Survey of audience reception in the Sistine Chapel: decoding the message of sacred art

Emanuela Edwards
Congregation of the Missionaries of Divine Revelation, Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT
The Sistine Chapel in the Vatican is home to the most famous frescoes in the world that also have a profound religious significance and unique history. This case study analyses a survey of audience reception (2017) in the Sistine Chapel. It investigates how everyday visitors to the Chapel – usually tourists – interpreted the Christian art that they contemplated. The survey provides an insight into how sacred art can be used to transmit the Christian faith to today’s generations by using the cultural heritage of the Catholic Church. The case study highlights the importance of producing explanatory materials and of an effective guest management strategy to ensure visitors are given the opportunity to know the spiritual significance of the artworks. Encouragingly, many visitors in the survey demonstrated that they understood the religious significance of these works because they ascribed a religious meaning to their preferred masterpieces. This draws attention to the potential that the Sistine Chapel provides for evangelisation because it presents opportunities to talk about the Christian faith to those who otherwise may have no experience of it. This goal may be achieved through the experience of the visit itself and the production of guide materials or the use of expert guides that accompany the visitors to the Chapel.

1. Introduction
Each year some 6 million visitors enter the Sistine Chapel, which makes it one of the most visited sacred locations in Christendom. Commenting on its famous decoration, St John Paul II said, “the frescoes that we contemplate here introduce us to the world of Revelation” (Pope John Paul II 1994, no. 2) to underline how its sacred pictorial scheme can be an effective means of evangelisation. This paper outlines the results of a visitor survey that took place in the Vatican Museums to provide insight into how and to what extent the modern-day visitor to the Chapel, usually a pilgrim or a tourist, understands its artworks.

CONTACT Emanuela Edwards sr.emanuela@mdrevelation.org Missionaries of Divine Revelation, Via delle Vigne Nuove 459, 00139 Rome, Italy

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
The survey also highlights how visitors to the Sistine Chapel are attracted to these images through either their meaning and their deeper religious significance or purely their aesthetical value. Taking the example of the Chapel’s two most popular paintings, the *Creation of Adam* and the *Last Judgement*, this paper shows how visitors could ‘decode’ or understand the meaning or the message contained within these artworks. Whilst the marriage of a sacred place with throngs of tourists has the potential to be a difficult union, the survey suggests that a visit to the Sistine Chapel could be a spiritual experience for a proportion of those surveyed.

2. The Sistine Chapel, a unique space to visit

For most visitors, a visit to the *Sistine Chapel* in the Vatican constitutes a unique experience. The vast majority of guests that visit the Chapel today do not come to celebrate the Liturgy of the Catholic Church, but simply to experience the magnificent frescoes realised by Michelangelo and the *quattrocento* artists who decorated its walls. These great works appeal to believers and non-believers alike not least because the two most famous pieces, the *Creation of Adam* and the *Last Judgement*, place before them extraordinary artistic images that strike at the heart of human experience by posing the questions: ‘where did I come from’ and ‘what will be at the end?’. They might find the answers in the meaning of these frescoes as they contemplate the Chapel’s decorative programme.

It is not therefore surprising that Pope Francis said that the Sistine Chapel constitutes a *work of evangelisation* (Pope Francis 2015, 9) echoing the perennial teaching of the Church that sacred art is a privileged means of communicating the faith. This teaching was also echoed by John Paul II in his *Letter to Artists* (Pope John Paul II 1999, no. 7). In his introduction to the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) mentioned that “a sacred image can express much more than what can be said in words ...” (Ratzinger 2005, no. 5). Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate how the modern-day visitors to the Sistine Chapel comprehend and derive meaning from the masterpieces they see and if they are drawn by the aesthetical beauty of the Chapel or, rather, they are moved by the theological significance of these great images.

Much academic attention has focussed on the interpretation of the Chapel’s iconographical programme by ‘expert’ viewers such as art historians and noted theologians, which has facilitated the greater comprehension of the Chapel’s message. The list of academic studies on the Sistine Chapel is vast. Verdon (2017), Wind (2000) and Seymour (1972) are a good starting point to demonstrate the range of texts. However, this survey of audience reception turns attention to how the 20,000 daily visitors ‘decode’ or understand the celebrated images in the Sistine Chapel. It deals with the question of how the audience receives the message that the Chapel communicates. Are the visitors drawn by its beauty or the depth of the Gospel message that appears in glorious colours on its walls? Indeed, this survey provides an insight into how sacred art can be a means of communicating the faith and how the message it communicates is interpreted.
3. The challenges of “decoding” sacred art

In order to understand a work of sacred art it is necessary to take account of a number of elements: the pictorial tradition, the Biblical or spiritual meaning of the composition, the iconographic signs and symbols utilised by the Church to depict the mysteries of the faith, and finally, the place and religious functions for which the work was commissioned. It is important to take account of the composition of the whole rather than just one element of the scene in order to determine its overall significance. John Shearman likened this process to reading a work of art because, like reading, it follows through to interpret the scene by understanding the sense of what is happening in the picture and also the role played by the work of art in its original use (Shearman 1992, 5–6).

Another difficulty in understanding the message is that looking at these great compositions today, we see them at a distance of some 500 years from when they were originally created, and this means that it is also important to consider the historical context of the artifact. The historical reconstruction of the story of the Sistine Chapel’s decoration is complicated further by the dispersal and destruction of some of the Renaissance papal archives during the Sack of Rome (1527) which has resulted in numerous gaps in the historic evidence (Seymour 1972, XIV). Therefore, the interpretation of the iconographical programme is not just simply an exercise in producing an historical account of events and documented details but rather, it requires that the images are viewed with the ‘mind’ and thinking of their time.

