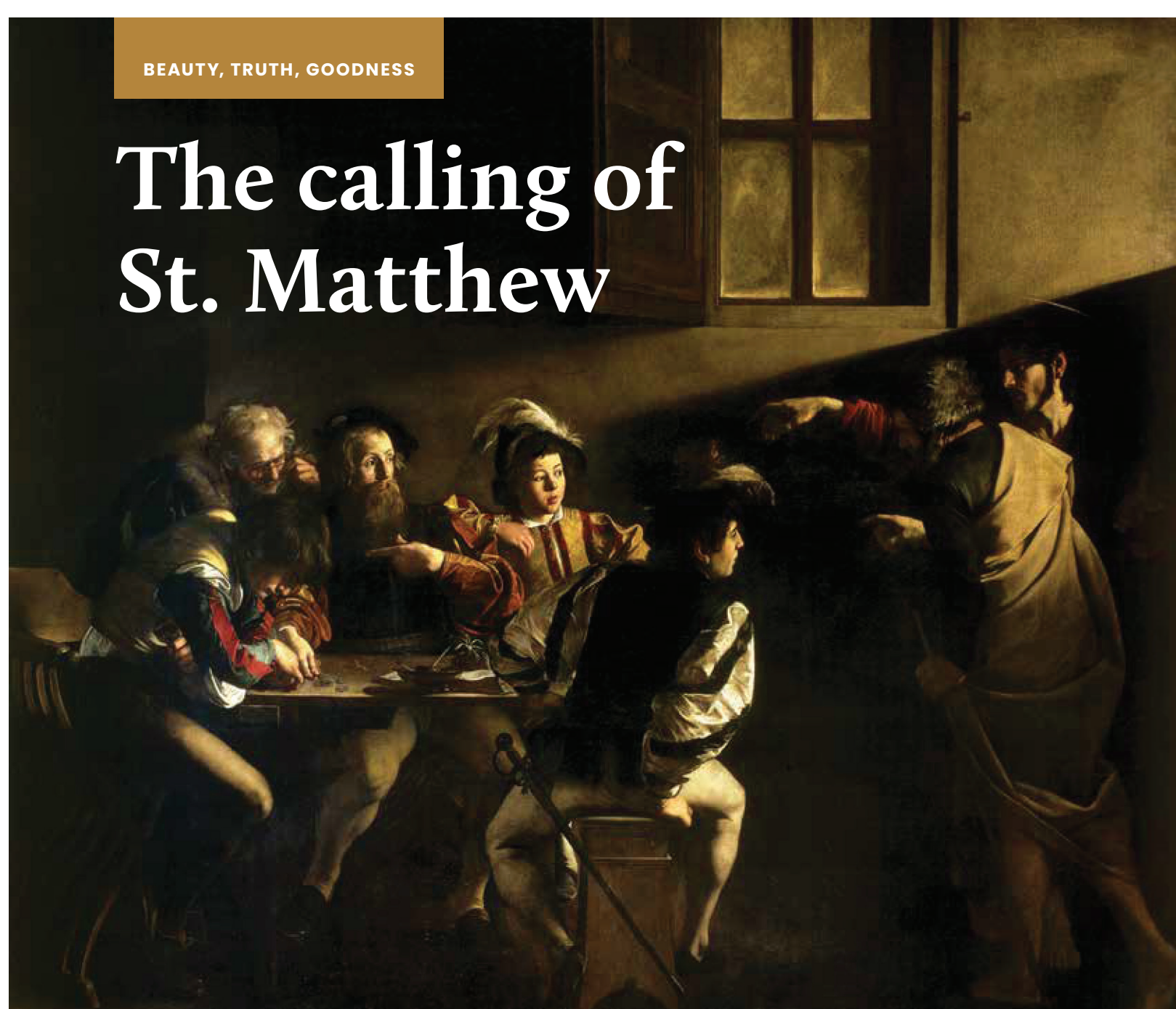


# The calling of St. Matthew



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**T**he French national parish of Rome (San Luigi dei Francesi) contains three priceless paintings by Michelangelo Caravaggio (1571–1610) known collectively as the Matthew Cycle. The three paintings depict, respectively, the calling of St. Matthew, his writing of the Gospel that bears his name and his martyrdom. Although Caravaggio was not a theologian, he had a strong grasp of the Catholic faith. This brief article highlights some of the theological meaning conveyed in “The Calling of St. Matthew” (1599–1600), based on the episode’s depiction in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

## ATTIRE OF THE CHARACTERS

Notice that the Lord and St. Peter (next to Jesus) are dressed in vesture commonly found in the first century. Meanwhile, St. Matthew and his companions at the customs post wear attire common to the 16th century. Here, Caravaggio is telling us that while the calling of St. Matthew took place once in history, the Lord is still calling contemporary “Matthews” to follow him.

## LIGHT THROUGH THE CROSS

Caravaggio was a master of the painting technique known as *chiaroscuro*, which juxtaposes light and darkness for effect. The contrast is symbolic of the contrast between good and evil, spiritual

enlightenment and darkness, and truth and falsehood. Notice that St. Matthew is receiving spiritual enlightenment from Jesus. That light passes alongside a nearby window that contains a cross, which is perhaps indicative of St. Matthew's future martyrdom.

### ST. PETER

Notice where St. Peter stands: in the folds of Jesus's garments. This evokes the idea that Christ and the Church (represented by St. Peter) are one. It also demonstrates that vocations are not just private invitations. Rather, they always occur in the context of a wider ecclesial community. Peter's extended right hand reminds us that Christ calls His disciples through the Church.

### JESUS' RIGHT HAND

Michelangelo Caravaggio was named after the more famous Michelangelo Buonarroti of Sistine Chapel and "Pietà" fame. Many art historians believe that Jesus' extended right hand was Caravaggio's homage to Michelangelo Buonarroti's "Creation of Adam," which is found on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In that fresco, God the Father creates Adam. In this painting, Jesus "re-creates" St. Matthew by calling him to conversion.

### MEN AND BOYS ALONGSIDE ST. MATTHEW

St. Matthew is surrounded by four male characters: two men (one young and one old) and two boys. Notice that the boys pay attention to Jesus and St. Peter, while the men are focused on their money. This juxtaposition of youth and age may be Caravaggio's way of telling us that it is far easier to follow the Lord if one has a childlike disposition of wonder and dependency, versus an older person's disposition of self-sufficiency. Notice, too, that the oldest man (next to St. Matthew) wears spectacles (symbolic of myopia or shortsightedness) as he focuses upon his money. Here, we are reminded of how fleeting material pleasure can be and that our focus should be upon Jesus, not our financial security.

### ST. MATTHEW

St. Matthew's posture is remarkable. His countenance and left hand reveal shock and surprise at Jesus' call. He cannot fathom being called to discipleship, given that he was considered a public enemy of the Jews. And yet, the Lord chooses to make St. Matthew one of his apostles and evangelists. St. Matthew's right hand (emblematic of security) is still grasping onto money. It seems as if Caravaggio has attempted to capture the very moment of St. Matthew's conversion. He is in a liminal space between his former life and his new vocation in Christ. ■

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