

Introduction: Response to the Plague in Early Modern Italy: What the Primary Sources, Printed and Painted, Reveal

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“Will you believe such things, oh posterity, when we ourselves who see them can scarcely believe them and would consider them dreams except that we perceive them awake and with our eyes open and that after viewing a city full of funerals we return to our homes only to find them empty of our loved ones?”

Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum familiarum libri*, VIII:7, Letter to His “Socrates” on the Black Death¹

1. *Plague and Art: The Subject of this Exhibition*

Dateline, New York City, Thursday, 7 November, 2002: “A 53-year-old New Mexico man was in critical condition last night at Beth Israel Medical Center with bubonic plague, the rare and deadly disease that once decimated Europe, health officials said. His wife, a 47-year-old woman, remains under observation at Beth Israel as tests for the disease are conducted.” This report from the *New York Times*,² repeated in newspapers across the country, took many Americans by surprise: bubonic plague, in their minds, had been relegated to the realm of the remote past and of the almost-legendary. In fact, this ancient enemy, the scourge of Europe for more than three hundred years, has never been completely wiped from the face of the earth. Nowadays, thanks to antibiotics, wonder drugs unavailable to medieval and early modern Europeans, bubonic plague is easily treated and no longer a grave public health threat.

Yet, even with the availability of modern wonder drugs, human society remains to this day threatened by other forms of deadly, contagious disease for which there exists no effective “silver bullet” treatment. In the closing decades of the twentieth century and in the dawn of the twenty-first, several other new “plagues” haunt us: AIDS, Ebola, Hanta, West Nile, “Mad Cow,” and SARS. Fortunately, with the sad exception of AIDS, these are diseases we have thus far, through great and anxious effort, managed to contain. Then, in the wake of September 11, 2001, there came the terrifying specter of terrorist-disseminated plagues, most notably anthrax and smallpox. For months this threat kept the American population in a state of anxiety, if not near panic.³ This nightmarish collective experience of impending doom and helplessness in the shadow of an unseen yet seemingly omnipresent biological enemy gave us our closest approximation to the psychological state of medieval and early modern Europeans who, from the mid-fourteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, lived through wave after wave of bubonic plague. For these nearly four centuries the plague struck so often and in so many localities that when the inhabitants of any given town or city were not actually living through an active outbreak of plague, they were anxiously awaiting and preparing for its certain return, knowing that there was little they could do to protect themselves.

Hope and Healing takes as its central theme the response of the visual arts to this omnipresent fact of everyday European life – bubonic plague – focusing on Italy during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. In this period, with its busy international

ports of trade and other centers of commerce with the East, Italy fell victim to this scourge with extraordinary and devastating frequency. Not surprisingly, we find, in fact, that the plague, explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly, partially or entirely, informed and influenced a massive number of works of art produced in Italy in the course of these years. At the same time, as we shall see, many works of devotional art created with no intended reference to the plague, featuring certain traditional, commonly depicted themes (such as the Lamentation over the Dead Christ or *memento mori*) inevitably acquired new plague-related resonances in the wake of the contagion. Yet despite the crucial importance of its theme in art, *Hope and Healing* represents the first major exhibition in North America devoted to this endemic fact of daily, lived experience of early modern Europe.⁴ Exploring the ways in which Italian society responded to this recurring, unpredictable disaster, *Hope and Healing* will illuminate a wide variety of aesthetic, social, and religious concerns that preoccupied artists, patrons, and the general population alike during the ages of the Renaissance and Baroque, and that found expression through art – indeed, helped to shape that art. Our exploration of these issues will be interdisciplinary: a wide variety of contemporary documents – including diaries, personal correspondence, medical and devotional treatises, chronicles and broadsides, poetry, sermons, chapbooks, and biblical commentary – will be examined to illuminate the paintings on display and the themes of the exhibition.

II. *The Role of Art in Times of Disaster*

Unlike the chroniclers (medical or otherwise) of the period, early modern painters did not primarily seek to document the gruesome effects of the contagion, its horror and destruction. This was deemed alien to the nature and purposes of what we now call “fine art.” Rather, during these times of social crisis, the role of plague-related art – whether commissioned by confraternities, communes, or private citizens – was, above all, to be an instrument of healing and encouragement, a mirror and a channel of society’s search for solace and cure from the heavens, that is, from God and the saints. While inevitably reflecting society’s anxieties and sufferings in the face of the unconquerable scourge, art served to remind the viewer of the necessity, availability, and efficacy of the various “celestial cures” at their disposal, thus offering comfort and hope in times of despair.⁵ Furthermore, specifically *ex-voto* works of plague art (e.g., cats. 7, 29, 36) rendered another form of comfort and hope inasmuch as they represented for the faithful effective oblatinal offerings to God or the saints. Let us note that even those works commissioned by civic authorities are explicitly religious in nature, the products of a society utterly defined by Roman Catholicism.⁶

Drawing from a wide reading of the abundant primary sources, this essay will look at early modern Italian beliefs surrounding the nature and cause of the plague and examine the varied, pro-active measures recommended by civil, medical, and ecclesiastical authorities in the face of the plague or threat thereof. In contemporary parlance, these measures were called “*rimedi*” (remedies) and we find them repeatedly described in the most widely disseminated, influential primary sources in print. Plague *rimedi* fall into two categories: “temporal” or “human” remedies (*rimedi temporali, umani*), that is, medical-social-political measures taken to contain the epidemic, and “spiritual remedies” (*rimedi spirituali*), those enunciated and mandated by the Church. Among the latter were special prayer, to Christ, the Virgin Mary, and other heavenly intercessors and protectors against plague; confession and public penitential processions; fasting; almsgiving and other acts of charity (the traditional “corporal works of mercy”); and prayerful meditation upon the inevitability and omnipresence of death and the vanity of this world as well as reward and punishments in the next life. All of these *rimedi spirituali*, in turn, we find depicted or alluded to in many of the plague-related images produced

in the period for, again, such was the role of art in time of plague, to remind viewers of these efficacious ecclesiastical *rimedi* at their disposal.

Scholarship on the plague has been largely epidemiological or sociological in nature, focused primarily on temporal remedies, that is, public health measures (quarantine, sanitation, hospitals, law enforcement, etc.) and political-economic consequences of the pandemics. This in spite of the fact that there was virtual unanimous agreement among early modern Italians that the only really effective remedies were spiritual. These spiritual remedies have received far less attention in modern scholarship than they receive in the primary sources, printed and painted. This essay – and indeed this catalogue and the exhibition – strives to correct the balance by focusing on the *rimedi spirituali* considered central in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

III. Terminology, Symptomatology, and Diagnostic Quandaries

Before we look at the specific content of the primary sources at our disposal, the “remedies” they advise, and the reflection of these remedies in art, some preliminary historical and medical data will be useful. First among them is the issue of terminology. The plague-related primary sources produced in early modern Italy simply refer to bubonic plague as *peste* or *pestilenza* (in Latin, *pestis* or *pestilentia* and, occasionally, *lues*), “plague” or “pestilence,” without any qualifying adjective, bubonic (*bubbonica*) or other. We cannot be certain that the calamitous disease that contemporary writers call *peste* or *pestilenza* (or their Latin equivalents) was in reality bubonic plague. Early modern usage of the two terms is characterized by a widespread and constant ambiguity.⁷ This ambiguity, in turn, derives from two factors. The first is the tendency in these centuries to refer to *any* extremely contagious epidemic disease resulting in high mortality as “the plague” or “the pestilence” – and not, simply and figuratively, as “a plague” or “a pestilence,” with the implication then being that the real “plague,” properly and strictly speaking, is specifically the bubonic plague.

In this usage, however, early modern Italians were simply emulating the example of the great ancient Greek medical authority, Galen, and in our own speech today we find the same terminological phenomenon.⁸ A virulent epidemic disease in early modern Italy can be labeled “the plague,” even in the absence of the most characteristic symptoms of bubonic plague, the buboes, described below. (Yet, at the same time, as we shall see, not every form of bubonic plague produces buboes and not every disease producing buboes is bubonic plague.) In many cases it is now suspected that the disease described is likely to have been either of the two other principal biological killers of these centuries, typhus and typhoid fever, identified as one disease in early modern Italy called *tifo*.⁹ Whether or not the disease in any given image or text is indeed bubonic plague, the fact is that the various beliefs surrounding any virulently epidemic disease and the varied responses to it on the part of early modern Italians remained the very same.

The second reason for the uncertainty we face in interpreting early modern descriptions of the plague is the medical establishment’s inability to correctly diagnose bubonic plague on all occasions. Bubonic plague can manifest itself in three different forms, according to the mode of entry of the microbe into the body. Each form displays differing symptoms that both vary in severity and are common to other diseases. The most common form of bubonic plague is characterized by the formation of the so-called buboes (in Italian, *bubboni*). These are the often greatly swollen and agonizingly painful pus-filled lymph glands in the armpits, neck, and groin.¹⁰ In the septicemic form of the disease (which occurs when the bacillus enters and rapidly multiplies directly in the bloodstream) and the pneumonic form (in which the airborne pathogen enters the body through the lungs, for example through the inhalation of

infected sputum), the buboes do not have time to form since death in these cases can occur within just a day or two. Furthermore, even within the same form of the plague, as George Deaux points out, “[t]he illness varies greatly among individuals and all degrees of severity have been observed, from a mild indisposition which may hardly be noticed to extreme violence equaled only by fulminating cholera.” The account of the 1656 Roman plague epidemic included in Jesuit cardinal and historian Sforza Pallavicino’s *Vita di Alessandro VII* underscores this fact as one of the “five indisputable truths” concerning this most confounding of medical conditions.¹¹

In the face of this bewildering multiplicity of symptoms, early modern doctors lived in a chronic state of diagnostic perplexity, even after centuries of medical experience, treatment, and technical description of the plague. As Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti points out in the survey of plague treatises included in his 1750 work on the “progress of the physical sciences” in seventeenth-century Tuscany: “It is well known from the history books that the Lord God, desiring to punish a population with the scourge of plague, permitted on certain occasions that the most accredited doctors, endowed with great learning and experience, were shamefully deceived in diagnosing the disease and did not recognize it for what it was, and thus, when consulted by government officials, dissuaded the latter from taking the necessary precautionary measures.”¹² Such was the case in Rome 1656 at the beginning of the contagion: Sforza Pallavicino reports that the 1656 calamity could have been avoided had there been greater diagnostic expertise on the part of the doctor from the Ospedale di San Giovanni assigned to examine the body of a Neapolitan fisherman who, according to other eyewitnesses, had died with all of the “*rei signali*,” sinister signs, of plague.¹³

However, there may have been another reason for such hesitation on the part of both doctors and government officials in acknowledging initial cases of the plague: fear of the disastrous economic consequences that would inescapably follow such an official pronouncement. In the ensuing wide-scale quarantine and prohibition of commerce necessary to contain the disease, the economies of entire towns and regions came to a crashing halt.¹⁴ To the horror of the contagion or threat thereof was thus added the misery of unemployment, food rationing, and general scarcity of goods and services. Hence, one could understand the reluctance to sound the plague alarm until greater certainty about its actual presence was obtained. But, by then, it was tragically too late.

iv. *Plague Statistics: Chronology, Historical Memory, Mortality*

Human misjudgment often rendered impossible what was already a Herculean task, given the state of health, hygiene, and civic institutions in the era: the prevention or effective containment of a plague epidemic. With regard to both the frequency of the outbreaks and subsequent mortality, the statistics emanating from early modern Italy are indeed grim. In their accounts of plague incidence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy, many modern studies simply refer to the epidemics of 1575, 1630, and 1656, but these were merely the most virulent and widespread among the scores of outbreaks that occurred in those centuries and even these three pandemics lasted in most localities far more than one calendar year. Biraben, Corradi, and Del Panta all offer statistics on the chronology and location of specific outbreaks in Italy for our period and beyond, the most extensive list being that of Corradi.¹⁵ In view of such statistics, it is certainly no exaggeration to claim that when early modern Italians were not actually living through an active outbreak of plague, they were anxiously awaiting its all-too-likely return. During the sixteenth century and for three quarters of the seventeenth, there was hardly a significant period during which the peninsula was completely free of

plague. Even when early modern Italians might be medically free of plague, psychologically they were certainly never free from its grip.

Geographical distance, furthermore, was only of small comfort: knowing how porous was the blanket of protection between them and plague and how rapid the disease's migration, the Genoese or Bolognese, for example, would have had every reason to begin to tremble when they heard of pestilence even in far-off Palermo. Early modern Italians were well aware of the peninsula's exceptional susceptibility to the plague, a susceptibility which they believed (erroneously) to be greater than that of all other localities on the European continent. Girolamo Gastaldi (d. 1685), Alexander VII's Commissioner of Health during the Roman outbreak of 1656, attributes the greater incidence of contagion in his homeland to the peculiarities of the Italian climate as well as the peninsula's easy access to foreigners by land and by sea.¹⁶ In fact, the contagion came to Italy most frequently from abroad, often from the Levant with which the various Italian port cities, especially Venice, engaged in extensive trade.

Commissioner Gastaldi further claims that of all localities in Italy, the city of Rome was "the most frequently infected," basing this judgment on the accumulated data concerning the dates and locations of outbreaks in the Western world, drawn from a wide variety of ancient and modern authorities.¹⁷ Beginning with the year 2443 B.C. with the plagues of Egypt and Ethiopia and ending with his own lifetime, Gastaldi's extensive list is not unique among plague treatises of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁸ Some authors enter into further discussion of the specifics of individual outbreaks, most especially the famous plague of 431 B.C. in Athens described by Thucydides in Book Two of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, an account that had great and lasting influence on painted depictions of plague in Italy.¹⁹ At least one source, the *Discorso di peste* of Andrea Gratiolo (Graziali) di Salò (Venice, 1576) even advertises in its title the fact that his work specifically contains a "catalogue of all the most notable plagues from times past," along with its "most useful speculations regarding the nature, causes and cures of the plague."

The prominence given to the inclusion of such chronological lists and the frequency with which one encounters them in our primary sources – especially in those treatises that simply include them with no further reference thereunto or processing of the data therein – causes us to wonder about their ultimate purpose. Historical curiosity and conscientiousness are no doubt part of the explanation, but I suspect there are further, perhaps psychological, factors. Did it give comfort to contemporary readers who were either living through another deadly outbreak or contemplating its imminent return to know that their suffering was not unique? As these lists demonstrated, in all parts of the globe, humankind had been visited throughout history by this dreadful affliction, which, however terrifying and lethal, had never succeeded in extinguishing human society. Despite the slaughter, life and civil order endured.

Returning to the outbreaks specifically of early modern Italy, as far as the actual number of deaths is concerned, accurate statistics are hard to come by. Suffice it to say that the population loss was frequently, as the Italians say, "*di proporzioni bibliche*," that is, apocalyptically catastrophic, even though the specific figures offered by contemporaries are impressionistic and usually the result of hearsay. We do know that the city hardest hit was Naples.²⁰ The learned Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602-80) tells us that 300,000 Neapolitans died within a five-month period during the height of the 1656 outbreak in that city.²¹ The plague had beset the city for a much longer period, and Kircher's estimation, like that of other contemporaries, may mistakenly include those who fled the city of their own accord. As Christopher Black reports, "[m]ore rational calculations suggest that the city's population in 1657-8 was two-fifths what it had been in 1654-5, with 240-270,000 persons out of 400-450,000 in Naples and its vicinity dying of plague and allied causes."²² Genoa, during the same outbreak, lost about 90,000 of its citizens, diminishing in population from 440,000 to

350,000. Venice's population in 1624, before the pandemic of 1630, stood at 142,804, whereas at the time of the next accurate count in 1634, that is, post-plague, it had been reduced to 98,804.²³

Having experienced brief outbreaks of the plague from 1524 through 1529, Rome escaped the great pandemic of 1630 unharmed. Furthermore, during the next outbreak, in 1656, thanks to the timely and stringent measures adopted by Pope Alexander VII, the Eternal City suffered a relatively low rate of mortality. Writing shortly after the plague had subsided, Gastaldi reports a loss of only 14,473 lives out of the little more than 100,000 residing in the city, whereas Pallavicino claims that figure to be less than 8,000. Modern estimations of Roman mortality in this outbreak place the loss of life at a higher rate, calculating 20,000 deaths out of a pre-plague population of 120,000. In reporting his mortality statistics, by the way, Cardinal Pallavicino adds, with a seeming air of satisfaction, the fact that "almost all of these deaths were from the ordinary masses, with few civil heads, and not one illustrious head, having been lost. One of those lost "civil heads," we might mention, was a brother of artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini, another of whose stricken brothers was, however, saved by ingesting, "con fede," the miraculous "bread (*pagnotella*) of Saint Nicholas of Tolentine."²⁴

Florence escaped the plague of 1656 entirely, "partly through timely action of the secular authorities to block any commerce with the infected regions of Genoa and the South."²⁵ During the earlier pandemic of 1630, although struck by plague, the city was nonetheless fortunate, for the same reason of quick governmental response: the *virtù eroica* of Ferdinand II Grand Duke of Tuscany, together with *la Divina Pietà* and the Virgin Mary's "*pietosa intercessione*," is credited by eyewitness chronicler, Francesco Rondinelli (Ferdinand's librarian and "one of the most illustrious letterati of his age"),²⁶ with having spared the city from the catastrophic mortality rate experienced by other infected cities. Rondinelli reports a total of circa 12,000 deaths in 1630, with 1,600 to 1,800 additional ones in the re-visitation of the plague in 1633. The Florentine author's figures reflect modern calculations, which put the population loss at only 12 percent of about 76,000 souls. In comparison, during the same outbreak of 1630, Verona and Parma saw the disappearance of more than 50 percent of their populations, as did Milan whose population decreased from 130,000 to approximately 66,000. In Brescia, between 40 and 49 percent of the city was lost to the plague while in Venice, mortality amounted to about 33 percent.²⁷

v. *The End of the Outbreaks and of a Medical Mystery*

The great pandemic of 1656-57 was the last virulent, widespread outbreak of plague on the Italian peninsula. Thereafter, only a few small, local, sporadic outbreaks are recorded.²⁸ The reasons for this abatement have never been identified with complete certainty, but it seems reasonable to conjecture that improved sanitary conditions, more efficient governmental vigilance, acquired immunity among surviving populations and their offspring, and the lessened virulence of the pathogen itself all contributed to the phenomenon. Late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century contemporaries, of course, had no way of knowing that they were now living in the post-plague era: the shadow of that great invisible enemy still hung over them. Fear was readily renewed whenever reports of plague came from abroad: for instance, in the second decade of the eighteenth century, Lodovico Muratori (1672-1750), famed historian and librarian-archivist of the d'Este family in Modena, was moved to write one of the best-known plague treatises in Italy, *Del governo della peste*, and thus prepare authorities for the contagion that had struck beyond the Alps:

Great apprehension and fear, o most illustrious Lord Conservators of the city and health of Modena, if we want to confess it openly, was provoked in us last year, in 1714 by rumors of plague. After it had penetrated into Austria from Hungary, striking Prague, Ratisbon [i.e., Regensburg, Bavaria], and other cities, and after at the same time, another plague – a different one, I believe – awoke in Hamburg, this horrendous disease, causing wretched slaughter among these peoples also wrought sheer terror in all neighboring areas. The less courageous souls already imagined it advancing through the regions of Italy and began to make plans for escaping it. ...²⁹

Muratori goes on to report that Rondinelli's *Relazione del contagio stato in Firenze l'anno 1630 et 1633*, was being republished "since lately it was noticed that it strangely had become rare and the authorities wanted to better prepare for the future."³⁰ This better preparation was rewarded and Italy lived through those years with no major harm from plague, as it did during the very last great outbreak in Europe, which assailed Marseille and environs 1720-22. Nonetheless, the threat was still felt beyond that date: in 1740 we find the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher's plague treatise, the *Scrutinium physico-medicum contagiosae luis quae dicitur pestis* (first edition, Rome 1658) being reprinted yet again, this time in Graz, Austria.³¹

Although, after a nearly four-hundred-year reign, bubonic plague, for all intents and purposes, disappeared from Western Europe after 1722, the biological nature of the contagion and the mechanism of its transmission would continue to remain medical mysteries for more than a century and a half. In 1894, in the wake of the new germ theory of disease (thanks to the work of Pasteur, Lister, and Koch), young Swiss medical student Alexandre Yersin identified in Hong Kong the pathogen responsible for bubonic plague, a bacillus he named *Pasteurella pestis* (renamed in 1970 *Yersinia pestis*). Shortly thereafter, in 1897, another vital piece of the puzzle was solved with the discovery that bubonic plague, primarily a disease of rodents (and, most notoriously, rats) was transmitted to humans by the bite of fleas escaping from the corpses of their dead rodent hosts.³² Always in great abundance and in intimate proximity to human beings in early modern Italy, neither fleas nor rats were ever seen as suspects in the outbreaks of plague. Rats are included in Poussin's *Plague at Ashdod* and Caroselli's copy thereof (cat. 1) because of their mention in the biblical story upon which the paintings are based, but neither the biblical author nor the artists understood the connection between plague and rodents.

One person in early modern Italy did effectively anticipate Pasteur's germ theory by three hundred years, Gerolamo Fracastoro of Verona (1478-1553), the "founder of modern pathology." In his *De contagione et de contagiosis morbis et curatione* (Venice, 1546), Fracastoro hypothesized that the contagion was actually disseminated by an invisible living agent, which he called *virus*. Later, thanks to the seventeenth-century development of the microscope, what was formerly invisible became visible. The ingenious, if at times fanciful, scientist Kircher took up Fracastoro's intuition and with his new lenses discovered the strange, unimagined world of microscopic organisms (which he called *corpuscula minima* and *seminaria*), multiplying rapidly in organic liquid material taken from plague victims: "so tiny, so slender and subtle, that they elude the senses' every power of comprehension."³³ According to Kircher, these organisms (which he also called *vermicula* "worms," because of their wiggling movement and shapes) were the true source of plague. What Kircher saw under his microscope – no one is quite sure to what specific organisms he is referring – was not the source of the contagion, that is, the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which would remain elusive to scientific eyes until 1894. Nonetheless, Kircher had identified the only proper, efficacious avenue for further research into the disease's etiology.

Unfortunately, no one pursued Kircher's indications and the traditional explanations of the cause of the plague and its diffusion continued to prevail. In the absence of knowledge of the germ theory of disease and of the existence of the pathogen *Yersinia pestis* and its passage from rodent to human via fleas, what then did the early modern Italian believe about the etiology and dissemination of "this most deceiving contagious serpent" (as one seventeenth-century author calls the disease)?³⁴ Early modern society still clung to explanations formulated, centuries before, by the ancients: simply stated, the plague, along with numerous other diseases, was caused and spread by "corrupt air." The famous "miasma theory of disease," first expressed in the ancient Greek medical text, *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, by Hippocrates (ca. 460-377 B.C.), which posited excessive humidity as a cause of disease-bearing miasma. Important elaborations by Galen (ca. A.D. 130-200) and Avicenna (A.D. 980-1037) added the putrefaction of organic materials, and the escape of underground gases, respectively, as contributing factors.³⁵

Thus, much attention in early modern Italy was devoted to ever-changing meteorological conditions in an attempt to predict and prepare for the arrival of plague. At the same time, early modern scientists taught – and the masses of people accepted the teaching – that astrological factors also played an important role in generating this scourge. In an age when everyone, from pope to peasant, sincerely believed in the direct influence of the stars and planets on human health and destiny, "evil conjunctions" of planets were commonly accepted as further generators of miasma, with certain astronomical phenomena, such as comets and falling stars, readily interpreted as presages of earthly calamity, especially pestilential epidemics. Furthermore, once plague had arrived in a locality, it was widely believed – and seemingly confirmed by daily experience – that the mechanisms and vehicles of transmission available to the contagion were frighteningly numerous: not only by touch, but also by breath; indeed, by hearing, sight, imagination, and fear as well, not to mention by deliberate spreading on the part of evil men, a fact acknowledged, for example, by both the already-cited Gastaldi and his younger contemporary, Filiberto Marchini (see Section VII below).³⁶ As Neapolitan Jesuit poet Giacomo Lubrano (1619-1693) laments in one of his eloquent grief-filled compositions, even the medicines offered to cure the plague could be responsible for its dissemination since they themselves were so easily infected by the mere breath of the already stricken.³⁷

Perhaps frustrated by the incapacity of the medical establishment to identify effective remedies, some early modern Italians were not at all satisfied with the official etiological explanations offered by scientific textbooks. Thus, Bolognese medical doctor and professor of science, Giovanni Antonio Bumaldi (alias of Ovidio Montalbani, 1601-1671) begins his 1656 treatise, the *Pestifugo esculapio*, impatiently proclaiming that he will not even bother to enter into a discussion of the causes of the plague because it is simply a waste of time. Even Roman Commissioner of Health Gastaldi admits that "there is nothing that taxes the minds of doctors more than this topic" – the causes of the plague – a further indication that even the medical establishment was dissatisfied with its own received wisdom.³⁸ However, let us note, the medical-scientific community was simply attempting to pinpoint what they called the "natural causes" of the plague. As we shall see, most everyone in early modern Italy, scientist and layperson alike, acknowledged that the ultimate, the "real" cause of the plague, its Aristotelian "*causa finalis*" (as Gastaldi terms it),³⁹ was to be found not on the natural or physical plane, but rather on the spiritual: it was a response of God himself to the wickedness of humanity.

