

Article

Art, Trent, and Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment”

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Abstract: Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel is one of the world’s most famous paintings, completed in 1542. Greatly admired, it was also criticized for the frontal nudity of some of the figures. Twenty-two years later, 1564, the nudity was painted over, an action attributed to the Council of Trent, 1545–1563. To what extent is that attribution correct?

Keywords: Michelangelo; Council of Trent; Charles de Guise; Catherine de’ Medici; iconoclasm; lascivious

Through the centuries Christians have had a wide spectrum of attitudes towards the arts [1]. Within that spectrum the church as an institution steered a virtually hands-off course in stated policy. It pronounced on the matter in significant, official, and universally binding declarations on only two occasions—at the Second Council of Nicaea, 787, and at the Council of Trent, 1563.¹ In both these instances not a desire to regulate the quality or decorum of the art in question but serious outbursts of iconoclasm occasioned the decree. In essence these declarations affirmed two things: first, iconoclasm is wrong, and, secondly, images of sacred subjects are legitimate and helpful. Trent added a third: such images should be appropriate to their setting and subject. In particular, besides sticking close to historical fact, they should not contain any “sensual appeal” or “seductive charm.”

¹ For the decrees in the original Greek and Latin, with facing English translation, see [2], 1, pp. 135–137, 2, pp.774–776. Constantinople IV, pp. 869–870, repeated the substance of the decree of Nicaea II; see *ibid.*, 1:168. In passing other councils have mentioned images, e.g., Lyons II, 1274; [2], 1, p. 323. The Trullian Synod, 692, an assembly whose disciplinary decrees were not recognized by the Western church, forbade licentious or obscene images. For local synods after the Reformation broke out, see [3], pp. 326–327.

After the Council of Trent, despite the debate and controversy that swirled among Catholics about what was appropriate for art in religious settings, the church as such issued no pronouncements and pursued no consistent or broadly enforced policy regarding music, painting, sculpture, or architecture. In 1571 Pope Pius V established the Congregation of the Index, which was the equivalent of a department of state. Its function was to censor and if necessary suppress dangerous books. Gabriele Paleotti, reforming archbishop of Bologna and important participant in the council, advocated creating an official and detailed list of criteria for detecting and correcting religious art deviations from Trent's directive, in imitation of the norms the Index provided for books. Yet no such handbook or set of norms was ever created ([4], p. 557).

In those same decades after the council and, indeed, for the next two centuries, popes, cardinals, and bishops continued to be among the most important patrons of the arts, manifesting in their patronage a great diversity of taste and a similarly great diversity of attitudes about what was appropriate, what was not, and about what should be done to correct any problems. For that reason extreme caution must be exercised in speaking of "the church" in relationship to the arts in this period. It is more accurate to specify pope X, bishop Y, theologian Z, or synod ZZZ. It is at the same time important to realize that even popes, bishops, and inquisitors were rarely able to impose their will on offending parties without meeting resistance. They often had to enter into some form of negotiation, which resulted in compromise or blunted impact.

During the latter half of the sixteenth century a wave of moralizing reform swept over parts of Europe, most notably in those where Calvinist influence was strong but also where Catholic. This "severe morality," as it is sometimes called, had an impact of course on the appreciation of art. Whence did it come? Many factors, surely, were responsible for it. During his nineteen-year episcopacy as archbishop of Milan immediately after the Council of Trent, Saint Charles Borromeo held eleven diocesan and six provincial synods in which strict norms were laid down about the public behavior of clergy and laity. The decisions of the synods were immediately published, beginning with the first in 1566. This publishing enterprise culminated in 1582 when a volume appeared that brought together all the decrees of all of Borromeo's synods, the famous "Acts of the Church of Milan," *Acta ecclesiae Mediolanensis*. It ran over seven hundred pages.

Borromeo's *Acta* were avidly studied by bishops throughout Europe, who looked to them as providing a program for a reformed church and society. To some extent they were more influential than the reform decrees of the council itself. They reflected Borromeo's obsessive personality in that they aimed at regulating deportment down to the last detail and making it conform to the highest moral standards. Similarly prescriptive and detailed was his "instruction" on church buildings and furnishings published in 1577, *Instructiones Fabricae et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticae*.

