

Painting the Counter-Reformation: Revisiting the Sistine Chapel as a Theological Document

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Abstract

The Sistine Chapel ceiling, painted between 1508 and 1512, remains one of the most iconic pieces of Catholic art in the world. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) painted his fresco series during the Italian Renaissance, a time of dramatic philosophical, artistic, and religious developments, all of which are illustrated in his masterpiece. Michelangelo's Catholic faith was heavily influenced by these Renaissance movements, such as Humanism, and he translated these new ideas into his fresco series on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The ceiling, in turn, served a critical iconographical role in representing Humanist themes in Catholicism before the Catholic Church technically adopted them at the Council of Trent in 1545. Ultimately, there is an undeniable connection between the Sistine Chapel ceiling and Counter-Reformation Catholicism. The ceiling may not have directly determined the decisions made at the Council of Trent, but it did illustrate the Renaissance ideologies that influenced those decisions. Through his artistic process and formal choices, while working on the ceiling, Michelangelo acted not only as an artist but also as a theologian. He depicted the complexities of the emerging Counter-Reformation Catholic Church through the incorporation of Humanist Renaissance ideas into classic biblical imagery and proved art's power to represent religious doctrine.

Introduction

It was not made for the sake of form or intellect, which were only servants to the central act, but as an act of worship and proclamation. It can be understood only by participating in the act, which is an act of worship.¹

This astute description by Professor John W. Dixon Jr. calls to mind an array of religious events, perhaps a Buddhist prayer service, a melodic reading of the Qur'an, or maybe even a Jewish Seder dinner. However, the "act of worship" Dixon speaks of is not an event at all. It is a 508-year-old fresco painted upon the ceiling of an even older chapel located in the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City.² It is a work of art globally renowned as one of the greatest creative accomplishments in human history and the most famous work of the Florentine artist, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). The simple amalgamation of pigments has become a paradigm of both Renaissance art and theological expression. Michelangelo's fresco series on the Sistine Chapel ceiling reflected the evolving doctrine of the Catholic Church on the Italian Peninsula during the Renaissance as it emphasized a new focus on humanity in Christianity and the importance of mortal life. The early 1500s was a time rife with religious turmoil.³ The beginning of the Protestant Reformation would eventually cause a readjustment of Catholic values and practices, determined largely at the Council of Trent, and with movements like Humanism and individualism driving creative pursuits in Renaissance Italy, the Sistine Chapel ceiling served as a precursor of coming theological developments.

Religious Turmoil in 16th-Century Europe

Before delving into the intricacies of Michelangelo's theology, it is paramount to survey the larger religious changes occurring in Europe, specifically the Protestant and Catholic Reformations. The culmination of these changes occurred in 1536 when the Pope convened what would eventually be known as the Council of Trent, a collection of the highest-ranking and most influential members of the clergy.⁴ Although the group did not meet until 1545, their summons served as a notice to all members of the Church, and Europe as a whole, that change was coming in what was arguably the continent's most powerful and

¹ Dixon, John W., Jr. "The Christology of Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 503.

² Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "Sistine Chapel."

³ Francesco C. Cesareo, "The complex nature of Catholicism in the Renaissance (Review Essay)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2001).

⁴ Bull, George, *Michelangelo: A Biography*. (New York City, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 329.

traditional institution.⁵ This unprecedented change was a response to an even larger religious movement, which essentially redefined the organizational structure and balance of power in Europe, the Protestant Reformation.⁶ The Protestant Reformation was led by Martin Luther, born in November of 1483, whose career in theology began in 1505 after a near-death experience in a thunderstorm drove him to join the clergy. By 1507, he had been ordained into the priesthood. Shortly after, he held a teaching position at a university and eventually earned a doctorate in Scripture.⁷ However, as he was furthering his studies of Catholic theology, Luther began to question some aspects of the Roman church's religious doctrine, specifically the necessity of demonstrative action to determine one's status as a faithful member of the Catholic church. Additionally, he opposed the practice of collecting indulgences, a lucrative business for many members of the clergy that involved accepting material or monetary payments to ensure salvation. He verbalized this opposition in his *Ninety-Five Theses*, which were published in October of 1517.⁸

