

CARAVAGGIO AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

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HOW DOES ONE EXPERIENCE and live the resurrection of the body on this side of the grave? How does the belief in bodily resurrection 'actually transform a person toward fullness of life in Christ?'¹ This article explores what three of Caravaggio's paintings might tell us about such questions.

Christian belief in the resurrection depends on the resurrection of Jesus. The different accounts of the resurrection in the New Testament and the earliest credal formulas all testify to the resurrection of the body as a core teaching of the Christian community. Greek philosophical concepts have too easily corrupted the understanding of the resurrection of the body, reducing it to the immortality of the soul. But the biblical notion of resurrection refers to the whole person, body and soul, filled with the new life of the Spirit.

The Supper at Emmaus 1601

Caravaggio painted two pictures of the *Supper at Emmaus*, one in 1601 and the other probably five years later. The earlier, painted for Cariaco Mattai, now hangs in the National Gallery in London. The second *Supper* hangs in Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera.

The difference between the two pictures is obvious. The first, the 'London' *Supper*, is bright, exciting, full of enthusiasm. The second, the 'Milan' *Supper*, is subdued, quiet, even sombre in tone. The depictions of the body are quite different, not only in the case of the resurrected Jesus, but also in that of the other figures. Clearly we have two distinct

¹ Sandra Schneiders, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin: Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality*, 6 (Spring 1998), 3.



Supper at Emmaus (1601), by Caravaggio

interpretations of the Supper at Emmaus, and two interpretations of the resurrection appearance of Jesus.²

The first, the London Emmaus, shows the body of Jesus as beardless, youthful, flooded with light; his face ‘framed with flowing hair, contrasts sharply with the earthly humanity of the disciples, with their heavy fishermen’s hands, and torn working dress’.³ With Jesus’ gesture of blessing over the meal the disciples’ bodies erupt into recognition of him as alive in their midst. The innkeeper, by contrast, stands unmoved with his hands tucked into his belt as he ‘stares directly at the Risen Christ without seeing anything out of the ordinary’.⁴

The feast, spread out atop a white table-cloth draped over what appears to be an eastern rug, shows off Caravaggio’s virtuosic skill as he carefully ‘distinguishes between pottery and glass, bread and fruit’.⁵

² Readers may find it helpful at this point to reread the narrative of this event at Luke 24: 1-35, and also to find good colour reproductions online through a URL such as <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/caravaggio.html>.

³ Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 231.

⁴ John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2001), 116.

⁵ John Drury, *Painting the World: Christian Pictures and Their Meaning* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 122.

The divided loaf of nice crusty bread and the curled feet of the roasted chicken 'are as startlingly real as the basket of fruit improbably cantilevered over the table's edge'.⁶ Ingrid Rowland, who reviewed *Caravaggio: The Final Years*, the



recent exhibition at the National Gallery in London, presumably got very close to this painting. She writes that 'condensation glistens on the ceramic water jug and light plays through the glass flask on white wine, each substance more transparent than the other'.⁷

Both Howard Hibbard and Helen Langdon understand the dramatic body movement of the disciples as Caravaggio's way of involving us in the scene.⁸ The disciple on the left is drawing his chair right out of the frame of the picture, while the disciple on the right extends his hands in the shape of a cross, reaches out of the picture with his left hand, and 'unites the painted actors with us, the living viewers, in a manner that signals a new age of participatory art'.⁹ This destruction of what Langdon calls 'the barrier between the world of art and the world of the viewer' draws us into the drama.¹⁰ The precarious positioning of the fruit basket, half on and half off the table, tempts us to draw near and catch it before it falls.¹¹

Caravaggio's purpose in this 'participatory art', it seems to me, relates to his interpretation of the Church's attitude to religious painting. In the Council of Trent's twenty-fifth session, its last, a document on the depiction of religious subjects was written. Caravaggio may never have read the document, but he could not have produced so many religious works for various churches without knowing its contents. While the Council Fathers were well aware of the abuses which the Protestants had highlighted, they still believed that religious art could legitimately engage Christian believers in its

⁶ Ingrid D. Rowland, 'The Battle of Light and Darkness', *New York Review of Books* (12 May 2005), 10.

⁷ Rowland, 'The Battle of Light and Darkness', 10.

⁸ Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 77; Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 231.

⁹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 77.

¹⁰ Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 231.

