Michelangelo's *Pietà* as Tomb Monument: Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning

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In focusing on Michelangelo's signature, recent scholarship on his "Pietà" in St. Peter's has separated the sculpture from its spiritual intent. In contrast, this article will consider how the sculpture group spoke to its original religious context, principally as the funerary monument of Michelangelo's powerful French patron, Cardinal Lagraulas. The Rome "Pietà" was an important part of the funeral rites for the cardinal that mirrors and amplifies the liturgy surrounding death, particularly the hour of vespers. Reconstructing the sculpture's relationship to its liturgical and funerary ensemble will highlight Michelangelo's iconographic and artistic ingenuity in the service of religion and his patron.

INTRODUCTION

ON 6 AUGUST 1499, clergy from various churches in Rome, including St. Peter's, Santa Maria in Aracoeli, and Santa Maria del Popolo, gathered to conduct the vigil for the dead for one of their own. Jean de Bilhères Lagraulas (1434/39–99)—Benedictine, cardinal of Santa Sabina, archbishop of St. Denis, and diplomat for French interests in Rome—had died.[1] His vigil began immediately at his home and lasted

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[1] On Lagraulas's death, see Celani, 156. The most complete biography of Lagraulas can be found in Samaran's volume, an outline of which follows. Born in the South of France, near Toulouse, Lagraulas entered the Benedictine order as a young man. He quickly rose through the ranks of the clergy, becoming a confidant of French kings, archbishop of St. Denis, and a diplomat for the French in both Italy and Spain. He traveled extensively on both peninsulas in service of the king of France. In fact, his political and diplomatic career may be more storied than his religious one. He was awarded the archbishopric of St. Denis by the king of France over

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through the night. The assembled clerics distributed candles and shared the singing of vespers, matins, and lauds. In the morning, the priests who had kept the overnight vigil processed with the body so that it could lie in state in St. Peter's Basilica on a catafalque adorned with twenty-four torches.[2] No fewer than eleven of his fellow cardinals honored Lagraulas's prestigious religious and political career by congregating in the church of Santa Petronilla—a site long associated with French kings—adjacent to St. Peter's for Mass the next day.[3] The commemorations continued following his burial in Santa Petronilla, including a High Mass on August 31 and a memorial service on September 9. Finally, on October 3 at San Luigi dei Francesci, the French national church in Rome, there was a funerary service organized by the clergy.[4] In accordance with Lagraulas's will, the church of San Luigi dei Francesci also established and oversaw a chaplaincy to pray for the salvation of his soul.[5] Sometime after his interment in Santa Petronilla and following his wishes, the cardinal's tomb was marked by a simple stone relief slab showing Lagraulas laid out on his funeral bier (fig. 1). In addition to this plain grave marker, the cardinal commissioned a young, relatively unknown Florentine sculptor named Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) to create a life-size image of Mary holding her dead son on her lap—more commonly known as a Pietà (fig. 2). Between 1499 and 1501, this sculpture was placed in Santa Petronilla alongside the cardinal's burial marker.

As has been often recognized, Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St. Peter's is a unique conception of the Pietà theme. The characteristics that make the work most striking—Mary's youth and calm, Christ's Adonis-like body, both figures' proportions, the stunning skill of the carving, and the large scale of the work—are also those that make it difficult to interpret. Adding to the trouble is that it seems to have little in common with either German counterparts, such as the

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the objections of Pope Sixtus IV, who favored Cardinal d'Estouteville. Alexander VI made Lagraulas the cardinal of Santa Sabina in 1493, perhaps as a political favor to Charles VIII.

[2] Samaran, 67.

[3] This group of cardinals included the pope's son, Cesare Borgia: Celani, 157. Santa Petronilla was a round building with six radiating chapels. Where the seventh chapel would have been was an access door to the transept of St. Peter's, and the eighth connected Santa Petronilla to Sant'Andrea, another circular church, via a slim corridor.

[4] Celani, 162, 166. The papal master of ceremonies, Johannes Burckhard, records this service, although he notes that it was conducted according to French custom, he was not invited, and did not attend. This was not the only incident in the cardinal's obsequies that annoyed Burckhard. He also records that the assembled clergy tried to rob Lagraulas's body as it lay in state awaiting burial. The clergy were prevented from this theft by another cardinal. This, it seems, was not uncommon behavior and happened at Cardinal d'Estouteville's funeral in 1483. For more on Cardinal d'Estouteville, see Gill.

[5] Documents reprinted in the appendix of Brandt.

Figure 1. Tomb slab of Cardinal Jean de Bilhères Lagraulas, 1499–1500. Vatican, Grotte, St. Peter's. Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY.

Röttgen *Pietà*, or French precedents of the theme. Although some of this license can be attributed to Michelangelo's own artistic vision and his considerable talent, the sculptor was not alone in making these visual and iconographic choices. His patron, a French cardinal, must have had a hand in the work's development and execution. Moreover, the physical changes Michelangelo makes to the

Figure 2. Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Pietà*, 1498–1500. Rome, St. Peter's Basilica. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

iconographic tradition of the Pietà also bring important shifts to the theological message that respond to the work's setting and function.

Cardinal Jean de Bilhères Lagraulas envisioned the Rome *Pietà* from the beginning as an integral part of his immediate and ongoing funerary commemorations. In addition to engaging with the theology of Durandus (ca. 1230–96), Saint Antoninus (1389–1459), Saint Bernard (1090–1153), and Savonarola (1452–98), among others, the Rome *Pietà* mirrors and amplifies the vigils and masses for the dead, particularly the service of vespers. Historically associated with Pietà images, the hour of vespers initiates the Office of the Dead. Mary is at the

center of this religious story and at the center of Michelangelo's composition. She functions as an exemplar to the faithful in grieving, as the consummate intercessor to the sinful, as the path for their salvation through her Assumption, and as their hope for redemption in her role as the queen of heaven. She is the faithful Christian's advocate and guide, especially in matters of death and dying.

Despite an agreement and several letters attesting to his involvement, scholars have largely divorced Cardinal Lagraulas from his tomb monument and best-known commissioned work, the St. Peter's *Pietà*.[6] Most recently, the vast majority of scholarship has been obsessed with the work's signature—an indelible sign of Michelangelo's artistic and humanist identity—to the exclusion of nearly every other element in the work (fig. 3).[7] More egregious, however, is that interpretations of the sculpture, particularly in light of its signature, have become increasingly secularized. For example, some scholars even claim that the *Pietà* "does not quite succeed" as a religious work, arguing that Michelangelo was more interested in proving his worth to the Roman art scene and besting the ancients than in making a coherent theological statement or properly commemorating the cardinal and his death.[8] Mary's incongruous youth, her restrained emotional reaction, and Christ's peaceful, sleep-like death are seen, more often than not, as Michelangelo's solitary and idiosyncratic choices. Only in this scholarly atmosphere could a quasi-sexual relationship between Mary and Christ not only be seriously considered, but reiterated.[9]

[6] Hartt, 1968, 78, claims that the cardinal is "unremembered by history." The most notable exception to the divorcing of the cardinal from the sculpture is in Brandt, although her analysis focuses almost exclusively on the political ramifications of the commission. Armando Schiavo also highlights the involvement of the cardinal, but focuses on Lagraulas's burial marker, which he also attributes to Michelangelo. This argument is generally unconvincing and has not found widespread acceptance in the literature. See Schiavo, 1958.

[7] See Juřen; Land; Wang; Pon; Pestilli; Brandt, 233; Barolsky. Most recently, Lavin has interpreted the signature as a sign of Michelangelo's personal religious devotion.

[8] Verdon, 158. Gilbert, 27, also notes the "hardness and plainness of the work," which he claims is achieved "at the expense of feeling." He concludes, "Michelangelo's choice is formalist rather than expressionist, and the pathos which a spectator may feel derives from previous associations with the subject." Ziegler has argued that Michelangelo's sculpture, though perhaps using Northern and/or Flemish precedents, rendered them "remnants of the pre-modern past." Moreover, in creating his own work, Michelangelo made the *Pietà* "into an 'object'" rather than a living instrument of devotion. As such, Ziegler sees the work as "technically self-conscious and empty of any devotional clues whatsoever": Ziegler, 1995, 34.