Important though Borromeo's *Acta* and other publications were in promoting the "severe morality" of the era, they rode the wave of earlier impulses. Not to be underestimated is the moral imperative at the heart of the humanist tradition as revived in the Renaissance [5]. Early in the sixteenth century no one propounded a strict public morality more insistently than Erasmus, Europe's most esteemed and widely read author.

An inveterate moralizer, Erasmus espoused a prudish attitude towards art, as Erwin Panofsky showed many years ago. His strictures on the subject in his treatise, "The Institution of Christian Matrimony," dedicated to the queen of England, Catherine of Aragon, 1526, are characteristic:

What shall I say about the license so often found in statues and pictures? We see depicted and exposed to the eyes what would be disgraceful even to mention. . . . Why is it necessary to depict any old story in the churches? A young man and a girl lying in bed? David looking from a window at Bathsheba and luring her into adultery? Or the daughter of Herodias dancing? These subjects, it is true, are taken from the Scriptures, but when it comes to depictions of women how much naughtiness is mixed in by the artist!²

At the same time the ostentatious life-style of great prelates and their sometimes scandalous behavior evoked cries of alarm and shame from preachers and reformers, who denounced their times as the most corrupt ever known. Of these Savonarola is the best known, but he was far from unique. More sober and methodical were the proponents of the so-called Observantist movements within the religious orders. Adherents of the movement sought to reform their order by a stricter and more literal observance of their Rule, which invariably entailed a more austere life-style and projected an image of moral probity. The great Franciscan archbishop of Toledo, Jiménez de Cisneros, warmly supported by Queen Isabella of Castile, succeeded in large measure in imposing strict moral standards on the Spanish clergy. And so it went.

By its disciplinary decrees, most of which dealt with the proper behavior of bishops and pastors of parishes, the Council of Trent added to the force of the moralistic wave. More pointedly, Trent's decree on sacred images had an impact on artists, patrons, and other interested persons to the point that it is legitimate, though perilous, to speak of Tridentine art. For that reason, it may be useful, before reviewing the origins of the decree, to place it in the larger framework of the council.

The council met over the course of eighteen years, 1545–1563, in three distinct periods—1545–1547, 1551–1552, and 1562–1563. It had an extraordinarily troubled history and lurched from major crisis to major crisis. Popes, kings and queens, the emperor, bishops, and Protestants threw obstacles of all kinds in its way, including war and the threat of war. One result of these problems was the small number of bishops who participated, especially in the first two periods. The council opened in December, 1545, with only twenty-nine prelates, plus five superiors, general of the mendicant orders. When it finally ended on December 4, 1563, about 225 bishops were present out of a potential pool of some seven hundred.

For various reasons none of the three popes under whom the three periods unfolded attended the council. They therefore appointed legates to preside over it. An efficient courier service allowed communication back and forth between Rome and Trent but of course with a delay usually of about ten days between message and response. Through the legates the popes had considerable, but imperfect, control over the council's course.

Emperor Charles V and other rulers also tried to impose their will on the council and were able to do so through the influence of their envoys (or ambassadors, or, officially, "orators") accredited to the council. Whereas the popes were more concerned to see the council pronounce on doctrinal issues, the secular rulers were more concerned with church reform. Hence, a fundamental clash of priorities occurred at the council from the moment it opened until the moment it closed.

It was a political miracle that the council was able to meet at all—then meet again, and after an interval of often difficult years meet yet again, but this last time with an almost entirely new cast of bishops and theologians. None the less, due largely to the skill of Cardinal Giovanni Morone, the

² As quoted in [6], pp. 209–210. See also [7].

leader of the papal legates directing the final phase of the council's third period, Trent was finally brought to conclusion. Only at the very end of this period was the decree on sacred images passed and done so as part of a longer decree that included the veneration of relics and the veneration and invocation of saints.

Given the bad press the council often receives, it is important to observe in interpreting it the distinction Giuseppe Alberigo made between Trent and *tridentinismo*, that is, between what the council enacted and how its enactments were later interpreted and implemented—especially when the interpretation and implementation exaggerated or distorted the council's intent ([8]; [9], pp. 219–21). It is equally important to take account of how careful and, in the context of the times, even moderate the council was in its decisions. Many of the bishops attending the council, while they may have had a meager theological education, were experts in canon law, trained to frame official statements in cautiously precise terms ([10], pp. 394–99).

