

The Lateran in 1600

*Christian Concord in Counter-
Reformation Rome*

Jack Freiberg



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

INTRODUCTION



Shortly after midnight on 28 July 1993, two terrorist bombs exploded in Rome's historic center, the first at the church of San Giovanni in Laterano, the second in the vicinity of San Giorgio in Velabro. The choice of these targets was the result of shrewd coordination, for Velabro and Laterano are place designations that evoke the twin historical supports of Rome's power. Virgil identified the Velabrum, located near the Tiber river between the Palatine and the Capitoline hills, with events that foreshadowed Rome's destiny as the chief city of the pagan world: In that place Aeneas set foot for the first time on Rome's soil, and the twins Romulus and Remus were washed ashore. The Lateran area on the slope of the Caelian Hill in the southern area of the city occupies a parallel position of honor in the rise of Christian Rome. It was there, on imperial property, that Constantine the Great established Rome's Cathedral church and the residence of the popes.

It is a simple fact, often remarked on, that in Rome one experiences in a vivid way impossible elsewhere the continuity of the historical tradition. On the map of Rome's sacred topography the Lateran occupies a prominent position. The exclusive association of the papacy's prestige with Saint Peter's is of relatively recent date, codified around the middle of the fifteenth century when the popes moved their residence to the Vatican. Until that time, for more than a millennium, the administration of the Church was conducted from the Lateran palace, and the basilica, known as San Giovanni in Laterano, but bearing an official dedication to Christ, functioned as the spiritual center of the Christian world.

The Lateran's past glory was of great concern to Pope John XXIII (1958–63) who offered as one of the reasons for his choice of name the fact that "it is the solemn name of innumerable cathedrals throughout the world, and first of all the blessed and holy Lateran basilica, our

Cathedral.”¹ John XXIII is best known today for initiating a fundamental reform of the Church with the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962; less known is the fact that his reform program, centered as it was on peace and unity, involved the Lateran in an essential way. On the feast of Saint John the Baptist, 24 June 1962, the pope announced his wish that all official functions concerning the governance of the diocese of Rome be transferred back to the “shining Lateran.”² In ordering this change he intended to “encourage in Rome and throughout the world the resolution of so many pastoral problems imposed by the modern age, and to revive those ordered actions that demonstrate to all peoples that church which, in the design of the divine Founder, is the Mother and Teacher, the light of the peoples.”³ John’s actions, undertaken within recent memory, parallel the history of the Lateran during the Counter-Reformation period when a similar renewal of the Church was initiated and the Lateran provided a field for the expression of reform ideology.

The revival of the Lateran in the second half of the sixteenth century and the visual expression this revival received during the reign of Pope Clement VIII (1592–1605) are the principal themes of the present study. In the middle years of the sixteenth century renewed appreciation for the Lateran’s unparalleled status emerged as part of the Church’s emphasis on its early Christian roots. The idea to restore the Lateran was introduced by Pope Pius IV (1559–65) and each of his successors continued the work. In effect, the Lateran became a central focus of papal patronage during the Counter-Reformation period. When considered together these papal projects at the Lateran can be shown to have had both a material and spiritual purpose, to preserve the church’s crumbling fabric, and to renew what can be called the Lateran’s mythos with its imperial, Judaic, and sacramental components. These concerns were developed with a new sense of clarity and purpose in the program of Clement VIII that was conceived in advance of the Holy Year of 1600 when, in keeping with a tradition three centuries old, pilgrims from the entire Christian world would flock to Rome to reap the benefits of the great purificatory indulgence that was made available only at that time.

Shortly after his elevation to the papacy in 1592, Clement ordered an ambitious renovation of the entire Lateran complex that, had it been carried out in its entirety, would have fulfilled the long-range goals of his predecessors. After four years or so, however, this comprehensive project was curtailed. Now limited to the transept of the basilica, an extraordinary expansion occurred that led to one of the most remarkable projects ever assembled in papal Rome. The transept was restructured as a quasi-independent liturgical space replete with its own entrance system, main altar, and cycle of narrative frescoes. This treatment respond-

ed to the particular way the Lateran relates to its urban context, with its north flank turned toward the street system that led people, then as today, to the Lateran from the direction of downtown Rome. Thus, the majority of visitors enter the church not from the east portico that fronts the nave, but from the north transept. In effect, the *nave clementina*, as the new transept came to be called, created an axis that asserted the connection – both physical and spiritual – between the city of Rome and the episcopal seat of its bishop, Christ’s vicar.