We have spoken of the difficulty that medical personnel faced in recognizing bubonic plague in their patients because of the confusing multiplicity of its symptoms. But what about artists? How did they convey the presence of bubonic plague to the viewers of their canvases? The most characteristic visual cues indicating the presence of bubonic plague are the buboes, located either in the groin, neck, or armpits of the victims. In early modern Italian art, decorum dictated that groin buboes be shown instead on the upper thigh, as in many a representation of Saint Roch. More frequently, explicit representation of the buboes was avoided altogether. Artists resorted to a more discrete visual allusion to the buboes, one that was readily understood by their contemporaries, namely, “the gesture of exposing the underarm region ... to the gaze of attendants,”⁴⁰ as we see in Tintoretto’s *Saint Roch Ministering to the Plague Victims* (1549, Chiesa di San Rocco) or Luca Ferrari’s *Saint Dominic Interceding with the Virgin for the Liberation of Padua from the Plague* (1630s, Cassa di Risparmio di Padova e Rovigo).⁴¹

Plague scenes in art also invariably show figures holding their noses closed with their fingers in an attempt to protect themselves from the horrible stench emanating from the pus-filled bodies of the dead and the dying. This is the second most common visual cue given by artists to indicate the presence of bubonic plague and indeed the horrible stench is one of the most common features of the disease described in the printed sources. Seventeenth-century Roman doctor Giovanni Pressi, who served in two of the city’s lazarettos (plague hospitals) during the 1656 outbreak, for instance, reports that the stench given off by the dead body of “that father confessor from San Lorenzo lingered in the air for three days so that any of us who encountered it ... almost fell in a dead faint because of it.”⁴² Stench was also caused by the corpses of the many unburied victims: these were left to decay wherever they happened to fall since personnel was in woefully short supply to attend to their proper burial, “so that the stench of the dead kills the living,” as Giovanni Baldinucci (1577-1656), an eyewitness to the 1630 pandemic in Florence writes in his diary.⁴³ Since stench was considered a sign of the “corrupt air” believed to be the origin of plague and most other disease, eliminating the stench by burying dead bodies was of utmost importance. This, together with Christian charity and respect for the earthly remains of a human being, the temporary dwelling place of the soul, accounts for the great emphasis in this period on the corporal work of mercy of “burying the dead,” as we shall see among the *rimedi spirituali* depicted in art and exhorted in the printed sources.

Another sign of the plague repeatedly mentioned in the primary sources is the darkening of the body of the victim, a condition that we now know to be caused by widespread subcutaneous hemorrhaging brought on by the infection. We turn again to our Roman doctor Pressi, who reports, for example, that the cadaver of one of his patients, a fifty-year-old friar from San Grisogono “turned horribly black, swollen, and foul-smelling.”⁴⁴ Aesthetic and moral decorum prevented painters from repugnantly accurate depictions of this blackening of the body; instead, they showed victims’ bodies in a state of grayish pallor, such as that of young woman held in the arms of (presumably) her husband at the extreme left of Pietro Bernardi’s *Saint Carlo Borromeo Praying Among the Plague Victims* (1610s, Verona, Church of San Carlo).⁴⁵ Knowing this, we wonder: did Nicolas Poussin wish to refer, indirectly but explicitly, to the bubonic plague by means of the exceedingly blackened body of the dead Christ in his *Lamentation*, a canvas executed in Rome right in the midst of, or immediately after, the great pandemic of 1656-57? Even if this were not the case (the current state of Christ’s body in the canvas could be simply the result of oxidation), given the years in which the painting was completed, it is hard to imagine that the plague could have absent from the mind of the

artist or of contemporary viewers. How could this wrenchingly pathetic scene of death and mourning not vividly recall for them the horrors of the plague? How, furthermore, could they not see in it a reflection of their own grief and suffering caused by the plague surrounding them on every side? As is well known, Christians traditionally used scenes of the Passion of Christ precisely in this cathartic, vicarious way: as a mirror of their own personal suffering and as a vehicle for the expression of their own private grief. Francesco Cozza's *Pietà* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Corsini), for example, a painting done in Rome in the same period as the Poussin *Lamentation*, was commissioned by Carlo Antonio dal Pozzo in memory of his older brother, Cassiano, who died in October, 1657.⁴⁶

Of the several other medical manifestations of plague infection – exceedingly high fever, skin rash, delirium, great thirst, headache, vomiting, and utter prostration – only the last sign, the extreme lassitude brought upon its victims, is generally rendered explicit in art. Plague scenes will almost always include a large grouping of men, women, and children with no apparent signs of contagion visible in or on them except their deathly prostrate or otherwise dazed, languishing condition (cats. 1, 2, 5, 6, 25). However, in the absence of actual plague victims within a scene, other, non-medical cues alert the viewer either to the presence of plague within a canvas or to the relevance, direct or indirect, of that disease to the painting. These include arrows, swords, and lances (symbols of divine wrath being vented through plague); dark clouds (a reference to the miasma, corrupt-air theory of plague causation, which may perhaps explain their conspicuous presence in Carlevarijs's *Feast of S. Maria della Salute* [cat. 33]); astronomical or astrological signs and symbols (stars and planets, as already mentioned, considered either causes of the plague or omens of its imminent arrival, such as the comet in Raphael's *Madonna of Foligno*); and an angel holding a flagellum or scourge, symbol par excellence of the plague.⁴⁷ Finally, there are, of course, the many plague saints – heavenly intercessors and protectors against the contagion – to also serve as visual clues.

Contemporary viewers would have readily recognized all of these visual cues, whereas we may overlook the significance of some of the more subtle among them. Hence, we may fail to recognize the relevance of the plague to the subject and meaning of a canvas. For example, nothing is known of the provenance of Tintoretto's recently rediscovered *Raising of Lazarus* (cat. 37), which, for stylistic reasons, scholars have dated to the years 1556-57.⁴⁸ There is every reason to suspect that this devotional work (whose size suggests a private residence as its original intended destination) may have in fact been an *ex-voto* in time of plague. To be sure, the raising of Lazarus from the dead – the most spectacular of Jesus's miracles – was one of the most popular subjects in Christian art from the catacombs onward, reminding Christian viewers of the promise of resurrection after their own death. However, this specific subject would have had greater appeal in time of plague, not only for its generic reminder of the Christian belief in the universal resurrection of the saved souls, but also because of its central character, the young *miracolato*, Lazarus. Unbeknownst to many viewers today, "Saint Lazarus" was in fact a plague saint: beginning in the eleventh century this New Testament figure acquired a new role as heavenly protector against leprosy and the plague, thanks to the medieval melding of the identity of the sore-covered beggar of that same name in Jesus's parable recounted in Luke 16:19-31 with that of the brother of Martha and Mary, raised from the dead as recounted in John 11 and depicted in Tintoretto's canvas. Visual cues serve to reinforce the association between this painting and the plague. Despite the absence here of blemishes of any sort, the languishing state of body of Lazarus would have called to mind the prostrate posture of plague victims as depicted in many other works of plague art. An even more vivid reminder of the plague, however, would have been the eyewitnesses in the background holding clothes to their noses in an attempt to protect themselves from the expected stench emanating from Lazarus's body. The years in which this painting is believed to have been execut-

ed, 1556-57, coincide precisely with another outbreak of the plague. Although not as deadly as those of 1575-77 or 1630, this mid-century epidemic nonetheless claimed thousands of victims in the artist's hometown, Venice.

Saint Michael the Archangel, Plague Icon

Giovanni Battista Moroni's *Two Donors in Adoration before the Madonna with the Child and Saint Michael* (cat. 21) presents a similar situation. Nothing is known of the earliest history of this work, except for its origins in the north-Italian town of Brescia. Although perhaps not the *podestà* of Brescia and his wife, as a nineteenth-century British exhibition catalogue identified them,⁴⁹ the two sitters are nonetheless edifying models of Christian piety: by their (painted) example they encourage the viewer to emulate their devotion to the Madonna, the Christ Child, and Saint Michael the Archangel. The sitters' austere black clothing (characteristic of the Hispanizing tastes of Counter-Reformation Lombardy) and Saint Michael's scales (with which to "weigh" the relative virtue and vice of each soul at the hour of judgment) suggest that the painting is an invitation to meditate upon the inevitability of death and the eternal fate of one's soul. However, looking at this canvas through plague "lenses," we wonder if indeed we may have before us another *ex-voto* piece commissioned in time of contagion.

To begin with, Mina Gregori's generally accepted dating of the work to 1557-60 corresponds to the later phase or immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the plague just mentioned in connection with the Tintoretto canvas. Apart from this chronological fact, there are visual clues as well, the most compelling of which is the presence of Saint Michael the Archangel. Though, of course, there could be other reasons for his inclusion – for instance, he may be the "name saint" of the male donor – we find Saint Michael most often performing two specific symbolic roles in the art of our period: that of a militant icon of the Catholic Church's struggle against the Protestantism and other external enemies – not likely a relevant issue in what would appear to be a domestic devotional canvas – and that of a plague icon, either in his role as unleasher of God's punishing scourge or as beneficent protector. This well-documented connection between Michael and the plague has its ultimate foundation in the Book of Revelation. Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, describes the Apocalypse, the end times of humanity and the final cosmic struggle between good and evil, in which Michael plays an important role as agent of God's revenge and justice and as conqueror of the "ancient serpent," Satan (Revelation 12:7). These end times, the text specifies, will be marked by the slaughter of a fourth of the earth "with sword, famine, and pestilence" (Revelation 6:8) – hence the apocalyptic associations that plague has always had in the imagination of Christian Europe since the Middle Ages. Although Revelation does not identify the sword-bearing soldier of God, Saint Michael, as deliverer specifically of the plague, his overall role as dispenser of God's vengeance and agent of God's will in this cosmic struggle makes the association between the archangel and pestilence natural, if not, indeed, inevitable.⁵⁰

A more specific association between the archangel and plague dates to a sixth-century outbreak in Rome: on that occasion, as we see in a canvas by Jacopo Zucchi (ca. 1540-96) now in the Vatican Pinacoteca. The severity of the contagion induced the pope himself, Gregory the Great, to lead a penitential procession through the streets of Rome, bearing one of the city's miraculous ancient icons, housed in the basilica of Saint Mary Major, of the Madonna and Child – who, let us note, are also present in the Moroni canvas. When the procession reached the precincts of Hadrian's tomb, Saint Michael suddenly appeared atop the monument, seen in the act of replacing his sword in its sheath – a further attribute present in Moroni's *Two Donors in Adoration* – signifying the appeasement of God's wrath and the end of the scourge. In gratitude for this miraculous deliverance, the ancient monument was renamed

“Castel Sant’Angelo” and eventually a statue of Saint Michael, with sword in hand, was placed at its summit. Recounted in that medieval best-seller, Jacopo da Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, this tale firmly established Michael as plague icon in all of Western Christendom.⁵¹ We find him, for example, occupying the front center position on the elaborately ornate title page of *Belli divini* (Florence, 1633), a major early modern Italian plague text rich with historical, theological, canonical, and medical information by the Barnabite theologian, Filiberto Marchini (1586-1636).

Returning to the Moroni canvas, we find another detail that may have been evocative of the plague to its original viewers, the gray clouds filling the upper portion of the canvas. As we have already seen, in plague-related paintings dark, thick, gray clouds can often function as a visual cue, reminding the viewer of the then universally accepted “miasma” (corrupted air) theory of plague etiology. Even though in the present canvas, it is most likely that the clouds serve simply as a partition between the heavenly and earthly realms and as a platform for the saintly personages, it is not unreasonable to imagine their serving also, if only unintentionally, as reminder to the viewer of the plague and its cause. Now, to be sure, taken alone, the presence of gray clouds or any single piece of evidence, chronological or visual, is not sufficient to identify a canvas as a plague *ex-voto*, but taken all together, as we here find, the evidence is indeed compelling. Thus, the somber black clothing worn by Moroni’s two sitters may not be merely an example of Hispanizing austerity of fashion, but rather an expression of mourning after the recent outbreak in the town from which the two grateful donors escaped through the intercession of Mary, Jesus, and Saint Michael the Archangel. Even if not specifically a plague *ex-voto*, the artist’s, the sitters’ and the original viewers’ all-too-proximate experience of massive contagion-caused mortality would have rendered the scene’s implied invitation to a pious meditation on death and judgment all the more urgent.

Sweerts’s Plague in an Ancient City: Deciphering the Enigma

Plague in an Ancient City (cat. 6) by Michael Sweerts, painted in Rome ca. 1650, presents a more difficult hermeneutical problem: there is no doubt at all that what we have before us is a scene of plague, but is it an actual historical plague?⁵² If so, which one and to what purpose is it here depicted? Unfortunately, nothing certain is known of the provenance of the work before its arrival in England in the early nineteenth century. The most ambitious canvas of Sweerts’s entire production, its debt to Nicolas Poussin’s celebrated *Plague at Ashdod* (1630, Louvre) is clear and has been frequently discussed.⁵³

But what is its subject? As late as 1984 when on the London art market, the painting was thought to depict the fifth-century B.C. Athenian plague described at length by ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, in Book Two of his *Peloponnesian War*. However, when we compare carefully text and canvas, we find that, despite the painting’s classical setting, the similarities are, in the end, too few to make a convincing argument. Furthermore, there is much taking place within Sweerts’s scene that the Greek text is simply incapable of explaining. Indeed, no compelling match can be made between this painted scene and any of the more famous written accounts of plague outbreak, be they classical, biblical, or early Christian. In recent years, scholars have uncovered much new information about Sweerts’s life and work, filling many a lacuna in our knowledge of his biography and artistic production. Alas, none of it has brought us any closer to deciphering the enigma of this canvas’s subject and, hence, its intended message. All that commentators have been able to say with confidence about its subject is what the painting’s current title declares: we are witnessing a scene of an outbreak of plague in a city of ancient times. Some have speculated that the artist may be using a generic classical scene to depict and comment upon a contemporary Italian plague, most obviously, that which

struck Rome in 1648-50. Others are of the opinion that Sweerts's *Plague in an Ancient City* is not "in any way a documentary work: rather a meditation on the disease's effects on mankind assuaging its horrors through art."⁵⁴

These two theories do not take into consideration the various, specific, and puzzling elements that Sweerts – a serious, learned artist working in lofty ecclesiastical and intellectual circles – has deliberately chosen to include. These features are not simply borrowed from conventional plague iconography and used merely to fill the stage with visually interesting but fundamentally insignificant, generic ornamentation. Rather, they seem to work in express concert to evoke a distinct historical episode, moment, or situation and thus communicate a specific message.

The canvas is divided into two distinct and, apparently, opposing sectors, each of which features a man-made structure of contrasting architectural form and physical condition. On the left, we see what we can, for convenience's sake, call the "Black Temple," dark, gloomy, and time-worn, and on the right (and more "noble") side of the canvas, the luminous and fully intact, if only partially visible, "White Temple." The dramatic chiaroscuro emphasizes this contrast and opposition between the two structures: moving from left to right, from Black to White Temple, we progress from deep darkness to full light. The strong diagonal crossing the canvas from the lower left to the upper right emphasizes the division.

The second distinguishing feature of Sweerts's canvas is the presence of the three gesturing, attention-focusing figures. Prominently positioned close to the very physical center of the canvas, we see an elderly, bearded, distinguished male figure in a brilliant blue toga. This standing male figure – let us call him the "Blue Prophet" – points downward with his left hand to one of the dead women at his feet, while his right hand points to the viewer's White Temple. On the steps before that temple stands another solemn male figure – we shall call him the "White Prophet" – shrouded, head and all, in a voluminous, radiant white garment, who points in the same direction as his counterpart in blue. This same gesture is repeated by yet a third figure, located further in the background (just left of center and closer to the obelisk), a female dressed in white, with covered head, only sketchily rendered but clearly and deliberately singled out by the light. These three figures all focus our attention on the White Temple and what it contains or represents. The distinctive "orans" (raised, extended hands) prayer pose of two of the figures before the temple suggests that it is a Christian church. In historically conscious seventeenth-century Rome, learned artists and learned viewers would have known that this, the "orans" form of prayer, was a defining feature of early Christian worship.⁵⁵

The third notable feature of the canvas concerns the "sun-worshippers" and the obelisk. Scattered in the middle- and backgrounds, especially left and center, we see numerous figures facing and intently gazing at the sun. In the center of the piazza in which many of them stand or sit rises conspicuously an Egyptian obelisk. As Sweerts and his contemporaries in Rome all knew, thanks to the abundant archeological studies published in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the ancient obelisk was a religious icon, a public structure erected in honor of the Sun God, whose beneficent, omnipresent rays the monolith's very form was meant to represent. This was true not only for their makers, the Egyptians, but also the ancient Romans who transported several of these granite monuments to their capital city.⁵⁶ Given the presence of this conspicuous symbol and the demeanor of the sun-fixated figures, I believe it is safe to conclude that the men and women, are actively worshipping the sun (probably at dawn, as was conventional in ancient pagan religion), and not mere passively looking in its direction. Some of the same men and women, it would appear, are also processing into the Black Temple, suggesting it is connected to their form of religiosity.

It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that what we are witnessing within the Black

Temple are funeral rites for victims of the plague. However, given the acute fear of contagion, plague victims in actual ancient and early modern practice were simply not given this sort of formal, ritualized burial. The highly infectious cadavers of the disease's victims were never paraded around in public, especially in the presence of large gatherings of people, much less so in such close confined spaces as the interior of the Black Temple. Moreover, even if all fear and caution had somehow been miraculously overcome, in the midst of a virulent outbreak of deadly plague such as we see outside the Black Temple, hundreds of men, women, and children died on a daily basis: why then do we only see two litters here? Thus, if burial is indeed taking place therein, it is, most likely, not of victims of the plague. Does the ritual, instead, somehow pertain to the sun-worshipping religion whose devotees we see outside the temple or processing into it?⁵⁷

Let us note that at the apex of the interior ramp of the temple, there is an unseen room or other area from which rays of the sun are pouring forth into the darkness of the temple. Is this simply another exit leading out of the temple? If the latter is the case, then why is no one exiting from the lower right, piazza-side ramp of the temple? Even if the people on the ramp in the upper right are indeed simply exiting the temple, the fact they are exiting in the direction of the sun, and not away from it (i.e., onto the piazza below by means of the lower ramp) would seem to bear some significance.

Also relevant to the identification of the temple is its single and thus highly conspicuous decorative element, a caryatid, incorporated into the left arch, an architectural feature born in pagan antiquity and, in early modern Italy, bearing only and overtly pagan connotations. The subject of a famous digression in Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture* (1:1), caryatids were standard ornamental features of the classicizing gardens of early modern Italian villas. Such gardens became popular in the sixteenth century, especially the rustic fountain grottoes thereof, built in imitation of ancient Roman nymphaea. Nymphaea in ancient lore were originally and literally "gardens of the Nymphs," dwelling places of the pagan female water deities. However, according to Oratorian archeologist Antonio Bosio in his monumental work of 1632, *Roma sotterranea*, the term "nymphaea" in both ancient pagan and early Christian usage came to mean simply places where fountains, streams, and other sources of water were present.⁵⁸ At the same time, as Andrea Palladio explains in his *Four Books on Architecture* (4:1), natural sites marked by the presence of fresh water sources were precisely the settings chosen by the ancients for the construction of temples dedicated to their gods of healing. Given all of the preceding visual evidence and historical information, it is reasonable to conclude (even though no sign of water is discernible therein) that the Black Temple is pagan in nature and probably has as its function the pursuit of healing. The pursuit of healing would not, of course, be at all surprising, given the massive presence of disease and death at the very doorstep of the temple. Furthermore, the temple's cavernous, rotund massive form bears a generic resemblance to a well-known ancient Roman monument, the Temple of Minerva Medica. The latter ruin, in Sweerts's day and for a long time thereafter, was believed to be pagan place of worship, due to the putative rediscovery there of the famous *Minerva Giustiniani* (now in the Vatican), an ancient statue of the goddess in her healing aspect, that is, holding in her hand a snake, the same attribute of the ancient god of healing, Aesculapius.⁵⁹

In view of the highly specified features enumerated above, Sweerts's *Plague in an Ancient City*, I would maintain, is neither merely a generic "meditation on the disease's effects," nor a representation of a contemporary, recently experienced Roman plague disguised in more fashionable classical garb, nor an artistic exercise "simply painted to demonstrate his [technical] capabilities."⁶⁰ Sweerts, I believe, is here contrasting two religious responses to the plague: one pagan (the Black Temple, left); the other, Christian (the White Temple, right). If this hypothesis is correct and assuming that Sweerts has not dispensed completely with histori-

cal accuracy or verisimilitude, we must then ask the question: At what point in actual history did both religions, paganism and Christianity, exist, side by side, legally and freely practiced by their respective adherents? Paying close attention to the visual detail supplied by Sweerts, we must further refine the question to ask not only when the two religions co-existed, but also when Christianity, in fact, enjoyed a greater state of well-being (v. the fine, intact White Temple), while paganism had lapsed into a state of partial decay (v. the dilapidated conditions of the Black Temple). But, there is a further element to factor into our interrogation. We must also, and finally, ask: With these two just-described conditions obtaining, when did, furthermore, a violent plague strike the Roman Empire as well?

The only answer possible turns out to be: in the first half of the fourth century A.D., during the brief but memorable reign (361-63) of Emperor Julian, “the Apostate,” enemy par excellence of the Christian faith. Although not one of the better-known plagues of western history, the Julian plague was duly reported by two much circulated texts in early modern Italy, Possevino’s *Cause et rimedio della peste* (see Section IX below) and, Possevino’s own source, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos (ca. 1256-ca.1335), the latter textbook all but forgotten today but much consulted in early modern Europe.⁶¹ But, why, in 1650, choose this particular episode from church history as subject for a painting? What relevance did it have for the contemporary state of religious affairs?

The ultimate aim of Sweerts’s *Plague in an Ancient City*, I would suggest, is to celebrate the Roman Catholicism as the “one, true faith” by recalling an episode of early Christian history, the reign of the “impious” emperor Julian, in which God responded to the persecution of his people by sending a castigating plague and other natural calamities (as well as by the premature, inglorious death of the young emperor). This was, in the eyes of apologists, a further example of the divine favor enjoyed by their faith. (The same apologetic message is also inherent in the most famous plague painting of seventeenth-century Rome, Poussin’s *Plague at Ashdod*, a source of direct inspiration to Sweerts in the creation of the present canvas.)

In 1650, in the wake not only of yet another dreadful visitation of the plague in Rome, but also of the humiliating, massive defeat – political, religious, and economic – of the papacy and the entire Catholic Church in the form of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, it is not difficult to see how reassuring such a message would have been to Catholics (especially the family of the reigning pope, Innocent X Pamphilij, for whom Sweerts was working while he was creating the present canvas). Indeed, as we shall see in Section IX, “heresy [i.e., Protestantism] as plague” was a recurring topos of early modern Catholic literature.⁶² On a more immediate level, of course, Sweerts’s work, like many other early modern plague paintings, served as a warning, not only to “heretics,” but to lapsed or lukewarm Catholics as well: Cling faithfully and devotedly to the “one, true faith” or else expect dire consequences!