The theologians who assisted them in formulating the doctrinal decrees and who by their direct interventions on the floor of the council provided the first framework for those decrees, were professionals drawn from prestigious universities or equivalent institutions. As Hubert Jedin, the great historian of the Council of Trent, observed for the first period, 1545–1547, the caliber of the theologians was extraordinarily high ([11], 2, pp. 59–61). A similarly high caliber prevailed in the other two periods. For all the limitations in the Scholastic theology of the period, its practitioners were trained in the art of examining evidence and facing it squarely ([1], pp. 103–115)

On three concrete issues that seemed almost designed to provoke a strong reaction from the council, Trent either refused to commit itself or took a notably moderate stand. It refused, for instance, to assert the necessity or usefulness of clerical celibacy ([12], pp. 102–105). It passed onto the papacy whether or not the Eucharistic cup could be allowed to the laity, which was an important and hotly contested pastoral issue of the day ([2], 2, p. 741). Finally, contrary to what is often said, Trent did not decree that the mass must be celebrated in Latin. It, rather, forbade the opinion that the only legitimate form was the vernacular: “Although the mass is full of instruction for the faithful people, the council fathers did not think it advantageous that it should everywhere be celebrated in the vernacular.”³ Latin, therefore, was legitimate but not prescribed.

True, the bishops and theologians for the most part simply assumed that Luther and other reformers were guilty of heresy in their teaching about justification and the sacraments. None the less, they did not respond in knee-jerk fashion or assume the reformers were wrong in every detail. They took extremely seriously the problems Luther raised about justification and spent seven months elaborating the decree on it. After they approved the final form of the decree in April, 1547, they moved to the sacraments, which became the almost exclusive doctrinal issue occupying them for what remained of the first period and for the entirety of the second and third.

The council, therefore, took as its template for doctrinal issues justification and the sacraments, into which issues such as indulgences, fasting, Purgatory, the cult of the saints, and the veneration of relics and images did not neatly fit. Largely for that reason, therefore, those issues, which were the issues

³ See [2], 2, pp. 735–36: “If anyone says . . . that mass should be celebrated only in the vernacular . . . , let him be anathema.”

that “out in the trenches” were causing consternation, did not hit the floor of the council until the last minute.

At the council, reform for the most part also had a precise focus. “Reform of the church” meant essentially reform of three offices in the church, viz., the papacy, the episcopacy, and the pastorate. This focus was traditional but had become urgent after the Council of Constance and especially after Luther. It was a focus on what is usually referred to as the “institutional” church, or, in other terms, focus on the hierarchy of the church.

Because of the popes’ adamant refusal to allow the council to deal with reform of the papacy, the council made little headway on the issue. In its reform of the bishops and pastors, however, Trent was successful in passing strong legislation but at the cost of great expenditure of time and energy. Radically improving the pastoral functioning of these two offices was the epicenter of the council’s reform. Trent set its eyes on the canonical traditions regarding those offices and determined to put teeth in them to make sure they were observed.

In particular, the council tried to correct two related and notorious abuses of canon law—bishops’ absences from their dioceses and their holding more than one diocese at the same time. With legislation firmly in place on those problems, Trent set about providing job-descriptions for bishops once they had set up residence in their diocese. Although the prelates at Trent made correlative provisions for pastors of parishes, they applied the most consistently stringent discipline and penalties for non-observance to themselves.

As with doctrine, the focus of Trent’s reform concerns helps explain why, despite all the time and effort the council spent on reform, it dealt with indulgences, relics, cult of the saints, and the veneration of images at the last moment, even though they were explosive issues for pastoral practice, especially in northern Europe. These issues did not neatly fit into either the doctrinal or reform template the fathers at Trent had adopted for themselves. Contrary to what art historical literature sometimes suggests, sacred images were not only not a major issue at the council but until the final hour not an issue at all for most of the council’s participants. As Hubert Jedin correctly observed many years ago, there is about it “virtually nothing in the official records of the council.”⁴

Trent, we must realize, did not undertake a general review of the state of Catholicism, as for instance did Vatican Council II in the twentieth century. Few phenomena of the sixteenth century, for instance, had a greater long-range impact on the future of Catholicism or were more characteristic of the church in that century than the great waves of missionaries sent by the religious orders to Latin America and Asia. About such missions, however, Trent uttered not a word. They did not enter the council’s purview. The council’s agenda was precisely focused for both doctrine and reform [14].