4. A different context and a new kind of audience today

The Sistine Chapel, and therefore its iconographical programme, was created as the Cappella Magna of the Holy Father and consequently its original ‘audience’ comprised of the Pope and his Court. The Papal Court, at the time of the decoration of the Sistine Chapel (taking the period from 1471–1542), was comprised of the Pope, resident Cardinals, curial officials, judges and notaries of the Papal Tribunals, the diplomatic corps and, in second place, the Senator and Conservators of the Commune of Rome (Buranelli and Duston 2003, 81).

This underlines the fact that the Chapel – including its music and its art – was designed to be the place for the celebration of the Church’s main liturgical feasts. It was designed to imitate the heavenly liturgy here on earth and hence the emphasis on the iconography and beauty (O’Mally 2000, XLIV). Through their theological preparations alone, this ‘expert’ audience would have been fully capable of understanding the complexities of the Chapel’s iconographic programme and therefore its message. In fact, there are even historical accounts of Cardinals contemplating the frescoes during the celebrations in the Chapel (Buranelli and Duston 2003, 82). In addition, the homilies of the Papal Preacher would have also echoed the decorative programme in the Chapel (O’Mally 2000, LI).

Barnes’ interesting study of the original audience reaction to the iconographic programme on the ceiling in the Sistine Chapel emphasises this point:

Most of the members of the Papal Court, particularly the clergy within the group, could be expected to mentally elaborate on the themes presented in the ceiling, drawing
connections between them from their own knowledge of Sacred texts [...] The imagery would serve to stimulate memories, particularly when a liturgical text, hymn or sermon referred to some detail on the ceiling (Barnes 2017, 97).

Indeed, Barnes goes on to highlight the fact that for many decades the splendour of Michelangelo’s frescoes would only have been contemplated by the restricted audience of the Papal Chapel alone since there were few engravings of these frescoes produced in that period (Barnes 2017, 103).

This original audience is completely different from today’s visitors who cross the Chapel’s threshold as part of a tourist excursion or pilgrimage. However, the general term “tourists” is inadequate to describe such a new audience because this category is actually comprised of very diverse “publics” with very different perceptions of the sacred art they are looking at. They differ not only by the purpose of their visit but also by their religious convictions. Smith categorised tourism on a continuous scale that ranged from pilgrimage, that was generated through a religious motivation, on one side and secular tourism on the other. In the middle he placed religious tourism which contained both elements of pilgrimage and general tourism (Smith 1992, 1–17). Rinschede argued that pilgrimages and religious journeys are multifunctional because they often also include holiday, cultural or social tourist activities alongside a religiously orientated visit (Rinschede 1992, 51–67). This aspect was also emphasised by Turner and Turner who outlined the characteristics of tourists, claiming that “a tourist is half a pilgrim and a pilgrim is half a tourist” (Turner and Turner 1978, 20). Indeed, a visit to the Sistine Chapel is not necessarily a pilgrimage or even a religious visit if it is motivated purely on cultural grounds. These diverse motivations, which draw visitors to the Chapel, can alter the perception of the image and so too the way the message is received by the viewer.

In addition, this diverse group of tourists may differ in their degree of religious conviction and this can also impact the way in which they interpret the art. For example, there may be those who are not from a western Culture with its Judeo-Christian heritage and so have no prior knowledge by which to interpret the images. There may be non-believers or Christians from other denominations or even practicing and non-practicing Catholics with various degrees of awareness of the meaning of sacred art.

The growth in the secularization of society and the increasing lack of religious knowledge can reduce the ability to understand the message of sacred art, so that the theological signs are rendered incomprehensible to many people today. However, what may be for some visitors a first experience of the faith can be facilitated by the mediation of verbal resources that explain the meaning contained in these works, their symbolic connotations and the Gospel message that they communicate (Chenis 1991, 39–140). In that way, “Sacred Art becomes a moment of information and access to the sacred” in whichever environment it is found and regardless of the initial level of comprehension of the viewing public (Chenis 2000, 82).

Ralf van Bühren confirmed that today the visual and verbal communications of Christian identity are still important.

Unfolding the meaning of Christian art and architecture, might even inspire a new culture of dialogue within multireligious and secular societies. Distinguished works of
Christian art, in particular, can grant aesthetic access to spiritual meaning, empowering a culture of reflection and high-content communication (Bühren 2017, 64).

By looking at a masterpiece of sacred art, a person can see and hear, however dimly, the announcement of the Gospel or the silent sermon “preached” by the work. In this way, sacred places such as the Sistine Chapel can act as a means of communicating the faith to a large cross section of people that come from all four corners of the globe. However, its message must be decoded to be understood by the international tourists who enter the Chapel.

5. Overview and research methods for the visitor survey

5.1. Understanding visitor reactions

A survey of visitors to the Sistine Chapel was a challenging subject because whilst the significance of individual scenes are easy to understand, taken as a whole, the relationships between the works and their iconographic details may be overlooked by all but the most informed visitor.

The objectives of the survey were to understand visitor reactions to the frescoes in the Chapel by utilising a mix of attitude type questions and free form answers. The survey sought to understand the level of preparation that visitors undertake prior to a visit to the Sistine Chapel. The main questions in the survey were designed to investigate if the visitors experienced a rhetorical or aesthetic reaction to these works. A rhetorical reaction is where the viewer attributes meaning to the work of art. By contrast, an aesthetical response “consists in the viewer’s direct perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the image … it may mean enjoying its colour, its form or valuing its texture” (Foss 2005, 148). In other words, it is related to the perception of the work. These aspects are by no means mutually exclusive and this needs to be considered in the way that the data is viewed.

From the perspective of communicating the faith, it is perhaps most important to understand the theological and cultural meanings that visitors ascribe to these scenes. When viewers of the frescoes attribute such theological or cultural interpretations to these sacred artworks it indicates their rhetorical power because, in doing so, the people attribute an important meaning to these works.