VIII. *The Temporal Remedies: “Mox, Longe, Tarde”*

Like Moroni’s *Two Donors in Adoration*, many Italian paintings in our period invite meditation upon death and final judgment, such meditation representing one of the spiritual remedies commonly recommended by ecclesiastical authorities in time of plague. However, before we turn to these spiritual remedies, a quick word about the other, so-called temporal remedies, is in order. After centuries of experience with the plague, early modern Italians had arrived at the conclusion that despite all the pills, poultices, and potions offered by doctors, pharmacists, superstitious healers, and practitioners of folkloric medicine, the only sure form of protection against the plague was to simply remove oneself from sources of the contagion, that is, to flee infected or possibly infected people, objects, homes, and towns. “Save your money and don’t bother with the remedies of the *fisici* for they are worthless,” advises the Florentine

Rondinelli, while our Roman doctor Pressi is obliged to admit that given the profession's ignorance as to the true anatomy of the disease, no sure treatment can be identified, and so everyone invents his or her own.⁶³ However, above all, as Lodovico Muratori informs us, most people made recourse to "the pill of the three [Latin] adverbs," "*Mox, longe, tarde*," as "the most certain and effective remedy and prophylactic known;" that is to say, they followed the advice of the collective wisdom of humanity, born out of long experience with the contagion, that counseled them to "flee immediately" (*cede mox*), "stay far away" (*recede longe*), "be late in returning" (*redi tarde*).⁶⁴

Of course, not all the inhabitants of an infected city or town had the means to flee or a suitably isolated, secure place to which to flee. For those who remained, a stringent regime of quarantine had to be endured. City gates were closed to all but certifiably safe traffic; letters and documents arriving through the mail were fumigated; assemblages of people were prohibited; the air was cleansed by the burning of bonfires; streets, buildings, clothing, and any possibly contaminated surfaces were disinfected with vinegar or sulfur or otherwise destroyed by fire; beggars and prostitutes were rounded up; and dogs were massacred as suspected spreaders of the contagion.⁶⁵ Homes in which persons had died of the plague (or were suspected to have died of it) were placed under immediate quarantine. In Florence, all women and children, even of those families free of plague, were forbidden to leave the confines of their homes unless they were wealthy enough to afford a sealed carriage for transport; this regulation, Baldinucci reports, "greatly afflicts the poor women who in hot weather suffer house confinement and deplore this partiality."⁶⁶ In Rome, the unfortunate residents of an entire neighborhood, Trastevere, where the first cases of plague erupted in 1656, found themselves literally walled in overnight by the authorities in a (failed) attempt to prevent the contagion from spreading to the rest of the city.⁶⁷

These remedies were bitterly resented and resisted by the very people they were meant to protect. However, no "remedy" provoked more resistance than the forced confinement to the lazaretto, the public plague "hospital" where victims (or suspected victims) of the plague were sent either to recover or, more likely, to die from the contagion. The lazarettos – dirty, malodorous, overcrowded, crime-ridden, unrelievedly wretched – inspired sheer terror in the minds of early modern Italians. Doctor Pressi, who spent many days serving in the lazarettos of Rome, confessed to diarist Carlo Cartari that he was

shocked and amazed that people in Rome [outside the lazarettos] could actually be laughing, much less playing music and singing, for if they stayed in [a lazaretto] for just one day, they would come out very different people and would not feel like laughing any more... All the babies sent there died; at times they were fed goat's milk with sugar to quiet them at night because they cried continuously, while the wailing of the women, whose had lost loved ones, pierced one's heart with compassion.⁶⁸

Muratori, who offers one of the most vivid descriptions of the lazarettos and the physical and emotional horror they represented, tells us that the mere thought of being dragged off from one's home and sent to the lazaretto caused people to fall into desperation or some other severe fit, or "*passione straordinaria d'animo*." The lazarettos, he adds, were often run "by people of little or no charity ... with horrible faces, bizarre dress, and frightening voices."⁶⁹ As Gastaldi reminds his readers, "even the imagination merely frightened by the plague is enough to bring on the disease."⁷⁰

Even though much ink was spilled in early modern Italy in an attempt to identify and dissect the scientific causes of the plague, most people seem to have accepted the Church's consistent and adamant explanation regarding the ultimate cause and fundamental meaning of this disease: it was, simply, God's punishment of a sinful disobedient humanity. "Pestis est flagellum et sagitta Dei ob peccata hominibus immissa," the plague is a wrathful God's "scourge and arrow," Kircher declares at the beginning of what is otherwise a scientific investigation of the plague.⁷¹ So great is God's wrath and so fierce is his response that, as Muratori mentions, indeed, "some call [the plague] a divine war" against humankind. Furnishing the title of Marchini's 1633 treatise, this blunt description, "*bellum divinum*," also represents one of the dominant images used in a 1493 "fire and brimstone" sermon on the plague by the zealous Observant Franciscan, Bernardino Tomitano of Feltre, who cites fourteenth-century legal scholar, Bartolus of Sassoferrato, as source of the expression.⁷²

Muratori, Marchini, and Tomitano appear not the least bit uneasy with the idea of God the Father and Creator waging war on his own children. Indeed, this same fundamental understanding of the plague echoes everywhere in the primary sources, be they written by ecclesiastics or laymen. Florentine diarist Giovanni Balducci writes in 1631, "Our Lord God seems to have unsheathed his sword against Italy, bringing hunger, war, plague and a flood of rivers. Let it please his Majesty not to punish us according to our deserts, but according to his sacred mercy."⁷³ In a famous exchange of letters on the plague from which Alessandro Manzoni will later draw for his *I Promessi sposi* and *Storia della Colonna Infame*, noted Bolognese poet, jurist, and letterato Claudio Achillini writes in the same year to his similarly learned friend in Rome, Agostino Mascardi:

I now turn to you and say that, rather than deploring the current castigations, you should use your angelic talent to instead call attention upon the abominable corruption of the present century; if you do so, you will then not only cease to marvel over the ferocity of these calamities, but, rather, will be dumbfounded at the fact that, indeed, all those things which rain down to us from Heaven are not the plague, and are not, instead, arrows aimed, like rays of the sun, at us.⁷⁴

Despite the apparent unanimity among the published voices of early modern Italy regarding the ultimate theological understanding of the plague, the fact that contemporary preachers and other spiritual authorities spend so much time forcefully delivering and strenuously defending this message – the angry God is punishing you for your sins – would suggest that many people in the audience were still in need of persuasion in this regard. Seventeenth-century Capuchin preacher Paolo Bellintani da Salò implies as much when, beginning his catalogue of the divinely sent punitive plagues of Scripture, he exclaims, "Hold it for certain truth that the plague is a scourge from God and that whoever thinks otherwise is grossly deceiving himself."⁷⁵ Almost the entire first part of a 1577 sermon to the Bolognese on the plague by famed Franciscan preacher Francesco Panigarola is devoted to a detailed philosophical defense of the notion that even the eternal, ever unchanging, Supreme Being is capable of anger and "just" revenge, followed by an equally detailed exposition of the strategies employed by Satan to deceive humans into believing that the plague has only natural causes.⁷⁶

Even those Christians who fundamentally accepted the Church's explanation still needed enlightenment and reassurance as to how this notion of a genocidally wrathful, vengeful God, whose merciless plague every few years killed thousands of innocent babies along with the

guilty, could be reconciled with the “Good News” of Jesus Christ, that is, with the New Testament message of a just, wise, merciful, and, above all, paternally loving God. A long response to this perplexity, coming in the first person from the mouth of God himself, is offered by Antonio Possevino, the already-mentioned sixteenth-century Jesuit author of *Cause et rimedio della peste*, published anonymously and only recently attributed to the Jesuit.⁷⁷ Likewise, most of Tomitano’s aforementioned sermon on “why tribulations are to be patiently endured” (“De tribulationibus patienter tolerandis”) is devoted to the same theme of theodicy, that is, a defense of the goodness and justice of God in the face of a world of pandemic, invincible evil and incessant, atrocious suffering.

Having identified the primary cause of the plague, some spiritual authorities proceed to identify the specific sins responsible for this pestilential “war of God” against humanity, each one doing so according to his own prejudices and personal experiences. For example, Marchini lists five plague-provoking sins in *Belli divini*: the violation of justice and unpunished killing of the innocent; the usurpation of ecclesiastical goods and property; the pride and ambition of the nobility; the refusal to pay tithes and other monies due to the Church and its representatives; and, finally, participation in devil worship, magic and superstition, profane comedies, and other theatrical performances and spectacles.⁷⁸ The earlier list promulgated by Tomitano is much longer, beginning generically with all forms of “injustice and rebellion” against God. However, the friar quickly becomes more specific in his accusations, naming as special culprits those who engage in “acts against nature” and other forms of *luxuria*; blasphemers and idolators; usurers and those who support or welcome usurers, especially Jewish ones; as well as, finally, those who refuse hospitality to strangers, the mendicant preacher having himself been a victim of this crime.⁷⁹

Five is also the number of egregious sins, or rather categories of sin, for which God sends the plague, according to Possevino’s *Cause et rimedio*.⁸⁰ Possevino includes such already-mentioned offenses as pride and arrogance, *luxuria*, usury and theft of property; but, of special interest in an art historical context is his fifth category of plague-provoking sins. This covers all forms of immoral entertainment which, the Jesuit claims, lead to more explicit forms of carnality and lust: “immodest madrigals and songs,” “lascivious dances,” “lewd books,” and, finally,

the use of nude images in which under the pretext of artistic expression, the world is easily roused to every sordid form of concupiscence. Moreover, with pictures recalling from Hell the memory of the evil and wicked persecutors of the Christian Church, people have now decorated their rooms, and have placed on equal or superior footing these [profane] statues with those of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of his Saints. Therefore it was against all of these barbaric impieties reviving the idolatry of the ancients, for their destruction and so that their very memory be eradicated from the earth, that the Holy Martyrs of Christ bravely exposed their lives to every form of cruelty and that now come, like magistrates of justice and executioners, the Plague and other scourges that castigate the world.⁸¹

Writing in the midst of the Counter Reformation, Possevino, we are not surprised to find, includes prominently (number 2 on his list) the sin of heresy and indeed, in Jesuit painting of early modern Europe, we encounter the same connection between heresy and plague. The latter is employed as a visual metaphor for the former, as, for example, in Rubens’s altarpiece of 1617, *The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier*, commissioned for the Jesuit church of Antwerp.⁸² However, the association between heresy and plague was not merely a Jesuit topos: in his

Bolognese sermon on the plague, Franciscan preacher Panigarola discusses at length the successful dissemination of the “heretical doctrines” of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and the other Protestant reformers as a recent scourge sent by an angry God to punish the sinful Catholic world. (Yet another scourge of late, he adds, is the ever-growing military victory of the Turks.) This *flagello* began, the friar says, in 1517 when “the wicked Luther mounted his cathedra of pestilence” and promulgated his “ninety-five false axioms,” which “immediately persuaded” the masses.⁸³

The source of this explanation of the divine source and punitive-vindictive nature of the plague was, of course, the Bible, the foundational text (at least, in theory) of all Christian doctrine. As preachers and spiritual writers routinely point out, there is abundant proof in Sacred Scripture that, yes, indeed, God is moved to anger and vengeance by the sins of humankind, and that, furthermore, the plague is one of his preferred instruments of castigation and vengeance. Panigarola claims in his Bolognese sermon that the wrath of God is so omnipresent a theme in the Bible that, in fact, “Scripture seems to be a dialogue between man and God in which they speak of nothing else but God’s anger.” The preacher goes on to give an extensive account of this “dialogue,” having previously catalogued for any skeptical listeners the many biblical examples of divine punishment for sin, beginning with Adam and Eve. All of Panigarola’s examples come from the Old Testament, but one could also cite New Testament texts encouraging a similar view of divine retribution for sin. As Deaux points out, even Jesus Christ reinforced belief in the connection between disease and sin: “Jesus himself before commanding a lame man to walk first announced his forgiveness of the victim’s sins; on another occasion, he enjoined those whom he had healed to ‘sin no more lest a worst thing befall thee.’”⁸⁴

x. *The Plagues of the Bible: Ashdod, King David, Moses and the Brazen Serpent*

In both the Old and New Testaments we find various references to “plague” (of whatever form) as tool of divine punishment,⁸⁵ the most familiar perhaps being “the ten plagues of Egypt” recounted in the Book of Exodus. Most of these biblical “plagues” clearly did not specifically involve the bubonic plague; our early modern sources, including preachers and ecclesiastical writers understood this. They nonetheless cited and discussed these episodes as relevant to their own contemporary experiences of pestilence, especially with regard to the question of the divine mechanism of justice and retribution.

The most conspicuous and most frequently cited example of plague as divine castigation was an episode in the life of King David, recounted in both 1 Chronicles 21 and 2 Samuel 24. During his reign as king of the Israelites, David decided to take a census of the people; for reasons that the texts never adequately explain (Yahweh himself orders a census in Numbers 1), this was deemed a most grievous contravention of the will of God. Infuriated at this act of pride – this is how our early modern Italian preachers and spiritual writers identify the sin in question⁸⁶ – God sends the prophet Gad to announce the coming castigation. God offers the king, however, his choice of punishment: war, famine, or plague. David chooses what he considers the least of the three evils, plague, and in the ensuing outbreak, 70,000 of the king’s people lose their lives. Among the spared, however, is the king himself, who shows himself properly remorseful and carries out public acts of contrition. Our early modern sources, like the Bible itself, are not excessively troubled by the fact that a multitude of innocent people died for a single ill-advised act committed by their ruler, an act that, in turn, was rather harmless in its intent; they accepted in the divine sovereign what they routinely experienced in their earthly ones. Of all of the sources consulted in the course of my research only one even raises the issue: popular Franciscan preacher, Bernardino de’ Busti (1450-1513/15) defends

Yahweh's actions, explaining in his plague sermon that King David's subjects were, in effect, his possessions and God does punish evil-doers by taking away their possessions. Furthermore, the preacher reassures his audience, even though they were innocent of this one sin, the slaughtered mass of Israelites were nonetheless guilty of others; in any case, it was better for them to die "because if they had lived, they would have become evil or worse, and would have suffered even greater damnation."⁸⁷

By virtue of this incident, David "became the most important biblical figure associated with pestilence,"⁸⁸ and for this reason we find him, for example, prominently placed on the title page of Marchini's *Belli divini* (along with Michael the Archangel and Carlo Borromeo) as well as in the vignette illustrating the allegory of pestilence in the 1758-60 Hertel edition of Cesare Ripa's famous handbook, the *Iconologia*. Among the rare painted depictions of this Old Testament episode is the predella of an altarpiece completed in 1536 by Giorgio Vasari, commissioned by the Confraternity of Saint Roch of Arezzo, Tuscany.⁸⁹ Another is Luca Giordano's *The Prophet Gad Offering King David the Choice of Three Punishments: Famine, Civil War, or Plague* (fig. 1), now in Australia. Nothing is known of the provenance of the latter canvas, nor of the second treatment of the theme by the same Giordano in a larger canvas whose date of execution may or may not coincide with a fresco of this episode that Giordano included in the scenes from the life of David done for the monastery church of San Lorenzo at the Escorial.⁹⁰ The Escorial fresco series, we might mention, was commissioned by King Charles II, "known for his exaggerated piety." As Meyer explains, this "choice of subject responded to an identification between leaders and events in the Old Testament and the reign of the Spanish Hapsburgs, culminating with the construction of the Escorial in relation to the final victory over the Muslims in Spain."⁹¹

This identification on the part of sovereigns and other nobility was encouraged by contemporary spiritual authorities, who used this scene from David's life to make an admonitory connection between the scourge of plague and the misdeeds of temporal rulers. Marchini's *Belli divini* interprets the episode as a noteworthy example of God's punishment of "the pride and excessive ambition of the nobility."⁹² One wonders if that message was grasped by the famous but erratic and extravagant Gaspar de Haro y Guzman, 7th Marqués del Carpio (1629-87), Spanish Ambassador to Rome and enthusiastic patron of artists: according to a 1682 inventory taken in Rome on the eve of his departure for Naples as the new Viceroy, Don Gaspar's own extensive collection of paintings included a canvas by (or, at least, then attributed to) Luca Giordano depicting the same episode, described in the inventory as "King David weeping for his sins in the presence of the prophet [Gad] and the Angel who is placing his sword back in its sheath."⁹³

Another Old Testament episode that involved God's recourse to pestilence in order to punish disobedience or opposition to his will was the Plague of Ashdod sent in retaliation for the Philistine capture of the Ark of the Covenant, recounted in 1 Samuel 5 and made famous in art by Poussin's great epic canvas of the scene. Already cited for its influence on Michael Sweerts (Section VII), Poussin's work was copied by contemporary artist, Angelo Caroselli (cat. 1), apparently during the very execution of the French artist's original. Caroselli's copy is believed to show the original state of Poussin's composition.⁹⁴ At Ashdod it was a plague of "tumors" (which may or may not be the buboes of the bubonic plague) that afflicted the enemies of God. Another chastising plague is recounted in the Book of Numbers 21: 4-9, where Yahweh sends a plague of poisonous, "fiery" serpents to punish the Hebrews for murmuring against him and their leader, Moses, during the uncomfortable forty years of wandering in the desert. As Panigarola comments in his plague sermon, "The Jews sinned a thousand times in the desert and God, turning from mercy to justice, made them pay dear for it, once with the armies of the 'Leviticí' [*sic*], another time with fire, another time with serpents... O justice, o



1. Luca Giordano, *The Prophet Gad Offering King David the Choice of Three Punishments: Famine, Civil War, or Plague*, n.d. Oil on canvas. Private collection, Australia; on extended loan to the Art Gallery of Western Australia, West Perth.

chastisement, o scourge, o wrath of God!”⁹⁵ In this case, just as God sends the affliction, he also sends the remedy, instructing Moses to create the image of a serpent – fashioned in bronze – and hoist it up on a staff, so that “everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” Centuries of biblical exegesis have attached many different layers of meaning to this story, but in the Christian tradition, it was seen, consistently and above all, as a prefigurement of the salvific act of Christ’s death on the cross, of the health and healing – of both body and soul – that comes through Jesus the crucified Savior.⁹⁶ This association was made in the New Testament itself by the Gospel of John 3:14-15. One late seventeenth-century Italian preacher, Jesuit General Gian Paolo Oliva, in a sermon to the Confraternity of Nobles at the Church of the Gesù in Rome, adds a footnote to this same message by pointing out that the episode proves that the way to cure evil-doers of their evil is to frighten them with images of horror, an observation of obvious relevance to contemporary audiences’ experience of the plague.⁹⁷

In times of plague, images of Moses and the Brazen Serpent acquired greater relevance and resonance for the double message contained therein – epidemic as divine castigation, Jesus as source of healing. Not surprisingly we find the scene occupying a place of central

importance in Tintoretto's decoration of the ceiling of the Sala Grande Superiore of the Scuola di San Rocco, a building that represents one of the most eminent monuments to early modern Italian response to the plague.⁹⁸ Tintoretto's rendition of the scene, executed during an actual outbreak of the plague in Venice, is coupled with two other Old Testament scenes, *The Gathering of the Manna* and *Moses Striking Water from the Rock*. These three narratives depict forms of service to the sick, the dying, and the otherwise needy, "all charitable activities to which the Scuola was committed"⁹⁹ and which, in fact, the Church encouraged, both in print and in paint (as this exhibition illustrates) on the part of all the Christian laity during times of epidemic.

For renowned Jesuit Biblical commentator Cornelius a Lapide, writing in the early seventeenth century, the Brazen Serpent episode (or more specifically John's citation thereof) offered an opportunity to emphasize the polemical Tridentine Catholic message that eternal life is gained by active effort, that is, by good works, in addition to grace and repentance.¹⁰⁰ (Of interest to art historians, we might add, is Lapide's anti-Protestant comment in the same context that Pope Adrian I's "first epistle to Charles the Great ... proves that the use of images is lawful from [Moses's use of] this serpent.")¹⁰¹ Finally, despite thorough catechizing of the early modern masses by Christian spiritual authorities, it is highly likely that the presence of the snakes in this canvas also recalled in the mind of contemporary viewers the pagan god of healing, Aesculapius, whose principal attribute was the serpent and whose fame and sculpted image (especially in the form of ancient statues recovered from long-burial under the streets of Rome) lived on in early modern Italy. The widespread recourse to superstitious remedies to the plague like magic scrolls and amulets bearing the likeness of animals, denounced in our sources, is yet another reminder of how vital and enduring was the "pagan" culture and mentality of early modern Italians under their Christian veneer.¹⁰²

The current exhibition includes a strikingly beautiful rendition of the Brazen Serpent scene (cat. 3) by Giovanni Domenico Ferretti, who "should be considered the leading Florentine artist of the eighteenth century."¹⁰³ The canvas comes from a private collection, now being seen for the first time in public since the completion of recent conservation work. Little is known of the origins of the canvas: it is signed and dated, 1736, and may have belonged to the Marchese Andrea Gerini and been exhibited in Florence in 1737 for the feast of Saint Luke the evangelist, traditionally believed to have been a medical doctor as well as a painter. Interesting for our purposes is the fact that a portion of its composition, specifically the tumbled mass of plague-stricken bodies, derives from an explicit plague painting, Marcantonio Franceschini's altarpiece of 1701 depicting Carlo Borromeo and the 1576 Milanese plague (Modena, Church of San Carlo Borromeo).¹⁰⁴ Here, the vertical orientation and the cross-like configuration of the uplifted pole around which entwined the brazen serpent emphasize the episode as a prefiguration of the Crucifixion.

XI. "Spiritual Remedies" for "Plague of the Soul"

In a 1576 pastoral letter written while his diocese was under threat from the plague, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, bishop of Bologna, reminded his flock that the plague is not a physical ailment, but rather "a plague of the soul."¹⁰⁵ All of the spiritual authorities of the day – and most of the believing lay ones as well – agreed with Paleotti's assessment and hence joined voices in identifying and publicizing the only truly effective response to this disease, the *rimedi spirituali*. These "spiritual remedies" took various forms – special penitential litanies and other prayers, confession, Masses, processions, public collective vows, charitable works – but they all had the same ultimate goal: to rid the land of plague by "placating" God's anger, God's anger being placated through earnest repentance for one's sin and sincere emendation of one's life.

Save your money and don't bother with the medications of the *fisici*, we have already heard Rondinelli declare, and the same scholar goes on to advise: "the true remedy is the correction of one's ways and public prayer, done with faith and perseverance, because if God does not safeguard the city, in vain do these others seek to do so, with all their diligence. ..." Muratori similarly reminds his readers that the most important remedies are those that regard the soul and God, for in time of plague, it is urgent to "make recourse to God and to placate Him."¹⁰⁶ "Even the pagans knew enough to turn to their gods," remarks Rondinelli, while Tomitano cites Livy's *History of Rome* in which Lucius Postumius advises the Romans that, since the plague "comes from God, it is necessary to make peace with God."¹⁰⁷

The two Franciscan preachers, Bernardino de' Busti and Panigarola, both point out in their plague sermons that the spiritual remedies have their symbolic counterparts in the temporal ones (e.g., physical separation from infected localities is meant to remind us of the necessity of fleeing from sin).¹⁰⁸ However, despite the insistence upon the superiority of the spiritual over the temporal, to my knowledge, there is no preacher or spiritual authority who counsels his audiences to simply ignore the temporal remedies, although the zealous and at times fiery Bernardino Tomitano comes close to it.¹⁰⁹ Both forms of response, the spiritual sources say outright or imply, are to be attended to. Pope Alexander VII's wise, thorough and bi-frontal (spiritual and temporal) attack on the plague in Rome in 1656 is recounted in detailed and approving fashion by Pallavicino in his biography of that pontiff. In their own plague treatises, the Capuchin Bellintani da Salò and the Jesuit Possevino freely intermingle remedies of both types in their recommendations. In the midst of his traditional spiritual counsels in the *Dialogo della peste*, Bellintani, for example, reminds authorities to stock up on food supplies as well as to sequester all beggars and prostitutes, the latter being a "causa fortissima" of contagion. Likewise, in the same breath that he discusses spiritual remedies, Possevino advises readers to burn any infected piece of clothing or other personal article that might spread the contagion so that a single person does not become "the occasion of death for an entire province."¹¹⁰

At the top of his list of "Pestis Remedia Spiritualia," Barnabite theologian Marchini places public "acts of repentance," citing the Old Testament case of King David. Among more recent examples, Marchini observes, is the famous penitential procession of Carlo Borromeo, cardinal of Milan, who, with bare feet and a noose around his neck, processed through the streets of his city holding a cross bearing one of the Holy Nails of the Crucifixion, one of Milan's prized relics (see cat. 24).¹¹¹ The civil authorities of Borromeo's Milan had vigorously opposed this procession, fearing (correctly) that such a massing of people would only spread the plague. But, the strong-willed Borromeo prevailed: in enacting this particular form of public devotion, Carlo was emulating the example of Pope Gregory the Great (section VII above) during the great Roman plague of 590. Among the earliest recorded in Christian history, that outbreak is memorialized in the late sixth-century *History of the Franks* (10:1) by Gregory of Tours, and, with legendary embellishments, by *The Golden Legend*. On that occasion Gregory mandated a huge procession – called "the sevenfold litanies" because it included representatives from seven sectors of the city's population – terminating in the "basilica of the blessed Mary, ever Virgin," Santa Maria Maggiore. In doing so, Gregory gave start to what was to become a long tradition in times of collective calamity, the solemn public processing of clergy and laity, with the former bearing sacred icons, relics, or banners depicting the Virgin and Child or tutelary saints. One such rare surviving processional banner (*gonfalone*) from the sixteenth century, by Jacopo Bassano featuring Our Lady of Mercy and Saints Roch and Sebastian (cat. 12).

According Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks*, Pope Gregory began his address on the occasion of the 590 penitential plague procession in this fashion:

Most beloved brethren, those scourges of God which we ought to dread when they are yet to come should be feared all the more when they are upon us and we have felt their power. May our sorrows open to us the way of conversion; may this punishment which we endure soften the hardness of our hearts, as indeed it was foretold by the prophet: "The sword reacheth unto the soul." Behold how all the people is smitten by the sword of divine wrath; one after another, they are swept away by sudden death. ... The blow falleth; the victim is snatched away before he can turn to bewail his sins and to repent. Consider, therefore, in what guise he shall appear before the stern Judge of all, having no respite in which to lament his deeds. ... Houses are left void, parents behold the funerals of their children, and their heirs go before them to the grave. Let every one of us therefore betake himself to lamentation and repentance before the blow is fallen and while time yet remaineth to weep.¹¹²

Setting the tone for much of all subsequent pastoral response to epidemic, Gregory's speech thus begins with a note of terror, the terror of death. For early modern Catholics, in fact, the greatest form of terror, especially in time of plague, was that of sudden death, death without proper sacramental preparation, especially the confession of one's sins to a priest. There could be no greater calamity than this, for, according to Catholic doctrine, dying in a state of unsolved mortal sin meant certain, eternal damnation in Hell.¹¹³

For early modern viewers, this fear inevitably resonated from Giovanni Martinelli's *Death Comes to the Banquet Table* (cat. 4). This startling Florentine Baroque canvas represents a variation on the traditional and popular themes of *memento mori* ("Remember you shall die") and *vanitas* (vanity).¹¹⁴ Another strikingly explicit, darkly melancholy Italian Baroque canvas belonging to the same genre is Salvator Rosa's *Humana Fragilitas*, painted in response to the pandemic of 1656, which killed both the artist's son and brother. The thoroughly pessimistic message of the painting, inscribed by the child on the parchment – "Conception is Sinful; Birth, a Punishment; Life, Hard Labor; Death, Inevitable" – derives from medieval Latin sacred poet Adam of Saint Victor. It was communicated to the artist in a sonnet written for him by his philosopher friend, G.B. Ricciardi. The same message is echoed in a contemporary poem, "Tratta de le miserie humane" (On the Misery of the Human Condition), by Rosa's fellow Neapolitan and celebrated man of letters, Giambattista Marino (1569-1625): "At the moment of his birth into this life full of misery, wretched man first opens his eyes not to the sun but to tears and as soon as he is born, he is made prisoner of tenacious bindings ... In the end a narrow rock encloses his remains, in such haste, that with a sigh I say: From the cradle to the tomb is but a brief step."¹¹⁵

The eerie, melodramatic nature of Martinelli's and Rosa's canvases has its counterpart as well in the written plague treatises of early modern Italy. There is perhaps no passage that matches the coarsely blunt, indeed, ghastly means used by a certain Capuchin friar to preach this *memento mori* message to a group of men and women who, confined to the lazaretto of Milan, had decided to throw a party to relieve the gloom of their forced enclosure. The scene is described by fellow Capuchin, Paolo Bellintani da Salò, in his *Dialogo della peste* (1580s):

One night some people were have a little party, dancing with each other, in order to keep their spirits up, in one of the rooms of the lazaretto, even though I had prohibited such things under the threat of most grave punishment. Fra Andrea, remembering that the day before among those who had died he had unloaded from a wagon a stout old lady, decided to go and find her body and use it to put an end to the party and inspire some terror among the dancing men and women. After night had fallen, without a lamp, he went to the grave pit in the center of the lazaretto where the dead bodies are discharged and went diligently searching there: finally he found the aforementioned old lady. In hoisting her over his shoulder, he happened to compress her belly so that the air that was in her belly come out through her mouth with a great noise. Who would have not been frightened to death? But not he; instead, calm and confident, he said to her in our Milanese dialect, "Hey, keep quiet, grandma, silence; I'm taking you to go dancing." He went to the door of the room where the dancing was going on and knocked. Some one inside asked: "Who's there?" He didn't answer as we [Capuchins] usually answer, "*Deo gratias!*" and instead said: "We're friends and we want to dance." The door was opened. He went in and threw the body of the old lady at the feet of those who were dancing, shouting out: "Hey, here, make her dance too." Then he added, "Is it possible that having seen death face to face, you are here fooling around and offending God?"¹¹⁶

Although somewhat shocking and repellant to us today, these incessant, omnipresent warnings about the plague as a punishment from God and the transitory nature of the world served a useful, positive role during time of plague. Not only did the *vanitas* theme remind those caught in the midst of the horror of an outbreak that "this, too, shall pass," but the ecclesiastical explanation at least "fit the plague into some rational and orderly framework" at a time when "it must have seemed to many that the very fabric of rational order in nature had been destroyed."¹¹⁷ In other words, the plague "could be understood as part of a coherent divine plan."¹¹⁸

Preachers and spiritual writers also imparted consolation in a more directly positive fashion. The greatest consolation for early modern Christians was, of course, the doctrinal belief in Christ's victory over death through his own Resurrection and his promise of life after death for the virtuous, be one's death due to plague or any other illness. The Resurrection was a popular subject for artists in all periods of Christian history, and it comes at no surprise to discover that Sebastiano Ricci's treatment of that theme (cat. 35), was commissioned for the chapel of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, England. According to Catholic belief, Christ's mother, the Virgin Mary, like her son, had the distinct privilege of entering heaven in her intact, uncorrupt body, and thus, depictions of her Assumption, such as that of the same Ricci in the present exhibition (cat. 34), would have conveyed a hopeful message to pious viewers about the Christian triumph over death and physical decay. (A reminder of the same triumph over death is likewise contained in Jacopo Tintoretto's *Raising of Lazarus* [cat. 37], discussed in section VII.) The eternal bliss awaiting virtuous souls in Heaven in the presence of God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints is similarly evoked in the many Renaissance and Baroque representations of the celestial realms and their choruses of saintly inhabitants including Vaccaro's *Madonna and Child with Saints Roch, Sebastian, and Francis Xavier* (cat. 18). Such reminders of the virtuous Christian's posthumous destiny in Paradise in a new glorified body were especially welcome in times of pestilence, to which Vaccaro's canvas makes explicit reference through prominent placement of these three male plague saints in the foreground.¹¹⁹

As far as written sources are concerned, for these and other messages of consolation in time of contagion, early modern Italians turned (after Scripture of course) most readily to the oldest and perhaps the most influential Christian treatise written in response to suffering in time of plague. *De mortalitate* is an extended sermon composed in 252 A.D. by Saint Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, while contagion raged throughout the Roman empire. Never out of circulation in the Christian world, Cyprian's work was reprinted in Padua in 1577 during the sixteenth century's most virulent outbreak and is cited in many of the plague sources in our period. Possevino includes *De mortalitate* in his list of "books of spiritual consolation" to be read during the trying times of contagion, while Marchini reprints several entire pages of text from the sermon in *Belli divini*.¹²⁰ Reminding his readers of the promise of the Resurrection and the glories of heaven, Cyprian declares that death is not to be feared but embraced as liberation from this world of trial with its vain joys. The traditional Christian theme of *contemptus mundi*, disdain for earthly things, resounds throughout *De mortalitate*: "So many persecutions the mind endures daily, by so many dangers is the heart beset. And does it delight to remain here long amidst the devil's weapons, when we should rather earnestly desire and wish to hasten to Christ aided by a death coming most speedily, since He Himself instructs us, saying, 'Amen, amen, I say to you ... you shall be sorrowful but your sorrow shall come into joy?'"¹²¹ Cyprian encourages Christians to triumph in spirit over the ravages of the plague, even as their bodies are brutally assailed. This experience represents a salutary test of their faith, he declares, at the same time that he delivers a detailed description of the disease's gruesome symptomatology:

That now the bowels loosened into a flux exhaust the strength of the body, that a fever contracted in the very marrow of the bones breaks out into ulcers of the throat, that the intestines are shaken by continual vomiting, that the blood-shot eyes burn, that the feet of some or certain parts of their members are cut away by the infection of diseased putrefaction, that, by a weakness developing through the losses and injuries of the body, either the gait is enfeebled, or the hearing impaired or the sight blinded, all this contributes to the proof of faith. What greatness of soul it is to fight with the powers of the mind unshaken against so many attacks of devastation and death. ...¹²²

XIII. *Charity and the "Corporal Works of Mercy"*

During the same plague outbreak that moved him to write *De mortalitate*, Cyprian composed another extended sermon whose message was likewise destined to echo across the centuries, especially in time of plague, the *De opere et eleemosynis*, "Works and Almsgiving." In Cyprian's time, as during all outbreaks of pestilence, masses of people were reduced to utter destitution in the ensuing collapse of trade and commerce and the overwhelming of all normal public service to the poor, needy, sick, and dying. Always a major threat to European populations even in the absence of plague, famine was a guaranteed consequence of epidemic outbreaks, when indeed it was not their immediate precursor and contributing cause.¹²³ Bringing commerce between town and countryside to a virtual halt, the contagion also brought death to massive numbers of both urban and farm workers, drastically reducing agricultural production. Cyprian reminds his readers that almsgiving and other works of charity benefit not only those in need but also the souls of those who perform them: "The remedies for propitiating God have been given in the words of God himself; divine instructions have taught that God is satisfied by just works, that sins are cleansed by the merits of mercy. And in Solomon we read:

‘Shut up alms in the heart of the poor, and it shall obtain help for thee against all evil.’¹²⁴

Cyprian’s message, repeated and amplified by a host of early modern preachers and spiritual writers, found its visual counterpart in a prodigious number of paintings depicting what have come to be known as the “corporal works (or acts) of mercy” – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, etc. (cats. 9-11). Deriving from Jesus’s admonitions in Matthew 25, the list was enlarged in the Middle Ages, specifically because of the plague, to include a further work of mercy, that of burying the dead.¹²⁵ Some painters, such as Michael Sweerts, depicted the entire series of acts of mercy (including *Burying the Dead* [cat. 11]).¹²⁶ The works of mercy were also illustrated in the form of engravings, such as, most notably in our period, the *Icones operum misericordiae*, first published in Rome, 1586, with commentary by Giulio Roacio. In this popular work, under the rubric, “Mortuos Sepelire Explicatio,” Roscio praises the Christians of ancient Alexandria for gathering the corpses of plague victims, closing their eyes and mouths, carrying them on their shoulders, washing, dressing, and giving them proper burial.¹²⁷ Also imparting the same message through the medium of the painted image are the many allegorical renditions of the theological virtue of charity, usually depicted as a young mother nursing three infants (cat. 9).¹²⁸ Preacher Bernardino Tomitano mocks the plague antidote, the “pill of the three adverbs” (“mox, longe, tarde”), declaring that “it comes from Hell” since it violates the divine precept of loving and serving one’s neighbor.¹²⁹

Printed sources (e.g., Possevino and Marchini, to cite only two examples)¹³⁰ often detail and extol the charity of specific historical figures, usually canonized saints, in the hope that readers will be inspired to “go and do likewise.” Indeed, many of them did, especially as members of the numerous charitable confraternities in operation in early modern Italy. One such confraternity, that of the Misericordia in Liguria, which buried plague victims as part of their service to society, commissioned Caravaggio’s *Saint John the Baptist*, now in the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City. According to Bishop Pier Francesco Costa, son of the artist’s patron, Ottavio, the melancholy nature of John’s visage is due to his contemplation of “human miseries” and “moves not only the brothers, but also visitors to penitence.”¹³¹ In early modern Italy perhaps the most celebrated exemplar of charity was Carlo Borromeo of Milan, whose reputation was greatly helped by the proliferation of painted images of his work on behalf of the plague stricken (cats. 23-25).

Other individuals celebrated in the printed plague sources include the fifteenth-century Franciscan preacher-reformer, Saint Bernardino of Siena, whose heroic service as a young man during a violent outbreak in his hometown in 1400 earned him a place of prominence in the early modern catalogues of charitable exemplars.¹³² In his sermon on the plague, Bernardino Tomitano, the Sienese saint’s namesake and fellow Franciscan preacher, cites the elder Bernardino’s scolding of those who ran from those in need during the outbreak: “Oh, what should I say of those who in the time of plague abandoned parents, brothers, sisters, neighbors, and left them to die in desperation, like dogs, without provision for either body or soul?”¹³³ Tomitano also reminds his audience of Bernardino of Siena’s promise that service to the plague-stricken will earn you heaven even if you are guilty of “innumerable sins,” while recommending (as does Muratori) the Sienese’s special devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus (as encapsulated in the IHS monogram of the saint’s own design) as an especially powerful prophylactic against or cure of the plague.¹³⁴

Even non-canonized figures were held up as role models for the public: the fourteenth-century Olivetan monk, Bernardo Tolomei (cat. 2) is seen in Crespi’s *modello* ministering with his companions to the plague-stricken while a solemn procession (on the left) arrives to bring Holy Communion to them.¹³⁵ Aristocrat-turned-Jesuit ascetic, Luigi (Aloysius) Gonzaga (1568-91), recently declared patron of victims of AIDS, is depicted in Batoni’s oval devotional portrait of ca. 1744 (cat. 19). Gonzaga labored on behalf of plague victims in Rome during

the 1591 outbreak, going so far as to carry them on his own back to the Roman hospitals of Santa Maria della Consolazione and Spirito Santo, as we see him depicted in Zoboli's altarpiece in the Roman church of Santi Carlo ed Ambrogio al Corso. The young Jesuit eventually died from the consequences of such incessant labor, though of "fever," not of the plague.

Although Gonzaga had been canonized twenty years by the time Batoni executed this canvas, even as a *beato*, that is, long before his canonization, he had been presented as an icon of charity in time of plague, especially in Jesuit sources. For instance, famed Jesuit orator Paolo Segneri (1624-96), dedicated one of his widely read *panegirici sacri* to the not-yet-canonized Gonzaga declaring him a veritable "martyr."¹³⁶ In Batoni's portrait, we observe the saint in prayerful contemplation of a crucifix lovingly cradled in his left arm. His right hand rests on his heart, a reminder of the emotional and spiritual intensity of his devotion to the Passion of Christ. Luigi wears a white surplice denoting his status as an acolyte, one of the minor orders leading to priesthood, which premature death prevented him from attaining. In the foreground, a skull is a reminder of Luigi's *contemptus mundi* (disdain for the "vain" transient things of this world) and of the inevitability of death, while a bouquet of lilies recalls the perpetual virginity the youth vowed to the Blessed Virgin in 1578 and again at the conclusion of his Jesuit novitiate in 1587.

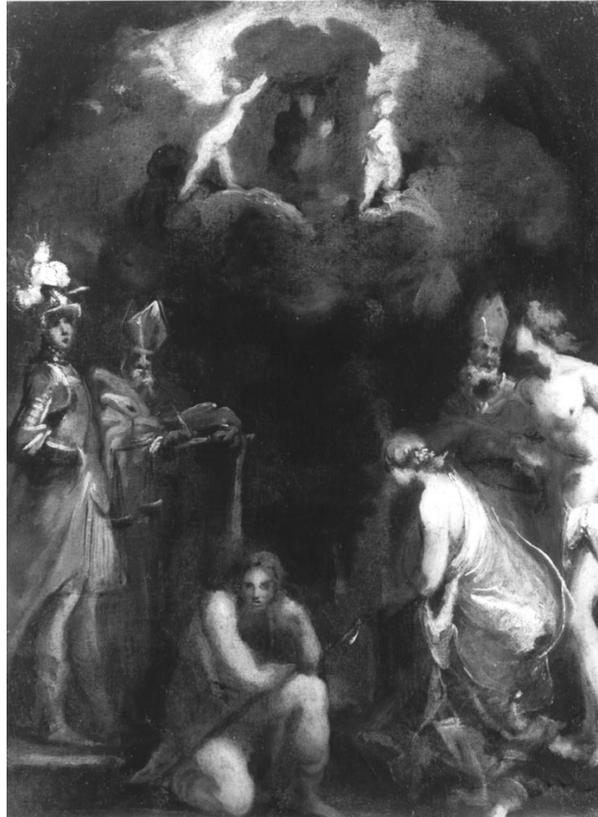
Though conventionally referred to, even today, as the Jesuit "boy saint," Luigi actually died at the age of twenty-five, which in the sixteenth century would have been considered adulthood. Nonetheless, mirroring the hagiographic tradition promoted by the Jesuits right from the time of Gonzaga's death, Batoni here represents him as a tender adolescent, thus emphasizing the dramatic contrast between his youthful, diminutive exterior appearance and his mature, heroic spiritual stature. Luigi's youthfulness would have been heightened in order to also facilitate greater identification with him on the part of Catholic adolescent boys (whose patron the Church had officially designated him), especially the students in the Jesuits' numerous secondary schools throughout Europe.

xiv. Heavenly Protectors Against the Plague, Universal and Local

Many of these saintly exemplars of charity in time of epidemic became, in turn, tutelary saints against contagion as well, even though they may not have cured anyone during their lifetimes. Bernardino of Siena: is memorialized, for instance, in a late fifteenth-century panel by Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saints Nicholas of Tolentine, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena with Kneeling Donors*, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose inscription identifies the four personages as "saintly defenders against pestilence."¹³⁷ Bernardino is just one of many such patron saints; in fact, as Christine Boeckl rightly observes, "[p]lague saints are legion."¹³⁸ This profusion is due to the fact that all of the various towns and cities of Italy (and indeed all of Catholic Europe) invoked their own local celestial patrons and canonized heroes and heroines for protection against the deadly scourge – as did, for example, the town of Este in commissioning Tiepolo's Saint Thecla altarpiece (cat. 7) – and did not restrict their recourse to just the few universally recognized tutelary saints.

The Virgin Mary

Among plague saints of universal reputation, the most famous, most invoked in prayer, and most frequently depicted in art are the Virgin Mary (cats. 13, 18, 21, 28, 34, 36), Sebastian (cats. 12, 13, 16, 19), and Roch (12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18).¹³⁹ Always one of the prime intercessors between heaven and earth, the Virgin Mary naturally became the object of even more intense attention during times of contagion. When civic authorities decreed the pronouncement of a



2. Zanobi Rosi, *The Madonna of Impruneta with Saints Sebastian, Roch, Michael the Archangel, Two Bishop-Saints, and a Barefoot Female Saint*, n.d. Oil on canvas. Mary Jane Harris Collection, New York. (Photograph: courtesy of M.J. Harris)

solemn vow to heaven for liberation from the plague, it was usually directed to Mary, in any one of her various avatars (most notably, the *Madonna della Misericordia*).¹⁴⁰ The pronouncement of a public vow was frequently accompanied by the commissioning of a church, painting, or other lasting visual memorial. In our period, among the most famous of these *ex voto* works of art devoted to Mary both have their origins in the pandemic of 1630-31: Baldassare Longhena's church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice and Guido Reni's silken processional banner, the *Pallione del voto*. The latter image was dedicated to the Madonna of the Rosary, a "surprising" choice, as Puglisi points out, inasmuch as it represented the supplanting of the two, older and more revered Bolognese Marian cults, the Madonna of Succor and the Madonna of Saint Luke. In the eyes of early modern Italians, not all Madonnas were created equal: some were deemed more powerful than others.¹⁴¹

For the Florentines, instead, two Madonnas were more powerful than one. While besieged by plague in the early 1630s, not only did the entire city gather to make a solemn public vow to their cherished "Santissima Annunziata" at her shrine in the center of town, but it also took the extraordinary measure of bringing into Florence itself the most venerable, miraculous image of the Madonna of Impruneta, an ancient icon normally housed in a small church in a village outside Florence. This temporary *traslatio* occurred *processionalmente* in stages over the course of four days in late May 1633, and at the end, many valuable treasures in the form of jewelry in gold, silver, and precious stones were offered to the Madonna. Rondinelli claims that as a result of this display of devotion on the part of the Florentines, "the plague immediately calmed down and soon thereafter was completely extinguished."¹⁴² *The Madonna of Impruneta with Saints Sebastian, Roch, Michael the Archangel, Two Bishop-Saints, and a Barefoot Female Saint* (fig. 2), a hitherto unpublished *bozzetto* by Zanobi Rosi, for an

unidentified work that was either never executed or lost over the centuries, may have, in fact, been created to commemorate this event.¹⁴³ At the very least, the work was meant to expressly invoke the Madonna's intercession in time of the contagion, as the inclusion of the universal plague icons, Sebastian, Roch and Michael, suggest.¹⁴⁴

Saint Sebastian

After the Virgin Mary, the heavenly helper whose assistance was most often sought was the early Christian martyr Sebastian. The concluding entreaty of Carlo Borromeo's 1576 anthology of special plague prayers, *Antiphonae, psalmi, preces, et orationes, ad usum supplicationum temporum pestis*, is emblematic of the special status enjoyed by the saint, invoking Sebastian (and, by name, only Sebastian) right alongside the Virgin Mary in its plea to God for rescue from the scourge: "Heed our prayer, o God of our health and salvation, and through the intercession of Mary the blessed and glorious Mother of God, together with your martyr the blessed Sebastian and all the saints, free your people from the terrors of your wrath. . . ."¹⁴⁵ As in prayer, so, too, in painting: in plague-related "Sacra conversazione" scenes, Sebastian is inevitably one of the patron saints depicted in the company of the Virgin, either by himself or with other saintly intercessors (cats. 13, 18). Although much has already been written about saint, it will be useful to here recall the basic facts of the life and cult of this prodigiously popular saint, who also enjoys the august title (given him by Gregory the Great) of "Defensor Ecclesiae Romanae" and privileged status as one of the three official patrons of the city of Rome.¹⁴⁶

As is the case with so many of the paleo-Christian and medieval saints, the facts of Sebastian's life are shrouded in centuries of pious legend, although the fact that he existed and died for his faith has itself never been a matter of doubt. The earliest legend, is the *Passio Sancti Sebastiani*, for many years believed (even by the Bollandists) to be the work of Saint Ambrose, but in reality a mid-fifth-century composition ("an historical romance")¹⁴⁷ by someone writing in Rome or at least knowing that city very well. According to the *Passio*, Sebastian was a member of the elite Praetorian guard under the Emperors Maximian and Diocletian; though a Christian, Sebastian kept his faith a secret in order to use his military status to help imprisoned Christians. His religious loyalties were discovered and he was sentenced to death at the hands of the imperial archers, who left his body in a field, pierced with so many arrows that, according to the *Passio*, he resembled a hedgehog: "quasi ericius ita esset irsutus ictibus sagittarum."¹⁴⁸ Under the cover of night, his fellow Christians rescued the almost-martyr, who was nursed back to life by a Roman matron, Irene, and her maidservant. "Sebastian healed by Irene," became a favorite subject of Baroque painting (cat. 15), thanks to the re-publishing of the Sebastian legend in Cardinal Cesare Baronio's *Annales ecclesiastici*.¹⁴⁹

Once recovered, Sebastian refused to flee the city for his own safety. He became so emboldened in his defense of the faith, that he dared reproach the emperor himself, face to face, for his crimes against the Christians. This time, the imperial death decree was effectively carried out: beaten to death, Sebastian's body was thrown into the Roman sewer, the Cloaca Maxima. The actual form of his martyrdom, "less noble and less picturesque" than the first attempt on his life in the field, Réau explains, "artists have preferred to ignore."¹⁵⁰ One of the few artists to treat the theme was Ludovico Carracci, in a canvas, now in the Getty Museum, commissioned in 1612 by Maffeo Barberini, the future Pope Urban VIII.¹⁵¹ However, this was not the end of the saint's story: a subsequent apparition by Sebastian to yet another Roman matron revealed the location of his body – on the spot now occupied by the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle containing the Barberini family chapel for which the same Carracci canvas had been originally intended. Sebastian's recovered body was given

proper burial in the catacombs on the Via Appia where now stands a church in his honor, the physical center of his Roman cult. Over the course of the centuries, Sebastian's remains were divided into smaller relics that ended up in various parts of Europe. Rome, of course, kept a substantial portion for itself: St. Peter's Basilica boasts possession of what has been publicized as the saint's head – in reality, as Réau points out, only a fragment of his skull – housed, not at the St. Sebastian altar, but in the sacristy.¹⁵²

Nowhere in the *Passio* or in any of the hagiographic sources of Sebastian's life before the eighth century do we find mention of the plague. So how did Sebastian acquire his role as tutelary plague saint? This was a question raised in early modern plague literature as well, in particular by Marchini for whom it represents one of many historical-theological-medical "problemata" posed by the plague. Marchini's answer is that the role was likely given to Sebastian because of the ancient association in both pagan literature and Christian Scripture between arrows and the plague as punishment inflicted by a wrathful divinity (i.e., Apollo and Yahweh).¹⁵³ The later Jesuit hagiographers, the Bollandists, however, disputed Marchini's answer: in the *Acta Sanctorum*¹⁵⁴ they point instead to the account given by Paulus Diaconus (ca. 720-ca.799?) in his *History of the Lombards* (VI:5), and repeated, with the usual fanciful modifications and deformations, in *The Golden Legend*. According to Paulus's somewhat confusing text, during an outbreak of the plague in 680 in Rome (and Pavia ["Ticinum"], capital of the Lombards), "it was revealed to a certain person that the plague would not cease until an altar was erected in honor of Saint Sebastian the Martyr in the Basilica of St. Peter in Chains." The instructions of the divine messenger were carried out and the city was liberated from the plague, the same miraculous liberation occurring (we assume, even though Paulus does not say it explicitly) in Pavia, which had immediately sent for relics of Sebastian.