Throughout his lifetime, Luther used the printing press to spread his ideas and further his Protestant cause, a strategy that was eventually adopted by the Catholic Church as well when they were promoting their reformed doctrine decades later.⁹ After four more years of Luther relentlessly offering his criticisms of the corruption and practices of the Catholic Church, he was officially excommunicated in 1521.¹⁰ This was a monumental occurrence as it officially separated his followers from the rest of Europe's millions of practicing Catholics. It further encouraged Luther to continue his work by organizing a team of like-minded thinkers and printers to build off of his translation of the New Testament into German to create a full German Bible translation.¹¹ Luther firmly believed that it was crucial to base one's Christian faith around the word of the Bible, and so this translation was necessary for him to help connect with and expand his followers, most of whom lived in German cities.

⁵ Bull, *Michelangelo*, 329.

⁶ Michael Mullett, *Historical Dictionary of the Reformation and Counter Reformation*, *Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements* 100 (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2010), xxiii.

⁷ Mullett, *Historical Dictionary*, 305-306.

⁸ Mullett, *Historical Dictionary*, 306.

⁹ Wolfgang Reinhard, "Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State: A Reassessment," *The Catholic Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (July 1989): 391.

¹⁰ Mullett, *Historical Dictionary*, 307.

¹¹ Mullett, *Historical Dictionary*, 308.

Luther continued publishing works that clarified and compounded his position on the justification of faith, arguably the area in which he differed most from the Roman Catholic Church. As discussed in his works “Freedom of a Christian,” and “Disputation Concerning Justification”, published in 1520 and 1536 respectively, Luther believed that faith alone was all that was necessary to justify one’s life for salvation, which opposed the Catholic ideology that faithful actions and deeds along with belief in God were what determined salvation.¹² This belief system was enthusiastically adopted by many European Christians, for a multitude of reasons including frustration with widespread financial corruption in the Catholic Church, allowing Luther to gain a widespread and devoted group of followers. This exodus of parishioners served as a startling notice to the leaders of the Catholic Church that the sentiment of ordinary Christians was changing, and that the organization needed to reform itself to maintain its awesome influence on the European stage.¹³

The reform took place on all levels of the Church, from regular clergy to the Papacy, but ultimately it ended up reestablishing key Catholic beliefs in a manner that better reflected the new Humanist values sweeping through Europe. These values are evident in Michelangelo’s artwork, which aligned with his faith. Although the Sistine Chapel is often analyzed in terms of specific artistic methods and overall aesthetic value, it must also be considered through the lens of what it truly was meant to illustrate, Catholic theology and history and more specifically, Catholic theology during the Renaissance. Ultimately, that is where the true meaning of the fresco series lies. Although a stunning piece of artistry and a triumph for fresco painting, it is fundamentally an illustration of a new Catholic ideology, deeply influenced by movements that flourished on the Italian peninsula during the early 16th century, such as Humanism and Classicism. These movements surrounded all aspects of Michelangelo’s life as a major figure of the Italian Renaissance, and therefore obviously presented themselves in his Catholic faith.

Michelangelo’s Catholicism

Throughout his life, Michelangelo was deeply religious and his Catholic beliefs manifest in his creative work, especially his tendency to depict biblical figures and scenes. Like many other children of the Italian Peninsula during the Renaissance, Michelangelo’s faith emanated from his family’s Catholicism. As he grew up, he continued to allow the

¹² Mullet, *Historical Dictionary*, 308.

¹³ Mullet, *Historical Dictionary*, 76.

Catholic values of performing good works and studying the Bible to define his practice. These characteristics show that Michelangelo was a good representative of most Catholics in the Italian Peninsula, as they were the common expectation of Italian Catholic parishioners. His religious doubts also aligned with those common during the Renaissance, as George Bull, an acclaimed expert on Renaissance Italy described in his biography of the artist, “Michelangelo’s spiritual torment was over whether his sinfulness stood in the way of his salvation; over how far Christ’s sacrifice would, as it must, outweigh transgressions.”¹⁴ This internal conflict mirrors one sweeping across Europe at the time regarding what determined salvation.

