



The Solemnity of Christ the King and Michelangelo's The Last Judgement



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Tourists and pilgrims to Rome anticipate visiting St. Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Museums. The terminus for the Vatican Museums is the world-renowned Sistine Chapel, which contains the subject of this article's reflection: Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement*. It is an appropriate piece of art to consider as the Church nears the Solemnity of Christ the King, which evokes many of the themes taken up in the fresco. Michelangelo executed the work between 1536 and 1541. Visitors are bedazzled by the sheer size of the fresco (nearly 43 square feet) and by the cornucopia of colors Michelangelo employed in his depiction of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46).

The fresco is centered around the dominant figure of Christ, who returns in glory to judge the living and the dead at the end of the world. His calm and imperious gesture commands attention and placates the surrounding figures, many of whom are agitated. The whole painting seems to rotate in wide, slow motion, in which all the figures are involved, excluding the figures in the two upper lunettes. Here, groups of angels bear the symbols of the Passion—trophies of Christ's victory over sin and eternal death.

1 To the Lord's right is the Blessed Virgin Mary, who turns her head in a gesture of resignation. She realizes that she can no longer intercede for her spiritual children but only await the result of her Son's judgement.

2 The saints and the elect, arranged around Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, also anxiously await the verdict. Some of them can be easily recognized, bearing their instruments of torture: St. Peter with the two keys; St. Lawrence with the gridiron; St. Bartholomew with a scalpel and his own skin (which is usually recognized as a self-portrait of Michelangelo); St. Catherine of Alexandria with the cogwheel; and St. Sebastian kneeling

and holding arrows. In the center of the lower section are the angels of the Apocalypse who awaken the dead to the sound of long trumpets.

3 On the left (Christ's right side), the elect recover their bodies as they ascend towards heaven.

4 On the right (Christ's left side), angels and devils fight over the damned as they are cast into hell. One figure within this section writhes in utter agony knowing his impending fate. This creates a sense of urgency towards repentance.

5 & 6 At the bottom of the painting, Charon (the fabled ferryman from Greek mythology) swings an oar, forcing the damned to disembark from his boat and face the infernal judge, Minos, whose body is wrapped in the coils of a serpent. These are references and a tribute to Michelangelo's fellow-Florentine, Dante Alighieri, and his *Inferno* within the *Divine Comedy*.

Acclaimed as it is, *The Last Judgement* has not been without controversy. Upon the fresco's unveiling, the Papal Master of Ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena, complained about the inappropriateness of the many nude figures in the original work. In response, the Congregation of the Council of Trent voted to have some of the figures covered with *braghe* (pants). These figures are known to art critics as the *braghettone*. Michelangelo resisted this intervention and painted da Cesena's face onto Minos's body as revenge.

Spiritually, *The Last Judgement* reminds viewers that in this life, man lives under God's mercy. When the world ends, he will live under His justice. While many contemporary pieces of art and music refer to this event as *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath), Michelangelo chose to depict both dimensions of the end times: the just will be saved and the damned will receive their punishment. Both realities are held in dynamic tension but never in conflict. The triumph of Christ the King, judge of the living and the dead, is echoed in the liturgical acclamation: "Through Him, and with Him, and in Him, ... all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever!" ■



"If we are dazzled as we contemplate the Last Judgement by its splendor and its terror, admiring on the one hand the glorified bodies and on the other those condemned to eternal damnation, we understand too that the whole composition is deeply penetrated by a unique light and by a single artistic logic: the light and the logic of faith that the Church proclaims, confessing: 'We believe in one God ... maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.'"

— ST. JOHN PAUL II¹

¹ John Paul II, "Homily for the Celebration of the Unveiling of the Restorations of Michelangelo's Frescos in the Sistine Chapel," (Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, April 8, 1994), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19940408_restauri-sistina.html.