This small-scale survey is designed to be a first indication of a subject that undoubtedly requires more in-depth studies in future research. In addition, the survey sought to identify the impact of the priest praying in the Sistine Chapel to see if his presence inspired a religious or spiritual experience during the visit.

5.2. Research methodology

To conduct the survey, a 1% sample of visitors leaving the Sistine Chapel via the Sala degli Indirizzi were asked, at random, to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix 2) during a two-day period from the 30th June to the 1st July 2017. Two hundred and eighteen visitors responded to the questionnaires which equates to an approximate 1% sample of the daily average number of visitors to the Chapel. Since the study was not investigating the images that visitors could remember, a printed handout
containing the names and pictures of the major pieces (the Ceiling, the Last Judgement and the frescoes of the quattrocento) was provided to assist in the completion of the questionnaire.

The data from the questionnaires was recorded in excel to conduct further statistical analysis. Where there was the opportunity for a free format response, namely for questions 4 and 6, these responses were categorised such that some simple comparisons could be ascertained from the visitor’s responses.

It was interesting to note that both questions 4 and 6 had an overall 17.9% and 19.6% blank response respectively to the free form question. In both cases this represents the second ‘most popular’ response of those surveyed. It expresses the reluctance of respondents to give a written reply that articulated why they liked the picture they selected or what it represented to them. This highlights the difficulties that are inherent in articulating the significance of a work of art, the feelings that it evokes or the message that it communicates. The survey suggested that this difficulty is real with the high non-response rate. Perhaps, in part, this indicates the reluctance of respondents to give a written reply rather than just tick box responses. However, even with the limitations of this form of questioning, the use of free form questions was essential to obtain the views of the visitors without influencing their responses with regard to the meanings of the images that they saw.

Only questions 1 and 2 presented the opportunity for multiple responses to indicate the various information sources used to prepare for the visit to the Chapel. However, since the survey was mainly interested in the identification of the types of support material used rather than their combinations, the data for each source of information was expressed as a percentage of the number of responses.

6. Results and discussion of the visitor survey

6.1. Explanatory support as a key to understanding sacred art

The full results of the Visitor Survey are presented in Appendix 1. The results were extremely interesting as they yielded many insights into how visitors comprehend the Sistine Chapel’s famous images. This in turn could highlight how sacred art and architecture can be used to transmit cultural and theological meaning.

The survey’s demographical data demonstrated that the Chapel attracts visitors from all over the world and that they hold a variety of religious convictions. According to the survey, 68% described themselves as Christian whilst 32% described themselves as being non-Christian or having no faith at all. Therefore, the survey results demonstrated the wide-ranging appeal of the Sistine Chapel’s famous artworks and that they are interesting also to those who do not possess religious faith. This emphasises the fact that whilst a visit to the Sistine Chapel may be viewed as a cultural visit, lacking in any religious motivation, it does provide opportunities to introduce the Christian faith to those unfamiliar with the Gospel message.

The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People’s recommended that tourists should be prepared prior to viewing sacred artworks or locations to understand their religious significance better (Chenis 2000, 3). For example, the preparation of explanatory materials can be seen as a way of evangelisation
through the artistic patrimonio of the Catholic Church. In fact, the Sistine Chapel visitor survey supported both the necessity and importance of having access to such materials. The survey demonstrated that 77% of visitors surveyed were prepared for a visit to the Sistine Chapel by using resources found on the internet (49%), in guide books (23%) or on the Vatican Museum’s website (15%). In addition, 57% of the respondents expressed the opinion that such resources assisted their comprehension of the significance of the frescoes.

This degree of preparation demonstrated the openness of the tourists to understand the artistic, historic and religious patrimonio of the Sistine Chapel. The degree of the tourists’ preparation shows that they are not ‘passive’ spectators but take an active interest in participating fully in the artworks’ meaning that the Chapel contains by being furnished with the supporting knowledge which enables them to enjoy their visit.

The fact that 77% of visitors to the Sistine Chapel make prior preparations for the visit stands in stark contrast with a recent VisitBritain Survey which reported that the number of tourists that seek preparatory materials before a visit to an English church building of cultural interest is about a third (Duff 2009). This perhaps is indicative of the importance of the location and the unique artistic, cultural and spiritual attributes of the Sistine Chapel.

The fact that most visitors seek explanatory material provides an interesting insight into how tourists actually decode or comprehend the religious images in the Sistine Chapel. The existence and use of such material demonstrated that, to a certain extent, the significance of art is mediated through such explanatory texts or tourist guides. Most visitors do not rely on their own capacity to ‘read’ or interpret these works by using their religious background or cultural education because their understanding of the works’ significance, at least in the first instance, comes from supporting materials. This is important because a picture does not directly communicate its meaning in the same way that speech or the written word does. Eck explained that:

“... there is more to a painting than meets the eye one can understand more than one can say” (Eck 2007, 144).

Indeed, a picture can speak a thousand words but its signs and symbols may not be comprehensible to the viewer, hence making a translation necessary. Given these challenges, the need for these images to be decoded emerges. The presence of explanatory materials almost turns full circle to the outset of the paper where reference was made to the work of experts who have interpreted the Sistine Chapel’s iconographic programme. In fact, through the production of materials to support tourists and the services of expert guides, the work of these experts is available to visitors and influences how tourists will understand the Sistine Chapel’s pictorial programme. In this, the decoding is not exclusively done by the tourists themselves but, in an indirect way, by those who publish the supporting materials or accompany the visitors on guided tours. This fact underlines the importance of materials that present the religious and spiritual meanings in these artworks. Indeed, all the Vatican Museums main guide books for the Sistine Chapel refer to the Biblical basis for the paintings and provide the appropriate Scriptural references.
The Vatican Museums also offer guided tours that are aimed at different types of tourists. To visit the Sistine Chapel, there is the possibility of a tour by an official, educational guide which guarantees authentic explanations of the art contained therein. In addition, there is also an Art and Faith tour which favours the religious interpretation of the Chapel’s images. Evidently, those choosing such a tour receive an explanation concentrating on the religious symbolism of the works rather than on their artistic and cultural aspects. In turn, these tourists will view the pictorial programme in the light of that interpretation. So, not only is there a mediation to help understand the religious works, such interpretation also depends on the degree to which the artistic, cultural and religious details are presented. To emphasise this further, during the visitor survey a respondent wrote, “the meaning [of the Chapel] was understood thanks to the reading of the guide.”

