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the print version of *Mysticism*.

Bernini's elegant sculpture is Italian Baroque art at its best, combining theater, drama, and religious meditation. The artist invites us to kneel at the marble balustrade and ponder the writings of St. Teresa.

Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). THE ECSTASY OF ST. TERESA, 1645-52. Marble, lifesize. Cornaro Chapel, Sta. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Yearning for God

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Perhaps the chapel decoration in the Roman church Santa Maria della Vittoria began as an opportunity for two men to seek the worldly recognition they coveted, but it endures as one of Bernini's most loved accomplishments.

Bernini was a devout Catholic and creative genius who served the papacy most of his career. Yet because he was very opinionated, he would occasionally fall out of favor with a pope and an enterprising individual could hire him for a private commission. When Pope Innocent X had a dispute with the artist, Cardinal Federico Cornaro asked Bernini to create a family chapel dedicated to St. Teresa of Avila in the left transept of the Santa Maria della Vittoria church. The Cardinal had papal ambitions and hoped the new chapel would draw attention to him, which it definitely did. He also was sympathetic to the Discalced Carmelites, the order that was founded by Teresa and affiliated with Santa Maria della Vittoria. Four Spanish saints were canonized in 1622—Isidore of Seville, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis of Xavier, and Teresa of Avila—and only Teresa had not been honored yet with a church or chapel being dedicated to her.

The chapel is a theater stage-set complete with a sculpted audience (deceased members of the Cornaro family) seated to the right and left of the central sculpture. The artist installed a window glazed with yellow glass in the ceiling to cast golden light on the figures of an angel and Teresa. In the vault above, scenes from the saint's life are painted to look like gilded bronze reliefs. The ceiling fresco of clouds and angels features an image of the Holy Spirit descending into the chapel.

The primary sculpture depicts the saint's "transverberation," her mystical vision in 1559 of an angel plunging a flame-tipped arrow into her again and again. Here is Teresa's report:

I saw in [the angel's] hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The

soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.¹

Interpreters have struggled with the apparently erotic pose in Bernini's sculpture. In the eighteenth century one scholar quipped, "If that is divine love, I have known it!" Twenty-first century art historians have come to the defense of Bernini's (and Teresa's) honor. "Bernini evidently did not intend a lascivious interpretation as he covered Teresa's body with layers of heavy drapery so that only her face, one limp hand, and her feet can be seen," Ann Harris observes. "Her unfocused eyes and open mouth convey her absorption in this miraculous experience."²

Perhaps Bernini was willing to sculpt a posture of physical love in order to express the soul's yearning for God, much as several medieval monastics employed the erotic language of the Song of Songs to convey our communion with God. The artist has listened with his heart to Teresa's words and translated them into a powerful image of a woman overtaken by the love of the Holy Spirit of God. His realistic depiction invites us to reflect carefully on Teresa's writings and the drama of her mystical experience rather than view these with the same clouded eyes as Teresa's confessor and theologian of the Inquisition who, after reading her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, found it evil and ordered that it be burned.

NOTES

1 Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, translated by David Lewis (New York: Benziger Bros., 1904), chapter 29, section 17 (www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8trsa10h.htm#l13.0).

2 Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art & Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2005), 111.



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