At the council the procedures were notably different for these two categories. For its doctrinal decrees the council employed an elaborate, somewhat cumbersome but thorough procedure. First, the theologians in serial fashion spoke on the issue in question, sometimes each for an hour or two in a process that could go on for a number of weeks. The bishops listened in silence. Only then did the bishops begin to debate the issue, which again could go on for weeks. Drafts were then formulated, debated, revised perhaps several times and then submitted to a final vote. The entire process could easily take a month or, often, much more.

⁴ See [13], p. 460: “*Man kann getrost sagen: Über die Entstehung des Bilderdekretes nihil fere in actis.*”

The process for the reform decrees was much simpler, faster, and often radically modified. The theologians played no part in it. The bishops received a draft decree, often formulated by a deputation of canon lawyers but sometimes by the legates themselves. The draft was then debated by the bishops, revised and amended, and then submitted for final vote. This process, although it sometimes took a longer time, might be accomplished in as little as a week or a few days.⁵ The difference in procedure is important regarding the decree on images because, although that decree contained doctrinal as well as pastoral content, the council dealt with it as a reform decree.

During the third period of the council when the decree on images was finally considered, the largest number of bishops by far came from Italy, more than two-thirds of the total. Spain provided the next largest number, followed at considerable distance by Portugal. In these countries iconoclasm was virtually unknown. The same was not true for France, where iconoclasm had broken out as early as the 1520s. The iconoclasm was little more than a symptom of the more general and early infiltration of “Lutheran” ideas into France and especially into the capital. In response to that situation, Antoine Duprat, cardinal-archbishop of Sens, convoked in 1527 the most important local synod (or council) of the sixteenth century before Trent. An irrefutable confirmation of its importance is the fact that at Trent, Italian and Spanish prelates invoked its decrees when it served their purpose ([18], p. 450).

Held in Paris, the Council of Sens, as it is known, issued a large number of decrees on a wide range of subjects. Two of the decrees pertained to sacred images. The first was a relatively long but traditional justification of them. The second, much shorter, dealt with their quality:

So that nothing improper take place in the church of God, it seemed right and reasonable [to decree] that, because of the sensuality of some images [*lascivas*] and their deviation from the truth of Scripture, in the future none be placed in the churches unless the bishop or his vicar approve beforehand and visit the church.⁶

This was the first time in the period that this issue was raised in an influential way in an official, though local, ecclesiastical document.

Despite the religious unrest in the kingdom, the French tried to prevent the convocation of Trent and virtually boycotted it once it finally opened in 1545. King Francis I saw the council as strengthening the hand of his enemy, Emperor Charles V. His son and successor Henry II saw it the same way and boycotted the second period just as his father had done for the first. But ten years later, in November, 1562, after the death of Henry and after the third period of the council had already been under way for ten months, a relatively small but important delegation led by Cardinal Charles de Guise finally arrived at Trent. The religious situation in the kingdom had become desperate, and even Henry II’s widow, the regent, Queen Catherine de’ Medici, realized that recourse to the council was unavoidable. Iconoclasm had meanwhile broken out once again as the Huguenots grew stronger.

Of course, the veneration of images was a concern for some others at Trent besides the French, but marginal or minimal. Because of their direct experience of iconoclasm, however, the French bishops felt a keen urgency in the matter and assigned it a high priority. Even in the rapidly deteriorating religious and political situation in France, the regent had earlier unrealistically hoped to calm the

⁵ See [15]; [16]; and [7]. The primary basis for reconstructing the procedures is the authoritative summary of them prepared after the council by its talented and diligent secretary, Angelo Massarelli, [17] 13/2, pp. 680–96.

⁶ [19], p. 1200, my translation. For the longer decree, see pp. 1175–76.

waters by bringing leaders of the Huguenot and Catholic parties together so that through conversation they might resolve their differences. At the Colloquy of Poissy, July 31 to October 9, 1561, Theodore Beza was the leading Huguenot spokesman and Charles de Guise the Catholic. Among many other issues, image- veneration was hotly debated. The Colloquy resolved nothing.