The emerging Protestant belief, which had been dictated by Martin Luther, was that man was, in his own words, “justified by faith without the works of the law.”¹⁵ Essentially what this meant was that no actions of charity or work for God were necessary to achieve salvation, that holy faith and recognition of God and his truths would suffice, which was directly opposed to the traditional Catholic ideology that service to the church and others was of paramount importance. Michelangelo, being Catholic, thought that good deeds were necessary, so he practiced acts of charity such as donating money to monasteries and orphans.¹⁶ The necessity of good deeds for salvation is something that the Catholic Church would eventually put at the core of its reformation and would feature prominently in their reevaluation at the Council of Trent, decades after the Sistine Chapel ceiling was finished.¹⁷

Further, Michelangelo’s career as an artist influenced his faith, as he believed both beauty and creativity were holy pursuits, and that God’s divine creation of humanity and the human world was the most perfect form of art.¹⁸ This fascination with humanity can be related to the Humanist movement, which was structured around the study of human history and behavior, and from which many Counter-Reformation Catholic groups like the Jesuits gained inspiration.¹⁹ But what may be most fascinating about Michelangelo’s personal Catholicism is how he often expressed it through a lens of uncertainty and powerlessness in his artwork. He never failed to infuse even the most glorious of images with hints of humility and humanity, an example being his placement of the

¹⁴ Bull, *Michelangelo*, 330.

¹⁵ Mullet, *Historical Dictionary*, 281.

¹⁶ Bull, *Michelangelo*, 375.

¹⁷ Bull, *Michelangelo*, 329.

¹⁸ Dixon, *Christology*, 509.

¹⁹ Mullet, *Historical Dictionary*, 247.

tragic illustration *The Drunkenness of Noah* next to the powerful *The Separation of Light and Darkness*.²⁰

The juxtaposition of God's glory and the absolute corruption of sin can be attributed to questions about Catholicism that Michelangelo pondered and that the Counter-Reformation would later try to answer. These ideas can be found in virtually all of the Sistine Chapel images, as the questions that haunted the Counter-Reformation ideologists were ones also asked in the Biblical times of the Old Testament. They were asked when God demanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and again in the Book of Job, a man who suffered countless horrible maladies. How can such a glorious God be so cruel? Is God even cruel, or do humans inflict this pain upon themselves?²¹ Although there is perhaps no real answer to these queries, Counter-Reformation theologians grappled with them, along with other issues like justification. But even before the leaders of the Church took it upon themselves to incorporate these changing ideals into the Church's doctrine, many ordinary parishioners, like Michelangelo, had recognized that they needed to be addressed. Michelangelo's religious sentiments echoed those of much of the Catholic Italian Peninsula. In his artistic pursuits, he integrated this increasingly complex ideology of Catholicism to spread its message to a larger audience.

Planning the Sistine Chapel Ceiling

Although a devout Catholic, Michelangelo had a strained relationship with Pope Julius II because of financial disputes. Nevertheless, Michelangelo accepted the commission for the Sistine Chapel ceiling, offered to him in 1508, and began planning a fresco that would illustrate the Bible's Old Testament through the lens of changing Catholic theological beliefs.²² The original plan given to Michelangelo was simply to do twelve separate images, one of each apostle. Michelangelo was not interested in such a basic design and successfully convinced the Pope to allow him to do something much more complex. In a way, the Sistine Chapel ceiling was an expression of Michelangelo's personal Catholic beliefs, as he felt his experience as both a faithful member of the church and his proximity to prominent religious figures gave him the ability to dictate how the nuances of Catholicism were to be portrayed in the ceiling. As art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon explains, "The balance of probabilities suggests that he did indeed take

²⁰ Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel* (New York City: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009), 114-115.

²¹ Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, 115.

²² Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, 59.

the license to reinvent and reconceive the meaning of the stories from the Old Testament that were his subject, filtering and refracting them through the lens of his own intellect, his own reading, his own sensibility.”²³ The result of this was that the ceiling represented a version of Catholicism that hinted towards the coming changes in the church, and was a reflection of Michelangelo’s own ideology, not just traditional beliefs.²⁴ Michelangelo planned to encapsulate the first section of Christian history, specifically the Old Testament era before God gave Moses the Twelve Commandments also known as the time “ante legem” or “before the law.”²⁵ Michelangelo sought to depict this period in a series of intricate scenes from different Biblical stories and illustrations of various significant religious figures. Artistic chronicles of Jesus’s life were common in Michelangelo’s time, an example being Gaudenzio Ferrari’s work in the chapel Santa Maria delle Grazie in Varallo, aptly titled “Life of Christ.” Ferrari’s bibliographical piece, which he completed in 1513, depicted key scenes and people in Jesus’s life in a series of twenty-one frescos on the inside of an Italian chapel.²⁶

