

# The Importance of the Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence in Counter-Reformation Europe

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*The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, Anonymous,  
17th century, ink and ink wash on paper,  
Italian

The martyrdom of Saint Lawrence became an increasingly important subject in religious painting during the Baroque period. This essay will discuss how this is due to a match between the goals of the Counter-Reformation Catholic Church and unique, mostly visual aspects of the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence. The visual power of the mode of Saint Lawrence's execution, his personal reaction, and the events that led up to his execution transform the legend of this martyrdom into an embodiment of the goals and beliefs of the Counter-Reformation Church, allowing the image of Saint Lawrence to play the role desired by the Church. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian ink and ink wash on paper *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* at the Robert Hull Fleming Museum of Art at the University of Vermont exemplifies this visual power (see Figure 1). Presumably a preparatory drawing for an altarpiece or other larger-scale painting, this dynamic but not overly complicated composition features the smoking pyre before which Saint Lawrence beckons to the heavens in divine acceptance, all with the drama and readability so characteristic of the Baroque period.

In response to Protestant criticisms of the Catholic cult of saints, the last session of the Council of Trent led to a commission that asserted the veneration of saints in the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> The seventeenth century in general was one that saw centralization in the regulation of saints and the development of a "papal monopoly" on sainthood.<sup>2</sup> The Church emphasized the role of saints as intermediary figures while maintaining that Christ was the single "redeemer and savior" of mankind. During the Counter-Reformation, saints were used to communicate with the people through the translation of Catholic ideas into a way of life.<sup>3</sup> Saints became more than virtuous examples, but intercessory figures that connected God and

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<sup>1</sup> Massimo Leone, *Saints and signs: A Semiotic Reading of Conversion in Early Modern Catholicism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2010), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Burke, "How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint" in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, ed. by Kaspar von Greyerz (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Massimo Leone, 2-3.

humanity, making them more valuable and powerful dead than alive. This importance of the non-living may have contributed to the popularity of martyrdom in the Baroque period.<sup>4</sup>

Art became an important tool for the Church to express this. In the Church of Santo Stefano Rotundo, Rome, emotional and spiritual reactions were sought in the seventeenth century through the viewing of martyrdom paintings. The martyrdoms were meant to evoke devotion, internal reflection, and personal connection with the saints. These paintings were physically integrated into the Liturgical ceremony, where parishioners would walk past them during meditation.<sup>5</sup> The martyrdom emerged as an especially important aspect of a Saint's life during the Baroque period, an aspect that was used extensively by the Catholic Church in its commissions of artworks that were meant to evoke such emotional reactions. The discovery of Roman catacombs shortly before the seventeenth century further encouraged a revitalization of the cult of martyrs seen in the early Church.<sup>6</sup>

Saints were depicted in a state of complete realization and acceptance of their fate; content in divine sacrifice. Likewise, in the Fleming Museum's Baroque drawing of the martyrdom, Saint Lawrence appears fearless as he is brought to his pyre. This divine acceptance is usually expressed literally with an angel flying above the scene to whom the saint looks or gestures during or before their brutal execution- a motif which also appears in the drawing at the Fleming. This denotes the promised rewards of martyrdom despite the often-gruesome violence, which in turn represents the rewards of a life of Catholic devotion despite worldly inconvenience, hardship, or suffering.<sup>7</sup> This violent suffering thus became of use to the Catholic Church during the Baroque period, and was considered "higher" than

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Burke, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Kristin Noreen, "Ecclesiae militantis triumph: Jesuit Iconography and the Counter-Reformation." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 27, (1998): 690-692.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Burke, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Leone, 2-3.

other forms of suffering.<sup>8</sup> Enduring torture was elevated to a symbol of triumph and glory in seventeenth century Catholicism, again symbolizing the sacrificial devotion to Catholicism.<sup>9</sup> This solidified to the status of saints as heroes.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence in particular became a staple in the subject matter of Baroque religious art. The mode of Saint Lawrence's martyrdom was especially torturous, making this a particularly powerful exemplum for the Catholic Church. During his time on the gridiron Saint Lawrence famously stated he was thoroughly cooked on one side and ready to be flipped over.<sup>11</sup> This almost humorous audacity is in stark contrast to the grisly reality of the extreme pain that accompanies death by fire, a prime example of the paradox of "brutality and glory" that the Counter-Reformation Church of seventeenth century Europe desired in martyrdoms.<sup>12</sup> This story therefore especially exemplifies the concept of the acceptance of fate and perseverance through hardship with a promise of divine reward that the Church sought to encourage.

Saint Lawrence was originally a deacon of Rome. After Pope Sixtus II was arrested, Saint Lawrence gave his riches to the poor and the orphans of Rome, knowing his time was coming. Upon hearing of this wealth, the prefect of Emperor Valerian demanded that Lawrence accumulate the riches of the Church to be relinquished to the emperor. In response, Lawrence gathered the diseased and dispossessed poor of Rome, claiming them to be the true wealth of the Church. It was this act that led to Saint Lawrence's gruesome fate on the gridiron. Therefore, Saint Lawrence embodied the ideals of charity and good deeds that were so important in early modern Catholicism.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, Saint Lawrence became an emblem of the value and importance of the Catholic masses- a concept that the Catholic

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<sup>8</sup> David Packwood, "Review of *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings* by Una Roman D'Elia," *Renaissance and Reformation* 30, no. 1 (2006): 139.

<sup>9</sup> John Knipping, *Iconography of the Counter Reformation in the Netherlands* (Netherlands: B. de Graaf, Nieuwkoop, 1974), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Burke, 47.

<sup>11</sup> David Packwood, 140.

<sup>12</sup> Massimo Leone, 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Foley and Pat McCloskey, *Saint of the Day: Lives, Lessons and Feast* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), 200.

masses would presumably respond to and appreciate, therefore making the martyrdom of even greater utility for the Catholic Church. This adds to the power of the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence in achieving what the Counter-Reformation Catholic Church sought through the veneration of the saints- an understanding, emotional and personal experience.<sup>14</sup> One can also see St. Lawrence's status as an ideal saint and martyr in Counter-Reformation Rome in the types of saints canonized during the time period. On average, these were Italian or Spanish men that were members of nobility and/or clergy. Lawrence, as a Spanish-born Roman deacon, fits these gender, ethnic, and class distinctions. During the counter-reformation, figures obtained sainthood through one of five mechanisms, one being charity, a virtue that Saint Lawrence embodies.<sup>15</sup>

The quantity and scale of representations of the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence during the Counter-Reformation show its importance in the period. Two of the most famous include Gian Lorenzo Bernini's 1617 sculpture, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence) and the *El Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial*, a royal monastery in Madrid dedicated to San Lorenzo, overseen from 1563-1567 by Juan Battista de Toledo and from 1567-1584. Notable Baroque paintings of this martyrdom include the Spanish Jusepe de Ribera's *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (c.1615, Catedral-Basilica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Zaragoza), Flemish Peter Paul Rubens's *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (Lucas Vorsterman I's 1621 etching of which resides the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art), French Valentin de Boulogne's *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (1622, Museo del Prado, Madrid) and Dutch Solomon de Bray's *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, (1652, LACMA, Los Angeles). In all of these images and especially the Fleming image, the

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<sup>14</sup> Leonard Foley and Pat McCloskey, 200.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Burke, 51.

presence of the smoking grill quite obviously identifies the scene as that of the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence. This readability was highly valued in the Counter-Reformation Catholic Church and surely contributed to the popularity of the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence.

The earlier mentioned contrast between the extreme level of suffering involved with burning to death and the equally shocking degree of Saint Lawrence's acceptance of the pain fashion his story in to an especially dramatic martyrdom. This drama and the iconic, readable nature of the scene regardless of its representation make it an ideal subject for Baroque painting in Counter-Reformation Europe, for the Church saw art as a tool for stirring emotional reactions in its parishioners, and for shaping such reactions.<sup>16</sup> The lives of saints were meant to be accessible and understandable to viewers so that they would be compelled to model their own lives after these divine examples. This was ensured through these responses of empathy and powerful emotion to a dramatic visionary experience.<sup>17</sup> In this way, saints were meant to be intercessory figures whose lives made Catholic devotion more realistic for viewers. Saint Lawrence's martyrdom embodied everything the Catholic Church needed in martyrdom: this event was easily identifiable and understood by the iconic gridiron of the execution pyre; the martyr famously disregarded his pain in defiance to the emperor and in devotion to a divine purpose; he provided an example of Catholic charity; and he represented the importance of the Catholic masses.<sup>18</sup> This placed Saint Lawrence as an example of many Catholic ideals- the precise role saints were meant to play in Counter-Reformation Europe. That is why the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence became so popular as subject matter in Baroque art made for the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation in seventeenth century Europe.

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<sup>16</sup> Kristin Noreen, 690-691.

<sup>17</sup> Kristin Noreen, 691-693.

<sup>18</sup> Leonard Foley and Pat McCloskey, 200.



**Figure 1:**



The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, 17<sup>th</sup> c., Italian, ink and ink wash on paper  
Robert Hull Fleming Museum of Art  
University of Vermont  
Burlington, VT

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