



Baldacchino, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1623-1644

# CHILDBIRTH IN ST. PETER'S BASILICA

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The architectural grandeur and immense interior space of St. Peter's Basilica draw the eyes heavenward, nowhere more than the Baldacchino, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's (1598-1680) four-columned bronze altar at the crossing of the cathedral. Surpassed by the visual spectacle overhead, the four piers that support the structure display a series of eight escutcheons at eye level on the outward-facing sides. Seven have heads of women; the eighth has a smiling cherub.

Carol Richardson of the University of Edinburgh, writing in the journal *Art History* in 2020, wrote on the symbolism of the women and baby and how they portray labor and childbirth, an allegory of the suffering that brings about spiritual awakening.<sup>1</sup> The convexity of the escutcheon resembles a gravid abdomen, undulating as labor progresses. The most controversial decorations are the masques at the base of each composition. With little imagination, the leering mouth of the *grotteschi* become the birth canal, with a bulbous nose that represents an engorged clitoris, and fleshy jowls that become labial folds to each side.<sup>1</sup>

Not what one would expect at the spiritual center of Christendom. The temptation is to dismiss such talk as something a ciceroni would tell gullible sightseers with a



Detail on the Baldacchino, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.



The faces of the Baldacchino, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

nudge and a wink. To Richardson, however, the problem is that the “scurrilous gynecological details [in Bernini’s compositions] are now impossible to un-see,” and thus require thoughtful analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### A montage of childbirth

Bernini, the Baroque’s greatest sculptor, glorified the papacy of Pope Urban VIII (r. 1623-1644), just as Michelangelo served Julius II and the Medici popes Leo X and Clement VII. Urban, scion of the wealthy Barberini family, had just been elected pope when he bestowed upon Bernini the commission for an altarpiece to mark St. Peter’s tomb under the rotunda of the basilica.

Bernini rewarded His Holiness with the Baldacchino. It took twelve years to complete (1623-1634) and required so much bronze that girders from the portico of the Pantheon were purloined for its construction.<sup>2</sup> Everywhere are references to the Barberini family and the Urban papacy. Garlands of laurel signify the gentle rule and eternal springtime that the pope hoped for his reign. Dotted the composition are bees, the Barberini family emblem when arranged in an inverted triangle.<sup>1</sup>

Each escutcheon on the supporting piers thus presents the Bernini bees on its central cartouche. Sheltered beneath the heavy keys of St. Peter are faces about the size

of a grapefruit; seven are women, and the eighth is a baby. At the base of the compositions are *grotteschi*— menacing faces with jowls draped over the base of the frame.

At the end of the 19th century, and the first decades of the 20th, the obstetrical motif of the escutcheons became part of Vatican folklore. Once the premise is suggested the women’s faces in clockwise sequence around the perimeter of the altar are recognized as stages of a woman in labor: placid; agony; giddy with relief; the mouth open in a gasp; once again relieved but apprehensive, a stray curl on the center of the forehead revealing the ordeal; a crescendo of pain; and concentrated effort, eyes set in middle distance, brow furrowed, mouth involuntarily open. A plump infant, atop the eighth cartouche, is the blessed outcome. The convexity of the oval cartouche is the gravid abdomen; the *grotteschi*, the external female genitalia and the vagina.

The connections to pregnancy and parturition were first documented in a popular English-language guidebook to Rome published in 1883.<sup>3</sup> In 1901, Giacomo Emilio Curatulo, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology and historian, correlated the dilation and contraction of the putative vaginal orifice with the phases of parturition. To Philippe Noury, a doctor from Rouen writing in 1904, the facial expressions of the women reflected the progressive agony of labor.<sup>1</sup>

In 1908, Gustave-Joseph Witkowski, another obstetrician, gave theological depth to the theme of childbirth. He proposed, in Richardson's words, "[that] the woman in labor is Mother Church, *Mater Ecclesia*, renewing herself with the new papacy."<sup>1</sup>

Compare the papacy to a woman who, in great pain, is giving birth to souls for God; for a pope, as for the rest of the Church, it is sometimes a pregnancy and a birth that are truly painful. What disappointments, what opposition, what struggles, what suffering do the pope and the Church not endure in order to bring into the world children of Grace, in accordance with holy writ.<sup>1</sup>