These results demonstrate the opportunities for transmitting the faith through art by the production of explanatory materials that favour the artistic, religious and historical understanding of the art. This is a great way of unlocking the potential of sacred art to help announce the Gospel message. St Gregory the Great emphasised the ability to utilise art to transmit the faith (Chazelle 1990, 141–142). Also in our age that is so influenced by the media it is perhaps appropriate that the Church maximises its potential by ensuring the availability of appropriate commentaries explaining the cultural and religious meanings of the artworks (Chenis 2000, 3; 82).

6.2. Attracting the visitor: the importance of both aesthetics and meaning

Part of understanding the visitor experience in the Sistine Chapel is to gain an insight into the artworks that the visitors like the most and those which attract their attention and also the reasons behind these facts. The visitor survey sought to investigate if tourists are drawn by the aesthetic impact of Michelangelo’s great works or by the religious meaning they discover in the Chapel’s frescoes. These two aspects – the aesthetic and the rhetorical – are not mutually exclusive but it is interesting to understand the aspects that primarily attract the visitors to the Chapel.

Not surprisingly, the visitors surveyed selected the two most famous pictures by Michelangelo: the Last Judgement (42%) and the Creation of Adam (25%) as the most preferred (see graph for question 4). However, a smaller number of respondents selected some of the lesser known quattrocento frescoes on the Chapel walls like the Last Supper by Cosimo Rosselli, the Beatitudes and Perugino’s Handing of the Keys. The results were curious because instinctively one would have expected the Creation of Adam to feature first due to its fame. In addition, the welcome existence of the quattrocento painting demonstrates that the Chapel’s appeal cannot solely be attributed to Michelangelo’s frescoes, but also to the message of the polyactive Biblical scenes on the two side walls.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the visitor survey relates to the identification of the motives that respondents declared for their preference of certain works. Table 1 shows the categorisation and sub-categorisation of the respondent’s motives for liking or preferring a particular artwork in the Sistine Chapel. The categories were generated by grouping the written replies to question 4 in the visitor
survey into common headings that were derived from the responses themselves. A further subdivision was created to group related rhetorical or aesthetic motives together to achieve a broader based analysis.

Whilst the overall ranking of the categories shows that most people liked a work due to its meaning (21.6%), familiarity with the work (11.9%) or the artistic details (11.5%) this could be misleading with regard to the overall categorisation. Looking at the division between the aesthetic and rhetorical responses shows that most people (40.8%) liked a particular work for aesthetic reasons whilst 29.4% of respondents liked the artworks for rhetorical reasons or for their meaning.

Further insight is possible by isolating the results for the Last Judgement and the Creation of Adam from the rest of the data for comparison. This is summarised in Table 2. It seems that the reasons why the respondents prefer these two scenes are related to their particular characteristics. For example, most people liked the Last Judgement because of its meaning and the size, scale and complexity of the image. On the other hand, those who liked the Creation of Adam choose it because of its familiarity and the meaning of the composition. The differences in the categorisations between the two pictures highlight that people were drawn to these paintings for different reasons that related to the artistic features of each work.

The application of the further categorisation is also quite revealing. The Last Judgement, arguably the most iconographically complex of the works, shows that the aesthetic considerations (53.8%) made people choose the work more than the

---

**Table 1. Reasons that respondents liked the artwork in the Sistine Chapel**

| Reasons for choosing certain masterpieces | Categorisation | % Overall | % Last Judgement | % Creation of Adam |
|------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Meaning of the work                      | Rhetorical     | 21.6      | 23.1            | 22.6              |
| No response                              | No response    | 17.9      | 12.1            | 15.1              |
| Artistic detail                          | Aesthetic      | 11.5      | 9.9             | 7.5               |
| Dimension, scale and complexity of work | Aesthetic      | 10.6      | 20.9            | 3.9               |
| Beauty                                   | Aesthetic      | 8.3       | 11.0            | 7.5               |
| Reflects Bible Scene/Message             | Rhetorical     | 7.8       | 3.3             | 7.5               |
| Familiarity/Famous work                  | Familiarity    | 11.9      | 7.7             | 28.3              |
| Splendour                                | Aesthetic      | 5.0       | 5.5             | 3.8               |
| Colour                                   | Aesthetic      | 3.2       | 5.5             | 1.9               |
| Presence/to see the work in reality      | Aesthetic      | 1.4       | 0.0             | 1.9               |
| I liked it                               | Aesthetic      | 0.8       | 1.0             | 0.0               |
| **Total**                                |                | **100**   | **100.0**       | **100.0**         |

**Table 2. Results for the Last Judgement and the Creation of Adam (Question 3)**

| Reasons for choosing certain masterpieces | Categorisation | % Overall | % Last Judgement | % Creation of Adam |
|------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Meaning of the work                      | Rhetorical     | 21.6      | 23.1            | 22.6              |
| No response                              | No response    | 17.9      | 12.1            | 15.1              |
| Artistic detail                          | Aesthetic      | 11.5      | 9.9             | 7.5               |
| Dimension, scale and complexity of work | Aesthetic      | 10.6      | 20.9            | 3.9               |
| Beauty                                   | Aesthetic      | 8.3       | 11.0            | 7.5               |
| Reflects Bible scene/Message             | Rhetorical     | 7.8       | 3.3             | 7.5               |
| Familiarity/Famous work                  | Familiarity    | 11.9      | 7.7             | 28.3              |
| Splendour                                | Aesthetic      | 5.0       | 5.5             | 3.8               |
| Colour                                   | Aesthetic      | 3.2       | 5.5             | 1.9               |
| Presence/to see the work in reality      | Aesthetic      | 1.4       | 0.0             | 1.9               |
| I liked it                               | Aesthetic      | 0.8       | 1.0             | 0.0               |
| **Total**                                |                | **100**   | **100.0**       | **100.0**         |
rhetorical aspect (26.4%) or the meaning of the work. However, for the *Creation of Adam*, the rhetorical (30.1%), aesthetical (26.5%) and familiarity (28.3%) of the work are more or less in equal proportions. This may suggest that with more complex works, the universal aesthetic language of art attracts the average beholder rather than the interpretation of the work’s meaning.

The beauty of the masterpiece attracts the viewer to engage with the work so they may fully discover its meaning which, at first glance, is not always obvious. In a certain sense, beauty operates in the service of the discovery of the truth. However, in simpler compositions, meaning, aesthetics and familiarity seem to go hand in hand. The great novelist Tolstoy wrote that art is only good if it is judged good by most people and art can only be great if it can be understood by all (Tolstóy 1960, 96). In the case of the *Creation of Adam*, people were drawn by its meaning, its artistic features and also its fame which suggests that the image has a broad or universal appeal. It is this universal appeal that helps the work communicate its message to a wide range of viewers.

### 6.3. Five ways to “decode” the artistic message in the Sistine Chapel

The most important result of the survey was its insight into how tourists actually understand the images in the Sistine Chapel. This result came from their explanations of what these images *represent* according to their interpretation of the work. The explanation of a single artwork is indicative of what the visitors themselves understand by these frescoes. It is a way of demonstrating how the visitors had received the message that the works of art communicate.

With regard to the picture’s meaning, the survey revealed five different ways in which the respondents understood the fresco paintings in the Sistine Chapel.

In question 6 the respondents selected the works of art that they found more meaningful and then went on to explain, in their own words, the images significance according to their interpretation. The *Creation of Adam* and the *Last Judgement* resonated most with the respondents followed by the other artworks indicated in the graph for Question 6 in Appendix 1.

The ways of ‘decoding’ the masterpieces were identified by categorising the responses explaining the paintings according to the method used by the respondent to interpret the image. The analysis showed that the respondents ‘decoded’ these images or ascribed meaning to them in the five following categories:

1. **Biblical or iconographical interpretation** of the artwork (24%). These explanations iconographically stated what the picture represented in accordance with the Bible.
2. **Moral or teaching implication** of the artwork (17%). These explanations went further by explaining the moral implications that flow from the biblical significance of the scenes. It is a way of explaining the ethical implications of the paintings.
3. **Personal interpretation** of the artwork (17%). Here the respondents said what the masterpiece meant to them personally without any reference to theological,
cultural or moral interpretations of the subject matter. These personalistic explanations were sometimes highly subjective.

4. **Incorrect interpretation** of the artwork (5%). These responses were objectively incorrect regarding the message that the paintings transmit.

5. **No explanation** – blank – (20%)/or a response unrelated to the question (17%).

From these five categories of responses, four can be considered ways of decoding the images in the Sistine Chapel. The first two categories can be considered more objective ways of decoding the Chapel’s message because they merely reflect the Biblical text and its implied moral teaching. By contrast, the third category – the personal interpretation of the artwork – is a more subjective way of decoding the picture. In this category the people said what they feel the image communicates to them. There is an interplay between the person and the work of art which results in the generation of the work’s significance. In “Framing the fine arts through Rhetoric” Helmers observes that:

Meaning is not located in the object itself. Nor is it found in the spectator’s well of previous experiences. Meaning derives from the interplay of these elements and it not limited to the expressive or persuasive modes of response (Helmers 2004, 65).

Helmers makes the point that the meaning or the message that a recipient, or visitor in this case, receives comes from both the message created by the artist in his work and the way that the viewer interprets that message given his/her previous experiences or knowledge. Indeed, the first three categories demonstrate this position to a certain extent. The biblical interpretation may be likened to Panofsky’s secondary mode of iconographic analysis which understands the subject matter of the work with reference to typical biblical themes and the way the artwork is realised (Panofsky 1972, 14–15). The second category is what Panofsky means by the **intrinsic meaning** of the work (Panofsky 1972, 14–15). In order to draw out the implications of the Sistine frescoes the respondents made reference to the symbols used in the works. This requires a more detailed reading of the frescoes and also a deeper knowledge of the content of the Gospels to facilitate such an understanding.

The third category, the personal interpretation relates to the message that the masterpiece gives to the spectator of the work. This category, being personalistic, does not necessarily relate to the significance of the symbolic elements of the paintings but just relies on the opinion of the spectators themselves. In effect, many of these visitors do not ‘decode’ the art’s message but rather project their personal opinion onto the painting before them.
Overall, the results demonstrated that a high proportion of respondents (41% rising to 58% if taken together with category 3) ascribed meaning to the paintings in the Sistine Chapel or could read the message that they contain. Given today’s level of secularisation and lack of knowledge in the faith, this is an encouraging result. It suggests that the message of sacred art in the Sistine Chapel is able to be communicated effectively to the majority of visitors.

6.4. Decoding the message of the “Creation of Adam” and the “Last Judgement”

Finally, in order to perform a more in-depth analysis of the results, the Creation of Adam and the Last Judgement were analysed separately. The results are presented in Table 3. It is interesting to note that a far higher proportion of respondents explained the Creation of Adam according to the biblical or iconographical meaning of the work (39%) than that of the Last Judgement only (19%). However, a higher proportion of those who choose the Last Judgement interpreted it more in line with the moral significance (23%) or gave a personal interpretation of the work (21%). One could presume that the reason is because the Last Judgement is more iconographically complex to describe than the Creation of Adam and so respondents generated meaning based on their own experience. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see that Michelangelo’s message is understood clearly by a greater proportion of those interviewed. It seems that for them, the meaning of the Creation by God resonated particularly.

