



The painting has some similarities to the same scene executed by da Vinci and other Renaissance greats. But there is much that is female-centred, a different take on what has often been a very male story: for example, the tablecloth on Plautilla's table has been carefully ironed and is pristine. The food, too, is plentiful: some Renaissance depictions of the Last Supper feature virtually no food, but Plautilla has piled up the plates; there's lamb and beans and salad, as well as plenty of wine.

Over the last few years, Plautilla Nelli's *Last Supper* has been undergoing restoration: in autumn 2019 it was unveiled in Santa Maria Novella in Florence. The city has several other examples of Nelli's work, including perhaps her finest piece, a *Lamentation* painting, which is kept in the Museum of San Marco, the monastery that was across the square from her convent and the home of the Fra Angelico murals. Nelli's *Lamentation*, like her *Last Supper*, puts a woman's take on a moment of history where men's views have been more prominent; she shows the dead Christ being tended to by the Marys and other women, while the men watch sorrowfully from above.

At a time when the Church is looking anew at women's contribution, it's worth considering the extraordinary step taken by a young nun in 1560, when against enormous odds she decided to take on painting the Last Supper. Her work, like that of every devotional artist, was itself a prayer; and she is united in prayer to this day to all who see the image. The tradition in those times was for artists not to sign their work; but Nelli decided otherwise. And not only her name is on the work, but also an appeal to all of us: "Pray for the Paintress", she wrote. Perhaps she meant not only herself, but all those women who have defied difficult odds to do what they believe to be right and who have dared to break the mould.

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

O sing a new song to the Lord, for he has worked wonders; in the sight of the nations he has shown his deliverance, alleluia.

FIRST READING Acts 6:1-7

PSALM Psalm 32

RESPONSE **May your love be upon us, O Lord, as we place all our hope in you.**

Or **Alleluia!**

1. Ring out your joy to the Lord, O you just; for praise is fitting for loyal hearts. Give thanks to the Lord upon the harp, with a ten-stringed lute sing him songs. **R.**
2. For the word of the Lord is faithful and all his works to be trusted. The Lord loves justice and right and fills the earth with his love. **R.**
3. The Lord looks on those who revere him, on those who hope in his love, to rescue their souls from death, to keep them alive in famine. **R.**

SECOND READING 1 Peter 2:4-9

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia! Jesus said: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me." Alleluia!

GOSPEL John 14:1-12

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

I am the true vine and you are the branches, says the Lord. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, bears fruit in plenty, alleluia.

Next Sunday's Readings:

Acts 8:5-8. 14-17
1 Peter 3:15-18
John 14:15-21



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PLAUTILLA NELLI, *LAST SUPPER*

The year was 1560; the place, a convent in Florence. A piece of art was about to be created: a large-scale painting that would cover the entire refectory wall when it was finished. It was to be an image of the Last Supper, the scene already painted so successfully a few decades earlier by Leonardo da Vinci in Milan. Since then, other masters of the Renaissance had taken a leaf from his book, and a huge painting of that scene was considered the high point of the career of any artist who considered himself on the map as far as history was concerned.

And the artist in this case was definitely confident enough to take that view. The only thing was: she was a woman. A Dominican nun, in fact: Suor Plautilla Nelli, who was now in her mid-thirties but who had been a member of the community since she joined as a novice aged fourteen. Plautilla had been born and raised in Florence, and had lost her mother at a young age. She entered the convent a few years after her only sister Costanza did the same. Once there, she realised that it was the perfect place to be the artist she had always believed she was.

Divine images



Joanna Moorhead continues this series on religious art.



Becoming an artist in sixteenth-century Florence was a lot harder than it might sound. Only boys could be apprenticed to the workshops and so train as artists; also, only male artists could belong to the all-important city guilds, which licensed them to sell their work. Women weren't allowed to paint anything other than small devotional miniatures; they were not allowed, as men were, to paint from life, using others as models. Plautilla could get round some of these difficulties as a nun: although she wasn't permitted to sell her paintings, the convent could sell them on her behalf. But it was still an extraordinarily bold thing to do when she picked up a paintbrush and began to cover a vast canvas with an image of the last meal Christ had with his apostles on earth.

10 MAY 2020

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I