



ST COLUMBANS MISSION SOCIETY

VISIO DIVINA

A resource to help you pray using the images and Art Guide of the
2026 Columban Art Calendar

Art Guide compiled by Dr Ursula Betka, Art Historian, Teacher and Iconographer | Resource concept & design by Ajesh Abraham
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“

SACRED ART

is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and
glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God. ”

CCC2502



Pray using the images and Art Guide of the 2026 Columban Art Calendar

What is Visio Divina?

Visio Divina, translated from Latin as "divine seeing", is a type of prayer that uses images. It is similar to the Lectio Divina ("divine reading") prayer, but instead of Scripture, art is used to help focus our mind on prayer. Praying with art allows us to connect with God on a multisensory level.

Steps for doing a Visio Divina reflection

Preparation

You can do the Visio Divina reflection alone or in a small group. Choose from 13 available images, which you can display on a screen or print out. Find a comfortable space without distractions for the exercise. Stay calm and open your heart and mind to listen to God.

Step 1: Gaze (Visio)

Take your time to observe the image closely, paying attention to every detail, hue, texture, person, location, and object. Keep your gaze fixed on the picture for a while and allow yourself to connect with it on a deeper level.

Step 2: Meditate

Take a moment to reflect on the image and consider what catches your eye. Are there any particular items or aspects of the art that are capturing your attention? If you are discussing the image as a group, feel free to share your thoughts on what stands out to you with others.

Step 3: Contemplate

Engage with the art provided in this resource by reading the Art Guide Reflection or scanning the QR code to watch the Art Guide video. Reflect on the related Scripture for each image and contemplate its meaning. Consider what new insights the image and reflection offer, and listen carefully to what God may be saying to you through this experience. If you are doing this activity as a group, allow each person to share their reflection in the group.

Step 4: Pray and Act

The final step is to spend some time in prayer and discernment as a response to God. This response can be transformative when one accepts God's promptings and seeks His help if prayer prompts action. Allow each person to share their responses in the group.



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FRONT COVER

Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, 1886 (oil on canvas),
Liphart, Ernest Friedrich von (1847–1932/34), Bridgeman Images.



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Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins,
1886 (oil on canvas), Liphart, Ernest Friedrich von (1847–1932/34),
Bridgeman Images.

Estonian painter Baron Ernest Friedrich von Liphart captures a climactic moment in the gospel parable of the 'Wise and Foolish Virgins'. Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to 'ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom' (Matt. 25: 1–13). The painting represents the moment at midnight when the bridegroom finally appears. Adorned in a luxurious red-orange robe, he escorts his bride to a palace entrance for the wedding banquet. Behind the wedding couple are the five wise virgins, also dressed in white, who bear their oil lamps already lit with flames that illuminate the flower-strewn steps.

By contrast, the foreground composition reveals the five foolish virgins who are unprepared, still asleep, and with their oil vessels empty and scattered upon the steps. 'Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" But he answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you"' (Matt. 25: 11–12). The moral of Jesus' parable is to 'Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming'.

Working in the late-nineteenth century, Liphart evokes the antique period setting of a Greco-Roman temple, with its white marble steps leading up to the entrance.

The doorway is flanked by formal rows of imposing fluted marble columns. An aura of midnight is also evocatively suggested through the dark blue sky, with the glow of oil lamps illuminating the faces of the five wise virgins—those who are ready for the bridegroom.

Click [here](#) or scan on the QR code to watch or listen to the Art Guide.



Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, 1886 (oil on canvas), Liphart, Ernest Friedrich von (1847–1932/34), Bridgeman Images.





JANUARY

The Baptism of Christ, 1723 (oil on canvas), Trevisani, Francesco (1656–1746), © Leeds Museums and Galleries, UK/Bridgeman Images.



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The Baptism of Christ, 1723 (oil on canvas),
Trevisani, Francesco (1656–1746), © Leeds Museums and
Galleries, UK/Bridgeman Images.

Trevisani represents the dramatic moment when Jesus is baptised with water from the River Jordan by John the Baptist. John amplifies the scriptural descriptions of Matthew, Mark and Luke by also acclaiming the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus (John 1: 29–34). In this detail of the larger painting, the artist includes cherub angels accompanying the descending dove of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is thereby shown to be baptised with both water and the Spirit.

