

Images of the Last Supper

Given for you... poured out for you (Lk 22:19,20)



TARGET AUDIENCE

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Overview

This Object provides a unique perspective for studying the Last Supper. The portrayal of the Last Supper has been central to Christian art since the 2nd century; the art varies in different periods from symbolic to literal depictions.

The multimedia element is a slideshow of art works on the theme of the Last Supper from earliest Christian times into the present day. It contains the work of famous artists as well as school students.

Teacher Background

Teachers are encouraged to review the 'Exploring the Mass' section of the DVD Rom *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* to deepen their understanding of the scriptural, historical and theological foundations of the Eucharist.

In particular, the following aspects of *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* provide entry points and context for this Learning Object:

- Within the pathway 'Scriptural Foundations' click on the tab 'The Last Supper'. It would be pertinent to read the other scripture passages in this pathway under the tabs 'Passion & Death', 'Resurrection', 'Emmaus', and 'Ascension'.

Where appropriate, use this material with the students.

Supporting Content

This text by Rosemary Crumlin RSM supports the focus of the multimedia element.

Artists have always seen the Last Supper as a story of great love and great betrayal. Jesus is about to give his life for those he loves. He gathers his 12 chosen friends for a last celebratory meal. They do not know that he is about to be betrayed and that one of them will be the betrayer. Jesus knows, and at a critical moment in the feast he replies to Judas the traitor, who protests 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' with 'You have said so'. Only Judas leaves the room. Later Jesus reminds the other guests of his unconditional love for them as well as of their own human weakness. 'You will all become deserters because of me'.

The portrayal of this sacred meal has been central in Christian art from the 2nd

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Supporting Content

century. We have no portrait of Jesus so we do not know exactly how he looked. But we have thousands of images of him created by artists. In different ages he is portrayed differently, usually like a person of the artist's time, and hardly ever as a Jew. Yet he was Jewish.

Among the earliest representations is this 3rd century image from the early Christian catacomb of San Callisto in Rome. You can visit it when you go to Rome. It is not the story as told by Matthew or Luke or Mark. What you see is an agape, a feast. Seven (a sacred number) are seated around a table on which are 7 baskets, each with 12 loaves. Like a lot of modern art, here is a symbolic telling of what is at the heart of belief for Christians but is deliberately hidden from those who would not value it.

The recent painting by a Melbourne secondary school student does something like that too. The artist has taken the things around them and given the items special meaning – the fish, the wine, the bread, the city, and the dove.

Many Medieval and Renaissance artists were more explicit. The early 6th century mosaic in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Ravenna has Jesus seated like an honoured Roman on the left of the table. He raises his right hand for he is speaking. Only two look at him – the others turn their heads to Judas at the far end.

Jacobo Tintoretto's feast is a much more rollicking affair. The Venetians are crowded into a huge room – there are angels, servants, and women. Mary, Jesus' mother, is on the left. Tintoretto has used light itself as a symbol. Jesus here is the light.

Hans Holbein's *Last Supper* is a solemn German occasion. His characters are closely observed for he knew anatomy and was a famous composer of images. And he is a master storyteller. Look at Judas closely and you will see Holbein's prejudices and those of his age.

Great art takes time and reflection. It can reveal us to ourselves even though we live in a very different time and place. Great Christian art speaks of God and his love for each one, and also of the understandings of those who create it at a particular time.

The meaning of the Last Supper is at the heart of what it is to be a Christian. 'Do this in memory of me' was Jesus' command and invitation.

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For Reflection and Discussion: Ideas for Use

Select one or more of the following activities for students to complete.

- 1 **Images of the Last Supper is one of three Objects on the Last Supper: The Last Supper and The Last Supper and the Mass. Screen for the students the multimedia elements of these other two Objects. Invite the students to name three insights they have gained into the foundations of the Eucharist as a result of viewing all three.**
- 2 **Invite students to undertake an internet search and assist them in completing the worksheet.**
Undertake an internet search for artistic depictions of The Last Supper. Source from six to eight images and use this [worksheet](#) to provide the following information: title; artist; explain how Jesus is depicted; name who is present; describe what is happening; and consider how well the image portrays Jesus instituting the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood.
- 3 **Invite students to reflect on the following question and share their thoughts with the class:**
What do you think the artist was trying to emphasise in his/her picture?
- 4 **Invite students to choose another event or theme from the life or ministry of Jesus and to undertake an internet search. Assist them in completing the worksheet.**
Choose another event or theme from the life or ministry of Jesus, e.g. the washing of the feet or the parable of the Good Samaritan. Again using the [worksheet](#) provided, repeat the above activity.
- 5 **Invite students to draw or paint their own version of the Last Supper.**
Draw or paint your version of the Last Supper. Provide the details for your own painting as outlined in activity two. Present your work to the class and include these details.

Teacher Professional Development Resources

Dr Coloe, Mary, [‘Leonardo Da Vinci was a painter not a theologian’](#), *CathNews* 2011

Pope John Paul II, [‘Angelus Address 2000’](#), encouraging engagement with art