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**Jesus' cleansing of the Jerusalem temple became a familiar subject in art, not to justify anger, but to remind the Church of its own need for purification.**

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# Zeal for God's House

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The cleansing of the Jerusalem temple is the story that most often comes to mind when we think of Jesus getting angry. All four Gospels record the event, though none of them explicitly mention his anger, and in John the disciples attribute Jesus' actions to "zeal" for his Father's house.<sup>1</sup>

This powerful scene became a familiar subject in art. We will discuss the version by a lesser-known sixteenth-century painter Ippolito Scarsellino, or Scarcella as his contemporaries called him. This artist lived in the period of transition between the third, and final, generation of Mannerist painters and the earliest artists associated with the Baroque.<sup>2</sup>

The son of a painter, Scarcella was born and died in Ferrara, Italy. After being apprenticed to his father, he traveled to Bologna and studied the Carracci family of painters, and to Venice where he was strongly influenced by Veronese and Tintoretto. Ugo Ruggeri comments that Scarcella's paintings at this time have a "flowing sequence of a very lively narrative quality and a feverishly spontaneous technique of execution reminiscent of Tintoretto."<sup>3</sup>

*Christ Driving the Money Lenders from the Temple* is very close to the Gospel narratives, especially regarding the visual details of the story in John 2:13-18. Jesus is immediately identifiable slightly to the left of center in the painting; his arms are raised, his pink gown and green mantle hang loose because he has removed his belt and made it into "a whip of chords" (John 2:15). The man of nonviolence is seen here as a man of violence.<sup>4</sup> The scene takes place on the porch of the temple in Jerusalem; a Solomonic twisted column is prominent in the foreground, as one of the moneychangers grasps it to steady himself as he leans down to collect the basket of his coins that has spilt onto the ground (cf. 2:15). Sheep, birds, and cattle crowd the composition to indicate that the temple has become a market place where sacrificial animals are sold and money is exchanged for them (2:14). The artist invents further narrative details to capture our interest.

One of the birds has escaped, and a young boy, oblivious to Jesus' actions in front of him, tries to trap the bird on a stick. Two women to the right of Jesus with baskets and cages on their heads try to rush off while attempting to regain the attention of another young child who is enthralled by what Jesus is doing.

During the Catholic Reformation, this scene, also known as the Purification of the Temple, was a very popular "teaching" subject. It became a symbol of the Church's need to cleanse itself both through the condemnation of heresy and through internal reform.<sup>5</sup> The idea of cleansing refocuses attention on Jesus' motive of "zeal for [God's] house" rather than momentary anger, which seems to be a more productive and positive reading of this famous story.

## NOTES

1 See Stephen Voorwinde's discussion of this episode in "Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?" *Anger*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 30-36.

2 In this issue of Christian Reflection, we discuss the work of all three generations of Mannerist painters. Beccafumi, from Siena, is among the first generation and Vasari, from Arezzo but most famous for his work and associations in Florence, is part of the second generation.

3 Ugo Ruggeri, "Scarsellino," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T076347](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T076347) (accessed September 8, 2014).

4 "Dawson Carr on 'Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple,'" web podcast (The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London, UK), [www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/el-greco-christ-driving-the-traders-from-the-temple](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/el-greco-christ-driving-the-traders-from-the-temple) (accessed September 10, 2014).

5 *Ibid.*, webpage.



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