Although Michelangelo also created a chronologically-ordered fresco series, his goal was to do so with a unique subject matter, hence his focus on the Old Testament. This departure from convention can be related to some Counter-Reformation themes, for example, the growing emphasis on the relationship between humanity and divinity, which is the focus of the Old Testament, and the relationship between God and the ordinary people of the Catholic Church. Instead of simply making a divine character the center of his work, Michelangelo chose to depict what George Bull aptly described as an “embodiment of the divine in the human; the history of man's dealings with God.”²⁷ With this plan in mind, Michelangelo began to paint his masterpiece and, as he worked, his artistic techniques added a whole new layer of depth and meaning to his original vision.

Michelangelo’s Artistic Methods

The artistic methods that Michelangelo used to create the Sistine Chapel Ceiling helped convey its complicated religious meaning. Michelangelo sectioned the ceiling into three parts, each depicting three smaller events. The first was God creating the universe, the second was

²³ Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, 183.

²⁴ Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, 184.

²⁵ Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, 63.

²⁶ Louis Gillet, “Gaudenzio Ferrari,” New Advent, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06047a.htm>.

²⁷ Bull, *Michelangelo*, 347.

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the third was the start of human history with Noah and the floods.²⁸ He surrounded this primary scene with depictions of other characters or situations, some from the Bible and others from real life. These included a shockingly powerful David standing over Goliath, arm raised in almighty fury, ready to strike and Eve reaching out in gratitude to a benevolent, almost fatherly God, while Adam lies beneath them in the gorgeous *Creation of Eve*.²⁹

Throughout his fresco scenes, Michelangelo takes care to convey interpersonal humanity and emotion between these holy beings, which can be attributed to the increasing emphasis on human relations and mortal livelihood during the early Renaissance. In terms of his more realistic inclusions, chronological illustrations of thirty popes and the ancestors of Jesus Christ adorn the ceiling as well.³⁰ These important historical figures serve as powerful reminders of the vastly influential history of the Catholic Church. The ceiling was meant to take its viewer on a journey, illustrating the story of early Biblical history and encouraging people to actively observe to follow the narrative.

The idea of viewer participation in art was popular during the Renaissance.³¹ In terms of the materials used on the ceiling, they were not extraordinarily luxurious. After Michelangelo completed the ceiling, Pope Julius II wanted to add gold trim to it, but Michelangelo firmly rejected this proposal, and the ceiling was not embellished. When the Pope said that without gold it “will look poor,” Michelangelo responded, “Those who are painted here, were poor themselves.”³² This conversation evidenced broader European conflicts at the time, as the Catholic Church was under harsh criticism for its opulence and monetization of faith. Michelangelo’s resistance to the proposition demonstrated how he represented the members of the Catholic population who were concerned about these issues, and eventually would portend the changes coming in the Catholic Church.

Michelangelo preferred to draw attention to his paintings through dynamism and movement, reflecting popular themes in Renaissance art like the expression of an energetic human form.³³ In his most important scenes, the significant character is often in motion either forwards or backward, this motion becomes even more apparent when he is

²⁸ Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, 69.

²⁹ Malcolm Bull, “The Iconography of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling,” *The Burlington Magazine* 130, no. 1025 (1988): 597, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/883597>.

³⁰ Bull, *Iconography*, 597.

³¹ Dixon, *Christology*, 514.

³² Bull, *Michelangelo*, 99.

³³ Dixon, *Christology*, 518.

depicting God as he shows his strong and commanding figure hurtling through space.³⁴ Michelangelo's artistic choices provide insight into how the Renaissance movement of Humanism influenced the chapel ceiling.

