

We recognize Christ anew in each celebration of the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, as the celebrant blesses our bread. Through Caravaggio's powerful image, we hunger again for His attention and revelation.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), SUPPER AT EMMAUS, *1600-1602. Oil on canvas, 54 3/4" x 76 3/4". National Gallery of Art, London. Photo © National Gallery, London.*

Beckoning the Hungry

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

The artist Caravaggio included people from all levels of society in his paintings. Most scholars believe that he preferred the companionship of the more indigent in Rome to the company of his wealthy patrons. In this sentiment, he was in line with the contemporary teaching of Ignatius of Loyola and St. Philip Neri to identify with the poor.

For most of his life, Caravaggio himself was a poor wanderer. Much of what we know about him is from police documents that survive in the archives of Rome and Naples. The artist struggled with his piety and Catholicism. While working for some of the most pious individuals of the seventeenth century, he would shock their sensibilities with his methods. For instance, when he painted a reverent image of the Virgin Mary's death, he used a prostitute's corpse, which had been dragged from the Tiber River in Rome, as a model for Mary's dead body.

In less dramatic but more significant ways, Caravaggio surprises us in *Supper at Emmaus*. Traditionally, paintings on this theme show a bearded Christ and depict his followers recognizing him as he breaks the bread (Luke 24:30-31). Caravaggio, working in Rome during the Catholic Reformation, chose a moment earlier in the narrative—the blessing of the bread—for the moment of recognition in his painting. Art historians have discussed at length the symbolic significance of this narrative shift in relation to the contemporary papal culture.† But the artist's focus on that instant of blessing the bread is also relevant to our theme of food and hunger.

In *Supper at Emmaus*, Jesus, being uncharacteristically clean-shaven, is disguised from his followers. Caravaggio positions the table so as to invite us into their meal. We become more than onlookers; we sit next to an unnamed disciple and participate in his moment of recognition. A delicately balanced bowl of fruit, laden with grapes, teeters precariously on the edge of the table, about to fall into our space. A scallop shell (a symbol of baptism) perches on the disciple's vest on the right, and he beckons us to join their fellowship. All the while the dramatic, tenebrist light for which the artist is so famous intensifies the occasion.

NOTE

† Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, "Caravaggio's London *Supper at Emmaus*: a Counter-Reformation Reading of Luke 24," *Christian Scholars Review* 28:4 (Summer 1999): 561-585.