[9] This argument was initially made by Steinberg. James Hall follows Steinberg's interpretation: see Hall, 28–30. This argument was reiterated by Unger, 43–77. Of the sculpture, ibid., 66, says, "Michelangelo shows Mary as an adolescent, while depicting Jesus as a young man, so that it appears to be the age at which Italians in the Renaissance usually got married. Jesus seems to have collapsed in her arms in what, if one didn't know better, could be interpreted as a post-coital swoon."

Figure 3. Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Pietà*, 1498–1500, detail of the signature. Rome, St. Peter's Basilica. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Although Michelangelo may have understood the magnitude of the career opportunity that stood before him in the commission for the *Pietà*, his iconographic choices can only be interpreted when considered in the sculpture's original context. In this case, context means reconstructing a physical ensemble for the sculpture; recognizing the central role of the commissioner, Cardinal Lagraulas; and, most importantly, considering the religious milieu in which the *Pietà*

functioned. This article will be the first to consider how this particular tomb monument functioned in the larger ensemble of mourning and remembrance during the liturgical rites associated with the cardinal's death that followed for years on the anniversary of his passing.

THE CARDINAL'S PLAN

Cardinal Lagraulas's tomb monument, if it was ever completed as he envisioned, did not remain intact for long. Although the *Pietà* was installed by 1501, Santa Petronilla's demolition began in 1514 and the sculpture was moved sometime before 1519. This means that the statue was in situ for fewer than twenty years and neither Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) nor Ascanio Condivi (1525–74) saw it in its original location.[10] Thus, no contemporary accounts exist describing what it was like to see the work in the space and in the ensemble for which it was intended. It was first moved to the *secretarium* of Old St. Peter's until 1568, when it became part of the chapel dedicated to Sixtus IV.[11] Today, it is obscured high above an altar in a sterile chapel behind bulletproof glass, which, in addition to protecting the work from madmen wielding hammers, reflects the constant flashing of tourist cameras and markedly obscures the sculpture group.[12] The sculpture's current exhibition is problematic for any number of reasons, not the least of which is that it conforms to neither the typical construction of fifteenth-century cardinals' tombs, nor what is recoverable of Lagraulas's intentions for the sculpture.

Carol Richardson notes that one of the most fundamentally important aspects of any cardinal's life was the provisioning of his will, which necessarily included articulating his wishes for his funeral and funerary monuments.[13] The reason for the will's great importance was the simple fact that cardinals, unlike popes or courtiers, did not have a clear path of succession for their worldly possessions after their deaths and frequently had large estates that needed tending.[14] Cost was also a concern, and with the number of funerary services required for a cardinal, price could quickly outstrip resources.[15] Typically, the will of any cardinal would give specific guidance on the following issues: the cost of his funer-

[10] Brandt, 227.

[11] Ibid., 227–28.

[12] The work's current installation is a reaction to a 1972 attack on the work in which Lazlo Toth severely damaged Mary's nose and hand with a hammer.

[13] Richardson, 424–28.

[14] Gill tracks the four separate wills of Cardinal d'Estouteville, a Quattrocento cardinal who clearly understood the importance of properly bequeathing his worldly goods.

[15] Richardson, 439–48, 434–39, particularly the discussion of "The Novena" and "Controlling Costs."

als, particularly the cost of wax for candles to adorn the catafalque, as well as how the services should be conducted; the creation of a funerary monument; money to pay clergy to offer services on his behalf on the anniversary of his death; and the division of any remaining wealth among charitable causes or churches that he supported. Indeed, much if not most of the will was consumed with the cost and implementation of the cardinal's specific plan for his death and burial, including any funerary monuments he wished to have established in his honor.[16]

Although previous generations of popes and cardinals may have been buried in other churches—St. John Lateran, for example—St. Peter's in the time of Cardinal Lagraulas "presented a unique and sought-after opportunity for commemoration after death," mostly because of its relationship to the relics of Saint Peter.[17] The majority of cardinals' tombs in the fifteenth century were concentrated in the north aisle of the basilica, which was commonly associated with the Easter liturgy—particularly vespers. Being close to the Easter Host and associated with the miracle of resurrection was understood to be personally auspicious for those buried in nearby tombs.[18] Julius II and subsequent popes destroyed the design and arrangement of these tombs when they pulled down the old basilica, but what remains suggests that tombs were either recessed into wall niches or quasi-free-standing monuments with canopies. Both tomb formats invariably featured the effigy of the entombed laid out on a funeral bier and elevated off the ground.[19]

Lagraulas used a conventional enough floor slab to mark his burial place—one that shows him laid out for his funeral. Such a burial marker was one of the most common and most humble kinds of commemorative sculpture available to fifteenth-century cardinals.[20] If he had stopped simply with the slab, he would have been of little interest to art history. He also, however, took the extraordinary step of commissioning not only an altar, but also a freestanding and over-life-size sculpture to accompany it.[21] Further, in two separate letters he refers to the sculpture as going into "a certain chapel, which we intend to found,"

[16] Ibid., 425–36.

[17] Ibid., 322.

[18] Ibid., 391.

[19] Ibid., 326–33; Gardner, 431. These two kinds of tombs were influenced both by contemporary French examples and the *columbarii* of Roman catacombs. Richardson's examples of the two tombs of Ardicino della Porta the elder and Ardicino della Porta the younger are excellent models of the two types of tomb monuments that could be expected.

[20] Gardner, 34, notes that such tombs were likely a "deliberate demonstration of humility" and that they were probably the earliest form of medieval tomb in Rome.

[21] Both Wallace and Brandt believe that the sculpture would have been set into some kind of niche: Wallace, 1995, 270; Brandt, 224.

and "our chapel."[22] The language of these letters clearly indicates that he intended for his tomb marker to be seen in conjunction with an altar and the *Pietà*. Furthermore, all three elements are associated in later documents from San Luigi dei Francesci, whose clergy oversaw the chaplaincy established by the cardinal to pray for his soul in perpetuity.[23] Infuriatingly, neither the documents from San Luigi dei Francesci nor the letters of the cardinal provide any idea of how the various elements—Michelangelo's *Pietà*, the altar, and the tomb marker—would have related to one another.[24] Nevertheless, it is possible to infer certain aspects about the ensemble.

From the evidence, it is clear that Lagraulas decided not to follow the example of his fellow cardinals when it came time to create his own tomb monument. Not only did he choose Santa Petronilla for his burial, rather than the north aisle, but he also eschewed the typical wall tomb format for his monument. Lagraulas's burial location in Santa Petronilla—a church both physically connected to St. Peter's at the basilica's transept and traditionally associated with the French monarchy—certainly carried an important political message, as has been explored by Katherine Weil-Garris Brandt.[25] The unorthodox form of his monument, however, currently has no scholarly explanation. There are no other comparable cardinal tombs in Rome currently known. The cardinal's deviation from contemporary models is particularly striking when one considers that most cardinal tombs at this time were loosely based on courtly French precedents.[26] At its most basic, Lagraulas's tomb would have marked him as different, memorable, and ambitious. The cardinal's contemporaries, moreover, might plausibly have seen the freestanding Rome *Pietà* as classicizing—an impression underscored by the fact that Lagraulas wanted the work to be more beautiful than any other sculpture, ancient or modern, yet existing in the Eternal City.[27]

Although modern viewers are conditioned to see the *Pietà* displayed above an altar—both because of the sculpture group's current installation and because of the installation of copies, such as the bronze in Sant'Andrea della Valle in Rome—

[22] Brandt, 246: "una certa cappella, quale noi intendemo fundare" and "una nostra cappella." These quotations are both from letters written by Lagraulas in 1498, and both are reprinted in Brandt.

[23] Brandt reprints most of these documents in 246–47.

[24] Lagraulas merely says that he is going to put or place the sculpture in the chapel. Brandt, 223–26, believes that the altar was established and that the sculpture was installed there.

[25] See ibid., 217–59.

[26] Richardson, 326–33; Gardner, 431.

[27] The wording in the agreement reads: "the said work . . . will be the most beautiful work in marble to be found in Rome." For a reprinting of the entire agreement, see Ciulich, 5–6.

there are several arguments against such a placement, despite the importance of the altar to the cardinal's plans. First, scholars question whether altar tables in the fifteenth century would have been large enough to even accommodate the work.[28] Moreover, no documentary evidence indicates that an altar existed in time for the cardinal's funeral. Nor do any documents from San Luigi dei Francesci mention moving the sculpture to accommodate the altar that was established in 1504, although the tomb monument, altar, and sculpture are clearly part of the same ensemble in the minds of the clergy.[29] Further, the *Pietà* does not seem to have been moved from one altar to another, as neither Vasari nor Condivi indicate that it was above an altar in Santa Maria delle Febbre, its first location after the destruction of Santa Petronilla.[30] Finally, any altar that the cardinal might have planned was certainly not established when the sculpture and tomb marker were placed, although the altar may have ended up in one of the semicircular chapel spaces in Santa Petronilla. In this case, it might be reasonable to assume that the sculpture, the tomb marker, or both might have been moved into that chapel space, but there is no documentary evidence for such a costly and troublesome action. In short, there is little to suggest that the intended placement of Michelangelo's sculpture was above or on an altar table. To reconstruct the cardinal's chapel, viewers must, as William Wallace suggests, lower their gaze.[31]

The papal master of ceremonies, Johannes Burckhard (1450–1506), states that the cardinal was buried to the right of the main altar in Santa Petronilla (located directly across from the entrance to the transept of Old St. Peter's), and it seems reasonable that, in absence of an altar (at least before 1504), the sculpture and the grave marker were grouped on the ground to the right of the altar and in front of the wall pier.[32] The *Pietà* was most likely set into a niche.[33] While en-

[28] Schiavo, 1960, 41.

[29] For example, in a document from 1525, the clergy are still noting that, although the sculpture has been moved to another location, it originally was in the cardinal's funerary chapel and part of the concern of the chaplaincy. It reads, "Make note that the said chaplaincy—or that is, the present chapel, whence first it was in 1525, since it was actually transferred to the chapel thus known as the Holiest Madonna della Febbri, which is placed along the portico before the doors of the Vatican basilica and the altar of the chaplaincy of Cardinal Saint Dionysius—is that in which one observes that great and singular marble sculpture representing the Holiest Virgin with Christ, her Holiest Son, who was deposed on the cross, a sculpture made at the expense of the stated Cardinal Saint Dionysius": reprinted in Brandt, 247.

[30] Brandt, 227–30, offers an excellent summary of the "peregrinations" of the sculpture after the destruction of Santa Petronilla.

[31] Wallace, 1995, 265.

[32] Celani, 156–57.

[33] Most reconstructions of the chapel, including those of Brandt and Wallace, argue that due to the lack of finish on the back of the sculpture, it was most likely intended for a niche. Brandt, 224; Wallace, 1995, 270.

tirely unorthodox in terms of surviving cardinals' tombs in the fifteenth century, this reconstruction follows what little documentary evidence survives, as well as allows the sculpture to be viewed optimally.

Although this reconstruction is in accordance with Wallace's ideas, it does not conform to Brandt's proposal. Both scholars agree that the sculpture would have been much closer to the floor and much more immediately accessible than it is today.[34] This placement affects both viewer interaction with the figure group and religious interpretations of the subject. Viewers must, then, imagine meeting the sculpture group in a much more intimate way and as part of an ensemble of several other objects, including the altar that the cardinal seemed desirous to found, and his grave marker. Brandt, however, is unsure about where the sculpture would have been placed in the chapel. She first proposes, following Burckhard, that the sculpture would have been close to the cardinal's burial location—that is, on the viewer's right as they entered the chapel.[35] Not one page later in her article, however, she questions this location, deciding that the sculpture was probably placed on the viewer's left, and to the right and favored side of the main altar. Her reasoning for this is that the work's ideal viewing point is just to the left of center and that the figures would have addressed viewers as they entered the chapel from this angle.[36] Troublingly, Brandt thinks that the possibility of either solution indicates that Michelangelo did not account for the location of the sculpture when carving it.[37] Both Burckhard and Wallace, however, place the work on the right side of the chapel. With the sculpture in this location, it becomes clear that Michelangelo carefully considered a viewer's unfolding interaction with the work in the space and composed it in an accordingly dramatic and moving fashion.

A viewer would have approached from the sculpture's left upon entering the church of Santa Petronilla from the transept of St. Peter's (fig. 4; the church is labeled "d" and the entrance is labeled "156."). Illuminated by high windows and candles, the sculpture would have sat either on the floor of the chapel itself or on a slightly elevated platform and in a niche or against one of the wall piers on the viewer's right and to the left of the main altar (fig. 4; the altar is labeled

[34] Both Brandt, 224–25, and Wallace, 1995, 270–71, agree that the work should be viewed from a lower angle and more intimately than the work's current presentation. Wallace advocates for placing the work almost directly on the ground. Brandt believes that the work was set in a shallow wall niche in one of the piers of the chapel and might have been elevated to a maximum height of 1.75 meters. Neither scholar argues that the work should be placed above an altar, as it is today.

[35] Brandt, 225.

[36] Ibid., 226.

[37] Ibid.

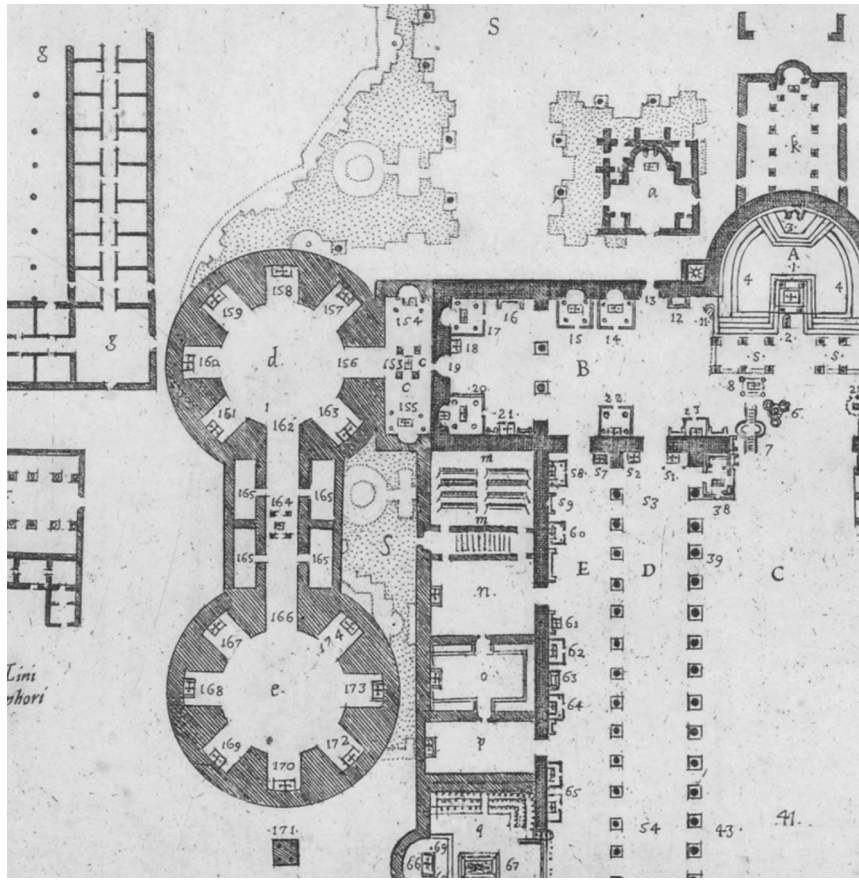

Figure 4. After Tiberio Alfarano. Detail of *Almae Urbis Divi Petri Veteris Novique Templi Descriptio* showing Santa Petronilla, 1590. London, British Museum.

"160").[38] From this angle, Mary's outstretched left arm and upturned hand would have beckoned for the worshipper to draw nearer (fig. 5). From this angle as well, the trim and muscular body of Christ would have been presented in a potent way for the viewers to contemplate as they moved from his relaxed feet and crossed legs to his handsome head, thrown back in a peaceful slumber. No less impressive is the contrast of textures in the sculpture from this angle. The brilliant white marble has been transformed into the smoothness of flesh, the ponderous billows of the Virgin's copious drapery, and the stony outcropping on which Mary sits—all of which are closely juxtaposed when seen from the

[38] Wallace is the only scholar to have discussed contemporary lighting of the work. See Wallace, 1995, 267.

Figure 5. Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Pietà*, 1498–1500, statue as seen from the left. Rome, St. Peter's Basilica. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

sculpture's left. Moreover, much of the most daring carving of the figure can be best appreciated from this angle, including Mary's unsupported arm with its carefully separated fingers, Christ's deeply undercut leg and foot, and the supple folds of the Virgin's mantle that frame her downturned face.[39]

Between the invitation from Mary's outstretched arm, the overwhelming beauty of the dead Christ, and the virtuoso performance of marble carving, a

[39] As Wallace, 2011, 85, observes, "Beyond its narrative function, the hand serves a further purpose as a self-conscious demonstration of Michelangelo's abilities as a marble carver. Not only is the left arm extended unsupported in space, but also every digit of the hand is separated, curled in different planes. In whatever manner we read the meaning of Mary's gesture, we should also appreciate the difficulty (*difficultà*) of carving it."

pilgrim or worshipper would have been practically compelled to continue walking around the sculpture. Likewise, the round shape of the church would have encouraged visitors to contemplate the sculpture from myriad angles as they moved through the space. Michelangelo designed the sculpture for this kind of active viewing demanded by Santa Petronilla. Mary's body subtly twists to the right, encouraging viewers to keep moving from her outstretched hand across the front of the sculpture, and finally to the closed end of the figure group: the drapery hanging from Mary's right arm. Like the closing of a curtain on a stage, this side of the sculpture group tells viewers the experience is over. The emotions engendered by this kind of active viewing are multifaceted. Mary's expression, for example, ranges from implacable and stoic, to downtrodden and resigned, to meditative and thankful, depending upon one's angle of viewing.[40] The work should not merely be viewed from the front, but should instead be intimately experienced from many angles. Moving from the sculpture's left to right, the viewer's experience follows the arc of a dramatic production. Visitors to the chapel are first enticed by the overwhelming beauty of an initial encounter with the sculpture. First impressions, however, give way to the dramatic emotional climax of the work: an impossibly young Mary mourning the loss of her son and savior, dead on her lap.[41]

From the angle just to the left of center, viewers can best appreciate Michelangelo's considerable artistic ingenuity, as he transforms the awkward conceit of a Pietà composition—a woman holding a dead adult man on her lap—into something graceful by subtly augmenting the mass and height of the Virgin.[42] Through voluminous drapery and the manipulation of the Virgin's proportions, Michelangelo makes it seem as though the Virgin could have held her son on

[40] This kind of active viewing is next to impossible to render in photographs, particularly in the sculpture's current location.

[41] Identified by Brandt as 30 degrees to the viewer's left as they stand in front of the sculpture: Brandt, 225–26.

[42] Hibbard, 28, calls Michelangelo's task a "knotty aesthetic problem." Michelangelo's solution to this problem begs the question of his artistic influences. Although Tolnay dismisses any possibility of German precedents, both printed and sculpted German Pietàs were imported across the Alps in Michelangelo's lifetime. Hirst points out that a popular wooden Pietà was held in S. Domenico in Bologna, where Michelangelo completed three marble sculptures. Artists of German Pietàs often played with the proportions of their figures, albeit in a much more extreme manner and to more grisly results than Michelangelo. What French variations Michelangelo had access to is not clear, although the Rome *Pietà*'s calm, youthful Mary; graceful Christ; and funerary setting are all consistent with contemporary French examples. See Tolnay, 2:148–49, on German Pietàs. For German Pietàs in Italy, see Hirst and Dunkerton, 52. The most important resource on the subject, though, is Körte. For French Pietà examples, see Forsyth, 21–147.

her lap without ancillary figures and, further, that this moment could have been tender and graceful, rather than awkward and grief stricken.[43] Michelangelo was bound by his agreement with the cardinal to a limit of two figures and he used considerable artistic intelligence to accommodate this restriction.[44] The manipulation of Mary's size also subtly increases her theological importance in the work. Although the relative difference of Mary's size is only apparent on considerable study, the sheer mass that she adds to the composition forces the viewer to think of the work in terms of Mary's reaction to Christ's sacrifice and not to simply focus on the five wounds on the body of the savior.[45] The wounds, in any case, are not overly prominent, though they are certainly present and accurately rendered.

Michelangelo's modifications extend to the rendering of Jesus as well. Christ is undersized in comparison to Mary's increased height and mass.[46] Moreover, his body is not completely stiff, nor is it limp and wilting over Mary's lap. The lack of rigor mortis in his frame ensures that it has just enough give, particularly in the bend of the knees and the hips, to settle into a comfortable and believable position across the Virgin's lap. His hips occupy the space left for them by the chasm between Mary's knees; his knees, in turn, fold admirably over Mary's thighs. His feet, not held by other figures, rest comfortably, one on the ground and one on a nearby stump. Mary supports his torso with her right arm, which presents enough tension and stability to be held by the Virgin. The body also demonstrates a supple softness, which allows Christ's head to fall back natural-

[43] The clearest precedent for Michelangelo's conception of the theme is probably Perugino's San Giusto *Pietà*. Its calm Mary and sculptural drapery may well have offered inspiration to Michelangelo. Perugino's solution to the problem of fitting Christ on Mary's lap, however, was similar to contemporary French examples and not an option for Michelangelo: he added figures at Christ's head and feet. Michelangelo's contract, however, specified that the artist was to sculpt only two figures. Coonin relates that Michelangelo preferred to source his pigments from San Giusto, which accounts for his familiarity with Perugino's panel.

[44] The agreement states that Michelangelo "must make a marble Pietà . . . namely a clothed Virgin Mary with Christ dead in her arms": Ciulich, 5–6. The concept of the Pietà, in this context, is defined as a two-figure group.

[45] This is not the last time that Michelangelo would employ relative size as a tactic for indicating theological importance in a figure group. Wallace, 2000, 93, notes that the artist did the same thing in the Florentine *Pietà* and with various figures in the tomb of Julius II.

[46] Michelangelo's artistic decisions about the relative sizes of Mary and Christ have often been interpreted as harkening back to Christ as a child in Mary's arms. In this sense, many scholars have argued that the work more closely resembled a Madonna and Child image, rather than a Pietà. For example, see Hilloowala and Oremland. Hibbard, 45, connects such a notion to Bernardino of Siena.

istically, his shoulder to hunch slightly above Mary's hand, and his hand to catch languidly in the folds of the Virgin's drapery.

While standing in front of the work, the viewer could also have seen the burial marker of Cardinal Lagraulas, an important, but consistently overlooked, part of the physical ensemble of the *Pietà*. Michelangelo's sculpture group, when seen in conjunction with the burial marker, would have seemed at once intensely physically present and as insubstantial as a heavenly vision. The weight and heft of the marble and its connection to the broader context of the chapel—particularly the cardinal's funeral marker—encouraged viewers to meditate on the sculpture's physical presence. The incongruously youthful appearance of the Virgin, the ease with which she holds her impossibly beautiful son, and the careful attention to the carving and finishing of the sculpture group, however, seemingly transport the marble to the celestial realm. Inspired by the contemplation of the sculpture and its obvious funerary context, the sixteenth-century visitor may even have offered up a prayer for the souls of the dead. In so doing, the viewer would have been echoing the prayers of those charged with commemorating the cardinal liturgically.

The clergy at San Luigi dei Francesci note their involvement in the ongoing commemoration of Lagraulas.[47] They arranged for and paid the chaplaincy to conduct masses for the "expiation of the soul" of the cardinal "everyday."[48] Clearly a part of Lagraulas's last requests, these funerary rites and commemorations continued for years after his death and were originally intended to happen in close physical proximity to the sculpture and the cardinal's funeral marker.[49] The precise physical context for the sculpture may be totally destroyed and beyond any reconstruction, but the liturgical and religious context—particularly the Mass for the dead—is not. Moreover, the Pietà as an iconographic category is intrinsically linked with such funerary and memorial rites. What Michelangelo and Lagraulas offer is a way of looking at Christ's death and lamentation in the context of Christian burial. The Rome *Pietà* is connected to funerary liturgical function in unique ways suited to the sculpture's setting, commissioner, and use. Understanding these elements is absolutely crucial to understanding

[47] See the documents reproduced in Brandt, 246–47.

[48] "The rectors of any such church and hospital pro tempore in perpetuo ought to have the chaplain or chaplains of the same church of San Luigi, or other suitable priests, celebrate a mass every day in the indicated chapel in penance for the spirit of the said cardinal, so as to maintain and provide for the altar where the said chaplaincy was established." For a transcription of the whole document, see ibid.

[49] Another document, of 1524, goes on to list the masses said for the soul of the cardinal. This means that the chaplaincy was established and prayed for the soul of the cardinal for at least a couple of decades, but may have continued for much longer: ibid., 247.

the original intentions of both the artist and the commissioner of the Rome *Pietà*.

