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Abstract

One of the most recognisable images of western culture is Michelangelo's portrayal of God's hand reaching out to Adam's. That image of two fingers almost touching in the cracked fresco has dominated our Western imaginations for almost five hundred years. The way we see and recall images effects us at a fundament level of our consciousness. The visual language used in the representation of those two hands has permeated more thoroughly than any verbal language, our collective imaginations and thinking about the nature of God and human kind.

Looking at and reflecting on pictures is both simple and complex. It is simple, in that looking engages the viewer in recognition. Recognition relies on the visual memory bank, which in turn helps in construction and attentiveness to what is seen. Looking is also complex, because visual experience also involves the viewer in essentially the non-verbal language of perception. Visual processes have their own connections

to minds and emotions and are independent of verbal language. Words then are secondary to the experience of seeing and involve an act of translation. Thus, a hermeneutic or act of interpretation of what is seen inevitably involves the viewer in an act of translation. The viewer often seems trapped in a tension between the intuitive language of perception and the use of verbal language to explain and interpret what is seen.

This reflection engages the viewer to look at the Hands of God in the art of Michelangelo with new eyes and new words. Familiar images can sometimes be seen in novel ways when images that have been over-looked are brought into focus. The hand of God in the Creation of Adam is one of twelve hands of God in the Sistine Chapel and this reflection seeks to engage viewers in looking and reflecting at the other eleven hands of God.

Thus, this reflection encourages the reader to engage with the twelve hands of God in Michelangelo's pictures accompanied by bible texts and reflections. Prayers from the two thousand year history of the Christian Church are used to help the reader respond to the images. As well, the images and texts are presented in the light of Michelangelo's own story.

The Hand of God in Michelangelo's Life

The artists of the Renaissance left a veritable treasure trove of Christian images, which have provided following generations with a wellspring of wonderment, inspiration and meaning making. The titanic Michelangelo towers over the Renaissance as the epitome of the Renaissance genius. This reflection responds to seven works by Michelangelo in the light of the images of the hands of God (i.e., 5 works from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; The Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel; The Conversion of Saul in the Pauline Chapel).

As we engage Michelangelo's images of the hands of God, we see him like many of the great prophets of old, experiencing the realities, mysteries and struggles of the images he portrays. Michelangelo grappled with the issue of portraying realities that were beyond reasoned argument. His own ideas about the process of creating and making art showed something of the tension he felt between intuition/visual perception and reason/verbal language. "It is necessary to keep one's compass in one's hand, for the hand executes but the eyes judge" (Vasari, 1550: 55). This underlying tension between reason and intuition is seen in many of Michelangelo's images of the hands of God in the Sistine Chapel.

Michelangelo was a product of 15th-century Florence and, with his contemporaries, shared in the great awakening of the humanist and Neoplatonic ideals of the

Renaissance. Paradoxically, Michelangelo himself drew little inspiration from his contemporaries in his work. He was far more indebted to Giotto, Masaccio and Donatello than to Botticelli. His early copies of the Standing Figures show the influence of Masaccio's monumentality rather than contemporary fashion.

Michelangelo was lucky to survive the first years of his life. His mother was sickly and died and he was taken to a wet nurse who belonged to a family of marble quarriers. He quipped to Vasari that his wet nurse's milk contained the inspiration to work with stone. At an early age, there were signs of a personal concern with the essence of creating and expressing. He was apprenticed to Bertolda in the Medici Court of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Lorenzo took a personal interest in the young Michelangelo, indicating his prodigy status within the neo-platonic circle of Florence. Another profound influence of lasting impact was that of the Dominican Reformist monk, Savonarola. Savonarola's preaching in the 1490's left a mark on Michelangelo's emerging spirituality. Michelangelo's struggle with the Reformist ideals of Savonarola and his obligation to his patrons and the existing order produced a tension that left an indelible mark on his life and work. This duality of experience can be identified in many of his greatest works and is at the heart of much of their energy and vitality (e.g., the Pieta; Moses). Savonarola preached ascetic and apocalyptic tirades against the Medici Court and its material and political excesses and achieved great popular support. His excommunication in 1497 and his public burning in 1498, left a deep spiritual legacy that was to have a marked impact on Michelangelo and his contemporaries. The turmoil contributed to the fall of the Medicis and ultimately to Michelangelo's own departure from Florence.