Counter-Reformation Themes in the Sistine Chapel Ceiling

Michelangelo demonstrated his belief in burgeoning reformist Catholicism by emphasizing humanity in the overarching themes of the ceiling. By painting characters in the nude and through his powerful depictions of Christ's mortal figure, he demonstrated his humanistic interpretation of Christian ideology.³⁵ Michelangelo was, and by some still is, considered to be the master of the human figure. Before him, God's visage had often been included in Christian art, but rarely along with an entire mortal body. Michelangelo illustrated God as a powerful and physically imposing man, with defined arm muscles and broad shoulders, yet His face conveys paternal kindness as He reaches out towards Adam, His greatest creation of all.³⁶ Michelangelo's stunning portrayal of God in the *Creation of Adam* is now culturally one of the most iconic images of the Catholic faith.³⁷

The concept of fully presenting God as a human was a product of growing Renaissance movements like Humanism. As Francesco Cesareo said in his essay on Renaissance Catholicism, "The process of renewal advocated by Catholicism in the Renaissance entailed a restoration of the image of God in the human person."³⁸ Additionally, it was a product of the Humanist emphasis on mortal anatomy, which can be demonstrated in artistic works such as Leonardo da Vinci's *The Vitruvian Man*. Leonardo completed his phenomenally detailed anatomical sketch in 1490, about thirty years before Michelangelo finished the ceiling.³⁹ Although Leonardo's drawing was not a religious piece, it was intended to be a representation of the "ideal man," as geometrically determined by a celebrated ancient Roman architect, Vitruvius. Leonardo explains this

³⁴ Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sistine Chapel, Ceiling*, fresco, 1508-1512, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

³⁵ Dixon, *Christology*, 522.

³⁶ Buonarroti, *Sistine Chapel*.

³⁷ "The Italian Renaissance-Faith, Imagined," *Columbia Blogs*, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://blogs.cuit.columbia.edu/maf2219/the-italian-renaissance-2/>.

³⁸ Cesareo, "The complex nature of Catholicism."

³⁹ Bolles School, "Humanism and its Influence on the Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Music of the Italian Renaissance," Bolles.org, accessed April 2, 2021, https://www.bolles.org/uploaded/PDFs/academics/AP_AP/APEuro3._Humanism_and_influence_on_Art_and_Music.pdf.

in a paragraph above the drawing and it serves as yet another example of classicism and rediscovery of ancient Roman thought.⁴⁰

Exploration of man's perfect form was a popular idea during the Renaissance, and one frequently utilized by Michelangelo, both in the Sistine Chapel ceiling and in other pieces of his work. Michelangelo's *David*, for example, was a gorgeous and hyper-realistic sculpture that is now widely regarded as one of the most iconic pieces of Renaissance art. *David* is a beautiful example of both Classicism, the rediscovery of Classical Greek architecture, art, and philosophy, and realistic human depiction.⁴¹ The latter can be seen throughout the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and to incorporate it, Michelangelo drew inspiration from the world around him. While painting the ceiling, he used average Italian people as inspiration for his divine figures and background characters. As he was finishing his masterpiece, Michelangelo would go out into the streets of Vatican City to find inspiration for imagery from the passersby, then create chalk sketches of these average people to use their likenesses as faces for his biblical characters.⁴² This emphasis on realistic imagery of characters was inspired by Humanism and the growing focus on mortal life in the Catholic religion. The confluence of Humanism and Catholicism was demonstrated on a religious level in the philosophy of the extremely popular Jesuit organization, and their practices such as missionary service.⁴³

Also, Michelangelo included domestic imagery and portraits of famous historical families in his fresco, as it was meant to show the power of the human family, which was designed perfectly by God.⁴⁴ Michelangelo's cherub-like *ignudi* figures, who dramatically clutch decorative items and swathes of ribbons and have faces of children but much stronger bodies, were one example of his complex depiction of the human form.⁴⁵ John W. Dixon Jr. faultlessly described their significance in his essay when he wrote, "They are the consummate beauty of the human, in their youth and their magnificent strength and energy."⁴⁶ Around the time of Michelangelo's work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, many of his peers in the top echelon of Renaissance art were also working on pieces that reflected some Humanist themes. One example is Raphael, who focused on two different aspects of Humanist ideology, secularism, and classicism, in his "The School of Athens," a fresco

⁴⁰ Bolles School, "Humanism and its Influence," Bolles.org.

⁴¹ Bolles School, "Humanism and its Influence," Bolles.org.

⁴² Bull, *Michelangelo*, 99.

⁴³ Cesareo, "The complex nature of Catholicism."

⁴⁴ Bull, *Michelangelo*, 101.