In desperation Catherine called another colloquy, which met in the Queen's own quarters at the Château-de-Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a few months later, January 27 to February 11, 1562. The first item on the agenda was the veneration of images, for which the theologians of the University of Paris had prepared a *Sententia* (an "opinion" or "position paper"), which will turn up again at Trent. The colloquy was, however, an utter and immediate failure, breaking down on the first item on the agenda, the veneration of images.

After the colloquy at the Château, a new rash of iconoclasm broke out. Catholics were outraged. Claude de Saintes, abbot of Lunéville and future member of the French delegation to the council, published his *Discours sur le saccagement des églises catholiques*, 1562, and dedicated it to Cardinal Charles de Guise. The situation rapidly deteriorated even further. On March 1 Duke François de Guise, the cardinal's brother, discovered a congregation of Huguenots holding a service in Vassy, a small town on his lands. An altercation ensued, which resulted in the death of sixty Huguenots, the famous "Massacre of Vassy" that set off thirty years of religious wars in France. The outbreak of what amounted to civil war, plus the impossibility at Saint-Germain of reaching an agreement over image- veneration, which the Queen Regent had considered among the easier issues to resolve, convinced her that she now had no alternative but to support French participation in the council ([18], pp. 326–27; [20]).

On November 13, 1562, therefore, "the Cardinal of Lorraine," Charles de Guise, arrived at Trent with twelve bishops, three abbots, and eighteen theologians [20]. This relatively small delegation, which was later somewhat enlarged, proved itself extremely influential, due largely to the forceful personality of de Guise, who from this point forward played a role at the council second only to the papal legates. On January 3, little more than six weeks after the French arrived, they presented the council with a memorandum of thirty-four articles on reform, one of which (n. 29) dealt, not surprisingly, with images:

29. Because iconoclasts have arisen in our times, men who believe images must be destroyed, which has resulted in grave public disturbances in many places, the council must take measures to ensure that the faithful are properly instructed in church teaching regarding the veneration of images. The council should likewise take measures to eliminate the abuses and superstitious practices that have grown up in that regard. Similar provisions should be made for indulgences, pilgrimages, the relics of the saints and the so-called brotherhoods [confraternities].⁷

The legates took the French proposals extremely seriously and in early February sent to Rome three reports that were article-by-article reactions to them—one by Tommaso Campeggio, bishop of Feltre, a seasoned and highly respected canonist, another by Giovanni Antonio Facchinetti, bishop of Nicastro, and a third that was a report from an eleven-person committee, made up principally of canonists, that the legates had created to provide their own considered response ([17], 13/2, pp. 114–40).

⁷ [17], 13/2, p. 108, my translation. Also see [18], pp. 842–867.

On number 29, the committee said simply, “Let the matter be treated in the catechism” ([17], p. 120). Facchinetti, a member of the committee who filed a separate report, did not even mention article 29. Campeggio recommended following the decree of Nicaea II, where, he maintained, the issue was adequately handled. He said, further, the council should ensure that “abuses and superstition be removed” ([17], p. 117) It would be difficult to minimize an issue more effectively than do these reports.

When the legates sent the reports to Rome they pleaded for a speedy response. It was a delicate moment at the council because, while the legates and Pope Pius IV were eager to keep the French there after their sixteen-year boycott, they were wary of them and especially of Charles de Guise. They recognized in him a powerful personality, who had the potential for swaying the council on crucial issues. They were suspicious of his Gallican leanings in ecclesiology and, more immediately, of the conversations on the Augsburg Confession that he on his own had initiated only a few months earlier with the Lutheran Duke Christopher of Württemberg.

When the reports arrived in Rome, the pope asked the opinion of his trusted and prudent confidant, Cardinal Morone, not yet appointed legate to the council. As to article 29 Morone said only, “Regarding images let there be a declaration [from the council] to observe what the seventh synod [Council of Nicaea II] prescribed” ([17], p. 115). Pius responded to the legates as swiftly as they could have desired. On February 13 came the papal reply in a letter from Carlo Borromeo, who was in charge of his uncle the pope’s correspondence. The comment on number 29 was simply, “The most reverend legates responded well,” which meant either to relegate the matter to the catechism or, if deemed necessary, to reissue the decree of Nicaea II ([17], p. 125). To reissue Nicaea II would have meant, as mentioned, a simple condemnation of iconoclasm and an affirmation of the legitimacy and usefulness of images for Christian devotion and instruction without mention of their quality. In any case, one thing is clear: neither the legates at Trent nor the pope in Rome saw “images” as a concern.

