

Celebrating the Assumption



One of the blessings of our church is the large window in our south transept, a reproduction of Raphael's famous painting, known as the Sistine Madonna. Many art experts claim that the Sistine Madonna is the most beautiful painting in all the world. The word Sistine is a derivative of the word Sixtus. Most of us have heard of the Sistine Chapel, which was restored by Pope Sixtus IV in 1482 and thus bears his name. By the way, the chapel was dedicated on August 15, 1483 by Pope Sixtus IV during a Mass offered in honor of Our Lady of the Assumption. The word Sistine in the title of Raphael's Sistine Madonna refers to different Sixtus, in this case St. Sixtus II, who was elected pope in 257 and martyred the following

year during the persecutions of the Emperor Valerian. Raphael painted the Madonna for a monastery of Benedictine monks in Piacenza, Italy in 1513 or 1514. The home for these monks was a place called the Monastery of St. Sixtus, and it is for this reason that the painting is known today as the Sistine Madonna. Furthermore, given the devotion of the monks to St. Sixtus, they directed Raphael to include the saint's image in the painting. We see him positioned on the left in our window as he was in the original painting, the tiara, a symbol of his papal dignity, resting beneath him. The figure opposite St. Sixtus is St. Barbara. I have not been able to identify why she was chosen to be included in the painting. Researching her life, I found that she is the patron for protection against lightening strikes. I mentioned this at Mass nearly two weeks ago, on the day the lightening struck our church again. One of the parishioners gave me a small medal of St. Barbara, and I plan to give it to the workers who are restoring our towers, and ask them to bury it in the concrete at the top of our towers. It is time to invoke St. Barbara for protection against lightening strikes.

Back to the window, and the message Raphael was communicating in the way he painted the two saints that flank Mary and the child Jesus. Sixtus points outward from the clouds of heaven, from the celestial glory of eternal life, beseeching Mary and Jesus to cast their gaze upon the world, upon its inhabitants, upon us. St. Barbara looks down toward us, listening, as it were, ready to appeal to Christ and His Mother for us.

The painting, and our reproduction in stained glass is not simply a presentation of Mary holding the Child Jesus. True, Jesus is depicted as an infant, but there is more. Observe how he sits, with his legs crossed, his left hand gripping his lower leg, his right hand following the contours of his body, grasping the cloth in which

His Mother is holding him. This is a child of power, comfortable in his humanity, more majestic and kingly than his years would indicate. While the child rests comfortably on His Mother's arm, and intimately against her face, He does not appear eager about or impressed with the world upon which He gazes. His arms do not stretch out to embrace us. In the original painting, which our stained glass window does not fully replicate, the eyes of Jesus peer mysteriously at the world, judging it. His hair is partially blown back, as if caused by a tempest and darkness in the world.

Mary, on the other hand, is coming toward us, carrying her child in the perfection of His humanity, in the fullness of her humanity. Raphael has captured in the faces of Christ and Mary the unity of the Son and the Mother. Though one face is clearly that of a child and the other of a grown woman, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the form of the face, even the dimple of the chin present a resemblance, expressing both a biological and a personal unity. Placed next to each other, each partially hidden, the face of one complements the face of the other. From this we are invited to contemplate the path of the Christian life and the goal of eternal glory: those who abide in heaven have achieved the likeness of Christ.

Mary approaches us with confidence and strength. She is beautiful to behold, elegant in stature; she moves among the clouds of heaven, effortlessly, majestically, tenderly. Though the Son sits in judgment, Mary walks with confidence, the Mother of God, the Mother of us all. This truth of Mary's ministry and privilege is a source of hope for us all. Mary is in heaven with Christ, and like Him, possesses her human body. We believe it is transformed, like His. We believe it can manifest itself and disappear, like His. We have heard her speak, through the visionaries of our faith like the children of Fatima, and Bernadette

Soubirous of Lourdes. Truly sharing in eternal life. Truly at home in heaven in the body. She is the first among us to achieve this. She is the sign and the hope for us all.

The Dogma of Mary's bodily assumption into heaven was declared 60 years ago this year but the belief in this gift was widely held in the time of Raphael, as it had been from the earliest centuries of the Church. The Sistine Madonna is a picture of heavenly splendor and glory, and central to this mystery is the presence of the human body in eternal life. There the body of Christ is present. There the body of Mary joins Him. Perhaps it is the bodily assumption which Sixtus pleads for and Barbara humbly implores. One day it will be theirs; God willing, it will one day be ours. Likeness with Christ is what is required. Mary presents Him to us for this purpose, that through life and likeness with Him, we may overcome death through bodily resurrection and enjoy the splendor of heaven in the beauty and gift of our human body.