

Who is Matthew? Caravaggio and the Question of the Call

This summer, I had the unexpected joy of viewing Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew* in San Luigi dei Francesi. Despite its fame, it occupies an unassuming position in the church. The Contarelli chapel holds three paintings of Matthew's life: his calling, martyrdom, and inspiration. The *Inspiration of St. Matthew* is placed over the altar beneath a lunette window, whose sunlight inspired the dramatic illumination unifying all three paintings.

To the left, a strong directional light mirrors the chapel's illumination in the dark room of the *Calling of St. Matthew*. It falls on tax collectors and aligns with Jesus's gaze and outstretched arm, with Peter's hand echoing Christ's gesture. Jesus and Peter wear first-century robes with bare feet, but the tax

collectors wear flashy attire of Caravaggio's own day: colorful doublets, feathered velvet berets, and hose. To the congregation of San Luigi, these figures would have looked like prosperous men from their own city whose wealth came from dubious transactions. The tense man in front, reaching for his sword, adds an element of bravado. For a modern equivalent, think of Jesus walking into the brokerage office in *The Wolf of Wall Street* where success is built on moral compromise.

Caravaggio makes Matthew ambiguous. In the other two paintings in this chapel, Matthew is portrayed as a bearded man, making the bearded figure here a plausible candidate.

In this reading, Christ's words, "Follow me," seem to hang in the air the moment before Matthew answers the call. Startled, he points to himself in disbelief, "Me?" He is poised between his former life and new mission.

Another reading identifies the bearded man as pointing toward the young, unaware figure, asking, "Him?" In this interpretation, the drama of conversion is suspended. Light falls on the faces of



Caravaggio, The Calling of St. Matthew, 1599-1600. San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

Matthew's companions while his head remains lowered, absorbed in counting the money, his face still in shadow. The tension of conversion waits for him to lift his gaze to meet Christ's.

Both readings leave the same question unresolved. What happens after the call? Caravaggio's painting doesn't answer this question, but scripture does. The parable of the two sons suggests an answer (Matt. 21:28-31). The father asks his two sons to work in the vineyard. One says yes but does not go. The other says, "I won't," but later goes.

The parable teaches that conversion is revealed not in words alone, but in the willingness to act."

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Adult Ministries Stop by the Ministries Fair on September 13

All are invited to stop by Hanahan Hall after the 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. services on Sunday, September 13, to learn about our outreach programs, education opportunities, and much more. If you've been looking for a way to get involved at Grace, that's where you'll find it! .