The French proposals, like similar documents from the Spanish bishops and from Emperor Ferdinand I, Charles V’s brother and successor, never made it to the floor of the council, nor were they distributed to the bishops for their perusal. Images, therefore, were still not an issue at the council. Other matters, including the crisis over the authority of bishops in relationship to the pope that brought the council almost to a halt, took precedence through the rest of the year and absorbed everybody’s attention. As the months passed, Pius IV pressed the legates to bring the council swiftly to conclusion.

Despite strong Spanish resistance to the idea, in the middle of November the legates succeeded in setting December 9 as the terminal date. Not until then did they begin to set in motion procedures for dealing with relics, indulgences, fasting, the invocation and veneration of saints, and the veneration of relics and images. One of the many ironies of the Council of Trent is that indulgences, which were the spark setting off the Reformation, got such late and, as things turned out, such cursory attention.

Although the circumstances in which the decree on images was formulated are well known since Hubert Jedin’s reconstruction of them, they bear repeating [13]. With a view to saving time, Morone, the chief legate, was able on November 15 to push through a plan to have documents on these matters prepared by three special committees or deputations and to treat them as dealing with reform rather than doctrine, which, as mentioned, not only much simplified and speeded-up procedures but also meant they would not be subjected to the scrutiny of the theologians accredited to the council.

The deputations went to work, but no record survives of what, if anything, they accomplished. Nothing, in any case, was forthcoming. Finally, Guise, worried that time was running out, appeared in

Morone's quarters on Sunday morning, November 28, and categorically demanded that the council enact decrees on Purgatory and the veneration of images. Surely in reaction to this pressure from Charles de Guise, Morone the next morning, November 29, disbanded the original deputations and set up a new one, with the charge of handling all the issues—indulgences, Purgatory, fasting, and the veneration of saints, their relics, and their images. At this point only eight working days were left to the council if it was to finish on December 9. During those days the council also had other business to handle besides those committed to the new deputation. The agenda was badly overloaded.

The deputation, meeting in the quarters of Cardinal de Guise, went to work immediately on the afternoon of November 29. But when late the next day news arrived from Rome that Pope Pius IV was so seriously ill that his life was in question, the legates insisted that the council be concluded immediately. If the pope died before the council officially declared its business finished, the council would automatically be suspended. Not only would it suffer the delay occasioned by a possibly long conclave, but its very existence would be in jeopardy because there was no guarantee the new pope would reconvene it ([21], 4/2, pp. 164–88).

On December 1 the legates were able to gain approval from the council that the next day, December 2, would be the council's last working day and that the solemnities ending it would be held on December 3 and 4, known as Session Twenty-Five. ("Session" designated a day or, in this extraordinary case, two days, principally ceremonial, when documents already debated, amended, and in principle approved were formally accepted.)

This change in closing date, which loped off a full week from the earlier calendar for closure, meant that the deputation had now only a day to complete its many tasks. Jedin convincingly argued that in dealing with image-veneration the deputation had to have had a prior document that provided it with a pattern for a decree it needed to formulate in such haste. Otherwise, it could hardly have produced the text in such short order. The decree on images was by far the most fully articulated of those the deputation produced.

Charles de Guise in fact had such a document in his possession, the *Sententia* on the matter formulated by theologians from the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris for the colloquy at Saint-Germain, a fact he had made known in the council weeks earlier. Five theologians from the University of Paris who had constructed the *Sententia* formed part of the French delegation to the council. Even if Guise had not carried the text with him, the theologians were surely able to supply him with it.

Almost from the moment of his arrival at Trent, the French cardinal became the most powerful and insistent voice demanding that the council take action on images. Had it not been for him it is not at all certain the council would have taken up the issue. If not for Guise, the decree would not have been formulated the way it was, and therefore it possibly would not have contained the provision about removing from images all "sensual allurements" [*lascivia*]. The pertinent section of that long decree, which in substance is a resounding validation of images, reads:

All superstition must be removed from the invocation of the saints, the veneration of relics, and use of sacred images; all possibility of financial gain eliminated; all sensual allurements be removed, so that the images are not painted or adorned with seductive charm.⁸

⁸ [2], 2, pp. 775–76; I have slightly modified the translation in Tanner.

