

Maundy Thursday 2022: *The Last Supper* & The Lord's Supper
Exodus 12:1-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35
April 14, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Cenacolo is the name the Italians give to the da Vinci masterpiece we call *The Last Supper*. You know, the one that looks like Jesus and the apostles are sitting at the head table at a wedding reception, all seated on one side of the table, facing us. Well, sort of facing us, because everyone is in profile except for our Lord. *Cenacolo* is like our English word *cenacle*, which means an upper room used for dining, like the upper room where Jesus had His last meal with the apostles, and the upper room where the disciples gathered after the Lord's ascension, and the Holy Spirit descended on them like tongues of flame.

The Last Supper isn't a piece of art we can hope will go on tour and make its way to the US. It's a mural painted on a wall and it definitely can't be packed up and shipped anywhere. That made me kinda sad when I was on sabbatical in France a couple years ago and Pastor Mark, Kristiane and I visited an exhibit at the Louvre celebrating the 500th anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci's death. We saw many beautiful things he created, but not the original *Last Supper*, just a smaller copy of it by one of his contemporaries. I thought, "Someday I want to see the real thing...." And about a month ago I did!

In March I was standing in awe before *The Last Supper* in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan and I was thinking of being with you in our Holy Trinity sanctuary on this Maundy Thursday, the beautiful day in our church year when we remember the **Last** Supper that became the **first** Lord's Supper. Christ coming to be with us in the consecrated Bread and Wine, the Sacrament of Holy Communion, is a **mystical** gift of God. The survival of da Vinci's artwork, *The Last Supper*, was described to us as a **miracle**.

A few years after Columbus sailed to America, da Vinci began to paint his masterpiece. He worked on it from 1495-1498. Most artists applied their paint to wet plaster. Da Vinci chose to use tempera paints on dry plaster, probably so he could go back afterward and tweak his work. That technique failed the test of time; less than 70 years later Giorgio Vasari wrote that it was "in such a poor state that all one can make out is a shiny splotch."¹ Environment played into the deterioration of the painting, too. It

decorates the wall of a refectory, a monastic dining room, so in addition to the fact that lack of sun kept the north wall moist, the steam of hot food and the breath of many diners made the indoor air humid. It didn't help that in the 1800's Napoleon's troops, including their horses, made the refectory their bunk room. The biggest problem of all, though, was the bombing of the monastery in August, 1943. The refectory was left with only 3 walls standing. The miracle that the Milanese cite is that those 3 remaining walls didn't collapse, and the sandbags which had been piled very high in front of *The Last Supper* and *The Crucifixion*, its companion mural on the opposite wall, did their job and protected the paintings.

Standing there and thinking of the devastation which was wrought on Milan and which **could** have been wrought on all that magnificent artwork, I found myself angry with the Nazis for the bombing. Then I realized: it was we, **the Allies**, who bombed Milan and other cities in Italy! Mussolini was in cahoots with Hitler. It was the Allies against the Axis powers. I felt silly and definitely humbled when I remembered that. When it comes to war and when it comes to life, none of us has clean hands. We're hearing the same thing out of Ukraine: Russian soldiers are guilty of terrible things, but Ukrainian soldiers have some marks against them, too. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This is why we need a Savior. This is why we thank Heaven that we have a Savior.

Our Lord Jesus is the only calm presence in da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Most of the apostles are jabbering to their neighbors, "Who among us is going to betray him?" Judas is clutching his money bag with one hand and turning toward Peter, who is holding a knife as he presses John to ask the Lord, "Who **is** it??" In the air is a cacophony of sound, and on the *The Last Supper* table are bread and wine. It was the custom of the Dominican friars who dined in that refectory to eat in silence. As they quietly enjoyed their meal did they gaze in awe on this depiction of the most famous Meal in human history, which gave birth to the holy Meal that feeds our souls? Or did they take the art, the food, the Sacrament, for granted as we might? The friars weren't any more immune to time pressure and other stressors than we are. At some point the bottom middle of the painting, including Jesus' feet, was eliminated to create a door, streamlining the delivery of food from the kitchen to the dining room!

Everywhere around us in the world there is a cacophony of sound; sometimes within us there is a cacophony of sound; and thankfully on this Table (the altar) are actual Bread and Wine. At times parts of us and parts of our lives start to deteriorate. Like da Vinci's mural over the centuries, we can attempt to rehabilitate ourselves and botch the job. Botched restorations of *The Last Supper* caused more damage than good. Thankfully, though, many replicas were made while it was still in pretty good shape, out of admiration, and out of fear that in time it would become unrecognizable. The most recent restoration took over 20 years: 1977-1999. *The Last Supper* doesn't look brand new, but it's magnificent nonetheless, and as close as we can get to da Vinci's original. The refectory-become-a-museum is now temperature-, light- and humidity-controlled and outfitted with super-duper filters to screen out dust and pollution. The number of visitors is strictly regulated. I wanted to sit down on a bench and gaze at it for a long time, but there are no benches and there are alarms that let tour guides know when their group must exit because the next group is approaching.

Thankfully there's no time limit (other than the length of our life) as we reflect on the mystical gift of Holy Communion with our Lord and with each other. The true miracle is that through Holy Communion we are rehabilitated spiritually; we receive the Lord's Body & Blood and He forgives our sins, time and again. Our paint may start to flake, our colors may dim, our outline may get a bit fuzzy. But we are made in the image of God, and by God's grace, sin may distort but not erase that likeness, as we keep coming back to the One who created, redeems and sanctifies us. The world's noise may deafen us at points, but in the Lord's presence, dwelling in His Word, receiving His Supper, in communion with our brothers and sisters, we find calm in the midst of the storm, humility to confess our sins, faith to believe that God forgives, and strength to live a life of faith active in love. In God's eyes, that is the true masterpiece: a life of faith active in love. Amen

¹Carlo Pedretti, Domenico Laurenza, Rodolfo Papa, Marco Pistoia, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper* (Milan: Giunti, 2020), p. 16.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham