

The Doubting Thomas

Painted in 1621 by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591-1666), nicknamed Il Guercino because of his squint, on commission from Bartolomeo Fabri (1582-1646), a prominent nobleman from Cento, as a pendant for another picture, *The Taking of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* (currently in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). Both subjects had been painted twenty years earlier by Caravaggio whose work much influenced Guercino.

The *Incredulity of St Thomas* was painted at least three times by the artist. A version is in the Pinacoteca Vaticana; a second version in the National Gallery in London; and a third version in the Residengalerie in Salzburg. The copy of this painting recently acquired by the parish from the Convent of Marcy in Newry, Co. Down, is based on the picture in the Vatican Gallery and was painted in Rome in 1864 by Giovanni de Boni. The subject is taken from St. John's Gospel (20:24-29) recounting St Thomas' refusal to believe in the resurrection of Christ unless he could physically touch the holes made in Christ's hands by the nails and place his hand in the side of Christ. Having done this, he professed his belief in the resurrection by saying 'My Lord and my God'.

The painting conforms carefully to the Council of Trent's canons for religious art: clarity and simplicity of composition; Scripture was to be accurately followed and all profane embellishments avoided; images were to inspire devotion and piety in the faithful by drawing the viewer into their action. In the case of the *Doubting Thomas*, Guercino literally depicts St. Thomas' journey from the darkness of doubt (on the left side of the picture) to the light of faith (on the right side). The picture serves as a visual reinforcement of the Church's doctrine of the literal and physical real presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist and also of the penitent's journey from sin to forgiveness through the Sacrament of Penance.