The team of artists employed on the commission were led by two prominent figures on the Roman scene, the architect Giacomo della Porta and the painter Giuseppe Cesari d’Arpino. The monumental organ positioned above the transept entrance, frescoes along the side walls illustrating the life of Constantine and the foundation of the basilica, and the focus of the scheme – the colossal, gilded bronze altar dedicated to the Eucharist – were conceived to exalt the Lateran as a sacred structure, a species of architectural relic, and to project the glory of human redemption against the backdrop of the Lateran’s special role in Christian salvation. The emphasis on themes of reconciliation and concord that define the program are paralleled in Clement VIII’s own achievement in leading the Christian nation to peace on the eve of a new century. For the nobility of its location, the prominence of its patron, and the synthetic vision that it offered, the *nave clementina* exerted its authority into the next century, constituting an important model for baroque church decoration in Rome.

In the considerable scholarly literature concerning the Lateran, the Clementine transept has been afforded meager attention; indeed, it is the only part of the church that has not previously been studied in depth. At least part of the reason behind this neglect lies in assumptions about the Counter-Reformation period, during which time the Church underwent a complex process of self-analysis and renewal, including critical examination of the role art should play in the religious life. The art that was produced in the wake of these developments has, in recent years, been brought from the fringes of art history into the light of scholarly examination. Attention has focused along quite circumscribed lines on subjects that comfortably fit the requirements set forth in the period itself, “clarity, simplicity, and intelligibility; realistic interpretation; and emotional stimulus to piety.”⁴ The *maniera devota* that recent scholarship has defined, was developed under the influence of the religious orders, especially the Jesuits and Oratorians, who advocated a return to the simplicity, purity, and faith characteristic of the first Christian generations.

When we turn to the illustrious patronage of the popes during this same period, the state of studies radically changes. These papal projects tend to be evaluated from a purely conceptual perspective, while their

style is often considered *retardataire*, preserving the stale conventions of an exuberant mannerism rather than sharing in the formation of the new artistic ideals that would come to fruition in the next century. A necessary component of any comprehensive view of the period is a more measured assessment of this other aspect of Counter-Reformation art emanating from the center of the Church.⁵

All factors suggest that the Lateran transept was the product of a coordinated effort in which the most respected artists of the day and the most elevated members of the inner papal circle participated. In attempting to provide a balanced discussion for what is arguably the most representative project of the time, I have been guided by respect for the artists and patron, and esteem for the artistic material in both its conceptual and visual formulations. I have endeavored to understand how the painted, sculpted, and architectural components of the project were conceived in response to three concepts: the Lateran's venerable history, the function of the transept to honor the Eucharist, and the celebration of the Holy Year of 1600. These factors not only determined the iconography of the decoration, but directly influenced its style. To be sure, many aspects of the Clementine program reflect broad currents in the art and thought of the period, but the way in which these tendencies were brought together and focused at the Lateran, and the way they were adjusted in response to the special nature of the site, provide a unique view of both the renewed consciousness of the Lateran's historical significance and the visual forms that artists developed to celebrate it.

The picture of the Clementine transept that emerges from this study recalls aspects of the high Humanist culture that was codified at the beginning of the sixteenth century with the visionary works initiated by Pope Julius II (1503-13) and continued by his immediate successors at the Vatican. One begins to discern in the Lateran transept, the papal project that closes the century, a pattern of patronage in which the historical continuity of the Church in its absolute reference to the Roman hierarchy constitutes the underlying message. Once the visual and conceptual ideas that were marshaled to express this theme are explicated, the Lateran transept can occupy a recognizable, indeed pivotal, place in the panorama of art history. Although its debt to distinguished Renaissance models is considerable, and its impact on the central formulations of the Roman baroque profound, these art historical moorings should not obscure the quite distinctive characteristics of the Lateran transept that this study seeks to define.