⁴⁵ Dixon, *Christology*, 508-509.

⁴⁶ Dixon, *Christology*, 508.

illustrating a collection of the greatest intellectual figures in human history such as Socrates and Aristotle.⁴⁷ This piece was also commissioned by Pope Julius II, to be hung in his residence in the Vatican. Both Michelangelo and Raphael and other renowned artists of the time created physically attractive and anatomically accurate depictions of the human form in their artwork, which aligned with the Humanist movement's burgeoning fascination with man's physical beauty and potential. This can even be attributed to the developing study of anatomy and medicine in the sciences.⁴⁸ When considered along with his motifs of human action and his exploration of the humanity of the divine and the divinity of humanity, it is evident that Michelangelo's fresco is a work of art that foreshadowed the religious themes that would define Counter-Reformation Catholicism later in the sixteenth century.

The Church Responds

Decades after Michelangelo finished the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the Catholic Church redefined its purpose at the Council of Trent in 1545, embracing ideas like Humanism that Michelangelo had included in his fresco years prior.⁴⁹ The Catholic Reformation was a response to a larger change in European ideas about faith, some of which Michelangelo's Ceiling addressed, and was prompted by Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Luther and other Protestant reformers disapproved of the Catholic Church's corrupt organizational structure and its system of profiting off of faith through practices like indulgences, where church officials would take money from their congregation to recompense for sins the people had committed or to a place in heaven for their souls.

The charismatic Protestant leaders encouraged a migration away from the Catholic Church to join new sects of Christianity, causing the officials in the Catholic Church to conclude changes needed to be made. The Council of Trent, which officially gathered in 1545, sought to address these issues. Notable clergymen convened with an agenda to answer the Protestant idea of "justification through faith alone," specifically to redefine the role of the pope, clergy, cardinals, and bishops, and provide clarity to how the Bible should be taught.⁵⁰ Seven months later, the Catholic Church emerged with a doctrine for the new

⁴⁷ Bolles School, "Humanism and its Influence," Bolles.org.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Seiferle, "Renaissance Humanism Definition Overview and Analysis," ed. Kimberly Nichols, TheArtStory.org, last modified October 19, 2019, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.theartstory.org/definition/renaissance-humanism/>.

⁴⁹ Bull, Michelangelo, 329.

⁵⁰ Bull, *Michelangelo*, 329.

era, one centered around the idea that one's life on earth, specifically the good deeds and faith practiced as a human, determined one's salvation. This philosophy echoed the Humanistic ideas that Michelangelo had also drawn inspiration from through its emphasis on the power and beauty of mortal life and the importance of actions one makes on earth. As Robert Birely, a Jesuit historian of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, explains, "Rather the result of 'the discovery of the world and of man' was the desire and the demand for a style of religion or a spirituality that took more account of individuality and of life in the world around us."⁵¹ This shift in religious doctrine was foreshadowed by the way artists such as Michelangelo portrayed God creatively, as a mighty yet anatomically human figure.

Furthermore, Michelangelo's inclusion of contemporary, non-Biblical figures and families in the ceiling was also indicative of the coming theological changes that ensured the Church served all its practitioners, not just its leaders.⁵² The mortal emotion and interpersonal relationships that Michelangelo weaved into his Old Testament stories illustrated the changing ideology of the Catholic Church, as it refocused itself on defining the relationship between God and His children, and how Catholic people practiced their faith. Michelangelo's incredibly beautiful and detailed human figures represented the Renaissance's fascination with anatomy and science and celebrated God's most glorious creation, man. The humanist themes incorporated in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco ultimately alluded to larger theological changes that would eventually be made by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent.

Art can both convey and elicit emotions and ideas of great magnitude and power. Michelangelo harnessed this ability whilst painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling and ended up creating a masterpiece indicative of the intricate complexities of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Michelangelo's ability to incorporate Humanist ideology into his fresco not only signified that he was an artistic precursor to Catholic reformers but allowed the Sistine Chapel ceiling to become a worldwide emblem of the beauty of Catholic art and the evolution of Catholic theology during the Renaissance.

⁵¹ Robert Birely, quoted in Francesco C. Cesareo "The complex nature of Catholicism in the Renaissance (Review Essay)." *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2001).

⁵² Bull, *Michelangelo*, 101.

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