In 1494 with the impending demise of the Medici Court, Michelangelo fled to Venice and finally to Rome. It was in Rome that he produced some of the masterpieces of Renaissance sculpture. The Pieta, with its masterly tension between strength and pity anticipated the great works to follow. To achieve such technical mastery of his medium at the age of twenty-one years is awesome and expresses the profound expanse of his genius. On his return to Florence in 1501, he undertook the massive project of David, which was to become a visual symbol of the Renaissance spirit. The image of the energetic Hebrew shepherd, youthful and aggressive, was fused with the Renaissance classical ideal of power, strength and dominance. The Renaissance ideal of humanism was expressed in the physical and psychological balance of the piece. Michelangelo was now identified as an artist who could visually articulate the Renaissance spirit.

Pope Julius II attempted to restore the authority of Rome, and he needed such an artisan to further his ends in making Rome the new imperial capital. He commissioned Michelangelo to make a tomb, which was to remain unfinished, then turned his interest to the construction of the grand new St. Peter's. Michelangelo returned to Florence but in 1508 was summoned to Rome to undertake the decoration of the vaults of the Sistine Chapel. The monumental project was to take Michelangelo four years to complete. The images of the hidden hands of God in the Sistine Chapel will be a major focus of this reflection.

With the death of Pope Julius II in 1513, Michelangelo continued his work on the tomb project, completing Moses and a number of slaves. There ensued two more frustrating contracts for the tomb and he left Rome for Florence in July 1516. He was to stay in Florence until September 1534 and in that time completed a number of architectural projects. In 1527 Rome was sacked by the troops of Emperor Charles V, but fortunately the great new ceiling frescoes of the Sistine Chapel survived the iconoclastic rampage. Michelangelo said that he had been protected by God's hand of providence throughout these troubled times.

When Michelangelo returned to Rome in 1534, the mood of Rome had changed from the heady days of Leo X. The Counter-Reformation was gaining momentum and there was great intellectual and spiritual ferment within the church. Michelangelo's close friend and spiritual confidant, Vittoria Colonna, the widow of the Marquis of Pescara who had been killed in the Battle of Pavia in 1525, gathered around her a group of reformers from within the Catholic Church. Cardinals Pole and Carafa and Michelangelo were some of Vittoria's closest associates. The Council of Trent later criticized her for her association with these cardinals. Michelangelo wrote sonnets to her and dedicated a large volume of drawings on Christian themes specifically to her honour. The cross-flow of ideas about spirituality, and particularly about grace and faith, are evident in their correspondence. She wrote to Michelangelo in 1538:

I already knew that in everything you follow the doctrine
of the Lord. I praise you for not painting for all the princes
who ask you to do so but for confining yourself to a
single work during your life as you have done.

(First Dialogue of Francisco d'Ollanda, 1538)

There is little doubt that Michelangelo's relationship with Vittoria was that of his spiritual confidant and that her encouragement fortified "his religious quest for God" (Besdine, 1985: 87). In turn, Michelangelo wrote:

As a faithful example to my vocation, beauty was given
to me at birth that is for me the lantern and mirror of
both arts...to ascent without grace is a vain thought.

(Salvini, 1978: 140)

Michelangelo was commissioned to complete the Sistine Chapel, the painting of which was to take another four years. The painting which was begun on April 10, 1536, was completed on November 18, 1541. His final works were painted from 1542 to 1550 and housed in the Pauline Chapel in Rome. He died in 1564 leaving a profound legacy of artistic and spiritual insight.

