

Pope Pius VII re-established the Society of Jesus in the universal Church on 7 August 1814. To commemorate the second centenary of this event, a canvas was unveiled above the altar in the chapel of the Passion in the church of the Gesù in Rome. This restored the thematic integrity of the chapel's paintings, which were originally completed by Giuseppe Valeriani and Gaspare Celio, around 1600. This unity was disturbed when the original canvas above the altar, a work by Scipione Pulzone, was removed in the early 1800's. It is now on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The process to commission and complete the new canvas has been long and arduous. A major issue centered on how appropriate it would be to place a contemporary work of art in an artistic context so historically different. Another challenge was to identify an artist who could, and would accept the disquiet which would inevitably flow from placing his new work beside traditional works, and who would meet the stringent criteria of those responsible for authorising his work.

The long history of the church of the Gesù saw layers and styles of art harmoniously develop in an almost unbroken sequence, at least until significant restoration took place in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even more so: Giovanni Battista Gaulli's magnificent series of paintings of the 1670's created a unique congruence between the stipulations of the Jesuits who commissioned the works, and the artistic ideals of the painter. The iconography designed by the Jesuits was complex, but Gaulli interpreted it admirably. The result was a masterpiece, both of baroque art and of the means to illustrate and communicate the Catholic faith most effectively.

With the assistance of the Special Superintendence of Historical, Artistic and Ethno-anthropological Heritage of Rome, and of the Diocesan Commission on Sacred Art, the not so easy dialogue between the Church and artists was pursued with renewed vigour.

In many ways, the project involved risks, but was also exciting. A commission compels the artist to restrict himself to a space that may seem to constrain his creativity. He may feel limited by the demands of the commission itself, as well as by the physical space for which his work was intended.

The artist would have to interpret his work by incorporating the many constraints which the commission involved, and which was destined for a church so significant as the Gesù in Rome. The primary purpose of the work was not to be celebratory. Rather, its purpose is to depict the spirit of the Society of Jesus and her desire to serve wherever she is sent to spread the Gospel. The figures depicted in the painting were the protagonists in that difficult time during and after the restoration of the Order; the reference to Father Arrupe brings to mind the Society's post-Conciliar renewal. In their participation in the deposition of the Body of the Lord from the cross, they had to recall that the vocation of the Society of Jesus is

to serve only God and the Church, and that under the banner of the cross.

After considering the vast corpus of Safet Zec, it seemed that he might be the right interpreter for the project. He is a Bosnian artist of great sensitivity. His art is rendered more acute and vibrant by his experience of the terrible inter-communal conflict which ravaged the Balkans. This experience affected him directly – even harshly – and it has given his work a rare intensity. His personal experience of pain and his compassion shine through in the persons he depicts, in their embraces with compassion, in their eyes filled with both tears and dignity, in their intense gaze. It also shines through in the ordinary objects of everyday life. The broken bread on a white tablecloth recalls the warmth of a canteen struck by a sudden tragedy. But it also holds the promise of restored communion and friendship. . . . There is, in the work of Zec, an anxious silence that fills the soul, a passion that endures endlessly, and that does not yield to the temptation to escape from it. Zec's work remains tightly focussed, and its meaning comes to those who are able to concentrate on the soul of the canvas' tragic image, or on the silence of the ancient Venetian facades as they decay magnificently, or on the still lives that recall the nostalgia inherent in an old, abandoned dwelling. Zec's paintings exhibit high technical skills. They employ subject matters that are strong and poignant, and always above and beyond the point of rhetoric.

The relics of St Joseph Pignatelli (1737 – 1811) and the mortal remains of the Servant of God Jan Philip Roothaan (1785 – 1853) are preserved and venerated in the chapel of the Passion. Pignatelli was a major player in the lead up to the Restoration of the Society. Roothaan, the second Superior General of the reborn Society, is venerated as its second founder. Pedro Arrupe (1907 – 1991) rests in the same chapel. He was the Superior General of the Society after Vatican II, and a decisive figure in the Society's *aggiornamento* that followed the Council.

As Pulzone had depicted in his original painting, Zec represents the deposition of the Body of Christ from the cross. But the inspiration behind this painting is entirely different from Pulzone's. One immediately notices, both from the faces and the clothes of the figures in the painting, that they represent the three Jesuits who are buried in the chapel. This substitution of the characters of the Gospel story reminds us of the contemplations of the mysteries of Christ's life, as presented in the Spiritual Exercises. In these contemplations, the person who prays plays his part in the action of the scene. The desire wells up to follow Christ, poor and humble, to share his mission, and to do so with apostolic creativity. The painting invites the viewer to contemplate, the fruit of which leads to apostolic charity. Looking at this work of art, the viewer will discover how it he is led to focus on the mystery represented. The viewer's gaze will dwell on the gestures and objects, grasping the richness of their symbolic meaning.

The scene captures the moment in which, with great fatigue, the Body of the Lord is being taken down from the cross, just after it has been loosened from its nails.

The vertical stem of the cross, the suspended ropes, the leaning ladder, the efforts of the people to support the weight of the dead body – all suggest a “construction site” in which something important, indeed unique is being realized. It is this challenging and convincing context which teaches the disciples the lesson of that practical charity which builds up the Church.

The deposition of the Body of the Lord from the cross, and the reverence with which his friends take it, hold an invitation for us to care for the human person, sick and humiliated. In this painting, the three Jesuits are united in their shared love for the Son of God, and in their compassionate care of his body. This refers to the Society of Jesus and her willingness to serve selflessly. As was the case with the people in the Gospels, this gesture reveals the Friends of the Lord as his disciples. They actively enter into Christ's suffering for humanity, and are determined to be associated with humanity's destiny. In the cross of Jesus, they found perfect freedom; in their faith in Him, they found the “precious pearl” of the Gospel. It is friends who detach that body – stripped naked, tortured, and exposed to ridicule – from the cross. They embrace it with deep reverence. They desire to restore to it the dignity which it was denied. They prepare to apply to it that humble gesture of charity which Jesus had taught them: to wash the limbs and feet of the Messenger who announces the good news of peace.

According to the Gospel, the Mother of the Lord stood by the cross of her Son. She was transfixed with pain, but convinced of the fidelity of God who hears the cry of the poor. Mary did not avert her gaze from the broken Body of Jesus, but neither does she intervene in the action. It is now her place to stand supporting, in their loving service, those who were given to her as sons by her dying Son. She is the incomparable Lady who, in pain but full of hope, gives birth to the Church, born from the pierced side. She is the Mother of the Society of Jesus, a Society determined to serve the Lord and the Church.

At the foot of the painting, on the earth, are the symbols of service: the basin and the towel. Jesus used these to wash the feet of his disciples to teach them the love which lies behind their willingness to be the least and servant of all. Also placed on the ground is the white robe which the victorious King will soon wear after rising from the dead; and the crown of thorns which is transformed into the sign of the glorious Kingship reserved for Him by the Father. The Lord enthroned on the cross is now seated forever as King at the right hand of the Father. He will sit with those who have decided to carry the cross after Him to the end. They are certain that the more they become like Him in the passion of their daily lives, the more will they be able to dispense the riches of his mercy to others.