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Advent Ethics.

This masterpiece of Caravaggio's career, THE BEHEADING OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST, reminds us how John, like the Messiah whose coming he foretold, confronted unjust powers and principalities.

Confronting the Powers

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

John the Baptist was both a foreteller and forthteller of the kingdom of God. The coming of the Messiah, John foretold, would be a threat to the unjust principalities and powers of the world – especially to King Herod Antipas who ruled the regions of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39. The king’s father, Herod the Great, was the ruler who ordered the massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem to prevent the Messiah’s birth, and his son had similar insecurities.

John, as a forthteller of the truth in the face of societal injustice, criticized Herod Antipas for being with his brother’s wife, Herodias. The king responded by imprisoning John (Matthew 14:3-4; Mark 6:17-18; Luke 3:19-20), which gave Herodias an opportunity to extract revenge against the prophet by luring Herod to kill John (Matthew 14:5-12; Mark 6:19-29).

John’s prophetic ministry intertwines with Jesus’ in remarkable ways: their births are foretold by angels, Jesus seeks baptism by John, their public ministries expose the injustices of society as they prepare people to welcome God’s kingdom, and they suffer violent deaths at the hands of governing officials. Indeed, when the perpetually paranoid Herod first hears of Jesus’ public ministry, he worriedly confides to his slaves, “This [Jesus] is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead” (Matthew 14:2; Mark 6:14). So, as we reflect during Advent on the import of Christ’s coming, we are reminded how he challenges the unjust powers and principalities.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* – considered the masterpiece of his career – depicts the prophet’s gruesome death.¹ The artist painted it during his final years, after he had fled from Rome to the island of Malta, by way of Spanish-controlled Naples, to escape the Pope’s jurisdiction. Caravaggio was a fugitive from justice, having murdered his former friend in a gang fight on May 28, 1606.² Ironically, Caravaggio’s works from this period of exile are some of his most religious.

Caravaggio was embraced by the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes, and Malta, the sons of the great Catholic nobility in many lands who lived together in chivalric brotherhood and were subject directly to the Pope. The Knights, established in the eleventh century as Hospitallers for pilgrims in Jerusalem during the Crusades, had received the donation of the island of Malta by the Spanish Emperor Charles V in 1530. Caravaggio

strongly desired to become a Knight. Because he was a murderer, he had to request a waiver from the Pope, which quite remarkably he received in March 1608. This was a second chance for Caravaggio to live a life of honor, chivalry, and service. He was installed into the Order on July 14, 1608. It has been suggested that this work was given to the Order in lieu of a proper *pasaggio* – the gift, usually of money, that Knights presented to the Order upon their admission.³ It was intended as the altarpiece for the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato that is annexed to the Knights’ conventual church of St. John in Valletta, Malta.

The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist is the only extant work that the artist signed: the letters “f. MichelAn...” are formed out of the blood spewing from the freshly cut neck of the Baptist.⁴ The painting, which is largest of Caravaggio’s works, dominated the Oratory space. The Caravaggio scholar David Stone explains, “Built in 1602-5 over the cemetery where knights, including those martyred by the Turks, were interred, the Oratory owes its origins to a petition from several knights who wanted to move their confraternity of the Misericordia to St. John’s.”⁵ This organization accompanied prisoners to the gallows. Although the Knights’ Oratory functioned to host elections, installation ceremonies, tribunals, and defrockings, it was also used for the training and devotions of the novices.

Caravaggio’s *Beheading* is set in an austere prison courtyard. At first glance, the dramatic story is told calmly on the left side of the composition. The body of John lies on the ground like a sacrificial lamb that has been slaughtered. The hairshirt, an iconic attribute of the saint, has its animal hooves placed near the Baptist’s head to reinforce that his martyrdom paves the way for Christ’s own sacrifice. The executioner has already used the sword to kill John and now uses the *misericorde*, a long narrow knife, to cleave the head from the body. The jailer points to the basket as if to get the deed over with as soon as possible. The girl – dressed in servant’s clothes and, therefore, probably not Salome – holds the uncovered basket. The only person to show compassion towards the event is the old woman, who has either accompanied the girl or is the prison nurse. Two prisoners in the low cell window watch a scene that they, like the Knights, have probably witnessed many times.

Caravaggio painted the event in John’s life that was most relevant to the work of the Confraternity of Misericordia: the slain saint represented the prisoners that the organization accompanied to their deaths by beheading. The sponsoring Order of the Knights of Malta, a highly religious group, also interpreted the event as foreshadowing the death of Christ.

The painting is a silent composition, a dead calm; although it does not shake awake its viewers, it requires close examination and evokes a response. This period of calm for Caravaggio ended abruptly when he committed a crime in Malta and was imprisoned. He fled Malta in late September 1608 and was defrocked *in absentia* by the Knights of Malta on December 1, 1608.⁶ In 1610, as a victim of mistaken identity, Caravaggio was falsely imprisoned

and his possessions seized in Rome. Released two days later, he contracted a fever and died soon afterwards, on July 18, as he made his way to Port'Ercole in the hope of finding his belongings. Caravaggio's death was the subject of morality plays by several authors that generated many prophet-like myths about the artist.

NOTES

1 Roberto Longhi, the great Italian scholar who brought attention to Caravaggio in 1951 with the pivotal exhibition in Milan, *Mostra di Caravaggio e dei caravaggeschi*, called *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* "the painting of the century."

2 David M. Stone, "'Fra Michelangelo' and the Art of Knighthood," in Keith Sciberras and David M. Stone, *Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2006), 92.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid. Because the signature, f[ra] Michelan[gelo], makes reference to Caravaggio's new status as a knight, the canvas must have been completed after Caravaggio's installation date. It is likely that it was unveiled on August 29, the feast of St. John's Decollation, the Oratory's titular.

5 Ibid., 93.

6 David M. Stone, "Light into Darkness," in *Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta*, 14.



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