The Hands of God in the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

It is ironic that one of the greatest paintings of Western art was embarked upon reluctantly. Painting in fresh, wet plaster each day, perched high on scaffolding above the floor, Michelangelo took four years to fill the immense space of 5,800 square feet of the Sistine Chapel ceiling with the themes of creation and redemption. It has been suggested that rivalry from Bramante and Raphael promoted the idea that Michelangelo be engaged in such a taxing and problematic project. In 1508, Michelangelo agreed to undertake the project and alluded to his reluctance in a sonnet to Giovanni da Pistoia in 1501: "I am not in a good place, and I am not a painter".

Papal intentions and conceptions about the decoration of the ceiling were more limited than Michelangelo's final immense vision. When suggesting to the Pope that the scheme of twelve apostles be amended to a greater vision of creation and redemption, Michelangelo engaged in a typical Michelangelesque parody. The Pope asked why the scheme would be poor. The artist replied, "Because the apostles themselves were poor". The final grand scheme embraced by Michelangelo was one, which had a theological debt to Augustine. "*Quod Moyses velat Christi Doctrina revelat...*What Moses veils the doctrine of Christ reveals". The metaphorical interpretation of the ceiling has long been debated and several positions advanced. For example, Tolnay (1945:20) emphasized the Florentine Neoplatonic notion of movement from darkness to spiritual enlightenment, while Wind (1944:

210), stressed the Dominican typology that had its roots in the preaching of Savonarola. Harte (1950) saw it as more naturalistic Franciscan theology rather than Dominican. A reading that looks to the great themes of creation and redemption as reflected in a number of these traditions is a helpful reading which parallels the ascent of the Individual from darkness (fallen creation to redemption) which is derived from Neoplatonic ideals.

Michelangelo presented the themes of redemption within the context of the Jewish prophets who represented the Jewish witness of the coming salvation and the oracles or Sybils who represented the Gentile witness of the coming light (Seymore, 1972). This two-fold witness expressed a Renaissance symmetry. Michelangelo carefully constructed a unity of images and ideas that are almost beyond human imagination. The vast panels, from Genesis sweep across the ceiling and are impossible to view in their entirety from any one vantage point. There is an interesting parallel with the theme Michelangelo was seeking to portray...the parts are not greater than the whole and yet the parts give unity to the whole.

Michelangelo reversed the chronological order of the Genesis story of creation and the individual heroes. His scheme is not fully appreciated today because the entrance to the Chapel has been altered from its original location. The scheme started with Noah and the deluge and moved toward the divine source, God as creator. While this Neoplatonic ascension from darkness to light was a popular theme, Michelangelo started with the human individual. In The deluge, images of the human condition, judgement and sin are confronted. The flow from Noah at the entrance of the Chapel to creation at the centre represented a flow of ideas as well as a significant flow of scale. The move towards The creation was also a move from the confusion of despairing small figures in the flood scenes to grandiose giants of Adam and God. Gould (1980: 6) argues that, although there is visual compensation of scale in Michelangelo's scheme, there is also a growth and expansion of vision as he moves towards the creator.

The flat panels of the Genesis saga create a tension with the supporting figures of the prophets and sybils. The sculptural nature of the sybils and prophets underlies the substance and classical allusion of their status (Seymore, 1980). There is also direct illusion of space. The Genesis story sets in motion an idea that these panels are flat and fixed in time and space. They are as follows:

(i) The drunkenness of Noah

(ii) The deluge or flood

- (iii) The sacrifice of Noah
- (iv) The Fall and expulsion from the Garden
- (v) The creation of Eve
- (vi) The creation of Adam
- (vii) Separating the earth from the waters
- (viii) The creation of the sun and moon
- (ix) God separating light from darkness.

The last five panels have ten representations of a hand of God.

The word hand in the Old Testament has a wide variety of uses. It has two Hebrew roots, Yad and Kap, one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and which is the cup shape “)” of a right hand. Hands are often expressions of power and intention. The grammar of hands in both the bible and the art of Michelangelo reveal a rich area for imagination, contemplation, meditation and worship. The first representation of the hand of God is the most familiar. This reflection encourages the viewer to look at God's other hand and attend to the textual reflections.