LITURGY

As a French nobleman and a cardinal, Jean de Bilhères Lagraulas would have been advantageously positioned to understand the role that sculptural Pietàs played in religious life in France and why such a monument would have been particularly appropriate for his tomb. Pietà statues were popular throughout France in the fifteenth century, appearing in churches, private homes, as illustrations in breviaries, and particularly on secondary altars in burial chapels. Pietàs, however, are not French in origin; the motif originated sometime close to the beginning of the fourteenth century in Germany. The oldest such sculpture recorded was in Cologne in 1298 (now lost).[50] Moreover, Lagraulas was a Benedictine and would have been better prepared than most to understand the central role of the Virgin not only in the Pietà sculptures, but also in the liturgy with which those sculptures were most closely associated.[51]

The Pietà as a spiritual and artistic theme has long had a connection to the hours of vespers, particularly those of Good Friday, when Christ's descent from the cross and entombment are commemorated. Sculptures of the Madonna holding her dead son on her lap are even known as *vesperbilder* in Germany.[52] Bearing in mind the long tradition of associating vespers and the Pietà image, it makes sense to consider Michelangelo's sculpture in terms of the liturgy that similar images were made to accompany, mirror, and amplify.

The vespers is the evening service, corresponding roughly to sunset.[53] As candlelight was brought into the church to combat the growing darkness, the faithful, particularly communities of monks and nuns, would gather to commemorate the closing of the day. On Good Friday, both members of religious communities and the lay faithful alike would (and still do) gather for vespers in front of Pietà images

[50] Forsyth, 17.

[51] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the preeminent Marian scholars in the Catholic Church, was a Benedictine. Saint Benedict himself is credited with establishing the order of the hours of the day in the traditional Roman breviary.

[52] A succinct history of the motif, which has a long legacy in both French and German culture, can be found in Hartt, 1975, 19–24; Forsyth, 17–21.

[53] Calling them the hours of the day is somewhat misleading to a modern reader. We tend to think of time as corresponding to specific hours as given to us by the clock. When the hours were instituted, the idea of the specific hour in which they needed to be sung was not so rigid. Therefore, vespers could be sung anywhere between the hours of 4 p.m. and 6 p.m., depending on the precise timing of the sunset and the duties of the monks or the other worshippers. See Cabrol, 1912.

in order to remember the sacrifice of the "Light of the World."[54] The popularity of *vesperbilder* also grew in conjunction with the devotion to the sorrows of the Virgin in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, evidenced in German mystic poetry.[55] As might be expected by images in these contexts, early *vesperbilder* focused on the physical suffering of Christ and the abject, inconsolable grief of Mary. The most famous of these German examples is the Röttgen *Pietà* (fig. 6). Here, the wounds of Christ are gaping, exaggerated, and thick with coagulating blood. Mary holds her dead son and twists her face into a cry of pain. Together, these figures present the simultaneous extreme emotion on the part of Mary and severe physical suffering on the part of Christ.

Vespers, however, was not merely reserved for the veneration of the Virgin's emotional suffering, nor simply for the marking of the hours, either on ferial days or otherwise. Vespers also marked the beginning of the Office of the Dead in the fifteenth century (a place it continues to hold).[56] The vespers service, which symbolically welcomes night into the church, also stood for the transition from life to death. Thus, immediately upon a cardinal's death, clergy would gather in his home to sing the Office of the Dead, beginning with vespers, proceeding to lauds and matins. They would then process to the church with the body, where it might lie in state for a few days before being buried.[57] A series

[54] Christ calls himself this in John 8:12.

[55] Pinder; Dehio. The sorrows of the Virgin (the prophecy of Simeon, the flight into Egypt, losing Christ in the temple, Christ's road to Calvary, standing at the foot of the cross, Christ taken down from the cross, and Christ's burial) are celebrated in a popular feast on the friday before Palm Sunday. Panofsky pointed out that their connection with poetry was an important part of the image's character and function. He classified the Imago Pietàtis and Pietà images as "Andachtsbild." One was not supposed to be edified on a particular Gospel narrative when looking at an Andachtsbild, but instead was to enter a state of contemplative meditation. Panofsky, 264, likened the experience to the difference between reading a narrative and reading lyric poetry. Ziegler and Dobrzeniecki both questioned the close association of mystic German poetry and Pietà images: Ziegler, 1992, 29; Dobrzeniecki.

[56] Battifol, 187–90, claims that this form of the Mass for the dead was instituted in Rome at least by the eighth century. Although Battifol's argument is disputed in scholarship, Ottosen, 31, notes that "the Office of the Dead was known by every religious by heart in the Middle Ages," indicating that, although its origins might be obscure, its popularity was never in question. The whole Office of the Dead is comprised of vespers, matins, and lauds.

[57] Burial was a relatively brief and perfunctory ceremony that seems to be little recorded. The disposal of the body was so swift that the temporary structure (catafalque) constructed for holding the body usually stood in the stead of the body during the majority of the funeral services. These temporary structures were left in place for weeks after the body was buried. See Richardson, 439–45.

Figure 6. Röttgen *Pietà*, ca. 1300–25. Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

of funeral masses would then follow, marking the passage of time since the departed's death.[58]

The Office of the Dead, however, was not limited to its immediate funerary function. It was also said in remembrance of the dead, particularly on the an-

[58] Sometimes, masses were said daily for nine days immediately following a death, which is known as a novena. After the novena, however, anniversaries of one's death were often marked, particularly the yearly one. See ibid., 439–48.

niversary of their dying.[59] The chaplaincy that was endowed by Cardinal Lagraulas and overseen by San Luigi dei Francesci was charged with saying a Mass for his soul every day, so it is highly probable that the Office of the Dead was recited for the cardinal with greater frequency than merely once a year. The psalms recited by the chaplaincy during the Office of the Dead, be it once a year or more often, were carefully chosen to remind the worshippers of the sacrifice of Christ, the help and comfort that could be found in the Lord, and the rewards of faithful service to God. They also emphasized the crucial task of intercession.

The five psalms for the hour of vespers "have been selected, from time immemorial" from Psalms 109 to 147.[60] These psalms are similar in theme and refer to the darkest hours of the faithful and their coming triumph through the Lord, particularly if they keep his commandments and are faithful servants. Durundus, in his *Rationale Divinum Officiorum* (1459), one of the most important theological commentaries on the liturgy, links these ideas to the evening hour, explaining, "for at this hour are intimated the tears of those for whom the sun of justice sets . . . and this will last until morning; that is, until the sun rises on the faithful."[61] Psalm 114 beautifully illustrates this theme when the worshipper cries out, "The sorrows of death have encompassed me, the perils of hell have found me. I met with trouble and sorrow." Later in the psalm, however, the worshipper finds peace in God who "showed mercy" and "delivered me," saying, "For he hath delivered my soul from death: my eyes from tears, my feet from falling. / I will please the Lord in the land of the living."[62]

However, an added emphasis was placed on these prayers, psalms, and hymns in the context of the Office of the Dead, as those who gathered to mourn or remember the deceased were not simply giving praise to God, but, more importantly, were praying on behalf of the defunct who could no longer advocate for him- or herself in this world.[63] Thus, these services acted as a kind of inter-

[59] Certain ferial days precluded the saying of the Office of the Dead. If, however, the day was not reserved for any other purpose, the Office of the Dead was to be sung. This practice is confirmed by contemporary examples, such as Federigo Gonzaga, who paid to have the full vigil said on the yearly anniversary of his death: ibid., 447–48. Ottosen, 3, notes, "From about 800 up to Paul VI's *Liturgia Horarum* of 1971, it was commonly celebrated each weekday, in addition to the ordinary Office of the Day."

[60] Cabrol, 1912. This is confirmed by Taft, 135–38, 307, who notes that the hour of vespers did not change significantly in its form from the time of Saint Benedict to the institution of Vatican II.

[61] Durand, 192.

[62] Psalms 119, 120, 129, and 137 are also associated with the Office of the Dead: Cabrol, 1911.

[63] Martimort, 642.

cession, as the assembled clergy prayed to God on behalf of the soul departed.[64] With each psalm, the assembled clergy would have asked for and received God's love and intervention, both for themselves and especially for their departed comrade.