¹¹ Drury, *Painting the World*, 122.

subject matter, whether that was a scene from the Bible or one from the life of a saint. The image should bring the beholder into the presence of the divine, so that:

... through the images which we kiss and before which we uncover our heads and go down on our knees, we give adoration to Christ and veneration to the saints, whose likeness they bear.¹²

Caravaggio involves us in the Emmaus scene through what Walter Friedlaender calls 'realistic mysticism'. Friedlaender argues that Caravaggio's religious depictions were of a piece with the religious movements of his day. The popular emphasis that Caravaggio's contemporary Philip Neri and the Oratorians gave to the Exercises of St Ignatius, along with the reforms introduced by the newly established religious congregations of the Barnabites and the Theatines, awakened 'a simplicity of faith and a mystic devotion which gave each individual a direct and earthly contact with God and His Mysteries'.¹³ Philip Neri's approach to the Exercises and to religious devotion allowed ordinary people to enter into the experience of their faith. He emphasized the 'naturalness and intimacy' of the spiritual life in a way that won him immense popularity with the Roman populace. Surely he must have made an indelible impression on the young Caravaggio, one that continued to influence the painter even in his later years.¹⁴

Does the London Emmaus scene, depicting a Roman tavern of Caravaggio's day, suggest to the viewers of that time 'a world in which the acts of every day are steeped in echoes of biblical reality'?¹⁵ Does the 'uncomprehending gaze of the innkeeper ... personify a simple, if unanswerable question: "Would I have seen the miracle, too, or stood there in the dark?"'¹⁶ Does the beardless Jesus in the picture suggest the judge of the living and the dead, with his right hand raised to give a blessing instead of breaking the loaf of bread, as the Gospel story states,

¹² Council of Trent, 'On Invocation, Veneration and Relics of the Saints, and on Sacred Images', in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Norman Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward), 774-776, here 775. See also Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1660* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), 108.

¹³ Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969 [1955]), 123.

¹⁴ Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 126.

¹⁵ Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 231.

¹⁶ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 116.

and with his left hand copying exactly the left hand of Michelangelo's Christ in the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel?¹⁷ In other words, is Caravaggio inviting us to treat the resurrection appearance of Jesus as a living reality that requires our response now if it is to have any meaning after death? Is Caravaggio asking us to reflect upon our spirituality of the resurrection of the body? We can approach these questions by studying the development of Caravaggio's understanding of what happened at Emmaus in his later depiction of the scene.

The Supper at Emmaus c.1606

The bodies in the Milan *Supper at Emmaus* appear quieter than in the London Emmaus. The outstretched hands of the disciple on our left convey surprise, but with a small gesture. The disciple at the right grips



Supper at Emmaus (1606), by Caravaggio

¹⁷ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 116.

the table with his peasant hands as if to steady himself in his bewilderment as he recognises the risen Christ. Yet his straining neck and weather-beaten face hold back whatever emotions might want to express themselves. The Christ appears older, sombre, even sad, as he raises his right hand in blessing over the very meagre meal of bread and wine. Standing at the left shoulder of Christ an older innkeeper, still with a hand on his belt, his brow furrowed, is joined by a woman of similar age, perhaps his wife. They are both dressed like the poor of Caravaggio's time, while Christ and the two disciples wear garb associated with the time of Jesus. She holds a dish of meat, identified by Spike, Rowland and Langdon as roast lamb, 'the sacrificial animal of Passover and Easter, and one of the most ancient of all Christian symbols'.¹⁸ An entirely new understanding of the Emmaus appearance presents itself to us here.

This second *Supper at Emmaus* was painted five years after the first, and just after Caravaggio had killed Ranuccio Tomassoni in a fight. The brilliance, the boldness and the dazzling colours of the earlier *Supper* yield to dark brown, blue-green shadows and evening light. The risen Christ, whose face is bearded, is 'a mature man whose weary expression suggests both the weight of his recent ordeal and of the endless mission to save humanity from its own folly'.¹⁹

In the Milan *Emmaus*, Caravaggio, exiled for killing Tomassoni, turned his thoughts 'to the extreme price paid by those excluded from God's grace',²⁰ even if not long after the killing Caravaggio was made a Knight of Malta, an honour which Pope Clement VIII, who knew what Caravaggio had done, made no attempt to prevent.²¹ The killing of Tomassoni was anything but premeditated.

Langdon describes the Milan *Emmaus* as 'a tender portrayal of confidence in a redemptive Christ, who gently renews hope in the despairing disciples, and brings comfort to the poor'.²² Rowland notes that, while the facial expression of the disciple at the right conveys his recognition of Jesus, we should focus particularly on his 'gnarled and ruddy' hands, because the right one rests next to Jesus' hand. 'In that

¹⁸ Rowland, 'The Battle of Light and Darkness', 10; Spike, *Caravaggio*, 178; Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 317.