One of the oldest representations of Sebastian in the city of Rome, in fact, dates to the same outbreak of the plague described by Paulus, as Gregory Martin's 1581 pilgrim's guidebook, *Roma sancta*, points out (and as indeed appears to be the case) and is located in the same church mentioned by Paulus and Martin, St. Peter in Chains (S. Pietro in Vincoli).¹⁵⁵ Yet, this representation, a mosaic, is rather curious inasmuch as it represents the martyr, not as the young athletic Praetorian guard that he was, but rather as a grave, sedate, white-bearded old man, dressed in Byzantine fashion, much as we find in an earlier mosaic in S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. Whatever the reason for this iconographic choice, according to Réau,¹⁵⁶ it held sway until the fifteenth century. With Renaissance humanism's rediscovery of the beauty of the human body and of the classical gods, Sebastian is increasingly depicted as a young, handsome, athletic hero, usually naked or nearly so. Cannata cites, in accounting for the change, an eighth-century legend in which Sebastian in the form of an ephebe appears to the bishop of Loan; however, among the more usual explanations for this iconographical switch is the desire on the part of artists to display their talent for a realistic depiction of human anatomy.¹⁵⁷ Another, and not unrelated, explanation is the Renaissance grafting of the iconography of Apollo – one of the handsome young athletic types of classical art – onto that of Sebastian. This transference is most apt, given the ancient god's association with the plague: in ancient literature we find Apollo invoked as both wrathful sender of and beneficent protector against deadly pestilence.¹⁵⁸

More recently, however, some scholars, specifically Louise Marshall and Ellen Schiferel, have contested this Sebastian-as-Apollo thesis, inasmuch as it does not take into proper consideration the sincerely Christian mindset of the original patrons and viewers of the early modern images of Sebastian. For these Christian viewers, they argue, Sebastian, was seen not as a pagan god, but as an *alter Christus*, another Christ, who fulfills the same expiatory, salvific role as does the Savior: he does this by taking upon his innocent shoulders the sins of the people and in his suffering, like a true scapegoat, makes effective reparation for their trans-

gressions in the eyes of God.¹⁵⁹ The basis of Marshall and Schiferel's claim is the undeniable similarity between the numerous representations of Sebastian's first "martyrdom" (via arrows tied to a tree or column in the field) with that of Christ's flagellation or Crucifixion, as most notably in St. Peter's Basilica in the work by Domenichino and in Strozzi's *Saint Sebastian Tended by Saint Irene and Her Maid* (cat. 16).¹⁶⁰ While the argument is extremely compelling and entirely reasonable, these scholars do not offer non-visual corroboration, that is to say, proof in the written texts of the period – sermons, sacred drama, and other devotional/spiritual literature – demonstrating explicitly or implicitly, this assumption of a salvific, Christ-like role by Sebastian in the eyes of early modern viewers. I myself have not yet found any such verification in the texts examined for this essay. What instead one does find in the primary sources regarding the early modern image of the young athletic – and scantily clad – Sebastian, is alarm and censure over the potential temptation to the sin of lust that these and all depictions of naked flesh, even or especially in religious art, represent. One famous expression of this concern is contained in the seventeenth-century moralizing treatise by Jesuit Giovanni Domenico Ottonelli and master painter-architect Pietro Berrettini da Cortona against the "abuses" of painters and sculptors who depict "immagini immodeste e ignude."¹⁶¹ The erotic depictions of Sebastian in the works by Régnier, Reni, Solimena, and Strozzi (cats. 15, 16, 29) would have certainly have raised the eyebrows of such ecclesiastical censors.¹⁶²

Saint Rosalie of Palermo

To examine a final case of tutelary plague saint, we turn to an example of a once purely local intercessor whose cult underwent prodigious expansion during our period throughout Europe, Rosalie (Rosalia) of Palermo, made famous in art by the series of canvases executed by Anthony van Dyck (cats. 30, 31). Rosalie's story is yet another variation on a conventional hagiographical scenario: daughter of Sicilian nobility, at the age of sixteen, the girl refused marriage and renounced her life of privilege, retreating instead to a life of penitential solitude and self-discipline in nearby caves. Death came several years later (1160 being the traditional date) on Monte Pellegrino three miles above Palermo.¹⁶³ Before 1625 few people outside of her native Sicily had heard of the twelfth-century hermit, and even in Sicily she was far from renowned among the island's canonized citizens, despite the churches dedicated to her there. Rosalie's name was not even included in the litany of saints prayed during a solemn penitential plague procession conducted by the bishop of Palermo in 1624.¹⁶⁴ More importantly, "she was not mentioned in any of the ancient martyrologies and there were no accounts of her life older than the end of the sixteenth century;" as a result, whatever we know of her has been "put together from the evidence of local tradition, inscriptions, and paintings."¹⁶⁵

What changed Rosalie's fortunes was the finding of her body – thanks to a supposed apparition of the saint herself – several months after the same 1624 procession in a grotto on Monte Pellegrino while the plague still raged in Palermo. Her relics were carried *processionalmente* through the city, an act of devotion that resulted in the cessation of the plague soon thereafter, according to the pious belief of the saint's *devoti*. Luckily for Rosalie, Palermo was home to a large Jesuit community, which was soon won over to the cult of the newly disinterred virgin hermit. The Jesuits (in particular Giordano Cascini) set to publicizing, through printed hagiographies and preached sermons, the life, virtue, and thaumaturgic power of the aristocratic young virgin, not only in Sicily, but throughout the order's international network. That network included, of course, Rome (and, notably, Flanders and France as well). In Rome, Urban VIII himself had a particular devotion to Rosalie: "inflamed with love for the saint," the pontiff had written a poem in her honor and wore on his person one of the saint's relics, a tooth, given to him by one of the major promoters of her cult, the pious Duke of

Montalto, Antonio de Moncada y Aragona. On January 26, 1630, another plague year on the peninsula, Urban further demonstrated his devotion to the Sicilian maiden by ordering the addition of Rosalie's name to the *Roman Martyrology*.¹⁶⁶ This designation formally marked the official elevation of her cult from the mere local to the universal.

It was most likely in these years of active promotion of her cult in Rome that was preached the Latin *Oratio Sanctae Rosaliae*, a hitherto overlooked printed sermon held in the Casanatense Library in the same city. Now unfortunately shorn of its title page and bereft of any indication of where, when, by whom, and to whom it was delivered, the physical evidence, however, clearly suggests that it came from a seventeenth-century Italian press. I strongly suspect that this text is the "oratio latina in laudem S. Rosaliae" described by the Bollandist Johannes Stilting in the *Acta Sanctorum*. Delivered at the Roman College on April 6, 1628, during a "festivitas" organized by the Jesuits, "with a magnificent apparatus," and the whole-hearted approval of Urban VIII (who paid for the publication of the oration), this stately, eloquent discourse in honor of Rosalie was written by the Jesuit Angelo Galluccio. However, for reasons unknown to us, it was, instead, on that occasion delivered (in the presence of the "most eminent papal nephew, Antonio Barberini and other Cardinals and Princes") by a "young nobleman," Giovanni Maria Roscioli, a Lateran canon.¹⁶⁷ Whatever its provenance, the sermon offers us a valuable glimpse into how the cult of the Sicilian saint was "marketed" in seventeenth-century Italy, in this case, as so often with ancient and medieval saints, largely on the basis of pure legend accumulated over the centuries.¹⁶⁸

As required by the *vitae sanctorum* conventions of the day, the *Oratio Sanctae Rosaliae* relies on the traditional stock of hagiographical themes, most especially that of *contemptus mundi*, in describing (or rather, imagining) the external behavior and psychology of the young woman, in order to assure the ecclesiastical authorities and pious laity that she indeed fit the tried-and-true, orthodox mold of Catholic sainthood. At the same time, to give her some distinguishing features among so many other penitential female hermits, the author of the *oratio* emphasizes her Palermitan roots and makes recurrent use of the floral topos, Rosalie/rose: for example, Rosalie among her familial riches was a rose among thorns while Urban VIII's devotion to Rosalie is likened to the work of bees – a reference to the bees of the Barberini coat of arms – drawn to the rose, resulting in the production of sweet honey. (This association between the saint and the flower is also seen in devotional art of our period [cats. 30, 31] as a useful cue for the identification of the saint.) Like other saints in the period, however, the aristocratic Rosalie also represents in this sermon a convenient political-diplomatic vehicle with which to render due homage to similarly aristocratic patrons and potential patrons, especially those of Spanish connection at a time when Rome was under the heavy-handed influence of Spain.¹⁶⁹ Delivered to a patrician audience (it begins with an address to "Illustrissimi Principes" – the above-mentioned Antonio Barberini and his princely peers?) the *Oratio* is effusive in its praise for not only Urban VIII, but also the island of Sicily and the city of Palermo, and the Spanish noble families of that city.¹⁷⁰

Further enhancing the early seventeenth-century expansion of Rosalie's cult was the fact that a foreign artist of great talent and social connection happened to be in Palermo on the occasion of the discovery of her body. In the spring of 1624, Anthony van Dyck was invited by the Sicilian viceroy, Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy to visit Palermo, already host to a Genoese community of substantial financial means.¹⁷¹ Rosalie was Van Dyck's principal artistic occupation during his Sicilian sojourn: "confronted with a figure rarely represented in art ... it was he who established the iconography of the saint,"¹⁷² producing several portraits of the saint, now scattered across the globe, two of which are included in the present exhibition (cat. 30, 31). When Rosalie is depicted alone, as in most of Van Dyck's series, the saint's iconography is essentially that of the traditional penitential hermit, seen in the wilderness,

skull at her feet. A wreath of roses around her head refers not only to her name, but also, as Barker points out, to “her protection against the ‘foul air’ of pestilence.”¹⁷³ Bernardo Strozzi’s portrait of the saint now at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen, adds a more explicit reference to the plague, showing an arrow in Rosalie’s right hand. A powerful new protectress was thus given to the universal church, visualized, immortalized, and publicized by the brush of the masters. However, as Amore observes,¹⁷⁴ as early as 1625, there had been serious challenges to the claims made about Rosalie and her relics at the time of her “resurrection”: “In all honesty, it must be confessed that the circumstances surrounding [the] discovery [of her remains] are the cause of grave doubts regarding the authenticity of the body that was found, doubts that are evident in the accounts given even by those involved in the affair.” These doubts, in the end, did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of her *devoti*, including the learned Jesuits of Palermo, Rome, and elsewhere, and the Supreme Pontiff himself.

xv. Conclusion: “Will you believe such things, oh posterity?”

The unquestioning alacrity with which early modern Italians, and indeed, Europeans – even those far removed from the geographical center of the Sicilian maiden’s cult – embraced the rehabilitated Rosalie in her new role as tutelary plague saint may be for us today the object of incredulity, if not derision. Yet, as this exhibition and catalogue demonstrate, the cultic enthusiasm for Rosalie, Sebastian, and the other heavenly helpers of early modern Italians, as well as the various other forms in which they responded to the plague, becomes completely understandable in light of the theological, psychological, social, and medical reality of that age. That reality was marked by fear, horror, and anxiety, so eloquently expressed by Italian humanist-poet Petrarch, whose famous letter on the plague of 1347-50, quoted in the epigram to this article, gives faithful voice to the emotions of three hundred years of survivors of the contagion. Such were the emotions generated by the assault of an invisible enemy whom science was largely impotent to conquer and who could be effectively combatted and overcome, early modern Italians believed, only by invisible, that is, spiritual means – the various *rimedi spirituali* preached by ecclesiastics and depicted by painters.

“Contemplating the calamitous and desolate state of these our most turbulent and most perilous times, with so great a grief in our heart...”: with these words, on 28 October of the pandemic year of 1576, Pope Gregory XIII announced a special “jubileum,” a period of extraordinary indulgences, graces, dispensations, and absolutions to offer further spiritual and psychological support, hope, and consolation to the Christian masses mercilessly afflicted by virulent plague.¹⁷⁵ Although Gregory’s and the other *rimedi spirituali* described in this essay and given vivid visual form by artists of the period did not eradicate, prevent, or even abbreviate the epidemics, it is clear from the testimony of the contemporary sources that they were, nonetheless, efficacious sources of healing and renewal. During the plague-tormented years of early modern Italian history, thanks in no small part to the power of images, ultimately, hope and courage won out. In the end, as Emile Mâle reminds us, even out of horror and terror there came forth beauty: “Thus, as in the Middle Ages, the great plagues have multiplied the paintings, the frescoes, and the statues ... From these catastrophes that terrified mankind, there remains today a bit of beauty.”¹⁷⁶

1. Petrarca, 417.
2. Thursday, 7 November, 2002, p. A26.
3. The conception of the present exhibition, however, preceded the events of 11 September, 2001, having its origins in 2000 in the participation of the current writer in the re-discovery of Tintoretto's *Raising of Lazarus* (cat. 37), most likely an ex-voto in time of plague (see Mormando 2000).
4. In 1979 the city of Venice organized a multi-genre exhibition entitled *Venezia e la peste, 1348-1797*, while in 1990 at the Invalides, Paris, Henri Mollaret and Jacqueline Brossollet compiled the historical visual survey, *Images de la maladie: La peste dans l'histoire*. The latter exhibition featured only photographed reproductions of the original works of art. In 1994 Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum presented a small exhibition, *Art's Lament: Creativity in the Face of Death*, devoted to "artistic response to epidemic catastrophe" (*Art's Lament*, Preface) across several centuries, national boundaries, and artistic media.
5. Our research confirms Louise Marshall's conclusions, based on her study of a smaller sampling of Italian (Renaissance) plague art, that is to say, its fundamentally hopeful, positive, and self-confident nature: "In setting up hierarchical relationships of mutual obligation between worshipper and image, those who lived during the pandemic were not neurotic and helpless, but were taking positive – and in their eyes effective – steps to regain control over their environment" (Marshall 1994, 488). See also Marshall 2000, 20: "Far from collapsing into neurotic guilt and helpless despair, as is so often assumed, those who lived under the constant shadow of plague responded to their situation with energy and hope. The invention and ritual manipulation of a wide range of prophylactic images testifies to contemporaries' confidence in their ability to access the sources of supernatural power."
6. For a discussion of the Catholicism of early modern Italy, see Worcester 2002.
7. Another common term for the disease is *febbre pestilenziale*, pestilential fever. The anonymous reviewer of a Paduan medical treatise on the plague (*Dissertatio therapeutica de peste habita in Archi-Lycaeo Patavino à Car. Patino*) in the *Journal des savants* (1683: 234) observes that a distinction must be made between "plague," "pestilence," and "pestilential fever," even though the "ancient doctors (*anciens Mediciens*) have confused the three terms;" however, he acknowledges the fact that the word "plague" (*peste*) is often "used in a more universal sense to refer to any disease from which few escape alive." Similarly, Alfonso Corradi, author of the massive *Annali delle epidemie occorse in Italia dalle prime memorie fino al 1850*, separates cases of "peste o peste bubonica" from those of "pestilenza" in the chronological lists of outbreaks at the end of his study, although some of the latter cases might indeed involve bubonic plague (Corradi, 5:647-68).
8. Deaux, 12. Lucenet, 15, quotes Galen as saying: "When a disease affects a great number of people it is an epidemic; when most of these victims die from it, it is a plague."
9. Black, 24. In his study of the fourteenth-century "Black Death," Samuel Cohn has come to the conclusion that this medieval killer "was not the same rat-based bubonic plague whose agent (*Yersinia pestis*) was first cultured at Hong Kong in 1894" (Cohn 2002, 703; see also Cohn 2003).
10. The information about the medical aspects of the diseases in the paragraphs that follow and in the next section of this essay is taken from Biraben, 1:7-12; Boeckl 2000, 7-12; Deaux, 64-66; McGrew, 36-46; Sobel, 200-201.
11. Deaux, 65; Pallavicino, 12-13; see also Wills, 80.
12. Targioni Tozzetti, 3:131.
13. Pallavicino, 11-12. For all aspects of the history of the plague in Rome and much of the related art, especially that of the seventeenth century, Sheila Barker's exhaustive doctoral dissertation is indispensable; see also her essay in the present catalogue.
14. Black, 23.
15. Biraben, 1:394-400; Corradi, 5:652-59 ("peste o peste bubonica"), 667-68 ("pestilenza"); Del Panta, 138-78.
16. Gastaldi, 18.
17. Gastaldi, 9ff. The commissioner includes this catalogue of outbreaks and sources ("Celebriores pestilentiae totius orbis, quarum extat memoria, per tempora et loca recensentur") in chapter two of his lavishly illustrated and conscientiously documented account of the city of Rome's response to the plague of 1656, the *Tractatus de avertenda et profliganda peste politico-legalis* (Bologna, 1684), which we have just quoted.
18. For other such chronological lists, see, e.g., Bumaldi, 28-32; Kircher, 132-48; Rondinelli, 219-30.
19. For a discussion of Thucydides's account in the primary sources, see, e.g., Marchini, *Belli divini*, 4-5, with a long extract given in his *Philosophica de pestilentia problemata*, 5-8.
20. For the plague in Naples, see James Clifton's essay in the present catalogue.
21. Kircher, 148.
22. Black, 23.
23. For the plague in Venice (and further mortality statistics for the Veneto region), see Andrew Hopkins's essay in the present catalogue.
24. See Black, 23 for modern calculations of the Genoese and Roman population loss in 1656; Black, 220 for that of Venice (as well as Preto, 97-98); Corradi, 5: 654 for plague in Rome, 1625-29; Gastaldi, 116; Pallavicino 17: "quasi tutto di plebe con poche teste civili, niuna illustre." The report about Bernini's brothers comes from the seventeenth-century diary of Roman lawyer, Carlo Cartari, 252.
25. Litchfield, 100.
26. The quotation is from the biographical preface (pp. v-vi) supplied by the anonymous editor of the 1714 edition (Florence: Jacopo Guidicci e Santi Franchi) of Rondinelli's *Relazione*.
27. Rondinelli, "A lettori (unpaginated preface to his *Relazione del contagio*) for the population figures; 3-4 for Ferdinand's heroic virtue; Dooley, 184 for modern statistics for Florence, Verona, Parma, Brescia, and Venice; Marino, 65 for the Milanese statistics.
28. Del Panta, 179-90.
29. Muratori, 432.
30. Muratori, 436. The value of Rondinelli's treatise is underscored by Targioni Tozzetti, 3:131.
31. Graeci: typis Haeredum Widmanstadii. For the Jesuits and the plague, see Sheila Barker's and Gauvin Bailey's essays in the present catalogue.
32. The 1897 discovery was made by Masanori Ogata and Paul Louis Simond, working independently. For all these nineteenth-century medical developments, see Wills, 71-85; and McGrew, 44-45. Wills notes, "After decades of controversy, it is now universally agreed that Yersin and not Kitasato was the discoverer of the plague bacillus" (75).
33. Kircher, 141, as quoted and translated by Rowlands, 105, cat. no. 116; for Fracastoro and Kircher, see also

- Capanna, 175-76.
34. Bumaldi, 6.
35. Gazzaniga, 53; Smoller, 173-74.
36. Marchini, *Philosophica de pestilentia problemata*, *Problemata* 23, 24, and 25; Gastaldi, 678-80.
37. Lubrano, "L'Eraclito, sfogo di malinconie per la peste di Napoli," 148, vv. 83-84, "E spargono ammorbati a gli antidoti stessi il Tosco i fiati."
38. Bumaldi, 5; Gastaldi, 641.
39. Gastaldi, 640.
40. Marshall 1994, 986.
41. See *Venezia e la peste*, 243-44, fig. a16 and color plate IV for the Tintoretto canvas; for Ferrari's ex-voto work, see the same catalogue, 269-70, fig. a44 and color plate V.
42. Quoted in Cartari, 249. Brighetti reproduces the same report in full (261-64; 263 for the stench reference) giving the doctor's name as "Ressi;" however since in his diary Cartari makes several references, by name, to "Pressi" as a man of his personal acquaintance, I assume this is the correct spelling of his family name.
43. In Dooley, 197.
44. Cartari, 249; Brighetti, 263.
45. See *Scienza e miracoli*, 341-42 and color plate D39 for Bernardi's altarpiece.
46. For the Cozza painting, see Fumaroli, 105 and fig. 82.
47. For these, see Boeckl 2000, 46-47, 54, 96-97.
48. For a complete discussion of the provenance and subject of this painting, see Mormando 2000.
49. See *Giovan Battista Moroni (1520-1578)*, scheda 23, 118; for this painting see also *Age of Caravaggio, 70-72*, cat. no. 8; and *I pittori bergamaschi*, 100.
50. For Michael and the plague, see *Scienza e miracoli*, cat. D46, 349-50; Mercalli; Sheila Barker's essay in the present catalogue, and, in particular for Michael as apocalyptic warrior in the context of plague iconography, see Barker, 5243-45. For the plague and the Apocalypse in general, see Smoller.
51. The earliest historian to describe the 590 A.D. plague procession, Gregory of Tours (593-94), does not mention any angelic apparition in his *History of the Franks*. Michael's connection to the story is a later medieval accretion, Jacopo da Voragine's text representing "one of the earliest surviving accounts" of the legend (Barker, 14). See Barker, 14-17 for Saint Michael's association with the Roman fortress named after him.
52. For the most current research and complete bibliography on Sweerts, see the essays in Jansen and Sutton, especially that of Bikker; for *Plague in an Ancient City*, see cat. XIII, 113-17 of the same work.
53. *Plague in an Ancient City* is believed to have been executed toward the end of Sweerts's stay in Rome. The artist arrived in the city in the mid-1640s and was there until at least 1652; by July 19, 1655 he had returned to Brussels (Bikker, 25, 31). The earliest documented notice of the painting is the news of its sale in 1804 at Christie's London (Jansen and Sutton, 117). For Poussin's *Plague at Ashdod* as "Sweerts's primary visual source," see Jansen and Sutton, 113, citing Roberto Longhi. Until Longhi's 1934 essay, the canvas had been attributed to Poussin. According to Longhi's later and now generally accepted thesis, the architectural setting of the painting comes from the hand of Viviano Codazzi, a specialist in the genre (Jansen and Sutton, 116).
54. Jansen and Sutton, 116. See *Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, cat. 49, for the opinion that in his *Plague* canvas Sweerts "was clothing in antique garb reference to the contemporary plague that raged in Rome from 1649 to 1650."
55. The fact was given wide publicity through (among other channels) the *Annales ecclesiastici*, that vastly influential apologetic history of the church by Oratorian cardinal, Cesare Baronio (d. 1607); see Baronio, Vol. 1, annus Christi 58, cc. 109-11. The "orans" prayer pose is a prominent feature, as well, of Caravaggio's *Entombment* (1603-4), originally created for Filippo Neri's Chiesa Nuova, a painting that, according to Alessandro Zuccari, gives evidence of the Oratorian "recovery of paleo-Christian typologies" (Zuccari, 55, n. 17)
56. The presence of the obelisk, thus, does not necessarily identify the setting of Sweerts's scene as an Egyptian city, such as Alexandria, the thriving, celebrated capital of Graeco-Roman Egypt, struck by plague in both the third and sixth centuries. Alexandria is, in any case, a port city, as Sweerts and his contemporaries well knew, and there is no sign of a port or any body of water in *Plague in an Ancient City*. It is possible that the artist may not have intended to invoke any one city in particular.
57. Fittler's engraving can be found in Forster, no. 31.
58. Bosio, 414. We can exclude the possibility, by the way, that the Black Temple is meant to represent a Christian catacomb. By the time Sweerts painted this canvas, many Christian catacombs had been extensively explored and their contents thoroughly inventoried and illustrated in Bosio's celebrated volume. Sweerts's Black Temple contains none of the visual details we find in Bosio.
59. There were conflicting reports about the true site of the rediscovery of the Minerva Giustiniani; see Haskell and Penny, 269-71, cat. 63.
60. Jansen and Sutton, 114.
61. Possevino, 6r-6v; Nicephorus, 10:35.
62. The space restrictions of the present catalogue do not allow me to here enter into a detailed exposition of these hypotheses or of any of the preceding observations concerning Sweerts's canvas, but this I shall be supplying in a separate publication, along with more extensive bibliographic citation.
63. Rondinelli, in the unpaginated "A' lettori" prefatory material; for the Pressi opinion, see Pressi, 262.
64. The popular proverb was communicated in the couplet: "Haec tria tabificam tollunt pestem / mox, longe, tarde, cede, recede, redi." See Muratori, 446; and Gazzaniga, 52.
65. These are among the typical measures taken by cities and towns of our period, as repeatedly described in many of our sources, e.g., Baldinucci, Cartari, Gastaldi, Marchini, Pallavicino, and Rondinelli. The detail about the elimination of the dogs comes from Baldinucci, 193. The most complete description of these measures, accompanied by numerous detailed illustrations, is that of Gastaldi. Among the many secondary sources discussing this topic, see the most recent Benvenuto. For further discussion of dogs and the plague, see Thomas Worcester's essay in the present catalogue.
66. Baldinucci, 199.
67. Pallavicino, 6.
68. Cartari, 248.
69. Muratori, 470.
70. Gastaldi, 680.
71. Kircher, 1.