The second part of the vespers is structured around a joyous hymn, the Magnificat. Since at least the time of Saint Benedict (ca. 480–547) and the early codification of the Roman rite (440–560), the singing of the Magnificat has been a consistent and enduring aspect of the vespers service.[65] It remains the most recognizable trait of vespers. Taken from the exaltation of the Virgin at the Visitation (Luke 1:46–55), the Magnificat does not refer to death or suffering, but humbly and graciously praises God, who, like a benevolent guardian, looks after his charges. The hymn expresses Mary's faith, wonder, and gratitude at being God's chosen vessel.

The first lines recount Mary's earthly role, her humility, and her reward for her faith in God. After having accepted her role as the Virgin mother of God and revealing this fate to her cousin Elizabeth at the Visitation, Mary sings,

> My soul doth magnify the Lord,
> and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.
> Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid;
> for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.[66]

Although Mary has experienced profound change, her canticle indicates that she is neither worried nor frightened. Instead, she rejoices, understanding that her immediate troubles are of little consequence and that her historical place as "blessed" is secure. The comfort that this long view of history, this humility, and this joy, must have offered to the faithful mourners and also to the dead would have been profound. Mary's hymn reminds the mourners, speaking on behalf of the dead, to be optimistic about life after death, for, as Mary states, "he that

[64] This increased in importance as the notion of purgatory gained ground. As Ottosen, 48, eloquently observes, "the celebration of the Office of the Dead as a service for the long departed rests on the tacit assumption that the souls after their separation from the body and before the Last Judgment experience an afterlife full of fear and trembling for which prayers and sacrifices from the living are the sole remedy."

[65] Woolfenden, 201–12.

[66] Luke 1:46–48 (Vulgate): "Magnificat: anima mea Dominum. / Et exultavit spiritus meus: in Deo salutari meo. / Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae: / ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes."

is mighty hath done great things for me / . . . And his mercy is from generation unto generations."[67]

Mary continues by listing the marvelous things that God has done for her and for all of the humble and poor. The Virgin exalts a God who has provided for those with no means, and has also withheld from the mighty and the wealthy. Finally, Mary reveals why she feels so blessed. The final line mentions "Abraham and his seed."[68] This reference is important for Mary as she is in the process of carrying on the line of Abraham and has just learned of her miraculous pregnancy with the Messiah. Through this act Mary is especially exalted, particularly by theologians such as Saint Bernard, who calls her "aqueduct" of God.[69] Bernard emphasizes that, as the "aqueduct," Mary mediates between God and man. She is the supreme intercessor of humanity, the conduit for all prayers, and a means for God to distribute grace in the world.

In a funerary context, this hymn reminds the mourners of their important intercessory function by referring to the consummate intercessor, Mary. Drawing together both the beginning of Christ's life and his painful death, the Magnificat alludes to Mary as God's vessel, which secures her position between God and man as she intercedes on behalf of the faithful. If the chaplains of the cardinal's altar who prayed for Lagraulas's soul in perpetuity needed any further reminding about their roles as intercessors for the dead, this would have come when they began to sing the Magnificat. When celebrating vespers for the dead cardinal, the assembled clergy would have been mirroring Mary's role as intercessor and praying to God on behalf of a person whose voice had been silenced.

Saint Antoninus might also have resonated in the minds of the mourners, Lagraulas, and even the artist. The most prominent theologian of fifteenth-century Florence, author of the *Summa Theologica* (1477), and Florentine archbishop, Saint Antoninus helps to explain the presence of the joyous hymn in the midst of this mournful ceremony. He complicates the idea that Mary merely stood at the foot of the cross and set an example of righteous mourning for Christ's followers. Although he never trivializes Mary's suffering, he does question if abject grief was her only reaction. Led by her superior understanding and knowledge of the will of God, Mary stands at the foot of the cross to "wait for the salvation of the human race" through Christ's sacrifice.[70] Moreover, Saint

[67] Luke 1:49–50 (Vulgate): "Quia fecit mihi magna, qui potens est: / . . . / Et misericordia eius, a progenie et progenies."

[68] Luke 1:55 (Vulgate): "Abraham, et semini eius in saecula."

[69] Bernard of Clairvaux, 1857–66.

[70] Antoninus, 4:col. 926–27. Translation from Gambero, 302–06. For a further discussion of this theme, see Ellington, 87–91, 195–96.

Antoninus indicates that Mary offers Christ willingly to be sacrificed, saying, "she herself was ready to offer her Son to God for the salvation of the world."[71] Through these actions, she becomes the "priestess of justice."[72] Saint Antoninus, in this passage, places particular emphasis on Mary's complicity with God's plan. Savonarola, who loomed large in Michelangelo's conscious, echoes the arguments of his Dominican brother.[73] Savonarola likewise makes a case for a more nuanced understanding of Mary's emotions during the Passion, saying repeatedly that she was "pleased, sad, and completely stupefied by the Holy Mystery and God's great bounty."[74]

Importantly, Saint Antoninus also indicates that it is through her suffering, her diligence, and her offering that she becomes the "mother of all men" and the sublime intercessor.[75] Mary's central role in the death of Christ and in the life of dying Christians is therefore further highlighted by the Magnificat, as Mary celebrates favored status with God. As a faithful woman, a model of female decorum, and as the priestess of justice, Saint Antoninus argues that Mary submitted once again to God's will and provided yet another example of her sublime humility. Because of her total submission, Mary becomes the "mother of all men," as well as an instrument and helper in the work of salvation.[76]

In calling Mary the "mother of all men," Antoninus accords her another fundamentally important role: queen of heaven. Mary surely refers to this when she says that "generations will call me blessed" in the Magnificat. Although not of-

[71] Antoninus, 4:col. 926–27. Translation from Gambero, 303. This section of the *Summa* is concerned with the various kinds of dignity Mary had. It is in this section that Antoninus identifies Mary as a queen, priest, and prophet: "She was also the priestess of justice, because she 'did not spare [her] own son,' but 'stood by the cross of Jesus' not, as Blessed Ambrose says, so that she might look upon her Son's death, not so that she might contemplate her Son's suffering, but so she might await the salvation of the human race, for she herself was ready to offer her Son to God for the salvation of the world." Later in the *Summa*, Antoninus, 4:col. 1207, claimed that Mary would have put Christ on the cross herself in order to complete the work of redemption in the world, despite her sorrow.

[72] Antoninus, 4:col. 917.

[73] Michelangelo's memories of Florence in the 1490s were so marked by Savonarola's preaching that the artist claimed, late in life, to be able to hear the monk's voice echoing in his head: Condivi, 105.

[74] Savonarola, 3:262–66: "Lieta e trista, tutta stupefatta del misterio e della grand bonta di Dio." Moreover, Savonarola says that she did not make a spectacle of herself in mourning, but was modest in her grief. Savonarola delivered these words in a sermon on Good Friday.

[75] Antoninus, 4:cols. 1059–60: "B. Mariae est, quod mater est omnium." Ibid., 4:col. 917, also discusses Mary's spiritual motherhood of the faithful.

[76] Ibid., 4:cols. 1059–60.

ficially made dogma until the twentieth century, Mary's Assumption into heaven was a widely celebrated feast in the Catholic Church in the fifteenth century. Moreover, one of its staunchest supporters was one of the most famous members of Lagraulas's Benedictine order: Bernard of Clairvaux. In Bernard's sermons for the Feast of the Assumption, he outlines why her ascension into heaven is so important for Christians, particularly those contemplating life after death. Bernard describes Mary's initial ascent and entrance into heaven as one of "exaltation" and "dazzling splendor."[77] However amazing the sight, Bernard takes care to remind the listeners that her rise into heaven merely prefigures their own. Encouraging his flock to believe in a final resurrection at the end of days and the heavenly reward, Bernard says, "Our great Queen has gone on before us, she has gone on, I say, and has been gloriously received, so gloriously that we, her poor servants, walk with confidence after our Lady."[78] Further, Bernard claims that "our exiled race has sent home an advocate."[79] Christians were exiled from the bosom of God, but Mary's example gave them hope of their return to heaven and an intercessor, ready to bend the ear of God to help them on their journey.

The Magnificat certainly celebrates Mary's humility, but it also establishes her critical roles as mother, intercessor, and queen of heaven. The universal hope for redemption through God after death and for Mary's intercession are celebrated in the specific vespers services surrounding death and its commemoration, as well as in the vespers services of the paschal season and those associated with the hours of the Virgin. In his version of the *vesperbild*, Michelangelo celebrates similar themes of personal redemption and intercession.