¹⁹ Rowland, 'The Battle of Light and Darkness', 10.

²⁰ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 178.

²¹ Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 316.

²² Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 316.

touch, or near touch, Caravaggio has concentrated all the fervour of a burning heart and distilled the essence of Christianity' as the meeting of God and humanity.²³ Both Rowland and Langdon understand the painting as what Rowland calls Caravaggio's 'meditating in paint', in which, his personal problems notwithstanding, 'his wisdom as a painter could fathom mysteries as deep as this tired Christ, his hostess's quiet reverence, and the fiery faith of the apostles'.²⁴ Langdon adds that the dark shadows of the inn, out of which the five figures of the painting emerge in the evening light, represent,



... the true Emmaus, the slow revelation of the divine to the despairing disciples, sharing an early Christian meal of extreme simplicity. It is an elegiac painting, suggesting the end of a weary day: 'Abide with us', said the disciples, 'for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent' (Luke 24: 29). Night falls, but the risen Christ, with the power to forgive sins, brings hope in the dark journey through this world. The disciples recognise Christ in the breaking of the bread: 'And their eyes were opened, and they knew him: and he vanished out of their sight' (Luke 24: 31).²⁵

It seems to me that the Milan *Emmaus* shows a definite shift in Caravaggio's understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. The arrangement of the figures tells the story. It puts aside the confidence in the image of the victorious Christ found in the London *Emmaus*, clothed 'in the triumphant scarlet and white colours', an image which breaks into one's doubts with the certainty of joy and the lavish display of abundant life.²⁶ In the London *Emmaus*, the bodies of the disciples are galvanised, witnessing instantly and enthusiastically to the marvellous event which surpasses all expectation. By contrast, the

²³ Rowland, 'The Battle of Light and Darkness', 10.

²⁴ Rowland, 'The Battle of Light and Darkness', 10. Rowland understands the maidservant's posture as one of prayer.

²⁵ Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 316.

²⁶ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 177.

arrangement of the figures in the Milan *Emmaus* makes us aware that people need time to recognise the reality of the resurrection. The figures are in dim light, with the bearded, mature Christ becoming present only slowly to the disciples. For their part, they seem to be growing before us in the understanding of what they see.

If one comes to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, one has to reconsider the whole of one's life. The London *Emmaus*, with its Roman tavern setting, suggests connections between everyday life and the continuous presence of Christ. By the time of the Milan *Emmaus* other experiences had become much more important to Caravaggio's understanding of the resurrection. These required more conscious involvement in the life of faith, in the spirituality of the resurrection.

The Death of the Virgin

In his *Death of the Virgin*, Caravaggio seems to be turning his attention to what death implies about the meaning of life. Faith's proclamation of life's fullness, expressed in the *Emmaus* paintings, needs to encompass the reality of death. The *Death of the Virgin* dates from between 1601 and 1605, with the balance of opinion favouring a later date. It was commissioned as an altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria della Scala in Trastevere in Rome by the prominent jurist Laerzio Cherubini, but was never installed.²⁷ The church had been given to the Order of the Discalced Carmelites, recently arrived in Rome, who had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven.

Looking at the picture one cannot avoid thinking of death. Yet it is the death of the Virgin Mother of God that Caravaggio was asked to paint. Roger Hinks expresses something of the work's power:

Caravaggio has turned his back not only on Mannerism, but also on the whole of the High Renaissance. He has gone back to the beginning. He has asked himself what these people really looked like in their bereavement. Something tremendous, incomprehensible, had come into their lives—and gone out of it again, with the breath

²⁷ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 152; Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 246.



Death of the Virgin, by Caravaggio

that had gone out of the wonderful woman they had loved and lost. No wonder they look so utterly forlorn and helpless.²⁸

The woman, stretched out on a simple board, has died. A soft reddish light, entering the room from the top left, directly illumines the torso, head and hands of the Virgin, as well as the back, shoulders,

²⁸ Quoted in Spike, *Caravaggio*, 152.

head, hand, knee of the only other woman in the room, identified as Mary Magdalene. Moving back from the two women, the light reveals the presence of some men, probably the apostles, caught in various states of mourning. Over all the figures hangs an immense red cloth, seemingly suspended from the wooden ceiling. The room is bare; the Virgin and the woman next to her are dressed in the working clothing of the Trastevere women of Caravaggio's time.²⁹

The iconography of the painting pays enough attention to the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* to show the apostles miraculously reunited at the death of the Virgin. But, contrary to the *Legend*, Jesus is not present here, nor are heavenly choirs ready to accompany the Virgin's soul to heaven.³⁰ In her book dedicated solely to this painting, Pamela Askew notes that, as far as she knows, 'Caravaggio's *Dormition* is the first independent self-contained painting of the subject in Italy in which Christ is absent'.³¹