The Hand of God and the Creation of Adam

The Creation of Adam (Fig. 1) has become a universal expression of the creation ideal. The creative act of God was conceived of as a large, dynamic, almost abstract composition and yet the visual forces within the composition direct the elements to a point of profound tension between Adam's and God's fingers. The dynamic force of God, who is surrounded by his hosts, sweeps earthward while Adam, the individual man of the earth, listlessly raises his arm to await the divine energy of the divine breath of life and power. This creative masterpiece was painted in only three days, as detected by the fresco joins. Recent cleaning of the frescoes has enabled conservators to establish the daily work patterns of the artist.

The clichéd image of the hand of God reaching across the space-time divide evokes one of the abiding images of the Western imagination. What is the significance of God's right hand? Where is his left hand and what is it doing? Who are the other people in heavenly hosts?

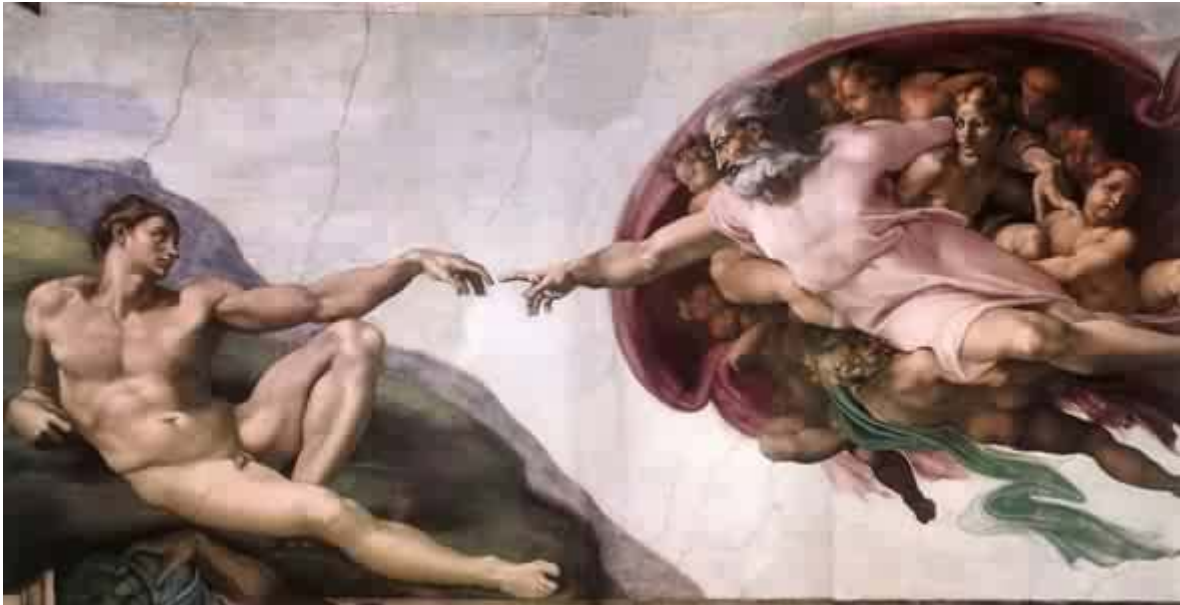


Figure 1. The Creation of Adam (Genesis 1.26a, 2.7.)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

The Creating, Forming, Blessing and Relational Hand of God.

Michelangelo represents God's right hand “forming” of the man in active creation, as divine designer, artist and creator shaping his creation for a purpose. The right hand of God is that of creator or potter. Isaiah 29. 16 “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, He did not make me?” Further, in the bible to touch a person's hand was to communicate authority, blessing and power. The right hand was more significant than the left in this respect as represented in the patriarchal blessing of Israel in Genesis 48. 14. “But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, thought he was the younger”. God reaches out with his right hand blessing and bestowing on Adam his authority as his regent made in His image. Man is of infinite value and worth to his creator.