No record survives of the deliberation of the deputation at Trent that formulated the decree. But by a careful comparison of the *Sententia* with the Tridentine text, Jedin showed the latter's dependency on the former [13]. The latter text, though considerably shorter, follows the sequence in which the *Sententia* developed its position. It occasionally quotes the *Sententia* verbatim, more often paraphrases it. The *lascivia* ("sensual allurements") in the Tridentine text, a word much discussed in art historical literature, is a simple reworking of *impudica et lasciva* in the Saint-Germain text, which itself may have been an echo of the *lascivas* in the decree from the Council of Sens.

On the afternoon of December 2 the council in a plenary working session received the decree along with the decrees on indulgences, Purgatory, and fasting. It at the same time received a large number of other decrees, which meant that none of them received anything more than a few scattershot and insignificant comments. None the less, it deemed them all worthy of presentation and final approval at Session Twenty-Five that followed on the next two days.

Thus, all we know about the construction of a text that had such influence on artists and patrons and that in the past hundred years has generated so much scholarly comment is that it was virtually the exclusive product of French concern, that Charles de Guise was the principal player in its evolution, that it was in a general way based on the *Sententia* of Saint-Germain, that it was put together in almost desperate haste, that it was passed by the council without examination or debate, that iconoclasm, not a desire to regulate the decorum of sacred images, was the driving force behind it, and that in the records of the council there is not a single mention of a painter or painting—not even of Michelangelo and his "Last Judgment."

After December 4 the bishops left Trent for home with the self-imposed mandate to implement the council's decrees. The bishop of Rome, though he had never set foot in Trent, felt himself under the same mandate of course but perhaps in an even more urgent way because of the preeminence of his bishopric and because of the need he surely felt to reassure the world that the harsh criticism the papacy had received at the council for being the major obstacle to reform was no longer justified. In consistory on December 30, 1563, Pius IV, now fully recovered from his illness, declared to the cardinals, with self-serving exaggeration, that the council's reform decrees were milder than if he had done them himself. He would see to it that they were implemented in his diocese.⁹

In the same consistory, accordingly, the pope created a deputation of cardinals to review the council's decrees to see what could and should be put immediately into practice in Rome and to lay the groundwork for his bull ratifying the council's decisions. The membership consisted of Giovanni Morone and Ludovico Simonetta, both of whom had been legates to the council, plus Carlo Borromeo, Giovanni Battista Cicala, and Vitellazzo Vitelli. To the deputation were added three canonists, two of whom—Gabriele Paleotti and Ugo Boncompagni—had been at Trent. The deputation met three times between January 18 and 21 and dealt with a wide spectrum of issues.

The final meeting of the deputation, January 21, dealt, for instance, with questions about benefices, marriage dispensations, the diocesan and provincial synods the council had mandated, and similar matters ([17], 9, pp. 1144–49). Among those matters was implementation of the decree on images. The deputation stated its recommendation in a simple sentence: "The pictures in the Apostolic Chapel are

⁹ For a summary of the pope's address, see [17], 9, pp. 1143–44. See also [21], 4/2, pp. 225–27.

to be covered, as [is to be done] in other churches if they display anything obscene or obviously false, according to Decree 2 in Session 9 [25] under Pius.”¹⁰

As we all know, what followed was the painting over of the nudity in Michaelangelo’s “Last Judgment.” In the literature about the relationship between the council and that action, there has been considerable confusion. Some scholars have mistakenly identified the action of the Roman deputation as an action of the council itself ([22], pp. 118, 136; [23], p. 194). Romeo De Maio in his influential book on Michelangelo made essentially that mistake by asserting that the “Judgment” was discussed by name at the council. He cited Jedin’s article on the origins of the decree to validate his claim, but Jedin never once mentioned either Michelangelo or the painting ([24], p. 39).¹¹ Mistakes like these unfortunately became established as well as unquestioned verities in scholarship about the painting.

No one has been able to discover a mention of the painter or the painting in the acts of the council. For that matter, no one has discovered a mention of any other painter or painting. Aside from Article 29 in the French memorandum on reform and the correspondence between Trent and Rome concerning it, sacred images and art in general were a non-issue at Trent until the curtain was about to come down on the council.

