

Between studying for my classes and working at the circulation desk, I spend a lot of time in the Bethel University Library, so it is perhaps appropriate that my research project, "Innovation and Harmonization in Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura," is about a famous library and its vision of truth. I wrote this paper for an art history class taught by one of my favorite Bethel professors, Wayne Roosa. I love how Dr. Roosa elucidates the big cultural ideas which lie beneath the surface of an image and shows how artworks aren't merely pretty pictures but profound symbols of a worldview. Intrigued by Dr. Roosa's lectures this semester about rooms covered with floor-to-ceiling with fresco paintings whose content combined to embody a complete belief system, I decided to research such a room this semester.

After checking out books from the Bethel University Library on several potential subjects, I decided to research the Stanza della Segnatura, a small room in the Vatican best known for its *School of Athens* fresco with its famous depiction of Plato and Aristotle. The room's name refers to the fact that it was at one time the place where the pope signed official decrees. However, I soon learned that Pope Julius II intended to use it as the papal library at the time he commissioned the famous painter Raphael to decorate its walls and ceiling. Thus, my research would have to explore the purpose of a library, as I considered what Raphael's images said about the nature of truth in written form.

As my research progressed, I used the CLICnet website to search for more sources on my subject, and I found images of the Stanza on the ARTstor database so I could view any part of the artworks whenever I wanted. I frequently mulled over what various authors said about the Stanza, as well as what I had noticed myself, trying to discover the distinctive meaning that Raphael was trying to convey through his images. After several weeks of reading and several thousand words of notes, I was finally able to synthesize my research into a few phrases which I believed summed up the message of the work. I discovered that this message was surprisingly relevant to Christians (and libraries) today who are trying to preserve a coherent picture of truth in a rapidly changing, philosophically pluralistic culture.

First, the layout of the Stanza promotes a holistic, rather than compartmentalized, view of truth. Pope Julius' library was divided into four sections: poetry, philosophy, law, and theology. Raphael painted each of the four walls of the stanza as a depiction of one of these branches of learning, but I found that he did not intend for the four murals to be viewed in isolation. In just one example, the *School of Athens* painting, which depicts philosophy, includes statues of Apollo, god of poetry, and Minerva, goddess of justice. Significantly, Apollo is placed on the left side of the picture, next to the wall depicting poetry, while Minerva is on the opposite side, adjacent to the wall for jurisprudence. I think Raphael would agree that what I learn about the world in a science class, about myself in a psychology class, and about God in a Bible class should combine to form a coherent, complete belief system.

Another overarching emphasis which I discovered was that diverse sources of truth can be harmonized into a greater whole. In the sixteenth century, Pope Julius was making a bold statement by ordering pagan poets, secular philosophers and scientists, and even Muslims portrayed across from saints, theologians, and angels in a church-owned building. Instead of condemning these thinkers as heretics or heathens, the church was recognizing that their learning contained some truth which was ultimately congruent with Christian revelation. Similarly, instead of following medieval scholars and treating Plato and Aristotle as philosophical opponents, Raphael portrays them walking in unison. Their outlooks, though very different, complement each other, a principle which is still applicable today, in this time of globalization and alternative worldviews.

However, I also realized that Raphael did not descend into mere pluralism and exalt all religions as equally true. His compositions make clear that the supreme source of truth, without which the others are pointless, is God's revelation of himself in his Word. In the *Disputá* (the painting depicting theology), Raphael places the vanishing point of the perspective exactly behind the Eucharistic host on the communion altar. Christ's huge halo dominates the sky above. On the opposite wall, in the *School of Athens*, the vanishing point is hidden behind the swirling robes of Plato, who points upward into a blank architectural space mirroring the shape of the halo in the *Disputá*. With these brilliant devices, Raphael indicates that all human attempts at philosophy, religion, poetry, and law ultimately point to God's self-disclosure in the person of Christ. As a Christian, I would do well to remember this in the face of claims that truth is relative and that Christianity is just another religion.

Thus, my research led me full circle—back to my world today. It gave me a new and rich perspective on the diverse cultures and worldviews which Dr. Roosa and my other professors investigate in their classes. It helped me realize that all those books that I read for my classes and shelve while at work are not isolated bits of information but little pieces in the big puzzle of truth. Finally, it reminded me that the ultimate standard for truth is God himself.