What of the left hand of God? Michelangelo's creator God has another hand. Part of the magician's craft is to have you focus on the one dramatic flourish with one hand while the other goes about the real business. How easy it is to miss seeing the other hand of God. What is He up to? The great creator embraces a group of ten figures. His left arm is wrapped around a female figure and his had rests on the shoulder of a

child. Who does Michelangelo represent in these figures? Is the female figure in the divine embrace Sophia “wisdom”, Mary, Eve or Lilith? Further, God's hand embraces a child, who could be the Christ Child. Does the child's position, scale, and touching contact with God show this as his son?

The great creation and redemption narrative is encapsulated in the drama. God creates man but also in his wisdom and mercy provides man's Saviour.

Psalm 103. 13-14, 19-21 imagines Yahweh as the God who forms us from the earth and loves us as his children.

As a father has compassion on his children,

So the Lord has compassion on those who fear him:

For he knows how we are formed,

He remembers that we are dust...

The Lord has established his throne in heaven,

And his kingdom rules over all.

Praise the Lord you his angels,

You mighty ones that do his bidding, who obey his word.

Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts,

You his servants, who do his will.

Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion

Praise the Lord, O my soul.

Prayer

You are God and we praise you; you are the Lord and we acclaim you;

You are the eternal Father; all creation worships you.

To you all angels, all powers of heaven,

Cherubim and seraphim sing in endless praise,
Holy holy holy Lord, God of power and might;
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Te Deum (Fourth Century prayer)

The Hand of God and the Creation of Eve

The Creation of Eve (Fig. 2) shows Adam lying in sleep. Eve emerges from his side and God is portrayed as the ancient of days raising his right open hand drawing Eve towards himself. Does he as some suggest regret of his creative act? Does he act as an "unwilling creator" (Murray, 1980:83)? The Lord God Yahweh looks Eve squarely in the eyes and their hands create a dynamic tension. Is Eve asking for blessing or thanking her Creator?



Figure 2. The Creation of Eve (Genesis 2. 21 – 23.)

So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took part of man's side and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made woman from the part he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The Attentive, Blessing, Imminent, Open and Welcoming Hand of God

Michelangelo portrays the man asleep as the Lord God has an intimate conversation with the woman. Her hands are raised in supplication and gratitude while the right hand of God is extended in blessing. The space between these hands charts a very different dynamic to the relationship between the man and God in the following panel. God's hand is sympathetic and encouraging. It is more imminent and relational than the distant Adam God stretch. While Eve is speaking to God He cups his "kapa" hand as the attentive listener. Here is visual metaphor of the "I thou" God. God is open, welcoming and attentive to our conservation. The grammar of this hand of God celebrates an attentive, blessing, immanent, welcoming and relational God.

Psalm 145. 13b-18. celebrates Yahweh the creator with an open hand attentive to his creation..

The Lord is faithful to all his promises

And loving towards all he has made.

The Lord upholds all those who fall

And lifts up all who are bowed down.

The eyes of all look to you,

And you give them food at the proper time.

You open your hand

And satisfy the desires of every living thing.

The Lord is righteous in all his ways

And loving towards all he has made.

The Lord is near to all who call on him;

He hears their cry and saves them.

Reflection

The one thing that matters is that we always say yes to God whenever we experience him.

(Julian of Norwich - *Revelations of the Divine Love*).

The Hands of God Separating Earth from Water

God Separating Earth from Water (Fig. 3) has God coming from the sky and sweeping down to the earth in one swirling motion and demonstrating his terrestrial provenance and power.



Figure 3. God Separating Earth from Water. (Genesis 1. 9 - 10.)

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place and let dry ground appear". And it was so. God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

The Balancing, Present Hands of God Celebrate the Goodness of Creation

In the ancient world of Israel, gods were thought to be geographic specific. The Semitic belief was that the sea deeply personified the powers that fought against deity. The story of creation affirms that the God of Israel is the creator of both the seas and the land.

