



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF FIRST VESPERS ON THE OCCASION
OF THE 500th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE INAUGURATION OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL CEILING

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Sistine Chapel, Solemnity of All Saints
Wednesday, 31 October 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Venerable Brothers,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this Liturgy of First Vespers for the Solemnity of All Saints, we commemorate the act, now 500 years ago, by which Pope Julius II inaugurated the fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I thank Cardinal Bertello for the words which he addressed to me and I cordially greet all present.

Why should we remember this event in art history with a liturgical celebration? First of all because the Sistine Chapel is, by its nature, a liturgical hall, it is the *Cappella magna* of the Vatican Apostolic Palace. Moreover, because the artistic works that decorate it, especially the series of frescoes, find within the liturgy, so to speak, their living environment, the context in which they best express the fullness of their beauty, all the richness and poignancy of their meaning. It is as if, during the liturgical action, this symphony of figures came to life, certainly in a spiritual sense but also in an intrinsic aesthetic sense, for the perception of artistic form is a specifically human act and, as such, involves both the senses and the spirit. In short: the Sistine Chapel, contemplated in prayer, is even more beautiful, more authentic; all of its riches are revealed.

Here everything is alive, in contact with the Word of God everything resonates. We listened to the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the

living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...” (12:22-23). The author is addressing Christians and explains that for them the promises of the Old Testament have been fulfilled: a feast of communion with at its centre God and Jesus, the Lamb sacrificed and Risen (cf. vv. 23-24). The entire dynamic of promise and fulfillment is represented here on the long walls, the work of great Tuscan and Umbrian painters of the second half of the 15th century. And when the biblical text goes on to say that we have approached “the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (v. 23), our gaze rises to the Last Judgment by Michelangelo where the background, the blue of heaven, echoed in the mantle of the Virgin Mary, gives the light of hope to the whole vision, very dramatic. “*Christe, redemptor omnium, / conserva tuos famulos, / beatæ semper Virginis / placatus sanctis precibus*” — sung in the first verse of the Latin Hymn of this evening’s Vespers. And that is precisely what we see: Christ the Redeemer at the centre, crowned by his Saints, and beside him Mary, in an act of prayerful intercession, almost as if to mitigate his terrible judgment.

But tonight our attention is mainly drawn to the great fresco of the ceiling, that Michelangelo, commissioned by Julius II, accomplished in about 4 years, from 1508 to 1512. The great artist, by then famous for his masterpieces of sculpture, faced the task of painting more than a 1,000 square metres of plaster. And we can imagine that the effect it had on those who saw it finished for the first time must have been truly awe-inspiring. With this immense fresco that erupted in the history of Italian and European art — Wölfflin was to say in 1899 using a beautiful and celebrated metaphor — was something like a “*violento torrente montano portatore di felicità e al tempo stesso di devastazione*”, [surging mountain torrent bearer of happiness and at the same time devastation]: nothing remained the same as before.

Giorgio Vasari, in a famous passage of *The Lives*, writes in a most succinct way: “*Questa opera è stata ed è veramente la lucerna dell’arte nostra, che ha fatto tanto giovamento e lume all’arte della pittura, che ha bastato a illuminare il mondo*”, [This work has been and is truly the beacon of our art, that has done much good and given light to the art of painting, that was enough to illuminate the world].

Beacon, light, illuminate: Vasari uses these three words, words not far from the hearts of those present at the Celebration of Vespers on 31 October 1512. But it is not just the light that comes from the wise use of colour with a wealth of contrasts, or from the movement that animates Michelangelo’s masterpiece, but the idea that runs throughout the great ceiling: it is the light of God that illuminates these frescoes and the Papal Chapel as a whole. That light with its power conquers chaos and darkness to give life: in the creation and in the redemption. Indeed the Sistine Chapel tells this story of light, of liberation, of salvation. It speaks of God’s relationship with humanity. With Michelangelo’s talented frescoed ceiling, the gaze is led to review the message of the Prophets, to which are added the pagan Sybils awaiting Christ, back to the beginning of it all: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). With unique expressive intensity, the great artist draws God the Creator, his action, his power, to show clearly that the

world is not the product of darkness, chance, or senselessness, but comes from an Intelligence, from a Freedom, from a supreme act of Love. In that moment of contact between the finger of God and the finger of man, we perceive the point of contact between heaven and earth; in Adam God enters into a new relationship with his Creation, man is in direct relation with Him, he is called by Him, he is in the image and likeness of God.

Twenty years later, in the Last Judgment, Michelangelo concluded the great parabola of the journey of humanity, drawing our eyes to the fulfillment of the reality of this world and of mankind, to the final meeting with Christ, Judge of the living and the dead.

To pray this evening in the Sistine Chapel, surrounded by the history of God's journey with man, wonderfully represented in the frescoes above and around us, is an invitation to praise, an invitation to raise to the Creator God, the Redeemer, the Judge of the living and the dead, with all the Saints of Heaven, the words of the canticle in Revelation: "Amen. Hallelujah!... "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great"! ... "Hallelujah! ... Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory" (Rev. 19:4a, 5, 7a). Amen.