The Baptist had stated to his followers: “I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11).

The gospel writers interpreted the meaning of baptism with water in terms of major events of redemptive history from the Hebrew Bible. The ‘Spirit like a dove’ descends upon Jesus, recalling the Spirit hovering over the waters at creation, along with Noah releasing a dove after the Great Flood (Gen. 1:2, 8:8). Sacramental baptism, through the imagery of water, is a participation in the ancient biblical pattern of passing through the waters of death to a new form of life -for God had announced that his son Jesus would rescue the world from human evil by going into death and out the other side.

Baptism expresses this identification with Christ’s death and resurrection, where the old self is crucified with Christ, and now followers of Jesus have risen with him in “newness of life” (Romans 6:3–11).

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The Baptism of Christ, 1723 (oil on canvas), Trevisani, Francesco (1656–1746), © Leeds Museums and Galleries, UK/Bridgeman Images.





FEBRUARY

St Benedict and St Scholastica, Corvi, Domenico (1721–1803), © A. Dagli Orti/© NPL – DeA Picture Library/Bridgeman.



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St Benedict and St Scholastica,
Corvi, Domenico (1721–1803), © A. Dagli Orti/
© NPL – DeA Picture Library/Bridgeman

This vibrant oil painting by Domenico Corvi represents the two great founder-saints of Western monasticism, St Benedict of Nursia and his sister St Scholastica, engaged in spiritual dialogue. Both saints were born in the Italian village of Nursia (Norcia), in Umbria, during the late fifth century. Scholastica is the focus of honour in this picture since her feast day falls on February 10th. She is traditionally regarded as the foundress of the Benedictine order of nuns since she established the first small hermitage about five miles from Monte Cassino, the abbey where her brother later resided with his fellow monks after leaving Subiaco.

According to the medieval 'Golden Legend' of the saints' lives, Scholastica would visit her brother once a year at a place near his abbey. There, they would spend the day together in prayer and discuss issues relating to sacred texts. This painting captures one of these moments of visitation and contemplation.

Between Benedict and Scholastica - and the object of their spiritual discussion - lies a manuscript bearing the text *Regole Benedetto per Le Monachi* ('The Benedictine Rule for Monks'), which opens on the opposite page with the prayer written in Italian—NEL NOME IL Nostro Signore JESU ('In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ').

