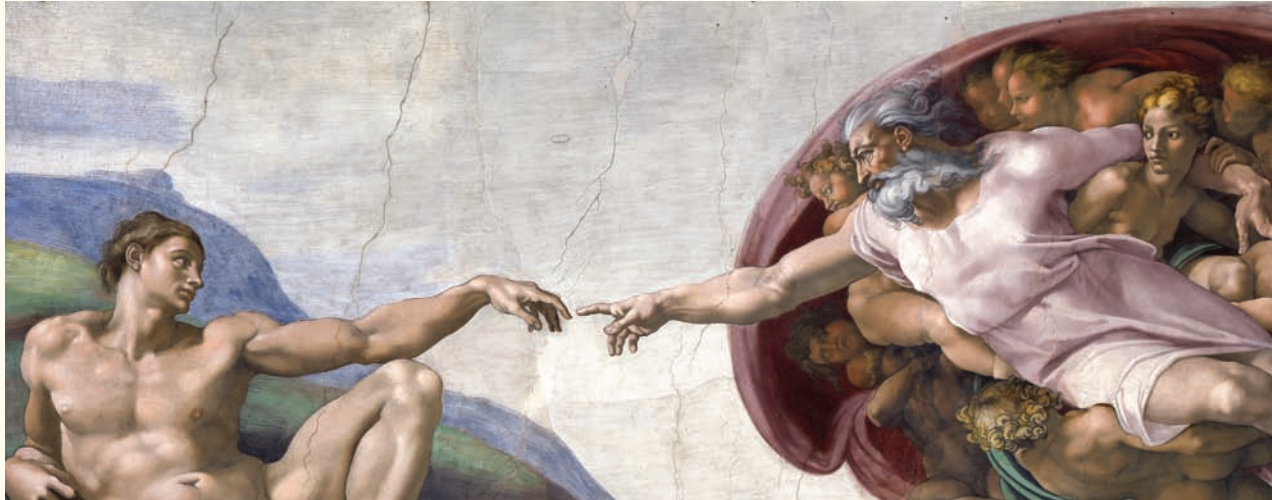
CREATION OF ADAM

Michelangelo Buonarroti
Sistine Chapel ceiling
Circa 1510–1511



THEME: God's kingdom come!

FOCUS OF THIS MEDITATION: You are God's creature, a special masterpiece, unique and irreplaceable.



▲ Pope Julius II called on the great artist Michelangelo to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—a work that consumed four years of his life, from 1508 until its completion in 1512.

In his initial design for the ceiling, Michelangelo envisioned painting the twelve apostles. However, Michelangelo understood that such a large space would require more figures. His genius as a sculptor propelled him to bring architectural form to the large empty space by painting a structure of faux or artificial pinnacles, ledges, and beams. Then he populated the resulting spaces with the seven days of creation, prophets, sibyls or prophetesses, decorative nudes, and large circular spaces called medallions.

The result was the very first decorative ceiling narration ever created in a church. Each year, more than five million people come to see the amazing result of Michelangelo's dedicated brilliance. Today, as then, the popes are elected under its protection.



SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

JEREMIAH 1:5

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you.*

PSALM 139:13–14

*You formed my inmost being;
you knit me in my mother's womb.*

*I praise you, because I am wonderfully made;
wonderful are your works!
My very self you know.*

*Our Creator's powerful and purposeful hand
reached out and lifted you into existence,
just as you are.*

As Michelangelo approached the central point of his painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, he found himself meditating on the very focus of our prayer for today—creation. Where did we come from? Do our lives have a plan or purpose? If so, what is it exactly?

Michelangelo's answer is as elegant and powerful as the hands he joins at the center of his spectacular creation cycle in this masterpiece, one of the most iconic images in Western art.

Our lives begin very simply. God and us; his hand and ours. Although we were not there at this momentous beginning, we can go there in our minds. There was a time when you and I did not exist. When humanity did not exist. Only God and all things in him existed. Then, in one dynamic moment, in an instant of creative love, God called humanity into existence. God is creating us still, for the Lord called you into existence when you were conceived in the womb of your mother: “Let us make human beings in our image” (Genesis 1:26). You and I are not the result of a cosmic coincidence or a chain of spontaneous chemical reactions. We began at the hand of a loving and purposeful God.

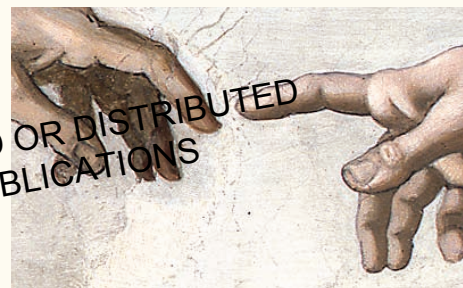
Michelangelo's painting shows the movement of God's divine hand—strong, skilled, purposeful, and intelligent—the hand of a sculptor or a craftsman. It is the hand of someone with a plan. In contrast, Adam's hand is limp and lifeless—yet poised to receive the same nature as the hand it images.



God willed you. God wants you. You are who you are because God's infinite love created you as a totally unique and divinely made human being. Our Creator's powerful and purposeful hand reached out and lifted you into existence, just as you are.

Yet our creation is not merely something of the past, it is a reality that touches us now. God holds us and sustains us in every moment of our life. In every breath and every move, God is with each one of us. No present circumstances, past pains, or future unknowns can change that we came from and are constantly held in God's almighty and providential hand.

Michelangelo hides another secret about our creation in this image. Look between God and Adam's fingers. What do you find? There is simply a space. A space of freedom. God created each of us to freely choose him or not. In the very act of creation, God opened himself to possible rejection, allowing reciprocation of his love to be free. This means that God opened himself to the possibility that we may not love him back.



No matter what choices you have made about God in the past, here you are. You have chosen to love our Lord by making this retreat now. Even in prayer, there are no coincidences. God is speaking. Do you hear his melodious voice calling you, speaking to you?

Continue to sit in God's presence while regarding this image, paying particular attention to the hands that began creation in Michelangelo's work. Absorb the truths that God wants to speak to you. And talk to God in prayer, perhaps whispering, "I came from you, live in you, and am going to you. I am yours, you are mine. You have created me with infinite love. Thank you. Life in you is the first and greatest gift you have given me."





PRAYER AND REFLECTION

God, I came from you, live in you, and am going to you. I am yours, you are mine. Amen.

✠ Do you see your life as a gift from God? What positive or negative events have influenced your understanding of life, particularly your own, as a gift?

✠ How is God's creative and loving hand present in your life now? Where do you need the Lord's presence more?

✠ How have you used the freedom God has given you? Do you use it to come closer to God?



Spiritual Exercises

✠

Call your parents and thank them for the gift of life and the sacrifices they have made for you.

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