The mourning for Cardinal Lagraulas, at his death and continuously afterward, as well as the predominant themes of that liturgy, must have been the point of departure for Michelangelo and Lagraulas when envisioning the *Pietà* and its ensemble in Santa Petronilla. The *Pietà*, like similar sculptures in French funerary chapels, would have reminded the assembled mourners and the paid chaplains of their intercessory role in praying on behalf of the cardinal, muted by death. When considering the *Pietà* in its ensemble, with the tomb monument of the cardinal grouped nearby, it would have been as though Lagraulas was a constant worshipper himself and a silent companion to the chaplains his estate paid to recite the Office of the Dead. After all, his grave marker displays the cardinal himself in effigy as though laid out on a funeral bier. With this sculp-

[77] Bernard of Clairvaux, 1984, 166.

[78] Ibid., 167. In this passage, Bernard also refutes the notion that Christians should be grieved at Mary's absence in the world.

[79] Ibid.

tural companion attending the Mass alongside the chaplains and other assembled mourners, it would have seemed as though the cardinal's funeral was perpetually in progress, thus making the mourner's intercessory prayers as urgent as the day of his death.

Together, Michelangelo and the cardinal crafted an image that speaks to the sculpture's liturgical and physical setting. Themes of hope, redemption, intercession, and humility are appropriate not only to the obsequies of the cardinal, but also to the larger context of Michelangelo's sculpture—both the church of Santa Petronilla and the complex of Old St. Peter's. These ideas must have been the point of departure for both the cardinal and the artist when envisioning the *Pietà*.

"ONLY BRIDE, HIS DAUGHTER AND MOTHER"

At the center of the sculpture group, physically and theologically, is Mary—her emotional and physical reactions to the death of Christ offer in visual form the hope of redemption found in Christian death and in the vespers service. Michelangelo depicts her as the embodiment of the Magnificat and the Madonna envisioned by Saint Antoninus—the recently anointed mother of the world, priestess of justice, supreme intercessor, and co-redemptrix. In the humble voice with which Mary sings the Magnificat, the Madonna offers her life and her son willingly to be sacrificed to God. Mary's bowed head, reminiscent of many Annunciation scenes, signals the Virgin's prayerful piety, humble submission to the will of God, and sweet sorrow at the loss of her son. Michelangelo's Virgin does not wail or shed tears at Christ's wounds; neither does Mary pray as someone detached and knowing. Instead, her reaction seems to show the transitory nature of her emotional state. This sculptural Madonna explores other aspects of the Virgin's reactions that day and indicate a kind of foresight expressed by Mary in the Magnificat. She trusts in the will of God because of her physical and spiritual connection to God through her pregnancy with Christ, which made her a facilitator, vessel, and collaborator with the Holy Spirit.

Grasping her son through her cloak, protecting the bodily sacrifice as a priest would the Host, Mary slightly elevates her son's body, willingly offering him as an expiation of sin to both the viewer and, humbly, to God. In this incarnation, she is truly Antoninus's priestess of justice, ready to assume her role as mother of the world and holding the sanctified Host. That the sculpture group has strong Eucharistic themes should not be a surprise, considering the close associations between vespers and the Eucharist. Durundus, in his commentary on the liturgy, explains that vespers marks the hour of Christ's descent from the cross. Although this association between Christ's sacrifice and the devotional hour would have been enough to ensure vespers' association with the bodily sacrifice, Durundus also states that this was the hour of the institution of the Holy

Eucharist at the Last Supper.[80] Durundus even links the five psalms of the service to Christ's five wounds.[81] Christ's strikingly handsome body in the sculpture, then, betraying only minimal signs of his torture and execution, can be read as a symbol for the transubstantiated Host. He has been transformed from a humble sacrifice into the perfected flesh and blood of Christ, presented for the expiation of the sins of the viewers, the mourners, and the defunct. If Christ is the Host, then Michelangelo transforms Mary from humble mother to both priest and altar table, elevating and offering the body of her son.[82]

Mary's left hand is upturned and slowly rising. It signals the humble strength of her offering—her only son—as both the living sacrifice for the faithful viewer and to God. The gesture, though, mimics the movement of her whole body. Although she bows her head, she also seems to be in the process of tilting upward. The subtle slumping of the Virgin's torso is belied by the sharp upward diagonal movement of the drapery between her legs that leads the sharp vertical support of her robe behind Christ's shoulders. Mary, in her hand, head, and body, seems to be straightening, even swelling upward. She is in the process of looking to the future and casting off her fear, her doubts, her mournful sorrow, as indicated by her inclined head. She moves upward, seeking God and acceptance. She shows a transition from the downtrodden mother at the foot of the cross to the woman who first spoke the triumphant words of the hymn: "My soul doth magnify the Lord / And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior."[83]

The wonderful subtlety that Michelangelo brings to the Virgin's movement shows her changing state of mind and, indeed, her changing status in the Christian world. Her understated movements toward the humble acceptance of God's plan would not be nearly so inspirational or moving (particularly to a mourning worshipper) were they not tempered with her past sadness. The slight pout of her lips contrasts with her implacably smooth forehead. In the Virgin's deftly

[80] Durand, 191: "Christ was taken down from the cross at Vespers. At the same hour, at supper, He instituted the sacrament of His Body and Blood. . . . Therefore, the Church rightly gives thanks to Christ at this hour."

[81] Ibid., 192.

[82] Brandt's discussion of the importance of the shroud, or winding cloth, to the composition also supports this reading. Brandt, 231, says, "As liturgists like Durundus tell us, the altar cloths symbolize 'the flesh of the savior' and thus, at once his Incarnation, humanity, and mortality. The altar cloth and Corporeal are interpreted symbolically as Christ's shroud and the cloth used to cover the chalice during Mass denotes the sheet used to lower Christ from the cross. When cloth and *perizoma* are of a piece, as they appear to be in Michelangelo's *Pietà*, notions of mortality and Eucharistic sacrifice are fused."

[83] Luke 1:46–47 (Vulgate): "Magnificat: anima mea Dominum. / Et exultavit spiritus meus: in Deo salutari meo."

changing facial expression (which changes particularly as one moves from right to left across the work), one reads both the sorrow that she is about to leave behind and the resolute faith with which she is about to accept and even praise the will of God. In short, Michelangelo's Mary mirrors the state of emotional instability common to every Christian facing death or mourning: there is sadness, but there is also hope and trust in the promise of eternal life. Mary, in Michelangelo's *Pietà*, reminds the viewer of the psalms of the vespers service, which both bemoan earthly sorrow and express faith in God for his coming deliverance. Psalm 129, for example, begins, "From the depths I have cried to thee O Lord: Lord hear my voice." It ends, however, with assurances of help and guidance from the deity: "Because with our Lord there is mercy: and with him plentiful redemption. And he shall redeem Israel."[84]

The work also speaks to the complicated and changing role of the Virgin in the moments after her son's death. As articulated by Saint Antoninus in describing her role at her son's death, Mary ceased being simply the mother of God and became the mother to the world, the supreme intercessor, and a source of grace in her own right. Mary's vital role in forging a path to heaven was recognized by previous generations who added two bronze angels to the sculpture, crowning Mary as the queen of heaven (although these were removed in 1927) (fig. 7).[85] Michelangelo's work captures her in the midst of this transition from humble to exalted mother—the moment between grief and sorrow, triumph and acceptance.

The transitory and complicated nature of the work, the emotions surrounding Christian death, and the various roles of the Virgin in Michelangelo's rendering were captured by Giovambattista Strozzi (1504–71) in a 1549 poem he composed after seeing a copy of the *Pietà* installed in Santo Spirito in Florence:

> Beauty and goodness,
> and grief and pity, alive in dead marble,
> Do not, as you do,
> Weep so loudly,
> Lest too early He should reawaken himself from death
> In spite of Himself,
> Our Lord and Thy
> Spouse, Son and Father,
> Only bride, His Daughter and Mother.[86]

[84] Psalm 129:1, 7–8.

[85] Wallace, 1995, 270.

[86] Vasari, 1991, 425; Vasari, 1962, 1:18–19: "Bellezza et onestate, / E doglia e Pietà in vivo marmo morte, / Deh, come voi pur fate, / Non piangete si forte / Che anzi tempo risveglisi da morte, / E pur mal grado suo, / Nostro Signore et tuo, / Sposo, figliuolo e padre, / Unica sposa sua, figliuola e madre."