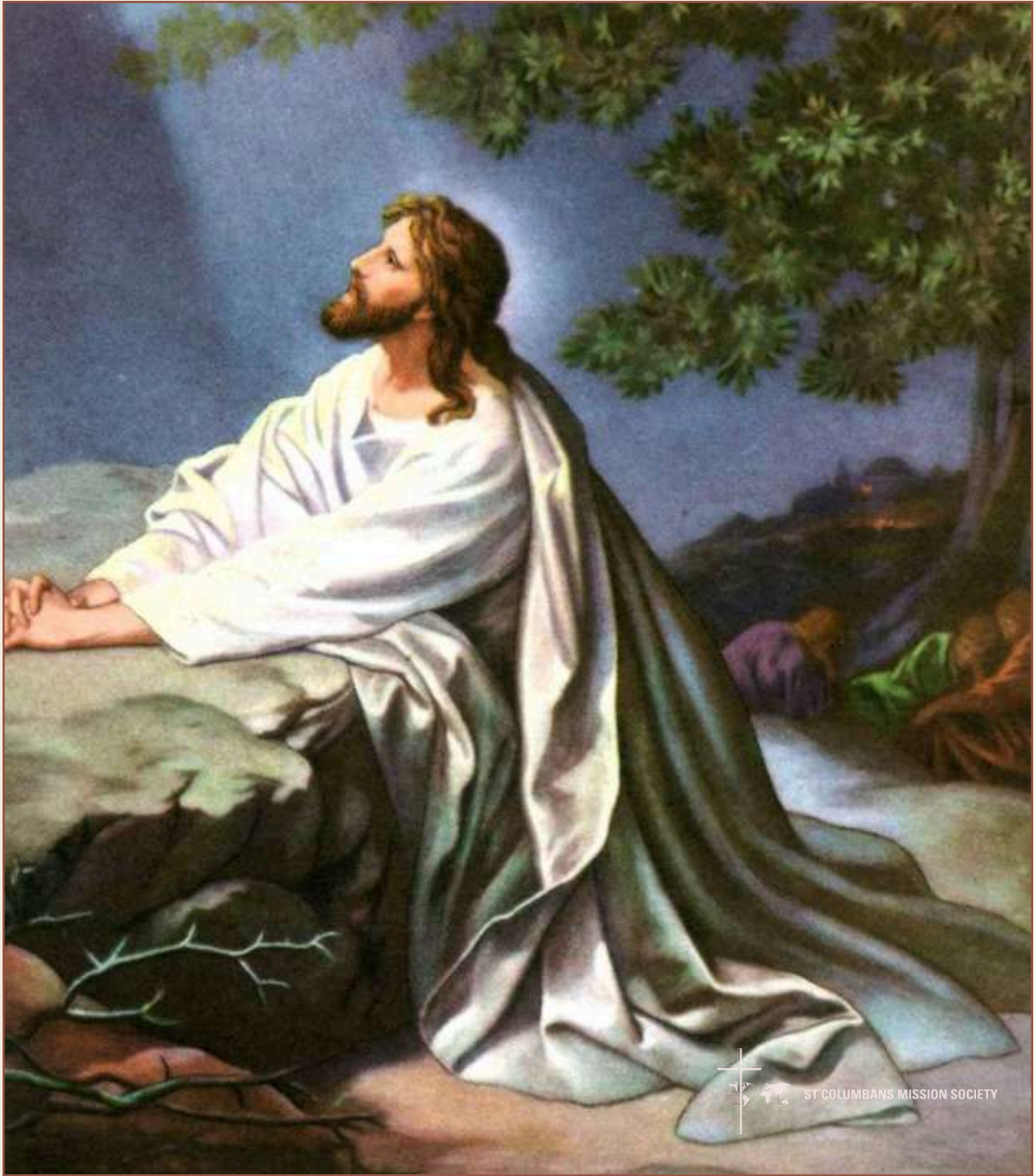
With one hand, Benedict points to the name of God and, with his other hand, indicates the small building in the background as a convent both inspired and blessed by Christ.

Click [here](#) or scan on the QR code to watch or listen to the Art Guide.



St Benedict and St Scholastica, Corvi, Domenico (1721–1803), © A. Dagli Orti/© NPL – DeA Picture Library/Bridgeman





MARCH

Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane by Heinrich Hofmann, 1886 (1824–1911), Oil painting, Riverside Church, New York City. Photo © GraphicaArtis/Bridgeman Images.



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Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane by Heinrich Hofmann, 1886 (1824–1911), Oil painting, Riverside Church, New York City. Photo © GraphicaArtis/Bridgeman Images

This painting captures a poignant moment of profound prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, on the night before Jesus was to die. The setting is just outside the walled city of Jerusalem, which is visible in the distant skyline across the valley.

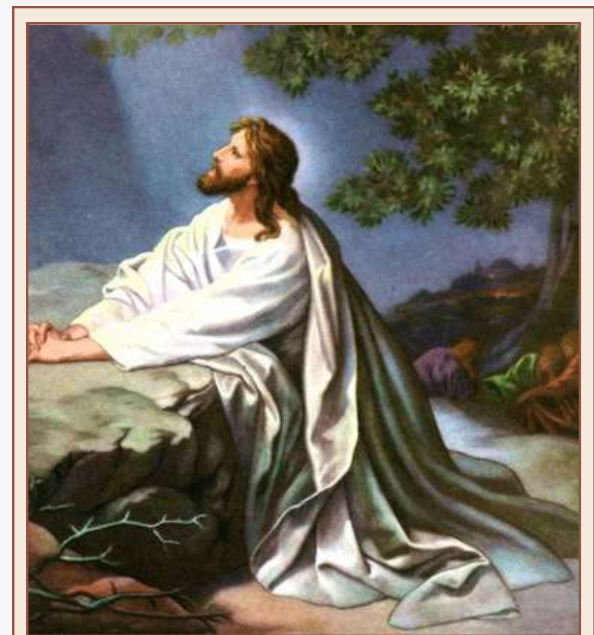
According to all four gospels, this was the place where Jesus suffered great mental and spiritual anguish—‘the agony in the garden’, and it was the site of his arrest that same night. Hofmann has represented the Garden of Gethsemane as a rocky outcrop with ancient olive trees—a sacral feature that characterises the garden to this day. Both the holy city and its sky are illuminated by radiant light from the figure of Jesus.