In an unpublished treatise dated 1937-1940 Sergei Eisenstein, a Russian filmmaker, saw a cinematic montage played out on the piers of the Baldacchino. Bernini, the master storyteller in carved marble, had an innate sense of one of the standard techniques of moviemaking. Art historian Irving Lavin, of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton wrote:

Eisenstein interpreted the reliefs in formal terms as a perfect demonstration of his theory of montage, that

is, sequential narration in film, and argued that their full significance could only be grasped when they were considered in this way.<sup>2</sup>

### Gynecological vulgarities

Lavin and Philipp Fehl of the University of Illinois dismissed the obstetrical story as far-fetched, and the gynecological interpretations as vulgar. They presented conventional iconographic explanations. Lavin wrote the figures were, "grotesque masks, half human, half bestial, [that] sneer and threaten vile, demonic pleasures."<sup>3</sup> The masks recalled the disguises marauding toughs wore when they tore through pagan festivals.<sup>1</sup>

Fehl saw the malign face of a flayed satyr, his skin spilling to each side. He wrote that the flayed satyr was part of the iconography in Bernini's time. For example, a piece of art might show an angel standing on a flayed satyr or raising it aloft in triumph over evil. To Fehl, the women's heads were Medusa figures, the female counterparts to the satyrs below. The cherub celebrated the arrival of Urban's papacy.<sup>4</sup>

Others believe that the crude depictions of female anatomy may have insinuated a scandal involving the Bernini family. One of its lesser members violated Bernini's



"Masks" of the Baldacchino, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

workshop by seducing the wife of one of the artist's assistants and left her with child. Female genitalia became highbrow graffiti, "an artisan community's retribution against a corrupt ruling clique,"<sup>1</sup> playing tricks in plain sight knowing that the Pope would be transfixed by the spectacle aloft.

It is doubtful that Bernini would toy with his papal benefactor. In Bernini's time, viewing the ecclesiastical artwork was a religious experience. Everything in the composition of the Baldacchino, from its four supporting piers at its base to the dome that soars above it, invite the pilgrim to contemplate "the wonder or spiritual ecstasy as a result of the Eucharistic remembrance,"<sup>1</sup> taking place under its canopy.

Rather than adopting the mainstream narrative, Richardson acknowledged the obstetrical and gynecological imagery. Childbirth is a metaphor for the rebirth of faith. Thomas Aquinas compared Christ's agony at his *Passion* with the pain of childbirth. Richardson wrote:

As John refers to the birth of a man, not of a child, Aquinas explains that this specifically foretells the Resurrection, "because Christ, in his human nature, rose from the dead, renewed, with the newness of a child at birth." And, like the woman after she has given birth, even though the saints and martyrs in heaven might remember their suffering, they no longer feel its pain. Most of all, this is a joy that will be felt in the very hearts of men, and it will last forever.<sup>1p78</sup>

The agonizing, but life-giving, experience of childbirth is the embodiment of the awakening of faith, Richardson wrote. She gave Bernini full credit for incorporating an overtly obstetrical statement into his masterpiece of religious architecture.

Bernini's concept of femaleness was one of being entirely subject to the life-giving process: an insistent force that cannot be resisted. While the biblical metaphor would have been more familiar to an audience in the 17th century—whether clerical or lay—Bernini's achievement is that he has imagined such a powerful, multivalent symbol in such an innovative way and for such a context. As a male, construction of a female experience, is a remarkably sensitive and compelling one.<sup>1</sup>

Unknowable is whether Bernini's use of obstetrical images was intentional. He was, however, a master of storytelling: *The Abduction of Proserpina* as she tries to

flee her abduction; the determination of *David* as he takes aim at Goliath; and the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* as she is pierced by the arrow of Divine Love.

At the Baldacchino, visitors recognize the theme of childbirth once it is pointed out. The durability of the interpretation lies in its portrayal as a montage. Centuries before the montage became a fundamental device in cinema, Bernini used it to combine eight images into a single spiritual message that resonates with 21st century sensibilities imbued with the techniques of modern moviemaking.

### References

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