

This photograph is available  
in the print version of  
*Sermon on the Mount.*

Just as Jesus employed striking verbal images in the Sermon on the Mount to make his teachings come alive, so Cosimo Rosselli and other artists who designed the Sistine Chapel's frescoes sought to teach truths of faith through artistic representations.

# Teaching through Images

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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When Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere) commissioned the building of the Sistine Chapel in the papal residence, he called on Cosimo Rosselli to paint several frescoes (paintings on wet plaster) on the long north wall of the chapel. The unusual dimensions of the room—approximately 134 feet long by 44 feet wide and 68 feet tall—recall the shape of Solomon’s Temple (as described in 1 Kings 6:2). The chapel is dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin and functions as the pope’s private chapel and the location of the conclave to select each pope. The north wall contains scenes from the life of Christ which parallel the life of Moses frescoes on the south wall. At the time of Rosselli, the chapel’s flattened barrel vault ceiling depicted a starry sky; some thirty years later, between 1508 and 1512, Michelangelo painted images from the Book of Genesis there.

In addition to *The Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Leper*, Rosselli was responsible for *The Last Supper*, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*, and *The Giving of the Law* frescoes. Rosselli—a Florentine artist who had developed his painting skills in the company of fellow artists in the workshop tradition and then continued as a master alongside Sandro Botticelli, Pietro Perugino, and Domenico Ghirlandaio—completed these frescoes between July 1481 and May 1482. A younger contemporary, Piero di Cosimo (1462-1521), assisted him in painting *The Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Leper*.

This fresco is an iconographically traditional representation of the narrative frame for the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel of Matthew records that “great crowds followed [Jesus]” as “his fame spread throughout all Syria” and “they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them” (4:24-25). Matthew depicts Jesus as a ‘new Moses’ who teaches the people: just as Moses had received God’s commandments on Mount Sinai, so Jesus “went up on the mountain” (5:1) to deliver a ‘new law’ which does not destroy the law or the prophets but fulfills them (5:17). In Rosselli’s composition, Jesus stands on an elevated hill wearing a red gown and blue mantle with his right hand raised in a blessing gesture. Though the apostles in the distance stand in rapt attention, the people in the foreground vary both in their dress and attention span, it seems! Some of them wear contemporary fifteenth-century clothing, in contrast to the Roman drapery worn by Jesus and his first-century followers. Most of the figures are captivated by

Christ's words, but two prominent figures in the foreground (one of whom has his back to Christ) are in a conversation of their own. We do not know the identity of these two men or their conversation topic. None of the figures are well drawn—they have small heads and somewhat elongated bodies. The use of large drapery for clothing may indicate that the artists had poor anatomical drawing skills.

The Gospel says that “when Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him,” and this is when Jesus heals a man with leprosy (8:1-4). Once again Matthew stresses the continuities between Moses and Jesus, for Jesus instructs the man, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (8:4). In the lower right of the composition Rosselli depicts Christ a second time: now closely followed and watched by his twelve disciples, he heals a kneeling man who suffers from leprosy.



When, in 1994, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*—the marvelous painting on the altar wall—and other frescoes in the Sistine Chapel had been cleaned and restored to their glorious power and color, Pope John Paul II noted in celebration of the occasion, “The frescoes that we contemplate here introduce us to the world of Revelation. The truths of our faith speak to us here from all sides. From them the human genius has drawn its inspiration, committing itself to portraying them in forms of unparalleled beauty.”†

The pope called attention to this sacred place in which the many paintings, like the images in an illustrated book, serve to make scriptural truths more understandable. Just as Jesus employed parables and striking verbal images in the Sermon on the Mount to make his teachings come alive for the people, so Rosselli and the other artists who designed the Sistine Chapel's beautiful frescoes sought to teach through artistic representations. In this worship space, the truths of our faith surely do speak to us from all sides.

#### **NOTE**

† Pope John Paul II, “Homily at the Mass to Celebrate the Unveiling of the Restorations of Michelangelo's Frescos in the Sistine Chapel” (April 8, 1994), available online at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/homilies/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19940408\\_restaurisistina\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19940408_restaurisistina_en.html).



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