72. Tomitano, 267-68: "Bartolus dicit: quid credis sit pestis, nisi bellum Dei contra nos?" For Marchini's title, see his discussion, "Tituli explicatio: cur divinum bellum," included in the "Apparatus ad tractatum," the unpaginated preface to his *Belli divini*.
73. Balducci, 194. Later (202) Balducci cites as proof of this belief the fact that "no nuns or friars have so far died from the contagion, except for those who looked after the afflicted and a few others."
74. Mascardi and Achillini, 14-15. For Manzoni's borrowings from these letters, see Bellini, 31-32.
75. Bellintani da Salò, 3738.
76. Panigarola, 264v-272r. For the dissemination of this and other works by Panigarola in France, see Thomas Worcester's essay in the present catalogue.
77. Possevino, 19r-23r. The attribution to Possevino was made by J. Patrick Donnelly, according to A. Lynn Martin, 89, n. 1. Possevino's text was widely disseminated in our period: first published in Macerata in 1576 by episcopal order, it was reprinted in Florence in the following year and then again in Milan in 1630.
78. The list is given in the unpaginated preface, "Apparatus ad tractatum," to Marchini, *Belli divini*.
79. Tomitano, 268-77.
80. Possevino, 12v-19r.
81. Possevino, 17r, v.
82. For this topos in art, see Boeckl 1996. For the discussion of heresy in *Cause et rimedii*, see 13v-14r; see also A. Lynn Martin, 95.
83. Panigarola, 272-74 for both the Protestant and Turkish threats. Plague is used as an image for heresy also in that best-selling inquisitional encyclopedia of early modern Europe, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches, first. publ. 1485): see, e.g., Part 3, Question 29.
84. Deaux, 6. The unidentified New Testament episodes to which Deaux refers are, I presume, Matthew 9:1-8 and John 5:1-14.
85. For a list of scriptural references to the plague, see, e.g., Day, 659; and Fuller, Index, s.v., "Plague."
86. See, e.g., Possevino, 11v-12r and 13r. Other references to the punishment of David in the plague literature are Panigarola, 265; Bellintani da Salò, 3738; and Marchini, *Belli divini*, unpaginated preface ("Apparatus ad tractatum").
87. Busti, 166-67.
88. Boeckl 2000, 54.
89. Marshall 1994, 518 and figs. 15-16.
90. The undated canvas (154.5 x 117.5 cm), now in a private collection in Australia and on extended loan to the Art Gallery of Western Australia, West Perth, is not listed in Ferrari's complete catalogue of Giordano's works. For the second larger and horizontal version (164 x 207 cm.), see Ferrari 1992, I, entry A372 and figure 481, where it is listed as "art market, Madrid" and given the date 1685, "presumed to be from [Giordano's] Spanish period since the same subject appears in the Escorial decoration; however, the painting would seem to have been executed before [his] departure for Spain." (See n. 95 below regarding a Giordano King David inventoried in Rome in 1682.) For the Escorial fresco, see Ferrari 1992, I, entry A525, p. 333 and fig. 663. A copy of the Australian Giordano, formerly property of the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, bore an attribution to Giordano's disciple, Paolo de Matteis, at the time of its sale at Sotheby's, New York, *Important Old Master Paintings*, June 7, 1978, lot 195. However, the canvas, presently in the Bob Jones University Museum, is now attributed to August Heyn (1837-1920), on the basis of what appears to be his signature inscribed on the reverse (personal communication from John Nolan, BJUM Curator, August, 2003).
91. Meyer, 122; the remark about the king's piety comes from Carr, 49. For David as a model for early modern princes, see also Polleross.
92. Marchini, *Belli divini*, unpaginated preface ("Apparatus ad tractatum"), "nobilitium virorum superbia ac ambitio inordinata."
93. See Burke and Cherry, 1:746, item n. 300 of Inventory n. 109. Although the description does not completely match either of the already-cited Giordano King David canvases, it is, nonetheless, very close and could in fact be referring to one of them, any discrepancy being due, perhaps, to hasty observation on the part of the compiler of the inventory. In any case, there is no other known treatment of this King David subject by Giordano. Burke and Cherry do note that "some evidence . . . suggests that many of Don Gaspar's pictures bore unrealistic attributions" (1:727); however, Giordano himself was present in the city at the same time and hence such a mistake in attribution would seem strange. For a brief biography of Don Gaspar (also known as the Marqués de Eliche, or Heliche or Liche), see Burke and Cherry, 1:462; and the *Grove Dictionary of Art*, s.v., "Carpio, Marqués de."
94. Poussin's composition is believed to have been changed after Caroselli's copy had been completed. For discussion of the Poussin and Caroselli canvases see Barker, 297-303, as well as her essay in the present catalogue; for both Poussin and Caroselli, see *Roma 1630*, 162-71.
95. Panigarola, 265.
96. For a typical early modern exegesis of the Brazen Serpent story, see that of the great Jesuit biblical commentator, Cornelio a Lapide (1567-1637), in his *Commentaria in Scriptura Sacra*, "Commentaria in Numeros," 2:304-06.
97. Oliva, "Sermone detto nell'Oratorio de' Nobili al Giesù, l'Ultima Domenica dopo la Pentecoste," *Sermoni detti*, 789-70, s. 630. In the same passage, Oliva refers to the "corpi apestati" (*sic*), the bodies of the plague-stricken victims of the fiery serpents, further reminding us of the ready connection that the early modern imagination made between this Old Testament story and plague epidemics.
98. For the Scuola di San Rocco, see Howard, 156-59; and Andrew Hopkins's essay in this catalogue.
99. Kaminski, 256.
100. Lapide, *Great Commentary*, Saint John's Gospel, 112. On the same page Lapide inserts another polemical swipe against the Protestants, commenting: "From all that has been said, it will appear how foolish is Calvin's interpretation that this lifting up of Christ is not His Crucifixion but the preaching of His Gospel." For Lapide's commentary on the Old Testament text of the Brazen Serpent episode, see n. 98 above. For another seventeenth-century commentary on the same Old Testament episode, see Segneri, 1:334-38.
101. Lapide, *Great Commentary*, Saint John's Gospel, 111. The anti-iconoclastic implications of the episode had been pointed out by second-century Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, long before the virulent controversies surrounding the legitimacy of devotional images of the eight- and ninth-century Byzantine Church and later of the

- Protestant Reformation. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, commenting upon the Brazen Serpent episode, Justin asks rhetorically, "Tell me, did not God, through Moses, forbid the making of an image or likeness of anything in the heavens or on earth? Yet didn't he himself have Moses construct the brazen serpent in the desert?" (quoted in Lienhard, 241).
102. For the use of amulets as plague remedies, see Kircher, 113-14; see also Smoller, 173-74; and Baldwin. Regarding the Roman god of healing, Aesculapius, it was in part because of the plague, we might point out, that the ancient Romans imported him to their city (Shelton, 367-68).
103. *Twilight of the Medici*, 220, entry 128, on which my discussion of the canvas here depends, as well as Baldassari, 175-76.
104. Baldassari, 176. For the provenance of the canvas, see *Twilight of the Medici*, 220; and Baldassari, 175-76.
105. *Copia di una lettera pastorale di monsig. illustrissimo cardinal Paleotti vescovo di Bologna al popolo suo nel pericolo della peste*, 1576, quoted by Zanette, 447.
106. Rondinelli, "A lettori," unpaginated; Muratori, 518.
107. Rondinelli, 234; Tomitano, "De peste," 267. Jesuit preacher Gian Paolo Oliva instead mocks the pagans who turned to their false god, Apollo, in time of plague and perished nonetheless: "Predica detta nella Basilica di San Pietro, la Domenica corrente fra le ferie dell'Epifania." *Aggiunta a' quaranta sermoni*, 180-81.
108. Busti, 174-85; and in summary fashion, Panigarola, 27.
109. Tomitano, "De peste," 266.
110. In Pallavicino, see, e.g., 15-16; Bellintani da Salò, 3745-46; Possevino, 36r-v.
111. Marchini, *Belli divini*, unpaginated prefatory section, "Apparatus ad tractatum." For the relic of the Holy Nail, see Pamela Jones's essay in the present catalogue.
112. Gregory of Tours, 2:426 (Book 10:1).
113. For the topic of sudden death in early modern Catholicism, see Worcester 1999, 90.
114. For the painting (of which another version exists in the Snite Museum, University of Notre Dame), see Spear 1971, 88-89; for this theme in art and in Italian culture in general, see Scalabroni; and Scaramella.
115. For the complete original text, see *Antologia della poesia italiana: Seicento*, 60. For Rosa's canvas and his personal experiences in this period of his life, see Scott, 108-17; *Treasures from the Fitzwilliam*, cat. 99; *Salvator Rosa* (exh. cat. Hayward Gallery), cat. 27; and Scaramella, 85 (74-85 for the Baroque period in general). For the same pessimistic view of human existence, see Fioravanti, bk. 1, chap. 57, pp. 60v-61r.
116. Bellintani da Salò, 3757.
117. Deaux, 5. Deaux is here specifically referring to the experience of the Black Death of 1348 but the psychological reaction holds true for subsequent outbreaks as well.
118. Marshall 1994, 516.
119. For Francis Xavier as plague saint, see Clifton, 491-94; and Boeckl 2000, 129-30. Xavier also appears in Guido Reni's famous ex-voto plague banner, the *Pallione del voto*, 1630, discussed later in this essay.
120. Possevino, 34v; Marchini includes his extracts from Cyprian among the unpaginated prefatory materials in *Belli divini*. Muratori also offers a list of specific works of spiritual consolation (539-40) but his list mostly comprises modern titles.
121. Cyprian, *Mortality*, chap. 5, 202-3.
122. Cyprian, *Mortality*, chap. 14, 210.
123. For statistics on the chronic food crises of early modern Italy, see Black, 25; for the problem of famine, see also Thomas Worcester's essay in the present catalogue.
124. Cyprian, *Works and Almsgiving*, 231.
125. Jansen and Sutton, 81.
126. For Sweett's Seven Acts of Mercy series, see Jansen and Sutton, 81-93.
127. Roscio, 41.
128. For the allegories of charity in early modern painting, see *L'allégorie dans la peinture*.
129. Tomitano, 271.
130. Possevino, 23r-29r; Marchini, *Belli divini*, 268-310.
131. Quoted by Ward in Townsend and Ward, 13. For confraternities and their art in time of plague, see, e.g., Marshall 2000.
132. Marchini, *Belli divini*, 275. For Bernardino and the plague of 1400 in Siena, see Mormando 1999a, 34.
133. Tomitano, 271-72; for the full quotation from Bernardino of Siena, see his *Opera omnia*, 3:173.
134. Tomitano, 272, 273; Muratori, 543. As Thomas Worcester explains in his essay in the present catalogue, Saint Roch also invoked the Holy Name of Jesus to cure cases of the plague.
135. For this *modello*, see Spike, who instead claims that the scene depicts a penitential plague procession, in which Bernardo successfully intercedes for the cessation of the plague, that cessation being signaled by the angel at the center of the composition seen in the act of departure (Spike 116).
136. Segneri, no. 13, 2:608, col. 2. For further discussion of Gonzaga as plague saint, as well as of the Batoni portrait and the controversial question of the saint's "martyrdom," see Sheila Barker's essay in the present catalogue.
137. Information from the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org.
138. Boeckl 2000, 40.
139. For Saint Roch, see Thomas Worcester's essay in this catalogue.
140. For the plague and the Madonna della Misericordia, see Marshall 1994, 506-15.
141. For the history behind and iconography of Reni's *Pallione*, see Puglisi (411 for the reference to the supplanted Madonnas). For Longhen's Santa Maria della Salute, see Andrew Hopkins's essay in the present catalogue.
142. This extraordinary event is described in detail by at least three contemporaries: see Baldinucci, 199-201; Rondinelli, 276-84, in the long appendix (247-84) to his *Relazione del contagio*, entitled *Breve Relazione della Madonna dell'Impruneta*; and Sobel, 265-68, who quotes the letters of eyewitness, Suor Maria Celeste Galilei. Rondinelli's claim is in his *Impruneta Appendix*, 275; at the very end of the same appendix can be found an itemized catalogue of the gifts made to the Madonna on this occasion.
143. The attribution of the small *bozzetto* (37 x 28 cm., oil on canvas) to Rosi was made privately by Roberto Contini to its owner, Mary Jane Harris (personal communication from M.J. Harris). Rosi (ca. 1585/89-1633) was one of Cristofano Allori's most devoted pupils and most intimate collaborators; it was he in fact who completed many of Allori's works left unfinished while Allori was all but incapacitated by an illness that led to his premature death in 1621. For Rosi, see Contini (121 for the conjectured dates of birth); Thiem, 32; and Pizzorusso, 31, 33, 54; the date of

Rosi's death is given by Brooks, 36.

144. The identification of the Marian icon here depicted was made privately by Mina Gregori to its owner (personal communication from M. J. Harris). Under the clouds at the right, let us note, appears the faint outline of yet another episcopal miter. In black and white photographs Roch might be easily mistaken for John the Baptist, but in the full-color *bozzetto* itself, the red bubo on his upper right leg and the white shell of Saint James on his pilgrim's staff are clearly discernible. I have identified the saint on the extreme left as Michael the Archangel: although he does not bear wings, his military apparel and the balances in his hand – both traditional attributes of the saint – strongly suggest this identification. The blond, barefooted female saint is likely to be Mary Magdalene, a popular model of repentance, one of the most important of the *rimedi spirituali* for the plague. Supporting Gregori's identification of the Impruneta icon is the thick wrap of cloth surrounding the image, which the *putti* have just raised to expose the image to the viewer: as Baldinucci reports in his diary (201), "This most holy image of Impruneta is covered with many cloths and is never exposed; and they say ... that God desires it to remain hidden, because anciently some prelates wished to expose it and lost their eyesight in various accidents and as soon as they put the cloths back on they were made whole again." See also Rondinelli, 250, who confirms this fact: "in so many centuries of being hidden [from human sight], there is no memory of anyone who has ever seen [the Madonna's image]." Hence, the icon in Rosi's *bozzetto* does not represent an accurate representation drawn from the actual image (of late Gothic style), still extant and now on public display, fully uncovered, at Impruneta.

145. *Antiphonae*, 22.

146. For the cult of Sebastian, see the *Acta Sanctorum*, "De S. Sebastiano Mart.," *Butler's Lives*, Jan. 20th, 242-44; and Gordini. For his iconography, see Cannata; Jones, 31-36; Marshall 1994, 488-500; Schiferel; Réau; Zupnick; and, especially for Rome, Barker, 13-14, 51-52, 60-65, 70-78, 113-14, 253-83, as well as her essay in the present catalogue 147. Gordini, 777.

148. *Acta Sanctorum*, "De S. Sebastiano Mart.," 642.

149. Réau, 1197. For Baronio and Sebastian, see von Henneberg, 138-41.

150. Réau, 1191.

151. For Barberini's devotion to Sebastian, see Schütze, 92; and Rice 1997, 192-93.

152. Réau, 1191; Rice 1997, 96n.68; Gordini, 785; Martin, *Roma sancta*, 28, 32. For the location of the saint's relics, see *Acta Sanctorum*, "De S. Sebastiano Mart." 625-28.

153. Marchini, *Philosophica de pestilentia problemata*, *Problemata VIII*, 17. For the arrows as symbol of divine wrath in pagan mythology and the Bible, see Deaux, 15; Marshall 1994, 493-95; Schiferel, 211.

154. *Acta Sanctorum*, "De S. Sebastiano Mart.," 624.

155. Gregory Martin, 42; see also Frutaz, 6; Réau, 1192-93; and Cannata, 793.

156. Réau, 1192.

157. See Cannata, 794, for both the eighth-century legend and for Sebastian as a "pretext for a free anatomical virtuosity."

158. For Sebastian and Apollo, see Deaux, 38; Freedman, 9-10; Marshall 1994, 491-93; Schiferel, 209; Zupnick, 217-18.

159. Marshall 1994, 491-500; Schiferel, 215-17. Note that

Marshall and Schiferel base their observations only on Renaissance (i.e., fifteenth-century) representations of Sebastian. Barker (253-83) notes the same explicit Christological casting of Sebastian in Roman art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although, again, contemporary textual confirmation is wanting.

160. Domenichino's original altarpiece was replaced by a mosaic copy and placed in the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli; for the altarpiece, see, Rice 1997, 192-97; Barker, 5:272-81. The Strozzi canvas was recently reunited with its long-missing upper portion (containing the *putti*); see Temin.

161. Ottonelli and Berrettini devote many pages to this theme; references to Sebastian can be found on pp. 42 and 289. For the same concern about nudity of the saints in art, see Mormando 1999b, 117-18; and Brown, 281-90. For the Ottonelli-Berrettini treatise, see Bailey, 171.

162. For a discussion of sexuality in Reni's several depictions of Sebastian and in the artist's own life, see Spear 1997, 67-76.

163. For Rosalie's life and cult, see *Acta Sanctorum*, "De S. Rosalia Virgine;" *Amore*; *Butler's Lives*; Collura, 9-78.

164. *Amore*, 428.

165. *Butler's Lives*, "Saint Rosalia, virg.," 49. For the events of 1624-25 leading up to the rediscovery of Rosalie's body and the subsequent renaissance of her popular cult, see Collura, 79-92.

166. *Acta Sanctorum*, "De S. Rosalia Virgine," 349, for Urban's devotion to Rosalie, his poem in her honor, and the relic given to him by the Duke. (The running marginal note to this *Acta Sanctorum* essay reads "Auctore J.S.," that is, Johannes Stilting, S.J.) See Collura, 84 for the date of the papal brief, "Scriptam in caelesti," announcing Rosalie's insertion in the Roman Martyrology. It is here appropriate to note, by the way, that, contrary to previous report (Boeckl, 57), Pope Urban never contracted the plague in Palermo or in any other locality.

167. *Acta Sanctorum*, "De S. Rosalia Virgine," 349-50. Stilting therein says (350) the oration was published in "Cascini, p. 51 seq." – most likely referring to Cascini's posthumous *Di Santa Rosalia, romita palermitana, palesata con libri tre ... nelli quali si spiegano l'inventione delle Sacre Reliquie, la vita solitaria, e gli honori di lei con aggiunta di Tre digressioni storiche, del Monte Pellegrino, ove visse e morì, di suo parentado, ch'ebbe discendenza dall'imperatore Carlo Magno, e d'alcuni componimenti in sua lode* (Palermo, 1651), which, unfortunately, I have not been able to consult in order to compare the oration texts in question. For this 1651 work, see Collura, 118.

168. Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, Vol. Miscellanee 1370, no. 1.

169. For the Spanish "occupation" of Rome in our period, see Dandeleit.

170. *Oratio Sanctae Rosaliae*, 7. Specifically mentioned are the "nobilissimae gentis de Aragona et Moncada" and Antonio duke of Montalto (the same *devoto* of Saint Rosalie, mentioned by the Bollandist Stilting), as well as "Ioannam de Lacerda Medinae Caeli Ducis filiam." Saint Teresa of Avila is also cited here.

171. For Van Dyck's Rosalie paintings, see Gauvin Bailey's essay in the present catalogue, as well as Martin and Feigenbaum. For Rosalie in art, see also Collura, 95-95-114, 125-82, figs. 1-99 and pls. 1-24. The *Acta Sanctorum* entry on Rosalie contains many illustrations and reproductions of her image in art, especially those of pre-1600 vintage.

172. Martin and Feigenbaum, 126.
173. Barker, 304, n. 242.
174. Amore, 428.
175. Gregory XIII, *Jubileum ad avertenda pestis pericula*. ("Calamitosum e miserabilem huius nostri"), publicatum Bononiae die 28 octobris 1576, M. Datarius Cal. Glorierius A. de Alexiis, apud Alexandrum Benatium.
176. *L'art religieux après le Concile de Trente* (Paris: Colin, 1932, 383), quoted by Barker, Preface, iv.

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Plague Art in Early Modern Rome: Divine Directives and Temporal Remedies

SHEILA BARKER

In times of plague (may God not will it) everyone who wishes to take part in this life [of service] must promise to serve those plague victims if he is commanded to do so by the Superior [of the order], however it is the *raison d'être* of this Company to give help to plague victims, both as Priests and as Layfolk.

Saint Camillo of Lellis, *Rule of the Company of the Ministers of the Sick* (1584)

When one seeks to serve God in serving his neighbor, it is a most supremely noble form of charity, sometimes more deserving of heaven's mercy than so many other acts of devotion.

Ludovico Antonio Muratori, *Del governo della peste e delle maniere di guardarsene* (1714)

When Bernardo Bellotto, a stranger to Rome and its history, chose his vantage point for *View of the Tiber with Castel Sant'Angelo* (cat. 20), he unwittingly placed himself in the midst of a setting once blighted by memories of plague. Trastevere, the neighborhood immediately adjacent to him as he contemplated his view, had been walled in like a giant tomb one night without warning during the plague of 1656 to prevent its residents from spreading the contagion to the rest of the city. The church of S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini that Bellotto painted in the right foreground was the home of the confraternity of the Pietà established in 1448 "when after a great eclipse of the sun Rome was left devastated by earthquakes and pestilence, and no one could be found to bury the dead, especially the poor among them."¹ Castel Sant'Angelo, the massive structure dominating the center of his canvas, had given scarce shelter to the papal court from the plague introduced by Charles V's army in 1527. At the fortress's peak, Raffaello del Lupo's sculpture commemorated the angel that, according to later legends, had appeared in the sky during the plague of 590, sheathing its bloody sword to signal the end of the plague as Pope Gregory I led a procession across the river.² This miracle is depicted in numerous Roman images all sharing the same configuration of fortress, river, and sky characterizing Bellotto's canvas, including Giovanni de' Vecchi's painting at S. Maria in Aracoeli, Giovanni Battista Montalto's fresco in S. Angelo ai Corridori di Borgo (now in the church of the Annunziatella), a fresco in the Santissima Trinità dei Monti by an assistant of Michelangelo, Jacopo Zucchi's painting formerly in S. Maria Maggiore (now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana), Giovanni Battisti Ricci da Novara's fresco in S. Gregorio al Celio, and an anonymous fresco in the atrium of that same church (fig. 3) which also depicts the Tiber River's infestation of snakes, then considered both a symbol and natural cause of pestilence.³

This river, placid and beguiling in Bellotto's view, for millennia had engirdled the city with danger, periodically unleashing bouts of pestilence. The populace sought to protect itself in antiquity by lining the shores with a phalanx of cults propitiating such health deities as Febris, Apollo, and Esculapius.⁴ These prophylactic cults were suppressed in the Christian era, but the river continued to be feared as a source of contagious diseases. Rome's physicians warned during the Renaissance that usage of the Tiber for drinking water "brings plague and

*Hope
and
Healing*

3. Anonymous, *The Plague Procession of Pope Gregory I*, ca.1642. Fresco. S. Gregorio al Celio, Rome.



4. Giovanni Battista Vanni, *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene*, 1625. Oil on canvas. S. Giovanni de' Fiorentini, Rome.



ruin to this city," and a slew of fountains fed by repaired aqueducts were built to provide a safer alternative.⁵ When bubonic plague swept through Italy in 1630, giant chains were hoisted from bank to bank at night to protect the city from surreptitious arrivals of contaminated cargo and travelers. These measures came too late during the plague of 1656, when a single Neapolitan fisherman sailed up this artery and debarked with a disease that killed more than 8,000 Romans, clogging the Stygian waterway with the traffic of little boats carrying blackened corpses to the mass grave near St. Paul's Basilica. (see Andrew Hopkins, p. 141 in this essay, on how a traveler from Trent brought the plague to Venice.)