It is plausible, of course, that in the discussions of the deputation that met in de Guise’s quarters the “Judgment” was adduced by some Italian members as an example of a deplorable *lascivia*. But that is pure speculation. There is no textual basis for asserting that it or any other specific work of art gave impetus to the stipulation in the decree that in sacred images “all sensual allurements” and “seductive charm” must be avoided.

We can reasonably infer that the corresponding passage in the *Sententia* of Saint Germaine sufficiently explains the origins of the stipulation. That text reads: “It is also by no means a small

¹⁰ [17], p. 1149: “*Picturae in capella Apostolica cooperiantur, similiter in aliis ecclesiis, si aliquid obscenum aut evidenter falsum ostendant, juxta decretum 2. in sess. 9 [25] sub Pio,*” my translation. For the minutes of the meeting of January 21, Stefan Eshes, editor for volume 9 of the *Concilium Tridentinum*, drew upon three manuscripts in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano. There is, however, a manuscript in the Vatican Library that contains a notable discrepancy from the text provided by Eshes, Borg. Lat. 61, fols 318–321, at 318v. As cited by Melinda Schlitt, for instance, and later checked by her at my request, the text reads: “*Picturae in capella Apostolica cooperiantur, in aliis autem ecclesiis deleantur, si quae aliquid obscenum aut evidenter falsum ostendant, juxta decretum secundum in sess. 9 sub Pio.*” ([22], p. 145, n. 10). The *deleantur* (“let them be effaced,” or even “let them be destroyed”) is obviously a significantly different reading. Unless the discrepancy can be resolved through certification of a reliable *Urtext*, which, given the extensive research of the past hundred years on documents related to Trent, seems highly unlikely, there are reasons for preferring the reading in the *Concilium Tridentinum*. First, why would the deputation establish a double standard for implementation of the decree? Second, why such a drastic measure for other churches in Rome? Third, whereas the provision of the minutes was literally and immediately carried out for the “Judgment,” we have no evidence, as far as I know, of parts of other “pictures” in Rome being “effaced” at that time. Finally, I find it highly unlikely that the members of the deputation, four of whom were at Trent and knew well the anti-iconoclasm origins of the decree, would call for the “destruction” of images. To do so would seem to play into the hands of the iconoclasts and give them grounds for saying, “See, you’re doing it too!”

¹¹ On the same page De Maio mistakenly identifies Morone as a Theatine and therefore a “reactionary” and inclined to prudish judgments about art. But Morone was a member of the religious circle known as the *spirituali* with which Michelangelo associated. He had been, moreover, persecuted by one of the founders of the Theatine order, Pope Paul IV, and, cardinal though he was, tried for heresy and thrown into prison by him.

abuse if images are painted and shaped in an indecent and sensually alluring form [*impudica et lasciva*] and one at odds with the chastity and upright character of the holy men and women the images represent.”¹²

The public controversy over the nudity in the “Judgment” easily accounts for the Roman deputation’s action after the council. From the moment of its unveiling twenty-two years earlier, it had been harshly criticized for its nude figures and been the object of public controversy at least since the publication of Pietro Aretino’s letter of 1545 deploring the indecency of the images “in the most sacred chapel upon the earth” ([25], pp. 189–91; [22]). (Aretino, who wrote pornography, is a strange critic of the “Judgment”). The offending painting was the “Judgment,” even though there were of course other *ignudi* in the Chapel that escaped such criticism. Whatever those other *ignudi* were or represented, they were not images of the saints.

Not until January 21, 1564, a month and a half after the council ended, do we have a document that relates the decree to the “Judgment.” That is the moment, moreover, that the more general application of the decree to the diocese of Rome got officially set into motion. Although artists and patrons there were made to feel the pressure of the regulation, there is no instance of any other painting in Rome being defaced as a result of it.

At about the same time other conscientious bishops set to work implementing the new duties the council imposed upon them. But, if we are to believe Gabriele Paleotti and other contemporaries, most bishops in Italy did not prove themselves particularly diligent in censoring sacred art. That is not to say, of course, that the decree remained a dead letter, or that it did not result in a phenomenon known as “Tridentine art”. None the less, it is important to keep in mind that what the council intended by the decree was to issue a resounding affirmation of the legitimacy and usefulness of sacred images and to defend them against those who would destroy them.

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