Figure 7. Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Pietà*, 1498–1500, statue before the removal of the bronze angels. Rome, St. Peter's Basilica. Alinari Archives, Florence.

The poem, much like the sculpture, explores the unique and often contradictory nature of Christian death and Mary's role in the Christian mystery of redemption. In the "dead marble" the author sees the contrasting qualities of "Beauty and goodness / and grief and pity" as paradoxically "alive." The very qualities of transition—between goodness and grief, life and death—are present in the sculpture. Strozzi understands the sculpture to be the visual expression of Mary's im-

possible role as "Only bride, His Daughter and Mother," or Christ's only wife, daughter, and mother. As Christ's mother, Mary brings the living sacrifice into the world as an expiation of sin, but she also mourns him as a mother. As his daughter, however, Mary is saved and given everlasting life through her son's intervention and death. As his wife, Mary is queen of heaven, supreme intercessor, and mother of the world. In the sculpture, Strozzi, like many of his contemporaries, must have seen in Mary's complicated expression and body position, as well as her preternatural youth, the state of flux between these various roles. As his mother, Mary mourns. As his daughter, she is grateful for his intercession on her behalf. As his wife, she humbly accepts God's plan and assumes her new role. As a Christian viewer and mourner, we follow Mary as supreme exemplar in all of this.

Strozzi's poem directly quotes Saint Bernard's prayer to the Virgin at the end of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320) in order to articulate these contradictory roles. In canto 33 of *Paradiso*, Saint Bernard opens his praise of Mary in the midst of educating the pilgrim by saying, "Oh Virgin Mother, daughter of your son, / most humble, most exalted of all creatures."[87] At this point in *Paradiso*, the pilgrim has climbed to the highest heights of heaven and is standing at the threshold of God. Strozzi's use of Bernard's words in this context indicates the degree to which Michelangelo's sculpture is a heavenly vision. Adding to the visionary air of the work is the extremely high and glossy finish that Michelangelo puts on the marble, as well as the pure, snowy whiteness of the stone. The marble block is perhaps the purest that Michelangelo ever carved and the only one he ever polishes to such a high sheen. He finishes the work in a way that evokes the perfection of the heavens. As heavenly visions (and virgins, as the artist took pains to remind Condivi) are not bound by the constraints of age and time, the sculpture can speak to the holy mystery of redemption and Mary's myriad and contradictory roles in that redemption.[88] Indeed, Michelangelo's sculpture is a perfect embodiment of these contradictory roles, as it is both fully, corporeally present and "humble" in its sculptural state, but at the same time visionary or "exalted."

Mary's transitions between roles and emotions—so reminiscent of the vespers service and Christian mourning—are so effective because Christ also simultaneously expresses several different states of being. Although Mary is the co-redemptrix of humanity, her son is the primary redemptor through his death on the cross, which is likewise explored in complex ways in this work. Strozzi's concern that Christ might "reawaken himself from death" seems a real one when

[87] Dante, 580 (*Paradiso* book 3, canto 33, lines 1–2).

[88] Condivi, 24–27.

considering how Christ is carved. Christ's body bears few traces of the torture he endured. The softness and pliability of his limbs and joints makes it appear as though he is sleeping and not suffering from rigor mortis. Christ's state is more akin to sleep than death and his soft expression and perfect body anticipate, in visual form, the coming resurrection. There is still an acknowledgment, however, of the real and necessary state of Christ's death. His wounds, although not gratuitously gory, are prominently displayed and the entire sculpture group would have originally been surmounted by a large wooden cross, reminding every viewer of the savior's recent torture.[89]

What is clear from the work's attempt to visualize the universal themes of Christian death in the context of the vespers service and the cardinal's funerary monument is that Michelangelo and Lagraulas clearly meant for the work to have a larger appeal than its immediate setting would suggest. They chose to make the work substantially larger than almost any sculpted Pietà yet attempted. The work's over-life-size scale, as well as its exploration of the complex and contradictory emotions attendant with death and mourning opens the work up to its larger context in Santa Petronilla and the Basilica of St. Peter's (which marks an important tomb in and of itself). Unlike the *vesperbilder* of Michelangelo's predecessors, this work does not focus solely on abject grief or on the prayerful example of Mary in mourning. Unlike other Pietàs, the work does not focus only on the moment of death at hand, but pushes beyond the temporal and physical limits of this world to remind the viewer of the coming reward of heaven.

That Michelangelo's work transgresses temporal boundaries allows for a further investigation of the work's signature, "MICHAEL-AGELUS-BONAROTVS-FLORENT-FACIEBA[T]."[90] Michelangelo's choice of verb tense—the imperfect *faciebat*—indicates that the sculpture is in a constant state of becoming. The work has been made by the sculptor, but it also continues to be made. Like Mary's state of emotional flux and Christ's rather tenuous clinging to a sleep-like death, Michelangelo's signature insinuates that the very rock of the marble itself could change, stretch, even move. Moreover, it alludes to the constantly changing interaction of viewers and mourners with the work. The viewer's movement across the work encourages catharsis, from a frank appreciation of the sculpture's beauty,

[89] This wooden cross is mentioned in the documents from San Luigi dei Francesci and has also been included in many of the prints after the work. See Brandt, 245–46; Wallace, 1995, 266–67.

[90] "Michelangelo Buonarroti, a Florentine, made this." The *t* in the inscription is omitted in Michelangelo's inscription, hidden under the folds of Mary's cloak. This omission is a witty Plinian joke, alluding not only to the sculptor's rivalry with Apelles, but to the fact that the verb, in the imperfect tense, is still in the process of becoming itself. See Wang.

to a contemplation of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ and his mother. As part of a funerary ensemble that included the cardinal's tomb monument, the process of enacting and reenacting the cardinal's funeral rites would have been ongoing in front of the image. In this sense, the signature, like the sculpture itself, participates in the past commemoration of the cardinal, the present mourning, and the figure group's future role in helping chaplains pray for Lagraulas's soul. One does not have to specifically mourn the cardinal in order to understand the work's power and the comfort it could provide to the faithful. The added layer of understanding that comes with relating the work back to the cardinal's death, funeral, the Office of the Dead, and specifically the vespers service, however, is invaluable.

The numerous messages of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, as well as their near-universal applicability to the Christian condition, not to mention the sculpture's incredible physical beauty, ensured its lasting fame and use in the Basilica of St. Peter's, even after Santa Petronilla was destroyed. The sculpture's first major move resulted in its being placed in the *secretarium* of St. Peter's.[91] It was at this point that the venerable cardinal's tomb marker was banished to the Vatican grottoes and the work's physical and liturgical context was lost. The work's second location reveals the historic view of the work as primarily Marian, as it was incorporated into the funerary chapel of Sixtus IV in 1568.[92] The pope's long campaign to make the immaculacy of the Virgin doctrine was recognized in the chapel's dedication to the Immacolata. In 1609, however, Sixtus's chapel was deconsecrated, and the sculpture was moved again to a temporary choir. It was not until 1749 that the work was lodged in its present location, in the chapel to the right of the entrance, where it continues to be an important site of pilgrimage for the faithful.[93] Unlike the funerary monuments of his fifteenth-century contemporaries, Cardinal Lagraulas's extraordinary sculpture remained in St. Peter's even after the Constantinian basilica was torn down and rebuilt.

Ironically, however, the widespread appeal of the sculpture has rendered its original liturgical and theological context unreadable. Throughout its travels, the work has sloughed off its original commissioner and funerary context and has become more of an aesthetic object than an expression of the piety of a specific moment at the end of the fifteenth century. Perhaps more troubling, however, is that the work has become little more than Michelangelo's first major artistic statement, his first foray into the art world of Rome, and his only signed sculpture. The context of the work, its commissioner, and the theological message that was meant to be imparted from the work have all disappeared, eclipsed

[91] Also known as Santa Maria delle Febbre: Brandt, 227–28.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

by Michelangelo's emerging talent and stature. Michelangelo's considerable iconographic innovation in the service of liturgy and worship has thus also been lost.

In order to properly understand the sculpture it must be thought of, first and foremost, as Cardinal Lagraulas's tomb monument. When seen in this light, it is clear that the work effectively expresses sorrow, acceptance, joy, redemption, and the other innumerable and contradictory emotions attendant with Christian death. The sculpture highlights and magnifies the liturgy of death and commemoration, just as the cardinal originally intended.

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