Arriving in Rome in 1741 – the same year that epidemic fevers broke out for the first time in New York⁶ – Bellotto encountered a society with an ancient history of epidemic disease and a plague culture quite distinct from that of his native Venice. However, over the preceding hundred years, advances in public health had spawned changes in the themes and functions of plague art, not only in Rome, but in other European capitals as well. As a result, obsolete now were many of the traditions and practices developed when plague was still seen from a position of almost total vulnerability. Even the disease itself was practically obsolete: plague had not touched Rome since 1696, and by the time of Bellotto's visit, Italy had endured its final outbreak of bubonic plague, aside from a limited outbreak affecting Messina in 1743.⁷ In this essay, we will examine plague art from the years leading up to Bellotto's arrival to Rome in light of the dramatic adaptations in the social response to epidemic disease. What role this cultural transformation might have played in the disappearance of bubonic plague from Europe so long before the true cause of the disease and its vectors were discovered is a question left for others to pursue.

The first significant evidence of this cultural transformation in plague art can be found in the early seventeenth-century depictions of Saint Sebastian – a universal plague saint to be sure, but one with particularly strong ties to Rome, where he was almost killed, then cured, then martyred, and finally buried. The traditional iconography of the saint depicts the first, unsuccessful attempt on his life: with origins in the tenth century and familiar throughout the European continent, it features Sebastian bound to a post and left to die after being shot with arrows by Diocletian's guard, as in *Virgin and Child with Saints Sebastian and Roch*, by Bernardino Luini (cat. 13). The image of the nude, wounded youth suspended on a column or a tree bears certain pictorial similarities to the Crucified Christ, especially in light of the knowledge that he will be restored to health; at the same time, in popular culture those arrows lodged in Sebastian's flesh retained their pagan association with plague. Both of these factors contributed to the folkloristic appeal of this traditional image of Sebastian, and to its superstitious use as a powerful shield against epidemic diseases: according to homeopathic magic as well as the ancient principle of totem sacrifice, the icon of a man inflicted with flesh wounds was commonly believed to repel and cure all those maladies blamed on the invisible, airborne arrows of divine anger.

By the time the plague of Palermo reached Rome in 1625, an alternative iconography for Sebastian had emerged. An altarpiece completed that year by Giovanni Battista Vanni (fig. 4), shows Irene and her assistants carefully extracting the arrows from Sebastian's flesh and covering his open wounds with medicinal ointments, working under the cover of darkness as they contravene Diocletian's death sentence and risk discovery by the imperial guards. Contemporary works of the same subject include *Saint Sebastian Attended by Saint Irene* attributed to Nicolas Régnier (cat. 15) and Bernardo Strozzi's *Saint Sebastian Tended by Saint Irene and her Maid* (cat. 16), with its strongly christological imprint recalling traditional images of Sebastian.

Two important changes are represented by this new iconography. First, as a history rather than a static icon, the representation of the Cure of Sebastian largely displaces the saint's

intercessory function with a moral or didactic emphasis; second, in depicting the care lavished on Sebastian's wounds, these images constitute a pronounced endorsement of temporal medicine in the treatment of bodily suffering. This emphasis on the role of medical intervention in Sebastian's cure links all the earlier morphologies of the subject, including those in which angels provide medical assistance (such as Giovanni Baglione's *Saint Sebastian Cured by an Angel*, executed in Rome in 1601), and those in which a male surgeon leads Irene and a male helper in the saint's cure (as in the case of Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri's *Cure of Saint Sebastian*, executed in Rome c.1615-18); it is clearly the most significant aspect of the new iconography.⁸

Images of the Cure of Sebastian seem to have served as the special insignia of laymen who volunteered to assist the sick, especially plague victims, at Rome's hospitals.⁹ Vanni's image, for example, was made for the church of S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini, which by this time had its own hospital, managed by the confraternity of the Pietà noted above; likewise, Giovanni Baglione painted his *Cure of Saint Sebastian by Angels* (1624) for a chapel at the church of S. Maria dell'Orto, the seat of a confraternity that oversaw the operations of a hospital annex staffed by doctors, priests, and assistants, as well as a pharmacy.¹⁰ As attested by one confraternity's sixteenth-century charter, the members of such brotherhoods were not only "motivated by piety," they were also "mindful of their own salvation."¹¹ Images of the Cure of Sebastian conceivably served functions corresponding to these two concerns. By showing Irene tenderly dressing wounds of the young, handsome, and unyielding Christian martyr, Baglione's and Vanni's paintings fostered piety toward an ideal patient so that the charitable caregivers might follow this example and "without any feelings of disgust look upon the sick."¹² The image also evoked direct comparisons between the confraternities that succored Rome's sick and their saintly (or angelic) prototypes who had aided Sebastian; by implication, both groups of caretakers might hope for the saint to reciprocate by interceding for their eternal salvation.

The Cure of Sebastian was – along with the Good Samaritan, Caritas Romana, and Tobias Curing his Father's Blindness – one of a handful of subjects available for the representation of medical assistance as a work of piety, an interpretation emphasized by the fact that Irene and her helpers are often referred to in the titles of such images as "*pie donne*," pious women. Yet among the subjects of this type, the Cure of Sebastian is most closely associated with contagious epidemics, since Sebastian's arrows retain their identity as metaphors for plague, and his caregivers risk their own lives to help their patient – just as in plaguetime. Altarpieces depicting the Cure of Sebastian therefore qualify as the first ever to figure within the sacred space of Rome's churches the goals and means of charitable medicine in association with plague.¹³

What is the significance of this? In effect, with these altarpieces depicting the Cure of Sebastian, the Church was redefining its role in relation to the problem of disease, especially epidemic disease. Stated most simply, these images signal a shift of emphasis from the bodily needs of the patient to the spiritual motives of the healer. The imagery of the older but still vital paradigm had addressed the afflicted in the form of miracle-working icons or thaumaturgic saints that promised spiritual cures for temporal ailments – a stance that, over the centuries, increasingly brought the Church into competition with other available therapeutic systems, such as pharmaceutical medicine and civic sanitation, while doing little to suppress the more heterodox systems of astrology, folk medicine, and witchcraft.¹⁴ The imagery of the new paradigm resolved this competition with temporal remedies by addressing instead the community of the healthy, spurring them to practice Christ-like charity toward the sick, and advocating natural medicines as one means of carrying out this spiritual mission.¹⁵

The incursion of an iconography of "temporal remedies" into the images decorating

Rome's churches is a result of important medical developments that took place in the sixteenth century, and that were connected to the general inclination toward reform then prevalent within the Catholic Church. The way for these advancements was in a large sense laid by the Capuchin order, the strictest followers of the Franciscan Rule, who became independent in 1528 as the *Fratres Minores de vita eremitica*. Clearly, the notion of eremitism explicit in their official title did not stop them from coming to the aid of the laity. They earned admiration for their selfless care of syphilis patients at Rome's hospital of S. Giacomo degli Incurabili (where they collaborated with the laymen of the Compagnia del Divino Amore, established at that hospital in 1515 under Ettore Vernazza), and for their devoted care of plague victims during the epidemics of 1577 and 1630.¹⁶

In assisting the sick, the Capuchins conformed to the precepts of scientific medicine with sanitary practices that included the purification of the foul-smelling air of the lazaretto with incense and the frequent changing of patients' bed linens; they also furnished medicines including the famous "Capuchin Syrup" at their Roman pharmacy, opened in 1633.¹⁷ Clearly, though, their service at the lazaretto transcended the concern for preserving the life of the body, especially when it came to their own bodies. Paradigmatic in this sense is Vittore da Milano's indifference to the risk of contracting disease at the Milanese pesthouse during the plague of 1630, modeled after Saint Francis of Assisi's zealous service among the lepers of Gubbio. According to one Capuchin witness,

Every day, even though extremely busy, he celebrated Mass, administered the Holy Eucharist, and gave sacramental Absolution to many out of heartfelt concern. In fact, this father was so full of charity and affection that, like a loving mother, he rushed to meet the carts arriving with the infected victims, and with his own hands helped to unload the sick and place them on the grass; he provided each with a place in the shelter, and with words overflowing with divine wisdom he encouraged them to bear the pain of the contagious disease while remitting their sins, and many of these victims would die in his arms.¹⁸

Thus, even as they sought to minimize the physical discomfort of the patients using medicinal remedies, the Capuchins were distinguished from the physicians with whom they worked in these lazarettos by their ultimate concern for their own and the patients' souls in preparation for the death that was sometimes postponed, but nonetheless inevitable.

An anecdote from the Palermo plague of 1624 describes how the friars addressed the universal malady that the physician's medicine can never cure, our mortal nature. At a lazaretto run by the Capuchins, a plague victim asked a doctor why God should allow the Capuchin fathers, his faithful servants, to die as they carried out their charitable work. The doctor replied, "Medicine did not educate me to investigate the judgments of God, but I can say this: that the Capuchin fathers teach us in life how we ought to live, and here in death they teach us how we ought to die; they die before us, with our same disease, and thus we learn, may it please God, that a true Christian dies resigned to obey God's will, contrite and humble, just as we have seen his servants the Capuchins die."¹⁹ This exchange dramatically illustrates how strictly Capuchins lived, and died, by the Catholic teaching that disease – even plague – has a place within the economy of salvation: it creates an opportunity for the caregiver to express his divine devotion through works of selfless charity, as well as an opportunity for both the victim and the caregiver to submit to the operation of divine grace.²⁰ Indeed, the numerous surviving accounts of the order's service to plague victims testify to the fact that despite their employment of "human" or "temporal" remedies to protect patients from the ravages of dis-

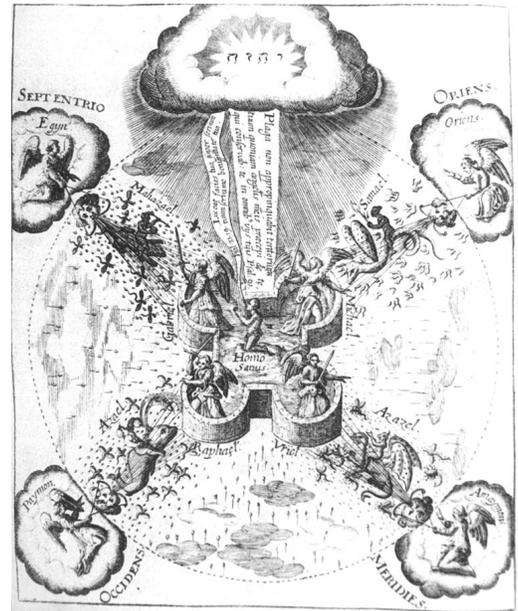
ease and to lessen their suffering, the Capuchins conceived of their mission as a religious one rather than a medical one, and were thus readily disposed to sacrifice their own bodies in order to save others' souls and give spiritual comfort.²¹

Though the Capuchins used temporal remedies in their care for the victims of plague and other contagious diseases, there is no indication of this aspect of their service in the imagery of their church of S. Maria della Concezione in Rome, built with the generous patronage of Urban VIII Barberini and his family. Construction of the church began just after the plague of Palermo receded, and the altarpiece commissions were determined in the wake of the next plague of 1630.²² However, aside from two altarpieces in this church depicting miraculous healings – Andrea Sacchi's *Saint Anthony of Padua Reviving a Dead Man* and Pietro da Cortona's *Ananias of Damascus Cures Saint Paul's Blindness* – it is difficult for the modern visitor to recognize in the other altarpieces (depicting christological subjects, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, Saint Francis, Saint Michael, and Saint Felix of Cantalice) any relation to the impact of plague. Only once it is understood that this order addressed disease foremost as a consequence of sin – the first cause of all human suffering – do the other subjects of christological devotion and Capuchin intercessors cohere logically into a single decorative program guided by the contingencies of plague.²³

To give an example of how these other images in the church of the Concezione reflect a unified response to the danger of epidemic disease, we ought to consider its most celebrated altarpiece, Guido Reni's *Saint Michael the Archangel Overcoming Satan* (fig. 5), whose composition is repeated in Giovanni Andrea Sirani's painting of the same name (cat. 22).²⁴ In Reni's work, Michael appears as the warrior angel of Revelation 12:7-9, conquering evil at the end of

5. Guido Reni, *Saint Michael the Archangel Overcoming Satan*, ca. 1635. Oil on canvas. S. Maria della Concezione, Rome.

6. Robert Fludd, *Munimenti nostril sanatatis*, 1631. Woodcut *Integrum morborum mysterium: sive medicinae catholicae*, I:338. Photograph: Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma..



time. It was then an unusual subject in Rome, especially when compared to the more prevalent image of Michael as the plague-rescinding angel who visited the city during the procession of Saint Gregory the Great.²⁵ These two roles of the archangel, however, are closely related, especially with regard to their cultic significance in times of plague: since sin was designated by theologians as the precipitating cause for God's punishing plagues, Michael's apocalyptic victory over evil is complementary as well as necessary to his historical role as a plague-rescinding agent.

The cult of the archangel as Satan's conqueror promised divine protection against plague and other diseases – and not just because plague represented the microcosmic enactment of celestial Armageddon (“Heaven's invisible intestinal war,” as Mattia Naldi, a contemporary physician, put it).²⁶ Salutory aspects of the warrior angel's cult in Italy can be traced back to Saint Michael's shrine at Monte Gargano, which had long been known for miraculous cures when Saint Francis visited the sanctuary.²⁷ In Rome, the cult of the warrior angel may date back as early as 530; however, there is no evidence of the cult's specific connection to plague until the outbreak of 1427-33, when the first Roman lay organization dedicated to serving the sick formed under the name of San Michele Arcangelo.²⁸

Though the Counter-Reformation Church had used the Archangel's apocalyptic triumph over evil as a standard for its battle against Protestant heresy, Saint Michael's cult in the seventeenth century still embraced the idea of temporal triumph over disease. The persistence of the cult's salutory aspects is most evident in popular devotions to the Archangel, such as the Palermitan chapbook prayer that promises Michael will cure a mountebank's roster of ailments, preserving his devotees “from sickness, and evil, from fever, misfortune, and deformity, and from every other great pestilence.”²⁹ It can also be surmised from the decoration of the end wall of the Old Ward of the Lateran Hospital once painted with Gaspare Celio's (now lost) fresco of Saint Michael, and, likewise, from the decoration of a room of the Jesuit infirmary at the Roman novitiate with an image of Saint Michael victorious over sin, displayed alongside allegorical images comparing pride to epilepsy, avarice to fever, lust to sanguinary excesses, and the cardinal virtues to medicinal remedies.³⁰

A vague reference to Saint Michael's salutory powers occurs in the prayer “Te splendor et virtus Patris” that Pope Urban VIII composed for the Roman Breviary of 1632, in which Michael and his fellow angels are beseeched to defend “our life on earth.” Urban VIII's actions, however, spoke even louder: he dedicated his papacy to Saint Michael after recovering from malarial fever, and, in December of 1630, he went to Saint Michael's altar in St. Peter's Basilica in order to extend the Jubilee concession in light of the dangers of famine, war, and plague.³¹ (See Thomas Worcester's essay, p. 165, for more on Pope Urban VIII and the plague.) Given this pope's interest in the natural sciences, he probably entertained the humoral and mechanical explanations of the angelic role in disease professed by such esoteric physicians as Levinus Lemnius, who blamed certain fevers on “perverse Spirits” and attributed their vanquishment to the internal action of “good ... Spirits, that is, salutory Angels,” or Robert Fludd, whose cabalistic medicine describes four evil angels (Samael, Azazel, Azael, and Mahazael) who assail the individual with maladies and four good angels (Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael) who defend the individual, as figured in the marvelous illustrations to Fludd's book (fig. 6).³²

In a cultural climate in which there were even “scientific” corroborations of the hygienic aspects of Saint Michael's cult, we can be certain that the laurel branches painted on the ceiling of Saint Michael's chapel at S. Maria della Concezione (fig. 7), just above Reni's altarpiece, are more than a simple proprietary declaration of Barberini patronage. Clustered around placards invoking the warrior angel's protection, this vegetative motif refers as much to the laurel wreath of victory as to the medicinal uses of laurel to repel the plague, simultaneously

*Hope
and
Healing*



7. Anonymous, Ceiling ornament of the chapel of St. Michael, S. Maria della Concezione, Rome.

8. Anonymous, *Jesuits Helping the Sick*, ca. 1620-1650. Oil on canvas. Oratory of St. Luigi Gonzaga, Rome.





9. Giacomo Zoboli, *Saint Luigi Gonzaga Helping a Plague Victim*, 1726. Oil on canvas. SS. Carlo e Ambrogio, Rome.

invoking the two special roles of the archangel figured in Reni's altarpiece below: victor over sin, and defender of health. Let us be clear, though: Reni's altarpiece attests to the power of divine remedies; by contrast, natural cures – aside from the medicinal simple decorating the ceiling of Saint Michael's chapel – have no place in this Capuchin church's decorative program, despite the order's liberal provision of temporal remedies in their service in Italy's hospitals and lazarettos.

The same is true of the Roman churches belonging to another order founded in the sixteenth century, the Society of Jesus. Following the approval of their order in 1540, the Jesuits soon demonstrated their zeal for the charitable assistance of the sick, eclipsing the Capuchins in the use of scientific medicine and introducing to Europe new remedies and drugs discovered in the course of their missionary work around the world. At the Collegio Romano, (best known for its fresco decorations by Andrea Sacchi and Emilio Savonanzi), the Jesuits operated a pharmacy that distributed medicaments to the sick under the supervision of physicians, and their novices staffed all of Rome's most important hospitals.³³ Such myriad public-health activities are represented in a painting in the oratory of S. Luigi Gonzaga at the Collegio Romano (fig. 8), where Jesuits are shown treating patients in a fantastic setting more reminiscent of a great church than a hospital.

Yet despite the centrality of the assistance of the sick to the Jesuit mission in Baroque Rome, not a single altarpiece in the churches of the order makes allusion to their activities in this realm. Instead, it is an altarpiece in the basilica of SS. Carlo e Ambrogio al Corso where testimony is given of the Jesuits' efforts to allay suffering through charitable medicine. Giacomo Zoboli's 1726 *Saint Luigi Gonzaga Helping a Plague Victim* (fig. 9) depicts the young

novice of high birth who, disregarding his own health, carried a plague victim he found lying in the streets of Rome to S. Maria della Consolazione, the hospital where he was posted as part of his Jesuit training. As a result of his contact with the sick man, Luigi contracted a plague fever followed by the consumptive fever that killed him in June of 1591.

Zoboli's painting shows the saint assisting a plague victim within a hospital while three saints above – presumably Augustine, Catherine of Alexandria (though perhaps alluding to Catherine of Siena, seen with her pen in the contiguous altarpiece also by Zoboli), and Thomas Aquinas – observe as the Christ Child on the Virgin's lap holds a crown of roses above Luigi's head. This interpolation of a *sacra conversazione* within the secular space of a hospital is no less an iconographic novelty than the presence of a hospital scene within the sacred space of a Roman church. Among the works leading up to Zoboli's noteworthy image is an anonymous work (fig. 10) in the oratory of Saint Luigi Gonzaga in the Collegio Romano, executed in a simple, anecdotal style, perhaps by a follower of Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri. It shows Luigi striding briskly through Rome with the plague victim slung over his shoulder in a heroic pose that has been justly compared to depictions of Aeneas carrying Anchises.³⁴ Walking directly behind him with marked worry, an older Jesuit companion holds up the berretta that has fallen off Luigi's head, but Luigi is too consumed with his mission to consider his own dignity, appearance, or even safety, with his bare head leaving him all the more exposed to contagion and to the elements. Despite the fact that this image makes no explicit reference to medicine, it nevertheless speaks to the Jesuit order's enthusiastic provision of temporal remedies to the most needy: on the one hand it testifies to Luigi's resolve to bring his charge to a hospital where his health will be overseen by physicians, and, on the other, it demonstrates that Luigi's assistance was in itself a "temporal remedy," which neither transcended his limited mortal abilities nor involved miraculous interventions of a divine nature.

In the following years, probably around 1710, French sculptor Pierre Le Gros gave dra-

10. Follower of Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri, *Saint Luigi Gonzaga Helping a Plague Victim*, ca. 1610-15. Oil on canvas. SS. Oratory of St. Luigi Gonzaga, Rome.





11. Pierre Le Gros, *Saint Luigi Gonzaga Helping a Plague Victim*, ca. 1710. Marble.
Hospital of S. Spirito in Saxia, Rome.

matic emphasis to Christian spirituality in the marble *Saint Luigi Gonzaga Helping a Plague Victim* (fig. 11) he produced for the hospital of the Consolazione, now at the hospital of S. Spirito in Saxia.³⁵ Dispensing with humanistic narratives of heroic action, Le Gros sought instead to depict in monumental fashion the profound devotion that motivated Luigi's compassionate act. Key to this portrayal is the way that Luigi's large, ponderous figure envelopes the fragile, half-naked body of the invalid, unmistakably invoking such christological images as Michelangelo's marble *Pietà* in St. Peter's. With this pose, the artist unites two men's faces so closely that their breath must dangerously commingle; he also allows Luigi to look upon the man in his arms with such tenderness and depth of feeling that one understands that in this dejected, soiled, and diseased mortal Luigi recognizes Christ himself. Unperturbed by the revolting sight and smell of plague, Luigi appears even to pause at the threshold of the hospital with his burden, as if to savor the wellspring of Christian love that bonds him to this pitiful creature.

Inspiration for Le Gros's remarkable portrayal may have come in part from the hagiographies of one of Luigi's immediate models of charity toward the sick, Saint Filippo Neri. Canonized in 1622, Filippo had worked for many decades in Rome's hospitals alongside the greatest physicians of his age; along with Cesare Baronio and Francesco Maria Tarugi, he helped to establish the Istituto della Santissima Trinità for the care of poor convalescents and pilgrims; he also succeeded in inducing local nobility to work at the city's hospitals performing tasks that not even the lowest-ranking paid staff would deign to do.³⁶ It is said that once, when Giovanni Battista Salviati, cousin of the queen of France, was neglecting his hospital duties in order to pray in the church of S. Spirito, Filippo and a sick patient walked up behind him and dressed him in a white apron to remind him of his oath to "to leave aside God for God" (*lasciar Iddio per Iddio*), that is, to seek Christ not at the altar but in the sick, who are made in his image.³⁷ In likening the plague victim in Luigi's arms to the dead Christ, Le Gros reminds us of this teaching.

As for the assimilation of Luigi in his mercy to Mary, Mother of God, Le Gros was echoing the teaching of yet another religious healthcare reformer working in the hospitals of Rome: Saint Camillo of Lellis (1550-1614), founder of the order of the Ministers of the Sick. Camillo, who was canonized in 1746, left writings indicating the nature of his contribution to public healthcare, including the “Rules and practices to be followed in the hospitals when caring for the indigent sick” appended to the Rule he wrote for his order in 1584. The twenty-seventh item directs clerics to undertake their work in the hospitals with motherly compassion for the sick: “First, each one must ask for the Lord to bless him with a maternal affection for his neighbor, so that he might serve him with all the charity of his soul and his body, because we desire, with God’s grace, to serve all the sick with the same affection that is shown by a loving mother when her only child falls sick.”³⁸ This instruction to offer the patient maternal love, when coupled with Saint Filippo Neri’s exhortation to seek Christ among the sick, suggests that the Virgin Mary, and particularly Mary of the Pietà, served as an ideal model for the caregiver’s affective state.

When Le Gros’s marble relief was moved in 1936 to its present location in the hospital of Santo Spirito in Saxia, an inscription was added identifying Luigi as a “victim of Christian Charity” (*victima christianae caritatis*).³⁹ This phrasing confirms the Church’s new focus on the caregiver’s administration of temporal remedies as an act of sacrificial compassion. It also implies Luigi’s status as a martyr – a designation that had become the focus of heated debate in the decades following Luigi’s death, when some theologians began clamorously arguing that those who died in the course of caring for victims of the plague deserved the crown of martyrdom.⁴⁰ One of these proponents of plague martyrdom, Francesco Antonio Sarri of the Order of the Ministers of the Sick, wrote a treatise that narrowly avoided condemnation, the *Glorioso trionfo d’invitta morte di carità, emulatrice di vero martirio nel quale al vivo si dimostra la molta somiglianza ch’è fra la morte de’ Santi Martiri, e di coloro, ch’in servizio dell’appetati per la Carità Christiana muoiono* (Naples, 1632); other treatises, like Teofilo Raynaud’s *De Martirio per pestem* (Lyon, 1630) and Barnabite Filiberto Marchini’s *Belli divini, sive pestilentis temporis* (Florence, 1633), were put on the Roman Inquisition’s Index of prohibited books for declaring that those who died serving the sick “are to be declared martyrs and counted among them.”⁴¹

The refusal of the Church to qualify Luigi as a martyr proved no impediment to his canonization in 1726, the same year that Zoboli completed the altarpiece (fig. 9) for SS. Carlo e Ambrogio. In Zoboli’s work, emphasis is moved from the motives that compelled Luigi’s actions to their profound consequences. As Luigi fulfills his rescue mission by gently setting the blue-skinned plague victim in his hospital bed, the two figures are momentarily bound in a sweet embrace. The interlocking of their limbs underscores their interlocking fates as two mortals who would both soon succumb to death; this idea of their shared destiny is echoed by the nearly symmetrical mirroring of their arcing torsos. Without dismissing Le Gros’s earlier assimilation of the rapport between Luigi and the plague victim to a meditation upon the dead Christ, Zoboli’s composition calls attention to Luigi’s own mortal nature, as well as his own imminent transformation into a dying patient.