Looking at the proportions of those who ascribed a meaning to the works of the Sistine Chapel it is also clear that a greater proportion of respondents assigned meaning to the Creation of Adam 71%, (taking categories 1,2 and 3 together) compared with the totals for the study overall 58% (taking categories 1,2 and 3 together). This factor may be due to the availability of explanatory materials that have helped to prepare the visitors by assisting their comprehension, and therefore the attribution of meaning to these works in particular.

In addition, the results attributed to the Creation of Adam may also be attributable to the relationship between the complexity of the work and its ability to transmit a clear message. Indeed, the image only depicts one scene, the creation of the first man, and includes only a few figures. This may suggest that one factor that determines the ability of art to transmit the Christian faith would be its comparative simplicity in projecting the message. This factor is not easy to isolate because,
the understandability of the message is also dependent on the viewer’s prior knowledge of the Biblical account and the overall familiarity with the work under consideration.

6.5. Spiritual aspects of a tourist visit to the Sistine Chapel

The Sistine Chapel is primarily a place of worship and a place where the liturgical feasts of the Catholic Church are celebrated. This liturgical and spiritual aspect is vastly different from entering the Chapel as a tourist amongst the thongs of other tourists who all want to get the best view of the Chapel’s treasures. Pope Benedict XVI underlined the link between the Chapel’s message and the liturgy when he said that it is during the liturgical celebration that the Chapel finds its true meaning (Pope Benedict XVI 2012). Therefore, the fact that these images are viewed by tourists in a museum context can somewhat modify their reception of the message that these pictures communicate. Gilson explained this difference with the change in the viewing context as follows:

When a picture is removed from a church and placed in some museum of fine arts, it does not remain the same, because it ceases to fulfil the same functions, to address itself to the same public and to aim at achieving the same end. A crucifix as religious art is something about which a Priest will preach and which will help him in his sacerdotal mission amongst men; a crucifix as an artistic masterpiece is something about which a professor will lecture as a good sample of what the fine arts can produce (Gilson 1965, 167–168).

In the case of visitors to the Sistine Chapel, its location in the Apostolic Palace is the same although the context of the touristic visit, during the opening hours of the Vatican Museums, is different from the liturgical use of this space. Chenis argues that this situation constitutes a certain intellectual alienation from the function of sacred art because the spectator enjoys a cultural experience rather than a liturgical one (Chenis 1991, 139–140). In the case of the Sistine Chapel it may be argued that this assessment is not totally applicable for two reasons. Firstly, the fact that the Vatican Museums have been very proactive in maintaining a spiritual dimension during a visit to this sacred place. Each day, through certain portions of the schedule, a priest offers prayers in various languages over the Chapel’s sound system and invites the visitors to participate in these prayers. At other times, he is available for confessions or to discuss any questions that the visit to the Sistine Chapel, with its powerful religious imagery, has provoked. The Museum management of the tourists also tries to maintain a quiet atmosphere to remind visitors that they are in a sacred place.

Secondly, it would not be true to say that visitors to the Sistine Chapel are not moved by the religious images they see. In fact, we can say that whilst the liturgical function becomes secondary, the kerygmatic function of these works continues to operate for whatever reason the tourists visits the Chapel. When the visitors ‘read’ and understand these creations of art, they receive the annunciation of the Gospel via the frescoes as a means of communication. The Chapel, drawing people from all over the world with its great artistic works uses meaning and beauty to speak of God to diverse sectors of society which otherwise would never enter a Church or attend a religious service. Therefore, the contextual variation of presenting these artistic
treasures can be considered an efficient way of drawing the tourists of our time to
the Gospel message.

The visitor survey also provided data to support the fact that the Sistine Chapel
can encourage the consideration of the Gospel message. The responses to Question 5
(Table 4) indicated that 62.8% of respondents agreed that the image which most
cought their attention caused them to “reflect” on the Gospel message whilst 46.8%
said they could empathise with the scene.

6.6. Transforming a cultural visit into a spiritual encounter

The data regarding the impact of the priest praying in the Sistine Chapel is reported
briefly below. Due to the fact that he was only present during the first day of the sur-
vey this data represents only 13% of those surveyed overall or 34% of those inter-
viewed on the first day of the study. Whilst the sample is small, it does provide an
indication of the kind of effect that offering prayers has on the visitors.

The responses of those interviewed demonstrated that the priest praying with them
did also influence their visit. 84% agreed that the prayer reminded them that they
were in a sacred place. 80% said that the prayers brought a spiritual dimension to the
visit and 62% said it encouraged them to pray. Anecdotally, looking at these
responses, it is interesting to find those who described themselves as having, “no reli-
gion” were encouraged to pray at the priest’s invitation.

Therefore, such a pastoral initiative can be a means of restoring the Chapel’s spir-
ituality by orientating the visitors towards God, at least for a time. It appears to
contradict those, like Gilson, who argues that its masterpieces and the situation in
which they are seen, do not inspire prayer. “In the crowds of tourists who visit the
Sistine Chapel, how many are seen to pray?” (Gilson 1965, 171). However, the data
shows that even amongst thousands of tourists, it is possible to recapture a space for
prayer and this, together with the great paintings can foster the contemplation of
God and the transmission of the Christian message. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI said
that, “the Sistine Chapel, contemplated in prayer, is even more beautiful, more
authentic; all of its riches are revealed” (Pope Benedict XVI 2012).