Matthew’s gospel explains that Jesus ‘... took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to the three apostles, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’ Jesus then prayed to the Father, ‘... if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will’” (Matt. 26:37–39).

At that moment, he accepted the will of God, returning to his companions to find them asleep.

The spiritual lesson for all Jesus’ disciples continues to resonate in the words Jesus put to his complacent friends in the garden with Him that night: ‘Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’ (Matt. 26: 40–41).

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MARCH

Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane by Heinrich Hofmann, 1886 (1824–1911), Oil painting, Riverside Church, New York City. Photo © GraphicaArtis/Bridgeman Images



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APRIL

Christ Falling on the Way to Calvary, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (Raphael), c. 1515 (1483–1520), Museo del Prado, Madrid, Oil painting/Restored Traditions



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Christ Falling on the Way to Calvary, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (Raphael), c. 1515 (1483–1520), Museo del Prado, Madrid, Oil painting/Restored Traditions

This large and dramatic painting was created in Rome in about 1515 by the acclaimed Italian High Renaissance painter Raphael. The artist captures the poignant moment during Christ's Passion when he bore the heavy weight of his crucifixion Cross, falling painfully for the first time.

This biblical event is also honoured during the season of Lent as a particular devotion on the Way to Calvary. Through the prayerful enactment of the Stations of the Cross, Jesus' first fall is a meditation for the Third Station. As Jesus turns his gaze towards his mother, she also suffers a spasm of agony and falls to her knees in anguish.

The four Marys and another holy woman accompanying Jesus on his way to Calvary are grouped to the right side of the painting. Jesus' mother is distinguished by her blue and white veil, and Mary Magdalen by her red-orange dress and long fair hair. All the intense emotion of the moment is expressed through the exchange of gazes and dramatic figural gestures.

Further, the event is enacted in the immediate foreground as part of the viewer's devotional space. Enhancing the sense of terror and violence are the Roman guards, some on horseback, dressed in metal armour and displaying their batons and spears.

In the far distance, painted in fine detail, is the way to Calvary, delineated by a procession of people, which leads the eye to the rock of Golgotha, where three wooden crosses stand prepared, heralding the culmination of Jesus' Passion and death to come.

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Christ Falling on the Way to Calvary, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (Raphael), c. 1515 (1483–1520), Museo del Prado, Madrid, Oil painting/Restored Traditions





MAY

Pentecost, 1732 (oil on canvas), Restout, Jean II (1692–1768), Musée du Louvre, Paris/Bridgeman Images



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Pentecost, 1732 (oil on canvas), Restout, Jean II (1692–1768), Musée du Louvre, Paris/Bridgeman Images

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them' (Acts 2:2–4).

The painter sets the viewer below the picture plane so that we gaze upward to the reactions of astonishment and perhaps fear. The 'violent wind' and 'tongues of fire' are visualised as tangible forces of other-worldly power and intervention.

The room is shown to be charged with the Spirit of God and renders each as a transformed being. At the centre of the composition stands Mary, the Mother of God, singled out as the one who remains poised and upright, solid and strong. She represents the pillar of the Church on Earth - Ecclesia.

The major Christian feast of Pentecost is celebrated fifty days after Easter Sunday and one week after the Ascension of the Lord.

The meditation welds together these three major events in the liturgical calendar, culminating in the forming and commissioning of the Body of Christ, the Church. At the Ascension, Christ consoles and comforts his disciples by promising He will always abide in our midst. By sending the Holy Spirit, all will be strengthened and empowered in a shared Christian mission of evangelisation.

Pentecost commemorates the moment the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus: 'When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.



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MAY

Pentecost, 1732 (oil on canvas), Restout, Jean II (1692–1768), Musée du Louvre, Paris/Bridgeman Images



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JUNE

The Birth of John the Baptist (oil on copper),
Italian School, private collection/Bridgeman Images



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The Birth of John the Baptist (oil on copper), Italian School, private collection/Bridgeman Images

This vibrant painting heralds the feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist, celebrated on June 24th. The image emits a warm golden light, enhanced by the copper support upon which coloured oils have been applied.