Psalm 95. 3 – 5.

For the Lord our God is the great God

The great king above all gods

In his hand are the depths of the earth,

and the mountain peaks belong to him.

The sea is his, for he made it,

And his hands formed the dry land.

As such Michelangelo represents the hands of God in truth balancing and brooding over his creation. Ecologists celebrate the balance of the natural environment. Here God's hands represent the balance of the natural terrestrial world. God's hands are open to the goodness of the creation.

Psalm 96.9 – 13.

Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness

Tremble before him all the earth...

Let the sea resound, and all that is in it;

Let the fields be jubilant and everything in them

Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy;

They will sing before the Lord,

for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness

And the peoples in his truth

Prayer

Praise be my Lord for our mother the earth,

who sustains us and keeps us
and brings forth various fruits
and flowers of many colours and grass.

Praise be my Lord for our sister water,
who is very serviceable to us
and humble and precious and clean.

Canticle of the Sun (St Francis of Assisi 1181 – 1226).

The Hands of God and the Creation of the Sun and Moon

The Creation of the Sun and Moon (Fig.4) has God stretching forth his hands in creative might. The semi-circular sun glows with light and radiates across the face of the hosts surrounding him. The moon is in darkness and like the sun only partially shown. The force of God's pointing hands sets these bodies in their orbit. What did Michelangelo know of the Copernican universe?



Figure 4. The Creation of the Sun and Moon. (Genesis 1. 14, 18b)

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years". And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and morning.

The Hands of God Directing, Sustaining and Seasoning

In the cultures surrounding ancient Israel the sun and the moon were worshipped as deities in their own right. The Phenicians worshipped the sun as Baal, the Moabites as Chemosh and the Ammorites as Moloch. They conceived the sun as the king of heaven and the moon as his queen who they called Astarte. In Israel Yahweh was a god who had made both the sun and the moon and kept them in their circuits.

Psalm 148. 1 - 3. says,

Praise the Lord

Praise the Lord from the heavens

Praise him from the heights above.

Praise him all his angels,

Praise him all his heavenly hosts.

Praise him sun and moon,

Praise him, all you shining stars.

The right hand of God directs the sun into its orbit. The left hand directs the moon. The space between the two is filled with God who is also conceived as the sustaining God. The cycle of the seasons and the weather are all due to the seasoning God whose hands care for his creation.

Prayer

O most high, Almighty, good Lord God,

To you belong praise, glory, honour,

And all blessing!

Praise be my Lord God for all his creatures,

especially for our brother the sun,

Who brings us the light;

fair is he and shines with a very great splendour;

O Lord, he signifies you to us.

Praise be my Lord for our sister the moon,

and for the stars, which he has set clear in the lovely heaven...

Praise and bless the Lord, and give thanks to him

and serve him with great humility.

Canticle of the Sun (St Francis of Assisi 1181 – 1226).

The Hands of God Separating Light from Darkness

In *God Separating Light from Darkness* (Fig. 5) Michelangelo brings his symphony to a climax of an encounter with a God who fills the infinite cosmos. Of all the figures of God, this one metaphorizes the transcendent otherness of God far removed from the individual. For Michelangelo and his Neoplatonic vision, the whole line of the previous panels sweeps up to hands counter-set against the light and dark to a bold conclusion. Here is a transcendent God far above the individual.



Figure 5. The Creation of the Sun and Moon. (Genesis 1. 3 – 5.)

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from darkness. God called the light “day” and the darkness “night”. And there was evening and morning – the first day.