7. Conclusions

The Sistine Chapel in the Vatican has been considered as a “figurative synthesis of
Catholic doctrine [that] performs an indispensable catechetical function” (Paolucci
2011, 76). In this regard, the analysis of the present research showed that the
Chapel’s unique artistic masterpieces can convey the Christian faith and that most
visitors, in one form or another, can actually understand the message in the works.

| Table 4. Question 5 results summary | True % | % Indifferent | False % | % No response | Total % |
|-----------------------------------|-------|--------------|--------|--------------|--------|
| It was so beautiful | 82.1  | 4.6          | 4.6    | 8.7          | 100    |
| I could empathise with the scene | 46.8  | 23.4         | 17.4   | 12.4         | 100    |
| It caused me to reflect on the Biblical scene | 62.8  | 17.5         | 8.7    | 11.0         | 100    |
| I liked the message it portrayed | 58.3  | 14.2         | 9.6    | 17.9         | 100    |
Theological meaning and aesthetic beauty both play a role in attracting the attention of the viewer to these artworks. Michelangelo may have had a different audience in mind when he created his works, but they still draw the attention of modern-day tourists who visit the Chapel.

Furthermore, many visitors to the Sistine Chapel prepare for their visit. This fact represents an opportunity for the Vatican Museums to convey the religious significance of the artworks by providing explanatory materials. The Sistine Chapel is perhaps a supreme example of how the artistic heritage of the Catholic Church can be used to speak of the Christian faith to those who otherwise would not experience it.

This study demonstrated that, even amongst the mass of other visitors, standing in the Sistine Chapel and looking at its unique artworks can effectively turn a ‘tour’ or ‘visit’ into a spiritual experience. This scope is enhanced by the way a priest offers prayers in the Chapel and by a ‘hushed’ atmosphere in this sacred place.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor
Sr Emanuela Edwards is a member of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Divine Revelation. As part of her apostolate, she works as an official guide for the itinerary of “Art and Faith” in the Vatican Museums. By drawing on the religious, historical and cultural significance of the artworks contained in the Vatican collections, this itinerary uses sacred art to communicate the Christian faith. Her work is a practical example of how guided artistic tours can be a means of evangelisation. In 2017, she obtained a Licentiate Degree in Social Institutional Communications at the Pontificia Università della Santa Croce in Rome. The focus of her current research is on how sacred art can be a form of visual rhetoric and how it can be applied in the communication of the Gospel message to all sectors of society.

References

Church Documents
Pope Benedict XVI. 2012. “In questa liturgia.” Address at the celebration of first vespers on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the inauguration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, 31 October. 
Pope Francis. 2015. La mia idea di arte, edited by Tiziana Lupi, Milano: Mondadori/Città del Vaticano: Edizioni Musei Vaticani.
Pope John Paul II. 1994. “Entriamo oggi.” Homily preached at the mass to celebrate the unveiling of the restorations of Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, 8 April. 
Pope John Paul II. 1999. “Personne mieux que vous.” Letter to Artists, 4 April. AAS 91: 1155–1172. 
Ratzinger, J. 2005. “Introduction”, 20 March. In Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2006. London: Catholic Truth Society.

Literature
Barnes, B. 2017. Michelangelo and the viewer in his time. London: Reaktion Books.
Bühren, R. v. 2017 “Caravaggio’s ‘Seven Works of Mercy’ in Naples. The relevance of art history to cultural journalism.” Church, Communication and Culture 2 (1):63–87. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2017.1287283 (accessed 25 August 2018). doi:10.1080/23753234.2017.1287283.

Buranelli, Francesco, and Allen Duston, eds. 2003. The fifteenth century frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Città del Vaticano: Edizioni Musei Vaticani.

Chazelle, C. M. 1990. “Pictures, books and the illiterate: Pope Gregory I’s letters to Serenus of Marseilles.” Word and Image 6:138–53. doi:10.1080/02666286.1990.10435425.

Chenis, C. 1991. Fondamenti teorici dell’arte sacra: Magistero post-conciliare. Roma: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano.

Chenis, C. 2000. “Verso I luoghi della bellezza e del sacro: Il turismo religioso nel Giubileo dell’Anno 2000”. People on the Move, no. 82, April, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/pom99-00_81_84/rc_pc_migrants_pom82_chenis.htm (accessed 20 June 2018).

Duff, A. 2009. “Unlocking the Potential of Church Tourism”. Tourism Insights, September [no pagination]. http://cvta.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/insights_church_tourism.pdf (accessed 18 February 2018).

Eck, C. V. 2007. Classical rhetoric and the visual arts in early modern Europe. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Foss, S. K. 2005. “Theory of Visual Rhetoric”. In Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media., edited by Ken Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis, and Keith Kenney, 141–152. Hoboken, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gilson, E. 1965. The Arts of the Beautiful. New York: Scribner.

Helmers, M. 2004. Framing the fine arts through rhetoric. In Defining visual rhetoric, edited by Charles A. Hill, Marguerite Helmers, 63–86. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

O’Mally, J. W. 2000. “The Religious and Theological culture of Michelangelo’s Rome, 1508–1512”. In Edgar Wind, The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling, edited by Elizabeth Sears, XLI–LII. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Panofsky, E. 1972. Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Paolucci, A. 2011. Arte e bellezza, edited by Carolina Drago. Brescia: La scuola.

Rinschede, G. 1992. “Forms of Religious Tourism.” Annals of Tourism Research 19 (1):51–67. doi:10.1016/0160-7383(92)90106-Y.

Seymour, C. Jr. 1972. Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel Ceiling. London: Thames and Hudson.

Shearman, J. 1992. Only Connect…: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance. (The A. W. Mellon lectures in the fine arts, 1988), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. doi: 10.1086/ahr/99.3.933.

Smith, V. L. 1992. “Introduction: The Quest in Guest.” Annals of Tourism Research 19 (1): 1–17. In”. doi:10.1016/0160-7383(92)90103-V.