The artist has depicted the moments after the birth of John the Baptist, based on the account in the Gospel of Luke 1:5–80. The attendant figures turn their gaze upon the mother, Elizabeth, and her newborn son, cradled lovingly on her lap. Standing behind her is Elizabeth's elderly husband, Zechariah, in a dark purple robe. The parents are portrayed as advanced in years, recalling the miraculous nature of the child's conception and birth. The focus of meditation is on the newborn child, who is recognized in his unique role as the precursor of Jesus.

The miraculous birth also recalls the earlier biblical narrative when Zechariah received an angelic visit announcing that Elizabeth would conceive a son in her old age, that he would be named John and would be a great prophet.

After the child is born and named 'John', we are invited to meditate further upon Zechariah's prophecies about their son's role in preparing the way for Jesus: 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give

knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'
(Luke 1:76–79).

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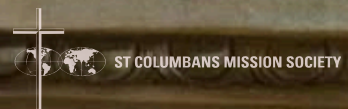
JUNE

The Birth of John the Baptist (oil on copper), Italian School, private collection/Bridgeman Images



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JULY

St Thomas (oil on canvas), Batoni, Pompeo Girolamo (1708–87),
The Iliffe Collection/National Trust Photographic Library/John
Hammond/Bridgeman Images.



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St Thomas (oil on canvas), Batoni, Pompeo Girolamo (1708–87), The Iliffe Collection/National Trust Photographic Library/John Hammond/Bridgeman Images.

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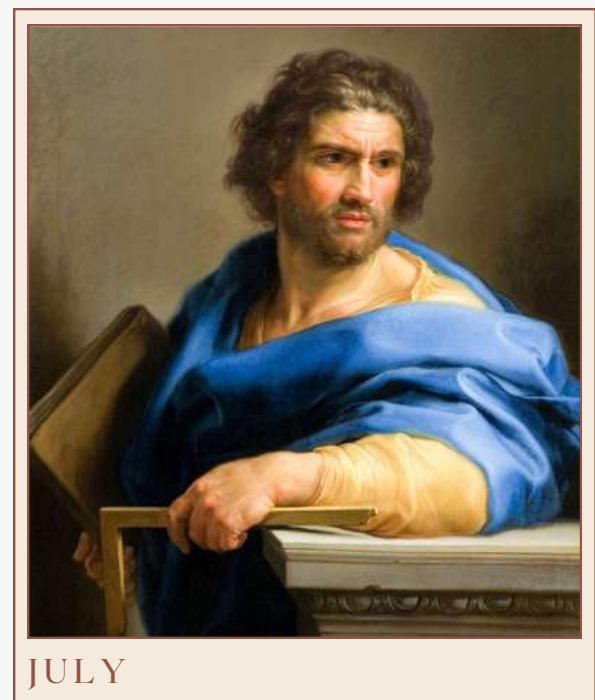
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St Thomas (oil on canvas), Batoni, Pompeo Girolamo (1708–87), The Iliffe Collection/National Trust Photographic Library/John Hammond/Bridgeman Images.





AUGUST

The Transfiguration (oil on copper), Ykens, Pieter (1648–1695),
Photo © Bonhams, London, UK/Bridgeman Images



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The Transfiguration (oil on copper), Ykens, Pieter (1648–1695), Photo © Bonhams, London, UK/Bridgeman Images

The technique of oil on copper gives this painting of the Transfiguration a distinctive shimmering quality that evokes the visionary nature of the biblical event. Recalled are the narrative accounts of the Transfiguration primarily found in the Gospels of Matthew (17:1–13), Mark (9:2–10), and Luke (9:28–36), where the divine nature and glorious form of Jesus is revealed to three disciples atop Mount Tabor. 'After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus' (Matt. 17:1–3).

Pieter Ykens depicts the participants in hierarchical order. At the centre, Jesus seems to dematerialise as one transformed by a manifestation of white ethereal light. To His left, Moses, identified by the tablets of the Ten Commandments received atop Mount Sinai, signifies the Old Law and indicates that Christ is the New Covenant. To His right, the prophet Elijah represents the prophets of old, and Jesus begins to talk to them both.

