



L'Angelus (The Angelus) painted by Jean-Francois Millet between 1857-1859

Oil on canvas, Dimensions: 22" x 26", Location: Musee d'Orsay, Paris

Jean Francois Millet was a 19th century French painter known for his beautifully simplistic images which highlighted the harsh, but honorable work of the peasant. He painted at a time when his countrymen were still reeling in the aftermath of the horrors and devastation of the French Revolution. Millet was neither highly political nor religious, and sought mostly to give dignity to the common man through the Realism he depicted on his canvases. He was not a church-going man, and he did not intend this painting to be a religious work of art. But as providence would have it, his painting quickly became one of the most widely reproduced religious paintings of the 19th century. Today, well into the 21st century, this painting remains a highly treasured piece of religious art, very often seen hanging on walls in countless church offices, priest residences, seminaries, Catholic schools, and Catholic homes. We can thank Millet's pious grandmother for this!

Millet told his friends and family that the inspiration for this painting was a nostalgic memory from his childhood of his beloved Grandmother, who always insisted that her family stop whatever work they were doing when they heard the church bells ringing for the Angelus, so they could reverently pray the age-old Angelus prayer. Some of us today are not so familiar with this beautiful Catholic prayer and devotion, but it was ingrained in the fabric of every day Catholic life in Millet's time. The Angelus prayer, which commemorates the Incarnation (the moment when Christ Our Savior became flesh and changed the course of history), first originated in 11th century within the monasteries of Europe. The Latin word "angelus" means "angel", which is the first word of the prayer: *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae* ("The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary"). Comprised of three bible verses recounting the Incarnation, alternating with three Hail Mary's, this prayer was prayed three times a day (6 am, noon, 6 pm). In an era when few people had clocks or watches, church bells were employed as an alert that it was time to pray the Angelus. Eventually as the common townsfolk heard the Angelus bells ringing, they too joined the monks and nuns in this holy habit. The devotional practice of praying the Angelus at 6 am, noon, and 6 pm every day fell from many Catholic's attention and habit in the later half of the 20th century, but now seems to be regaining more widespread use and devotion currently among Catholics.

What is it about this painting that has made it become one of the most beloved religious paintings of the past several centuries? As one takes note of the virtues of the two figures, one can begin to understand the artwork's powerful draw. A man and woman, peasants who've obviously been laboring and persevering through long hours in the potato fields, have abruptly stopped their work as they hear the Angelus bells ringing from the church steeple in the distance. Millet felt that the peasantry and countryside were the closest to nature, and therefore closest to God. His simple subjects stand in a vast field, single-minded and undisturbed, with the tools of their work around them, a basket of hard-earned potatoes between them, laid down for something of higher importance, in the waning sunlight of dusk. (Notice though, they remain in the light!) The figures are mostly silhouetted, with few identifying characteristics detectable, making them essentially every man and every woman. The viewer's vantage point is a little below them, so they stand like statues meant to inspire, as they share a religious experience at sunset, one of humble devotion before the God of all Creation. Reverent before Almighty God, they humbly bow their heads, the man removing his hat out of respect for God, and the woman folding her hands close to her heart as she prays. Even though they are peasants leading simple lives, one sees supreme dignity in them, which gives hope to all us faithful -- that true faith, true devotion, true fidelity to God and the resultant graces are not merely for canonized saints, but for any virtuous person who is in loving relationship with God and seeks eternity with Him. This man and woman, who bespeak of little in the way of earthly possessions or comfort, witness to us the gift of gratitude. They elevate this virtue to the viewer so much so, that we begin to hold it in awe -- something tugs at our hearts to imitate them. Millet's figures seem to have accomplished the monastic idea of "*ora et labora*" (pray and work), and relay to anyone who views this beautifully serene painting the calmness derived when work and prayer find their balance. In their moment of silence, which the viewer shares with them, we're all reminded that we have an inescapable connection with the God of Heaven and Earth. The figures in this lovely painting are a study in the virtues of holy men and women of any generation. How many virtues do you see in them? Spend a little time contemplating how they make the virtues of faith, hope, charity, fortitude, prudence, humility, meekness, prayerfulness, obedience, simplicity, temperance, diligence, thankfulness, reverence, and modesty so very attractive! And before you walk away from viewing this painting, in order to drink in all its beauty, pray the concluding prayer of the Angelus, imagining these might be the very words on the lips of the virtuous figures in Millet's painting: ***"Pour forth we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts; that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of His resurrection, through the same Christ, our Lord. Amen."***