Tolstóy, L. N. 1960. What is Art? Translated from the Russian original by Aylmer Maude. New York: The Liberal Art Press.

Turner, V. W., and E. Turner. 1978. Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press.

Verdon, T. 2017. La Cappella Sistina: Cuore e simbolo della Chiesa, Vol. 3: La volta di Michelangelo. Città del Vaticano: Edizioni Musei Vaticani/Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Wind, E. 2000. The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling, edited by Elizabeth Sears. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Appendix 1. Results of the Sistine Chapel Visitor Survey

*Results for questions 1–3: Preparation for visit to the Vatican*

| Did you read any information about the works of art before visiting the Sistine Chapel? | %   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Yes                                                                                  | 77% |
| No                                                                                   | 22% |
| Empty                                                                                | 1%  |
| Total                                                                                | 100%|
Results for question 4: Which work of art did you like the most?

Motives why respondents liked the Last Judgement and the Creation of Adam

| Motive                                      | % Creation of Adam | % Last Judgement | % Overall |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|
| I liked it                                  | 28.3               | 0.0              | 10.0      |
| Presence / to see the work in reality       | 5.5                | 1.9              | 0.0       |
| Colour                                      | 5.5                | 8.3              | 3.3       |
| Splendour                                   | 11.9               | 7.5              | 7.5       |
| Familiarity / Famous work                   | 11.9               | 7.8              | 7.8       |
| Reflects biblical scene / message           | 11.0               | 7.8              | 7.8       |
| Beauty                                      | 20.9               | 10.9             | 10.9      |
| Dimension, scale and complexity             | 20.9               | 10.9             | 10.9      |
| Artistic detail                             | 12.1               | 9.9              | 9.9       |
| No response                                 | 15.1               | 17.9             | 17.9      |
| Meaning of the work                         | 21.6               | 21.6             | 21.6      |
Results for question 5: Which works of art caught your attention the most and why?

Which work captured your attention and why? Rate the following statements:

| Statement                                               | % True | % Indifferent | % False | % No response | Total |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------------|---------|---------------|-------|
| It was so beautiful.                                    | 82,1   | 4,6           | 4,6     | 8,7           | 100%  |
| I could empathise with the scene.                       | 46,8   | 23,4          | 17,4    | 12,4          | 100%  |
| It caused me to reflect on the Biblical scene.          | 62,8   | 17,4          | 8,7     | 11,0          | 100%  |
| I liked the message it portrayed.                       | 58,3   | 14,2          | 9,6     | 17,9          | 100%  |

Which work of art caught your attention the most?
Results for question 6: Which painting was most meaningful to you? What did it represent?

Results: Respondents data

![Bar chart showing the distribution of responses to question 6.]

- Religious belief: 55%
- Christian (Catholic): 22%
- Christian (Other confession): 13%
- Other religion: 5%
- No religion: 5%
- No response: 5%

![Pie chart showing the distribution of religious beliefs.]

- Religious belief: 55%
- Christian (Catholic): 22%
- Christian (Other confession): 13%
- Other religion: 5%
- No religion: 5%
- No response: 5%
Appendix 2. Visitor survey

Dear Visitor to the Sistine Chapel,

thank you for taking the time to complete this survey about your visit to the Sistine Chapel. The questions focus on your experience visiting the Sistine Chapel. There are no correct or wrong answers because the study seeks your opinion. The data will be used for a university research study and the data will not be shared with any third parties.

Preparation for visit to the Vatican:

1. Did you read any information about the works of art before visiting the Sistine Chapel?  Y / N
   If yes, where?
   Guide Books
   Vatican Museums website
   Internet Resources
   Other (specify):

Visit to the Sistine Chapel:

2. What sources of information did you use during your visit to the Sistine Chapel?
   Guided Tour:  
   Museum Guide  
   Museum Audio Guide  
   Art and Faith Audio Guide  
   External Guide  
   App for smartphone  
   Guide Book
   None  
   Other (specify):

3. How was your visit assisted by the guide / guide books you used?

Rate these questions from 1 (true) to 5 (false)

| Without a guide / guide book I would not have understood the images in the Sistine Chapel. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| It is easy to understand the images in the Sistine Chapel.                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| It is better to experience the art in the Sistine Chapel without a guide.                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| The guide / guide books do not help to understand the significance of the images.       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

4. Which paintings did you like the most?

| Why? |
|------|
5. What painting caught your attention the most?

State the work of art: ..............................................

Why? Rate these affirmations from 1 (true) to 5 (false)  

| Affirmation                                      | True  | False |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| It was so beautiful.                            | 1     | 2     |
| I could empathise with the scene.               | 3     | 4     |
| It caused me to reflect on the biblical scene.  | 4     | 5     |
| I liked the message it portrayed.               | 5     | 4     |
| Other (specify)                                 | 3     | 2     |

6. Which painting was most meaningful to you?

Name of the masterpiece: ........................................

What did it represent?

7. During your visit to the Sistine Chapel was a prayer offered by the priest? Y / N

If yes, how did that affect you?

Rate these affirmations from 1 (true) to 5 (false)

| Affirmation                                      | True  | False |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Not at all                                      | 1     | 2     |
| Encouraged me to pray                           | 3     | 4     |
| Reminded me that the Sistine Chapel is a Holy Place | 4     | 5     |
| Gave the visit a spiritual dimension            | 5     | 4     |
| Other (specify)                                 | 3     | 2     |

8. General Information

| Gender:  | Nationality: |
|----------|--------------|
| M / F    |              |

| Age:      |              |
|-----------|--------------|
| Under 21  | 51-60        |
| 21-30     | 60+          |
| 31-50     |              |

| Profession: |
|-------------|
| Self employed |
| Employed    |
| Retired     |

| Faith:      |
|-------------|
| Christian (Catholic) |
| Christian (other confession) |
| Other religion |
| No religion  |