The Transcendent, Mysterious and Eternal Hands of God

The figure of God is the largest image of the divine creator viewed in a transcendent elevation, swirling with an “s” of the scarlet robe attracting the viewer's attention. The head of the creator is viewed from underneath with the white of the beard linking with the light filling the dark void. The right hand of God is light against the confusion of the formless and empty, dark space of the cosmos. The divine creator rolls back the empty darkness with a cupped hand as if opening the curtain of the universe revealing the mystery of light. The left hand of God is dark against the cosmic explosion of time and space. The narratives of science provide us with the ideas of relativity and the mysterious ways in which light, time and space all came into existence at the birth of the universe. Physicists investigate the smallest clouds of matter and speculate about the moment and nature of the big bang seeking to unlock the mysteries of the universe. Michelangelo represents the hands of God separating the mystery of the universe.

Psalm 104.1 –2.

Praise the Lord O my soul.

O Lord my God you are very great;

You are clothed with splendour and majesty.

He wraps himself in light as with a garment;

He stretches out the heavens like a tent.

Psalm 139. 5b – 12

You have laid your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,

Too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there...

Even your there your hand will guide me,

Your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"

Even the darkness will not be dark to you;

The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Prayer

You, O eternal Trinity, are a deep sea,

into which the more I enter the more I find,

and the more I find the more I seek.

The soul cannot be satisfied in your abyss.

For she continually hungers after you,

the eternal Trinity,

desiring to see you with the light of your light...

Catherine of Siena 1347 – 1386.

The Hands of God in the Last Judgement.

When Michelangelo returned to Rome in 1543 to complete the Sistine Chapel decoration, Rome was a different place. The growing Counter Reformation mood was brooding. Pope Paul III chose the theme of judgement, which contrasted the humanism of the Renaissance agenda.

In *The Last Judgement* (Fig. 6), the theme of judgement was much more appropriate for a Medieval mindset than that of the Neoplatonic Renaissance man. Michelangelo, now in his sixties, undertook this expressive masterpiece and, in doing so, dealt with the universal themes of creation and redemption. The fluid structure of this fresco, which fills the entire back wall of the Sistine chapel, defies classical order. In fact, the cornices and lateral walls penetrate into the fresco itself. The spectator views the painting as a whole. The chaos of the human self reigns. The turmoil of the judgement has Christ as the Son of Man proclaiming law, judgement and condemnation. Mary hides covering behind Christ while figures are being dragged down to hell in torment.



Figure 6. *The Last Judgement*. (Matthew 25. 31 – 36.)

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. And all nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,

I was a stranger and you invited me in,

I needed clothes and you clothed me,

I was sick and you looked after me,

I was in prison and you came to visit me'.



Figure 7. Detail Son of Man in The Last Judgement.

The Dispassionate, Powerful, Judging Hands of the Son of Man

Michelangelo's judging "Son of Man" stands at the centre of the chaotic division between the right and the left, the bliss of heaven above and the horror of hell below. Christ's right hand of judgement is raised as an umpire condemning the accused. The whole notion of judgement seems anachronistic belonging to a pre-modern imagination. At the beginning of the 21st century our imaginations are shaped by sports highlights of cricket and baseball matches compressed into twenty seconds of outs with umpires raising hands in condemning judgment. One senses that these

hands are not raised in raging condemnation but in true justice. One of tenants of the Apostles Creed is that Jesus will judge the living and the dead. The hands of the judging Son of Man are powerful. Michelangelo fills the space between each hand with three elements. The axis of Christ's hands form the vertical axis of a cross. The horizontal axis flows from the hands and face of Mary pleading for mercy and the face of Christ with a truthful downward gaze across a scared side to the flayed skinned figure to the lower left. The point that Michelangelo is making is that the story of redemption, that is (the death and suffering of Christ) makes the judgement possible and at the same time unavoidable. The scar in the side of the judge's body qualifies him to judge those who have fed the hungry, given the thirsty a drink, taken in the stranger, clothed the poor, cared for the sick and visited those in prison.

Where did Michelangelo place himself in this paradigm? After a life of unparalleled achievement of the highest Renaissance ideals, he portrayed himself as the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew (Fig.8). This radical interpretation by Michelangelo underpinned the great battleground of personal redemption under the gaze of the judging Christ. Here is cosmic disorder and order on a grand scale. Here is a universe and the self in need of salvation, not by Neoplatonic reordering but by redemption through grace. The veiled widow, who is behind St. Laurence, is looking with pity at Michelangelo's remains. It may well have been a portrait of Vittoria Colonna.