If Luigi is meant to be seen here as a man contemplating his own death, then Zoboli has shown him to be utterly at peace with these thoughts, painting Luigi with a smooth brow and a subtle veil of a smile. He freely offers his own arms to give a small bit of comfort to the wretched plague victim, surely thinking upon the eternal comfort that awaits them both in the arms of the Creator. In a letter to his mother, written in the final days of his illness, Luigi expressed himself in terms that reverberate strikingly with Zoboli’s image:

The violence of the fever at the height of its course and fervor has somewhat eased up, and [the sickness] had proceeded slowly in me up until the

glorious day of the Ascension. Beginning then, however, a great flow of phlegm took hold of my chest, such that, bit by bit, I am making my way toward the sweet and tender embraces of the Celestial Father, on whose breast I hope to rest safely forever.⁴²

Barker:
*Plague Art in Early
Modern Rome*

In this letter, we see how Luigi's experience as a health worker allowed him to monitor the progress of his disease; the letter also demonstrates that Luigi's knowledge of his body's accelerating material demise was accompanied by the perception of his soul's rapid advance toward eternal life. In this way, Luigi's last days exemplify the chiasmic relationship between spiritual growth and physiological death that was the crux of such religious treatises on the plague as Jesuit Etienne Binet's *Sovrani et efficaci rimedi contro la peste e morte subitana*, translated into Italian in 1656, which teaches that to find consolation in plague time one must "live dying," that is to say, through mortification and the frequent meditation upon death, deadly fears of death are overcome, and the way to eternal life is made clear.⁴³ (See Thomas Worcester's essay, p. 164, for more on Binet and the plague.)

Later images of Luigi frequently refer to these very sorts of meditations that prepared the Jesuits for the consequences of an active life of sacrificial service. A particularly exquisite example is the 1744 portrait, *Saint Luigi Gonzaga*, by Pompeo Batoni (cat. 19). Luigi's death at the tender age of 23 vividly exemplified the early-modern conviction, expressed by Binet, that "Living a long life is of little consequence, since what matters most is dying well."⁴⁴ Batoni's work contrasts the healthy, pink bloom of Luigi's youthful countenance with death's skull beside him, an alarming reminder that it is never too early to begin preparing for the next world.

Batoni's painting carries an additional message, suggesting with its subtle poetics that these spiritual preparations can take on a physical expression as well. If we consider the imagery carefully, we can see how fully Luigi is engaging his body in his meditations, cradling the crucifix against his breast (with the same gentleness he would later direct toward the plague victim), setting his supporting arm directly atop the skull as if to enact Christ's triumph over death, and gesturing emphatically to his chest with his other arm to declare his willingness to suffer with Christ in order to join him in eternal life. The expressive physicality of Luigi's devotional exercises reminds the viewer that these were directly related to his mission in the world, embodying the kind of spiritual discipline considered indispensable to the practice of charitable medicine by reformers such as Saint Camillo of Lellis. As Camillo explained in an address of 1599 to the members of his order, the Ministers of the Sick:

If someone inspired by the Lord God should want to practice charitable works, both corporeal and spiritual, though our institution, let him be aware that he must be dead to all the things of this world, including family, friends, possessions, and even himself, and he must live only in the Crucified Jesus, under the gentle yoke of perpetual poverty, chastity, obedience, in service to the poor sick, even should they be stricken with plague, in their corporeal and spiritual needs, both day and night, according to whatever is commanded of him, which tasks he will carry out for love of God, and as penitence for his sins.⁴⁵

Batoni's portrait of Luigi not only alludes to the rare spiritual gifts required of this new breed of religious caregivers, it also depicts the rigorous devotional exercises by which they honed these gifts, "dying" to themselves in order to serve Christ in the world.

In the years just preceding Batoni's creation of this masterful portrayal of the spiritual

12. Lazzaro Baldi,
*Saint John of God
Attending Plague
Victims*, 1690. Fresco.
S. Giovanni
Calabita, Rome.



basis for charitable medicine, Rome's artistic glorification of its practical and corporeal dimension reached both a literal and metaphorical pinnacle. This moment was in 1742, when Corrado Giaquinto completed the fresco spanning the ceiling of the nave of S. Giovanni Calabita, *Glory of Saint John of God* (fig. 13).

Saint John of God made his impact on the reform of public medicine as the founder of the Order of the Hospitaller Brothers in Granada in 1539; of all the religious orders dedicated to the assistance of the sick, this one boasted the greatest number of physicians, surgeons, and pharmacists, many of whom received their professional training within the order itself.⁴⁶ In Rome, where the order was popularly known as the Fatebenefratelli, Saint John of God's followers first organized a modest hospital in the Piazza di Pietra before founding the hospital of the Tiber Island, which served as the city's primary intramural lazaretto during the plague of 1656.

When John was canonized in 1690, the Roman branch of the order celebrated by commissioning Lazzaro Baldi to fresco the ceiling of the sacristy of the Tiber Island church given to them in 1640, S. Giovanni Calibita. Baldi's image of *Saint John of God Attending Plague Victims* (fig. 12) shows members of the order in their black habits giving medical assistance to plague victims.⁴⁷ In the foreground a barefoot Hospitaller Brother sits next to a patient in order to apply unguents and bandages to his leg, while two others carry a plague victim into this room where he will join the other new patients lying on the floor, waiting for treatment; only the young assistant in lay clothing covers his hand to protect himself from the pestilential air, whereas the Hospitaller Brothers seem accustomed to the ubiquitous danger and unpleasant smells, from which the smoking incense burner in the foreground provides only partial protection. In the background we see patients recovering in neatly ordered beds, receiving medical attention from the solicitous brothers. Astoundingly, there is in this whole scene only one detail that indicates a priestly activity: on the right side of the composition in the middle ground, a Hospitaller Brother with a stole around his neck kneels on the ground before a prostrated patient and her child, presumably holding a Sacramentary and administering the sacrament of Last Rites.⁴⁸ Other than this one vignette, however, the activities depicted are exclusively medical.⁴⁹

Though we have already seen in the discussion of paintings at the Collegio Romano how the ancillary spaces of church complexes might contain strong endorsements of public medicine, nothing in Rome compares to the fresco that the Hospitaller Brothers of Rome commissioned for the ceiling of the nave of their recently restored church. Here, in the lower zone

of Corrado Giaquinto's *Glory of Saint John of God* (fig. 13), the order's founder is depicted tending to plague victims on the steps outside a hospital, offering a bowl to a patient with one arm and reaching with the other for the medicines on a tray supported by a helper in elegant clothes. Also on these steps is the Archangel Raphael, directing other angels above to distribute bread to the sick – a miraculous incident recorded in the same hagiographies that claim Raphael once appeared to the saint saying, "John, you and I have the same task."⁵⁰ In the upper zone, John appears in heaven as he receives a crown of thorns from Mary and Christ; bearing witness to the celestial scene are three saints, Sebastian (Rome's stalwart intercessor against plague, and the saint whose feast marks the day that Giovanni experienced his "conversion" in 1537), Augustine (the author of the order's rule), and John Calabita (to whom the order's Roman church is dedicated).⁵¹ John's activities in the earthly realm below, which are dialectically paired with his reception into heaven, involve the provision of food and medicine to the sick. These are, of course, strictly temporal remedies, based on secular science; this point is emphasized by the fact that John's assistant is not dressed as an acolyte, but rather as a fashionable courtier. The celestial coronation of a brother who serves the sick with the layman's cures rather than the priest's is nothing short of revolutionary; it is an apotheosis of charitably administered temporal remedies, triumphantly brandished across the length of a church.

With Pompeo Batoni's portrait of Saint Luigi Gonzaga and Giaquinto's fresco, *The Glory of Saint John of God*, this discussion of Rome's plague art returns to its point of departure: the years when Bernardo Bellotto briefly alighted in Rome. Bellotto arrived just as charitable medicine received its supreme pictorial "placet" in the Hospitaller Brothers' church of S. Giovanni Calabita, culminating more than a century of experiments with iconographies for the depiction of the new alliance between temporal remedies and spiritual directives. Though no one had yet realized it, this was also the moment when public healthcare reforms initiated by such great religious leaders of the sixteenth century as Filippo Neri, Carlo Borromeo, Gaetano of Thiene, Camillo of Lellis, and John of God had – along with other contributing factors – permanently disrupted the cyclical outbreaks of bubonic plague in Italy.

Bubonic plague may have been only one of the diseases that confronted these religious reformers of public medicine, but as the most fierce, violent, and terrifying illness known to Europe, it challenged these men to muster their greatest spiritual gifts, and to reshape the ideologies that conditioned and limited social response to such crises. The art examined in this essay documents these changing ideologies in Rome, and in some circumstances, it may have served as a stimulus of such changes. Accompanying these epistemological developments was the rise of new orders who worked in concert with the medical community to make temporal remedies available on a city-wide scale. Their interventions introduced new themes and protagonists to plague art, but more importantly, they helped to bring a close to Rome's long history of living in the shadow of plague.



13. Corrado Giaquinto,
*Glory of Saint John of
God*, 1741-42. Fresco.
S. Giovanni Calabita,
Rome.

1. Totti, 244-45; see also Micheloni, 281-308.
2. The first sculpture of a plague angel may have been elevated to the top of Castel Sant'Angelo before the reign of Nicholas III Orsini, i.e. before 1277; the present plague angel is Pietro Verschaffelt's 1752 version (D'Onofrio 1978, 166-72).
3. Titi, 377, attributes the Trinità de' Monti fresco to "un siciliano, che serviva Michel'Angelo Bonarroti."
4. On water and health in Roman religion, see Adanti, 36. The original *apollinar* of Veiovis / Soranus, later identified with Apollo, was on the north shore of the Tiber in Campo Marzio near the church of S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini (Coarelli, 377-78; and Gagé, 72). On Febris, see Gagé, 72; and Adanti, 19. On Esculapius's cult on the Tiber Island, see Kerényi, 16-17; and Wickkiser, *passim*.
5. Lack of spring water in Renaissance Rome obliged many to rely on the Tiber for drinking water even though such physicians as Alessandro Traiano Petroni, Giovan Battista Modio, and Andrea Bacci debated its safety. See Pecchiai, 9; and *Roma la città dell'acqua*, 36-37.
6. Riley, 93.
7. On the plague that infested Rome's rione of the Borgo in 1696, see Pazzini, 385-86. Preto, 1-3, mentions several plagues that struck Europe in the eighteenth century.
8. On Baglione's *Saint Sebastian Cured by an Angel* (Harris Collection, promised gift to the Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University), see Smith O'Neil, 203-4. See also Henneberg, 140, for its possible relation to the patronage of charitable institutions, as well as Jones, 31-35, for its iconographic relation to the cult of guardian angels. On Guerrieri's *Cure of Saint Sebastian* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), see *Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri*, 90-91.
9. One image of the Cure of Sebastian was made for a church where there was no organized assistance for the sick: Baglione's 1630-32 *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene and Her Assistant* for the basilica of Quattro Santi Coronati (only later in Urban VIII's reign would an orphanage be established here); in this case, the patron, Cardinal Girolamo Vidone, may have wished to edify the crowds who flocked to the saint's relics beneath the image with an example of pious charity.
10. The hospital at S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini was organized in 1606 to serve the poor sick among that nation. S. Maria dell'Orto's hospital and pharmacy served the guilds that in turn staffed and funded these facilities. See Maroni Lumbroso and Martini, s.v. "Arciconfraternita di S. Giovanni Battista della Pietà dei Fiorentini" and s.v. "Arciconfraternita di S. Maria dell'Orto"; Biblioteca Vallicelliana, 17, 22, 29; and Fanucci, 51-52. For the history of charitable assistance in Rome, see Da Villapadierna. Baglione's altarpiece at S. Maria dell'Orto decorates the chapel of Saint Sebastian, where an inscription stone notes the patronage of Luciano Brancalleo, a fruit vendor, in 1624; see Guglielmi, 319; Barroero, 95-97; and Smith O'Neil, 224.
11. See Sannazzaro, 34.
12. See Gentilcore, 132.
13. Before the Christian endorsement of human remedies was depicted in churches, it could be seen in Rome's hospitals and pharmacies, such as the pharmacy of the Collegio Romano, frescoed in 1629 by Andrea Sacchi and Emilio Savonani. Also relevant is the ca.1600 cycle of decorations in the Jesuit infirmary at the novitiate of S. Andrea al Quirinale, described in RicheTMme, 2:422-58.
14. Images of the old paradigm sometimes coexisted with those of the new paradigm. At S. Maria dell'Orto, where Baglione's *Cure of Saint Sebastian by Irene and Her Assistant* encouraged Christians to aid the afflicted to the best of their human abilities, there was also a miraculous image, the Madonna dell'Orto. The cult of this healing icon, which dates to 1488 when it cured a woman's disease, induced locals to build the namesake church (Barroero, 17-18). On the complex—and sometimes conflicting—coexistence of various therapeutic systems in Italy, see Cipolla, *passim* and Gentilcore, *passim*.
15. Expressing this view of human remedies, Francisco di Castro in 1585 wrote that for Saint Camillo of Lellis, "the medicine of the body was the means of [furnishing] that of the soul" (Russotto 1958, 40).
16. On the Compagnia del Divino Amore in Rome, see Canezza, 204-6; and Biblioteca Vallicelliana, s.v. "Arciconfraternita di S. Maria del Popolo e di S. Giacomo." The Capuchins' work at the hospital of S. Giacomo degli Incurabili began in 1529 at the instigation of Vittoria Colonna (Canezza, 207-8, 215). For the Capuchins' care of plague victims, see *I frati cappuccini*, 3/2:5; D'Alatri, 84-88; Cordovani, 31ff; and *Annales minorum*, 27: 298-304. Additional bibliography is found in the *Lexicon capuccinum*, 1339-43. For the Capuchin perspective on the theology of disease, see for example "Il raggugliamento della fondazione del Ven.o Monasterio delle Monache Cappuccine ad Monte Cavallo," B.A.V., Vat. Lat. 9162, f.45, in which plague is defined as a "corruption of the air that men draw into themselves when they breathe and respire that contaminated air, which upon penetrating the veins poisons the blood, generates acute and pestilential fevers, and since there is no punishment from God more universal or more severe than this [plague], it thus happens many times that those who have sought out the evil acts of humans as [contributing causes] find the proof."
17. Pellegrino da Forlì, 1:17.
18. *I frati cappuccini*, 3/2: 3694.
19. *I frati cappuccini*, 3/2: 3706.
20. The Church's fundamental teachings on disease can be traced back to Saint Cyprian's "De mortalitate" from the third century, discussed extensively in the essay by Franco Mormando in this catalogue. For general accounts of the conception of disease in the Catholic Church, see Palmer, *passim*; Maggioni *passim*; and Amundsen, ??.
21. See for example Da Seggiano, ??; and *I frati cappuccini*, 3/2: 3694.
22. Da Isnello, 79-82, recounts the history of these commissions.
23. The christological subjects in the original program, including Mario Balassi's *Transfiguration of Christ*, Baccio Ciarpì's *Christ in the Garden*, and Andrea Camassei's *Pietà*, may reflect the fact that for Capuchins, the invocation of Christ was foremost among the "exercises of piety and devotion...practiced as a religious prophylactic against plague" (*I frati cappuccini*, 3/2: 3859 n. 7). These same christological subjects also figure among the paintings in the Jesuit infirmary at S. Andrea al Quirinale. The Concezione's altarpiece program and its relation to the plague are discussed at greater length in Barker, 242-55.
24. The altarpiece's patronage and its pertinence to the plague are discussed in *Scienza e miracoli*, 348. On the sources for Reni's altarpiece, see Pepper, 32, 281; and Guarino, 83-92.

25. Earlier examples include Giovanni de' Vecchi's altarpiece (see n. 27 below) and the fresco that once decorated the altar wall of the sixteenth-century Chateaufvillain Chapel of the Trinità dei Monti. The Triumph of Saint Michael over Satan was repeated later in the century in Francesco Mola's altarpiece at Saint Mark's and Sebastiano Conca's for S. Maria in Campitelli. There are no Barberini commissions of Raphael as the plague-rescinding angel; I suspect that the Barberini doubted the authenticity of the story that arose six centuries after the event. In Torrigio's study of Saint Michael dedicated to Francesco Barberini, the plague-rescinding angel is treated only as a subject of art, not as an historical event.

26. "Guerra intestinale invisibile dal Cielo" (Naldi, 2). On the sanitary and militant aspects of Michael's protection, see Guarino, 84, 91-2; Mercalli, 96; and Rice, 429. They are traced to the Archangel's cult in Byzantium and its Hebraic origins in Rohland, 9-33 and 75-104. In popular imagination, Michael's foe, Satan, was associated with the plague and with its dissemination; see Rinaldi, 81.

27. At the cave of Monte Gargano, where the militant Saint Michael had been worshipped since the early middle ages, pilgrims gathered stones believing these would repel and cure illness. On this tradition, as well as Saint Francis's pilgrimage to this site, see Mâle, 376, 491; D'Onofrio, 1978, 163; and Guarino, 110.

28. According to Severano, 3, (a treatise dedicated to Card. Francesco Barberini), Boniface II erected a church dedicated to "S. t' Angelo" in 530. The confraternity of San Michele Arcangelo, founded in 1432, established a hospital called the Angelorum, as well as the church mentioned above, Sant'Angelo ai Corridori di Borgo (which was destroyed during the reign of Alexander VI and rebuilt in 1564); see Lombardi, 346; also Hülsen, 527; Totti, 24; and Fioravanti Martinelli's "Roma Ornata" in D'Onofrio, 1968, 19. In this church, Giovanni de' Vecchi's painting, *Saint Michael Vanquishing Satan* stood at the high altar while a scene of Gregory I's plague procession was relegated to a side chapel; the arrangement suggests that the image at the high altar encompassed all aspects of the angel's cult, including the historical manifestation as Rome's plague-rescinding angel.

29. *La devotissima oratione del Glorioso Santo Michaelae Archangelo*, fol.1-2.

30. On the hospital of S. Giovanni in Laterano in the seventeenth century, see Mola, 78; and Curcio, 119, 122. Celio's fresco is mentioned in Titi, 473. On the decoration of the Jesuit infirmary, see Riche^{me}, 2:455-58.

31. On the Pope's sickness and the dedication of his reign to Saint Michael, see Rice, 428-29. On the solemnity of 1630, see the *avviso* of December 13, 1631, B.A.V., Ott. 3338, 218v.

32. "Perversos Genios," "bonos...Genios, seu Angelos salutare." Lemnius, 134-37. Fludd, 1:333-39.

33. The Jesuit novices were particularly active at the hospital of the Consolazione, designated for the treatment of plague victims. Their work here is noted in the entry for "pestilence" in Moroni, 52: 227: "Jesuit novices stayed, for all but a few days of the month of October, at the above-mentioned hospital [of the Consolazione] in order to do pious works, both spiritual and corporeal, among the sick."

34. The allusion to Aeneas and Anchises is noted by Arcari and Padovani, 2:81, where it is also noted that the two fountains seen in the image were built by Paul V in

1612-13, establishing a *terminus post quem*. The fountains thus may indicate Borghese patronage of the painting, and this in turn supports the association with Guerrieri, who was working for the Borghese in these same years.

35. This work appears in Bissell's catalogue raisonné as no.

27. It was probably displayed at the hospital of the Consolazione near another low-relief sculpture also transported to S. Spirito, this one in terracotta, representing of Camillo of Lellis assisting the sick. See Da Riese, 38; and Pericoli, 79.

36. Filippo owned all the books written by Andrea Cesalpino, his own doctor, and learned much about pharmacy from his friend, botanist Michele Mercati. His adherents were taught to offer the sick a range of human remedies, from words of hope and comfort, to foods determined according to their illness, to hygienic care that included shaving their beards, cleaning their beds, and washing their feet. See Canezza, 102-4.

37. This incident is described in nearly these very words in Canezza, 103.

38. "Ordini et modi che si hanno da tenere nelli hospitali in servire li poveri infermi," published in Vanti 1965, 64-66.

39. The inscription is visible in fig. 48 in Bissell; it is no longer displayed near the relief.

40. On this debate, see Vanti 1944, 120; also Sannazzaro, 136-38. The Church may have opposed the designation of this new class of martyrs so as not to encourage the convocations of people near the corpses of those religious who died of plague while manning the lazarettos. Similar questions regarding "martyrdom for hospitality" continue into the present: on October 25, 1992, the 71 Hospitaller Brothers assassinated in Spain while carrying out their mission were beatified under Pope John Paul II. According to a statement on the event posted on the website of the Order of the Hospitaller Brothers (www.oh-fbf.it), "With the beatification of these 71 Hospitaller martyrs the Catholic martyrology has been enriched in a significant manner. This is not so much by reason of their number, but more for the precise and special way they died as martyrs of hospitality."

41. "martyres esse iudicandos et inter martyres recensendos." Filiberto Marchini, *Belli divini*, cited in Vanti 1944, 120.

42. "La violenza della febbre nel maggior corso e fervore allentò un poco, e m'ha condotto lentamente fino al giorno glorioso dell'Ascensione. Dal qual tempo per un gran concorso di catarro al petto si rinforzò, talchè a mano a mano m'avvio ai dolci e cari abbracciamenti del celeste Padre, nel cui seno spero potermi riposare con sicurezza e per sempre" (Letter of 10 June, 1591, in Canezza, 217).

43. "Per consolatione dell'anime atterite dal timore della morte...si vive morendo"; "...morendosi vivo, vive" (Binet, 63).

44. "Il vivere gran tempo, poco rilieva, importa ben molto il muorir bene" (Binet, 87). One of the most popular seventeenth-century treatises on the earthly preparation for Final Judgment is Roberto Bellarmino's *Art of Dying Well*, first published in Rome in 1620; on this work, see Worcester, 87-106.

45. "Se alcuno ispirato dal Signore Iddio vorrà esercitare l'opre di misericordia, corporali, et spirituali secondo il Nostro Istituto, Sappia che ha da esser morto a tutte le cose del mondo, cioè a Parenti, Amici, robbe, et a se stesso, et vivere solamente a Giesù Crocifisso sotto il suavissimo

giogo della perpetua Povertà, Castità, Obbedienza, et Servizio delli Poveri Infermi, ancorché fussero Appetati" (from the "Formula di Vita" as presented at the 9th Congregation of the order on June 19, 1599, published in Vanti 1965, 97).

46. On Saint John of God and his legacy of healthcare reform, see Pazzini; and Russotto 1969. The professional preparation of the order is discussed in Russotto 1969, 2: 94-96.

47. One memorial sketch of the composition, attributed to Baldi's assistant Giovan Battista Lenardi, is in the Fagiolo Collection; another is in the Galleria Spada.

48. I thank Franco Mormando for his assistance with the reading of this image.

49. In contrast to this imagery of secular remedies, Francesco Solimena's ca. 1690 painting of *A Miracle of Saint John of God* in the present exhibition (cat. 29) emphasizes spiritual remedies, especially of the type that occurred after the saint's death. In particular, Solimena's image may represent the miraculous cure of 16-year-old Isabella Arcelli, a patient at the lazaretto on the Tiber Island during the Roman plague of 1656 who, after being treated surgically by the Hospitaller P. Pasquale, recovered overnight through the spiritual intervention of John of God, to whom she had prayed before going to sleep. It is one of two miracles officially recognized in the saint's canonization proceedings and detailed in Russotto 1969, 2: 219-220.

50. The several miracles involving Raphael are noted in Russotto 1969, 1: 28. In Hebrew, Raphael's name signifies "God heals," and he is associated with healing because he instructed Tobias on how to cure his father's blindness (importantly, though, this spiritual intervention produces a cure by means of a "natural remedy," the fish oil).

51. Information on the commission of Giaquinto's work and the iconography comes from Huetter, 56-59, and Russotto 1950, 34-35.

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Hope
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