

The Vintage Voice

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Il Cenacolo SPEAKS

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I am an Episcopal priest lately retired from full-time parish ministry. To celebrate this event, and in anticipation of our Silver Wedding Anniversary, my wife and I took the trip of our lives. We cruised the coast of Norway, then toured “the Best of Italy” last summer.

We viewed some of the most beautiful scenery in the world from the fjords of Norway to the Isle of Capri off the Amalfi Coast of Italy, taking in some of the greatest works of painting, sculpture, tapestry, and architecture of western civilization—including St. Peter’s and the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Michelangelo’s *David* and all four of his *Pietas*. But I was moved most by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Il Cenacolo*, “The Last Supper.”

This surprised me. As often as this work has been replicated, imitated, parodied and discussed, it had become little more than a religious cliché to me. In addition, the deterioration and defacement it has suffered since it was completed in 1498 has made it the worst-preserved of any like masterpiece. Most of the attempts at “restoration” have done more harm than good, until the last one, which took twenty years to complete. After going through two airlocks to stand before this painting, now perpetually bathed in scientifically calibrated light and air, I found the impact amazing!

I saw the piece for the first time and what I saw was the original Christian community in great conflict and pain.

Il Cenacolo is located in the refectory of *Santa Maria delle Grazie* Church in Milan. It was commissioned for the Dominican Order who built the church to decorate the north wall of the room where the monks ate their meals. (It is not in a church at all. I wouldn’t call it a religious painting in the strictest sense.) It covers the refectory wall from side to side and is life size.

The scale of the work and Leonardo’s genius with optics, design and perspective creates the illusion that Jesus and the twelve at table with him occupy the same space as the rest of the room. It’s as if Jesus and his friends are at another table in the refectory at a higher level. It must have been uncanny to eat in that hall when the painting was new; the sense that the monks were across the table from Jesus would have been inescapable. At times they may have felt as if they were participants in the drama portrayed. And what a high moment of drama it is.

In a dramatic departure from all prior renditions of the scene, Leonardo chose the moment of Jesus’ announcement, “One of you is going to betray me.” He captures the uniquely spontaneous response of each one present. Through facial expressions and body language, Leonardo reveals volumes about each disciple’s individual character, place and role in the community. However, as realistically as he depicts the interaction and feelings of the twelve, everything else—the table, chairs, dishes, glassware, food, and furnishings—are contemporary with his own time, the last years of the fifteenth and the first years of the sixteenth centuries.

Nor is the supper depicted as a typical Jewish Passover, which is what the meal was. Instead, it is the kind of meal that the monks who ate there would have recognized readily. The brilliance of the piece is not in its biblical or historical accuracy, but in how well Leonardo reveals that fellowship in the first throes of emotional distress. What makes the painting so timeless is how powerfully and personally it renders that small community of faith in turmoil, blame and self-searching. What makes this masterwork of the Renaissance so great for any Christian is what it says about us and our congregations as members of Christ's Body.

We are now the ones capable of betrayal, denial, disobedience, and hard-heartedness. We are the ones who chronically decry the specks of sawdust in the vision of our companions while overlooking the timber planks in our own eyes (Luke 6.41f). We are the ones who too often refuse to forgive as we have been forgiven. And we are the ones for whom Jesus established the meal which bears his name. We are the ones to whom Jesus continues to say — as he said then before announcing his impending betrayal — “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22.19)

Leonardo captured the instant in which the original Christian congregation began to break apart as each disciple experienced a very personal dis-integration. The process of communal and individual dissolution began but was never completed nor was the meaning of the meal which Jesus made his own that night grasped until they had gathered again. At the same table three days hence he came to them in his still-wounded yet resurrected flesh.

That was when they began to realize that nothing they had done or could do was beyond the reach of his forgiveness and redemption. He was the one by whom each and all could be reconciled to God and know a fullness of life beyond any deserving or expectation. That was when they began to realize it was at the table and through the food Jesus had made into a feast of his presence that anyone could bring the same sins, the same fears, the same concerns, distress and conflict they felt that night, which Leonardo da Vinci immortalized in a new way, and they could receive some measure of peace.

I left the dining hall of *Santa Maria delle Grazie* with a fuller appreciation of our Episcopal Church, Anglican Communion, Apostolic tradition and how long-standing the struggle among us has been to remain in fellowship with each other and the Lord. My encounter with the masterpiece was a moment of grace and more. It was an epiphany that made me more certain than ever that Jesus left us the sustenance, the table and the *koinonia* where, with Judas, we can bring our divided loyalties and greedy schemes to regain fidelity and purity of heart; where, with Peter, we can bring the phoniness and bravado that overlay our fear and insecurity to find honest faith and trust. The apostolic community at the Lord's Table is where, with James and John, we can bring our impatience and volatility to be granted quietness and calm; where, with Thomas, we can bring our bleak expectations and undying doubt to receive a new and buoyant hope for ourselves, for the Church, and for God's world.



David Clemons was ordained deacon and priest in 1963 and retired in 2002 after serving congregations in Oklahoma, Minnesota, Idaho, and California. He served in the Army Chaplain Corps and Reserve Components from '67-'90. In retirement he enjoys part-time ministry and freedom to travel with his wife Kathryn and hosts or visits their children and grandchildren.