Depicted below them are the three disciples, dismayed and dazzled to near blindness by the luminous vision ensuing from the parting cloud.

For the first time, God the Father reveals the divine nature of his Son in full spiritual glory. The Father then spoke: '... a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"' (Matt. 17:5).

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The Transfiguration (oil on copper), Ykens, Pieter (1648–1695), Photo © Bonhams, London, UK/Bridgeman Images





SEPTEMBER

St Matthew and the Angel, circa 1655–1660 (oil on canvas),
Pluym, Karel van der (1625–72), North Carolina Museum of
Art/Bridgeman Images



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St Matthew and the Angel, circa 1655–1660 (oil on canvas), Pluym, Karel van der (1625–72), North Carolina Museum of Art/Bridgeman Images

St Matthew, one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus, is believed to have written one of the earliest gospels. Along with Saints Mark, Luke and John, Matthew is honoured as one of the four canonical gospel writers, known as the Four Evangelists. The feast day of St Matthew as Apostle and Evangelist is celebrated on September 21st.

Pluym represents St Matthew at a moment of reflection and inspiration, poised to write his gospel. With a feather quill pen in one hand and an ink pot and a manuscript on his writing desk, the evangelist is guided by the angel's touch, acting as a divine source of inspiration.

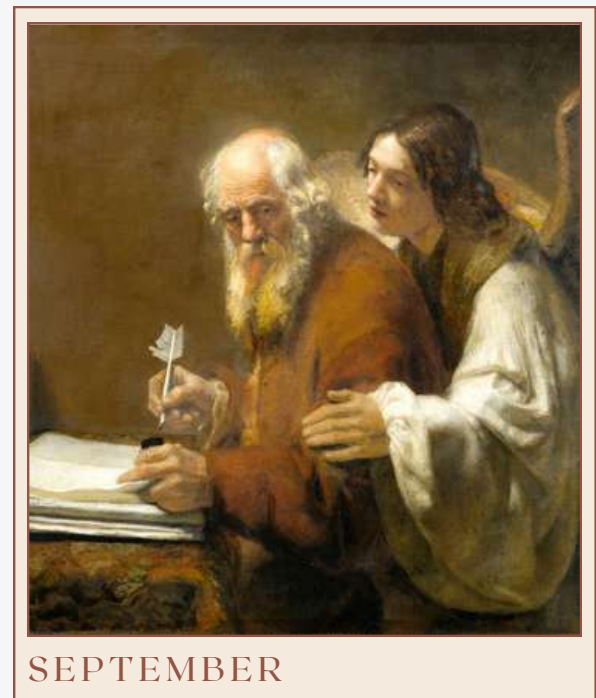
The angel or winged-man figure depicted with the saint is also the symbol that came to be associated with the evangelist Luke since the Gospel of Luke begins with the human lineage of Jesus back to Abraham.

The narrative of the angelic appearance to Joseph follows: 'When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him"' (Matt. 2:13).

Matthew's gospel also relates the self-reflective calling and conversion of a tax

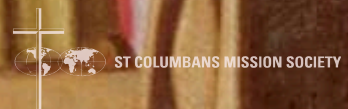
collector for the Roman empire: 'As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him' (Matt. 9:9). In an instant, the life of the tax collector had changed forever.

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St Matthew and the Angel, circa 1655–1660 (oil on canvas), Pluym, Karel van der (1625–72), North Carolina Museum of Art/Bridgeman Images





OCTOBER

St Clare Receiving the Veil from St Francis of Assisi
(oil on canvas), Italian School, (17th century)/Bridgeman Images



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St Clare Receiving the Veil from St Francis of Assisi (oil on canvas), Italian School, (17th century)/Bridgeman Images

This painting captures an important moment in the life of St Clare of Assisi, a close companion and follower of St Francis of Assisi. Represented here is Francis 'veiling' Clare as the founder of a monastic order of women in the Franciscan spirit, later known as the Order of Poor Clares.

The beloved St Francis was born in the Italian hilltop town of Assisi in 1181 and is honoured as the founder of the Order of Friars Minor (meaning 'Lesser Brothers'). His feast day, on October 4th, acclaims the poverello ('the poor one') as the model of utter humility and devotion to the original message of Jesus, according to the gospel precepts, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me' (Matt. 19:21).