The Virgin has a young body, and her hand, placed 'on her swollen belly', recalls for Langdon 'the protective gesture of a pregnant woman ...'.³² It seems that she has only just died and her body has not yet been laid out; the copper basin near the feet of Mary Magdalene suggests that the body is to be washed. The apostles kneel, bend or stand in various states of arrested grief or bewilderment: two have their heads bowed, overcome with grief, their rough, thick-veined, working hands shielding their faces from view. They are dressed in robes, which contrast with the contemporary clothes of the Virgin and of Mary Magdalene. The solemnity of their heavily draped, barefoot bodies, together with the dark interior and the soft evening light of the room, helps to make the grief almost palpable. Langdon sees in the painting 'the painful humanity of the Virgin', which 'does not negate redemption, but inspires a passionate contemplation of the mystery of the divine made human'.³³ Similarly, John Spike views the scene as a statement by Caravaggio that, however and whenever the sanctification of the Virgin and the Apostles took place, '... first of all, they were human':

²⁹ Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 249.

³⁰ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 152.

³¹ Pamela Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 25.

³² Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 249.

³³ Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 249.

He was standing on solid theological ground, but squarely in the path of the proliferating regulations regarding sacred images. The Council of Trent had not been convened to grant artists licence to excise medievalism or reconsider pictorial traditions Caravaggio was making the case for personal experience. The painting's representation of a deceased woman surrounded by mourners was truer, and more deserving of belief, in his opinion, than the supernatural panoply required by tradition. He did not soften the blow. Death has not lost its sting. All the criticism directed against the picture started with this failing, in their eyes; nothing in the desolate chamber suggests that anything will happen next. The woman's swollen body is hardly in a condition to be assumed into Heaven.³⁴

But Pamela Askew sees what Caravaggio's contemporary critics failed to see. The painting does point to Mary's assumption, even in the midst of the starkness of her death. The body of an apostle, identified by Askew as Paul, stands out in clear distinction from the others in the painting. His right hand is raised in astonishment, in a gesture of insight rather than of grief. His mouth is open in wonder; his eyes are lifted in a kind of amazement while Peter's are narrowed in puzzlement. Askew points to the 'golden colour of Paul's robe which identifies him with ... light', and observes how 'his startled gesture make[s] clear that he has seen what



©Photo SCALA, Florence: Louvre, Paris

Peter and Paul in the Death of the Virgin

³⁴ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 155.

he did not expect'.³⁵ Paul sees something more than the others do, and his bodily gestures express this revelation; this is why Caravaggio depicts him as distinct from them, bathed in a gentle light.

Caravaggio invites us to look closely at the death of Mary, for Catholic faith the most favoured of human beings apart from Jesus himself. He invites us, in that utterly human moment, to dare to acknowledge what Paul accepts: the privilege of Mary in being with her Risen Son, and our own eventual arrival with them in glory. But he presents this privileged death starkly. Only when we can stare at this death as really a human death, he seems to be saying, can we really know how to live a life that will bring us to the glory beyond death. Only then can we, like Paul, come to understand the privilege that she received, and the gift that awaits us at the moment of our own death.

The Biblical Notion of 'Body'

I have already noted the difference between the biblical and the Greek philosophical notions of the person. In the biblical understanding, human beings are not divided into body and soul, with only the soul being ultimately important as the place where the intellect and will reside. The writers of the Bible understood the person as an integrated whole of body, soul and spirit.

When we speak of the resurrection of the body, do we thereby mean that Jesus rose with the same flesh, blood and spirit that he possessed when he was laid in the tomb? Does the resurrection really mean the resuscitation of Jesus' earthly body? Definitely not. We need to explore more deeply the biblical notion of resurrection. To help us, we can draw on a recent essay by Sandra Schneiders, in which she discusses how the body is to be understood as a symbol of the self.

Schneiders' ideas arise in connection with a study of chapter 20 of John's Gospel. The concept of the body as symbol of the self is not new as such: Schneiders herself notes the chapter in Karl Rahner's *Theological Investigations* on the subject.³⁶ Her explanation of the concept, however, aims to address directly questions raised by modern

³⁵ Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 41.

³⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel: A Key to Johannine Spirituality', in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, edited by John R. Donahue (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 168-198, here 172 n.23. See also Karl Rahner, 'The Theology of the Symbol' (1959), in *Theological Investigations* 4. 221-252.

science, cosmology, psychology, anthropology and history regarding the resurrected body of Jesus. More importantly, she also articulates the vital role of a *spirituality* of the resurrection of the body. She shows us that to think of the body as the symbol of the self enables us to make sense of what the Bible says about resurrection, in a way inseparable from the demands that the resurrection gospel makes on us.

Schneiders lists four ways in which the body serves as a symbol of the self:

- 1 No matter what changes an individual undergoes, we still recognise the individual by their body.
- 2 The body distinguishes one person from another, and indeed from all others.
- 3 The body 'provides the condition of possibility and the ground of interaction with others'.
- 4 The body becomes the way in which all who relate to an individual form a relationship, explicit or not, with them.³⁷

For Schneiders, the body of the risen Jesus fulfils all these functions. The risen Jesus is present in a way that is bodily but not physical.

- 1 Even after his glorification, Mary Magdalene and the apostles recognise Jesus in his resurrected body as the same person as before. He is 'not a ghost'.
- 2 He is still very much an individual, 'distinct from them and from everything else'. He is clearly visible. The apostles do not control his presence or absence, and they are not absorbed in mystical prayer when he appears.
- 3 Jesus interacts with the disciples; he speaks with them, eats with them. They experienced him actually doing things they could not have predicted him doing.³⁸

³⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Resurrection of Jesus and Christian Spirituality', in *Christian Resources of Hope*, edited by Maureen Junker-Kenny (Dublin: Columba, 1995), 81-114, here 97-98.

³⁸ Schneiders, 'Resurrection of Jesus', 99.

- 4 They relate to one another in a new way as a result of the appearances of Jesus which they have experienced. Jesus unites them to each other.

The risen body of Jesus is not ‘as a physical “house” for the spiritual soul’, but rather the symbolic expression of the self. ‘The body of the risen Jesus’, Schneiders writes, ‘functions symbolically just as his earthly body did, but the difference lies in the character, not the fact, of his bodiliness’. What changes is the ‘mode of the bodily or symbolic presence of Jesus among his disciples’.³⁹

Since Jesus is no longer within history, his symbolic material—his body—differs from ours, which is limited by space and time and by the corruption that accompanies this limitation. Jesus’ risen body is no longer within history, and so the conditions of physicality, of history, no longer apply to him. He was ‘transformed in God in such a way that he could symbolize himself in ways that transcend our ordinary experience or capability (or his while he was on earth)’.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Schneiders writes, ‘if Jesus had ceased, at his death, to be a living human being then Christian faith as Christian has no real object’.⁴¹ His bodiliness, this mode of presence as risen Lord, ‘... is integral to the meaning of [his] real, living humanity’.

Because of his glorification and resurrection, the primary symbol of Jesus’ real, divinely human presence is ‘his present historical body which is all the baptized who are corporately one as the body of Christ through the power of his indwelling Spirit’. For Schneiders, ‘the glorified Jesus *is* the Christ of faith, *is* the principle of his body the Church, *is* the One whose cause continues in and through his disciples down through history’.⁴² But he is not reducible to this mediated presence. Nor can he be confined within his mediated presence in Scripture, or in the sacraments, or in the faith-life of those who embrace his way of life as their own.

³⁹ Schneiders, ‘Resurrection of Jesus’, 103.

⁴⁰ Schneiders, ‘Resurrection of Jesus’, 103.

⁴¹ Schneiders, ‘Resurrection in the Fourth Gospel’, 180.

⁴² Schneiders, ‘Resurrection of Jesus’, 106.

A Spirituality of the Resurrection of the Body

If we as Christians are the body of Christ, the primary symbol of the divine and human presence of Jesus, then it is through our actions in relation to one another that we will embody a spirituality of the resurrection of the body. In their approach to the resurrection appearances of Jesus, Caravaggio's two *Supper at Emmaus* pictures seem to be saying that the mystery of the resurrection can only be lived in and through all the experiences of our lives. In the *Death of the Virgin*, Caravaggio seems to insist that we can only live the resurrection if we face squarely the reality of our own death and avoid resorting to sentimental images of a heavenly realm. In the stark encounter with our own mortality he hopes that we will discover what he depicts Paul as discovering: the truth that in death there is life.

A spirituality of the resurrection of the body must, it seems to me, address all those places and situations where embodied human beings have been given up for dead, or desecrated, or violated, or excluded from the fullness of life that is the ongoing presence of the Risen Jesus among us. A spirituality of the resurrection of the body must engage forcefully in all the issues of justice and peace. It is here that we will find an experience of living the doctrine of the resurrection of the body that actually transforms us toward fullness of life in Christ.

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