Figure 8. Detail, St. Bartholomew.

Romans 7. 21 – 24

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me prisoner of the law of sin at work in my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

The empty, hollow hands of Michelangelo

Of all the hands, these are the most poignant hands of the frescoes. These hands are the hands of the artist aware that in spite of his achievements, his own personal need for a redemptive embrace. Michelangelo wrote in his sonnets about this personal struggle. His hands are hollow and wretched in the gaze of the judging Son

of Man. As I write this reflection I reflect on the words of the Son of Man (Matt 25. 43) "I was stranger (refugee) and you did not invite me in". I identify with the empty, hollow hands of Michelangelo. We all have failed to live according to the law of love.

Prayer

O Son of God, do a miracle for me, and change my heart...

Tadhg Og O Huiginn 1448

The Hands of God in the Pauline Chapel.

Perhaps the least known of all Michelangelo's frescoes are those in the Pauline Chapel. This Chapel serves as the private Papal Chapel within the Vatican, and as such, has little public access. Pope Paul III built the Chapel in 1537. He intended Michelangelo to paint Paul and Peter in Papal authority modes. This was a key concern in the Counter-Reformation papacy. Pope Paul III conceived Peter being handed the keys of papal authority (Murray, 1980: 167). Again Michelangelo, the master of paradox, rearranged the focus to create a final crucial statement that summarised the resolution of the spiritual and visual dilemmas of the Sistine Chapel. The choice of the two martyred apostles, the founders of the church, was thought to be an appropriate one for the Pope's own chapel. In 1550, Vasari indicated that the subject of the presentation of the keys to St. Peter was to be central. The subsequent development by Michelangelo seemed to be an important personal statement about creation and redemption.

The Conversion of Saul (Fig.9) had been depicted for many centuries. The risen Christ confronts Saul the persecutor. The flash of lightening striking the blinded Saul cut through a huge circular composition. While those around try to flee, Saul with long white beard and open mouth is helpless. There is a harmony between the figures and the landscape, the spiritual and the temporal. Critics have recognised "the virtues of ancient Italian frescoes" (De Tolnay, 1975: 65).

In this work, there is a new colour sense. Gone is the heavy expressionist over-painting of the judgement. Here is light, warmth and anticipation of a dramatic acceptance of self in search of salvation: The conversion of Paul marks a theological and visual watershed for Michelangelo. Here is God's work of grace, a "mystical contact between God and man" (Salvini, 1978: 143). Here is a profound mystery of union between heaven and earth, linked by the shaft of light shining from Christ's person.



Figure 9. The Conversion of Saul. (Acts 26. 12 – 18.)

I was on going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light shining from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads'. Then I asked, 'Who are you Lord?' 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, the Lord replied...I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you...I will rescue you...sending you to them to open their eyes, and turn them from darkness to light...so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me".

The Redeeming, Imminent Gracious Hands of the Risen Christ

These hands mark the climax of the grammar of Gods hands in Michelangelo. The Son of Man encounters another Adam. The right hand of the risen Jesus is open in the shaft of light brighter than the mid-day. The left hand is pointing to the witness of the saints and directs the ellipse of the compositional sweep bringing earth and heaven together. The right hand bears the scar of a redeeming sacrifice. The space between the raised hand of Saul and the open hand of Christ is the axis on which all-else

turns. The face of the fallen Saul is said to be a self-portrait of the aged Michelangelo. To 'ascend without grace is vain glory'.

Ephesians 1. 18 – 21.

I pray that your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...Which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Prayer

Take, Lord, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will.

You have given me all that I have, all that I am,

and I surrender all to your divine will,

that you dispose of me.

Give me only your love and your grace.

With this I am rich enough, and I have no more to ask Amen.

Ignatius Loyola 1491 -1556



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