Francis's life of compassionate action and prayer gives us a supreme example of how to love Jesus Christ. This love he expressed through his reverence for all created things, a life of simplicity, and his selfless service to the poor and marginalised.

Inspired by Francis's preaching and the life of poverty, Clare also decided to dedicate her life to Christ. Here, she takes the same rough brown tunic of the Franciscans, renouncing her former life as the daughter of a noble family.

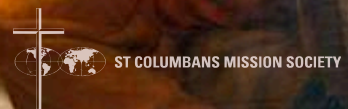
The three women to the left, dressed in the sumptuous garments of the nobility, are her mother and sisters. However, they, too, inspired by Clare's life of prayer and love, later join her in the enclosed order she founded.

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St Clare Receiving the Veil from St Francis of Assisi (oil on canvas), Italian School, (17th century)/Bridgeman Images





NOVEMBER

Interior of Noah's Ark, 1857 (oil on canvas), Ramirez, Joaquin oe Joaquim (1839–66)/Bridgeman Images



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Interior of Noah's Ark, 1857 (oil on canvas), Ramirez, Joaquin oe Joaquim (1839–66)/Bridgeman Images

The biblical story from Genesis 8:6–12 portrayed in this painting evokes the interior setting of Noah's Ark, populated with the sons of Noah, their wives, and pairs of animals and birds. Noah, the monumental figure dressed in flowing white robes, had initially sent out a raven from the ark to test the flood waters. 'The raven returned to the ark, unable to find dry land.'

After seven days, he then released a dove, '... but the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth' (Gen. 9–10). When the dove was again sent forth, it returned this time with an olive leaf sprig.

The painting depicts Noah holding up the retrieved olive leaf and displaying it to all the occupants of the ark. In this moment of revelation, all know that the flood waters have at last begun to recede, and the great deluge has ended. With this revelation comes the hope that the ark will soon come to rest on dry land. Noah's left arm leans on the open window ledge, indicating the resilient white dove who has returned to the ark with a wondrous sign of hope and renewal.

The significance of the dove as a sign of hope, intercession and renewal is continued with the life of Christ in the gospels.

We, too, in the sacrament of baptism, pass through the waters of death, emerging into the new life of grace in Christ and the restored hope of eternal life. The earth and its creatures are renewed.

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Interior of Noah's Ark, 1857 (oil on canvas), Ramirez, Joaquin oe Joaquim (1839–66)/Bridgeman Images





DECEMBER

Nativity scene. Adoration of the Magi. Fresco, Genoa. Italy,
Italian School, (18th–19th-c) © Pascal
Deloche/Godong/Bridgeman Image.



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Nativity scene. Adoration of the Magi. Fresco, Genoa. Italy, Italian School, (18th-19th-c) © Pascal Deloche/Godong/Bridgeman Image.

This delightful fresco fragment at the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Vigne in Genoa turns our devotional gaze to a moment in time after the birth of Jesus. The biblical account of the Adoration of the Magi describes the journey of three wise men from faraway lands to Bethlehem in Judaea, following the portent of a luminous star. That guiding star enabled the Magi to bear witness to the newborn divinity, the incarnation of Christ, and the prophesied redeemer.

‘And when they came into the house, they saw the young child with Mary, his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh’ (Matt. 2: 11). These special gifts hold both earthly and symbolic value: gold for the king, frankincense for the divinity, and myrrh for Christ’s future sacrificial death and entombment.

The visitation of the Three Magi to Bethlehem came to signify the conversion and redemption of the Gentiles (non-Jews) and, further, the acclamation of the incarnation of Jesus as the divine son of God. The Feast of the Epiphany, liturgically observed twelve days after Christmas, celebrates the theological meaning of ‘Epiphany’, from the Greek word ‘to reveal’, when the infant Jesus was ‘revealed’ to all humanity.

This painting places the focus of adoration upon the baby as a revelation of light and grace. Mary unfolds the white swaddling cloth to reveal her newborn son to the universe as the gift of salvation to all humanity.

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DECEMBER

Nativity scene. Adoration of the Magi. Fresco, Genoa. Italy, Italian School, (18th-19th-c) © Pascal Deloche/Godong/Bridgeman Image.



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