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**THE ALTARS AND ALTARPIECES  
OF NEW ST. PETER'S  
OUTFITTING THE BASILICA, 1621–1666**



**Louise Rice**

*Duke University*



**CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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**To my father**

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# Introduction



**S**T. PETER'S is no ordinary church. "Regina delle basiliche,"<sup>1</sup> "Tempio de' tempi,"<sup>2</sup> "Base della Fede Cattolica,"<sup>3</sup> "the Quintessence of wit and wealth,"<sup>4</sup> "the most perfect modell of decent Magnificence in the world,"<sup>5</sup> "la maggiore delle meraviglie dell'universo"<sup>6</sup>: the superlatives that have been used to describe the basilica bear witness to its unique place in the history of Western art and religion. St. Peter's is the mother church of the Catholic faith; and in the eyes of many it is the cathedral, not of the city of Rome, but of the entire world.<sup>7</sup> Its unparalleled prestige is due in part to its great antiquity, in part to the preciousness of the relics it contains, but above all to its close associations with the institution of the papacy. Built over the tomb of the apostle Peter, it is the Petrine monument par excellence, an embodiment in stone of the belief in the apostolic succession from Christ through Peter to the bishop of Rome that is the doctrinal rock on which Roman Catholicism is based.

St. Peter's was founded around the year 320 by the Emperor Constantine. The original fourth-century structure survived more or less intact until 1506, when Pope Julius II (1503–13), judging it dilapidated beyond repair, determined to tear it down and replace it with a majestic new edifice of modern design. The construction of new St. Peter's took over a hundred years to complete.<sup>8</sup> It was the most ambitious artistic undertaking of the Renaissance, and one with obvious political and propagandistic significance. The project coincided with a turbulent period in the history of the papacy, a period defined by the

<sup>1</sup> Baglione, 1642, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Pichi, 1782, p. 9, citing Baronius.

<sup>3</sup> Fontana, 1694, p. 406.

<sup>4</sup> Lassels, 1670, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond, 1648, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Alveri, 1664, II, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Bralion, 1655–59, I, pp. 269–70: "Certes il semble que cette Eglise seule ait une dignité si ample & si eminente, qu'elle l'esleve au dessus de toutes les autres; car au lieu qu'elle n'est pas ainsi que S. Jean Latran, la Cathedrale du Pape, pour l'Evesché particulier de Rome, elle l'est en quelque façon pour toute la Terre." In a similar vein, Totti (1637, p. 9) characterizes St. Peter's as "Capo, Maestra, e Madre di tutte le Chiese del Mondo." On the relationship between St. Peter's and the cathedral of Rome, S. Giovanni in Laterano, see Freiberg, 1995, pp. 177–90.

<sup>8</sup> The literature on the history of the construction is vast, but see in particular Wolff Metternich, 1972; 1975; and with Thoenes, 1987. See also Hibbard, 1971, pp. 65–74, 155–88; Frommel, 1976; Francia, 1977; 1989 (a); Carpiceci, 1983; 1987; Ackerman, 1986, pp. 193–220, 317–24; Thoenes, 1986; 1992 (a); 1992 (b); *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo*, 1994, pp. 395–423, 598–671 (with extensive additional bibliography).



start of the Protestant Reformation, the Sack of Rome in 1527, the Council of Trent, and the institution of the policies and strategies of the Counter Reformation. As the new basilica, with its massive cupola and its broad facade, rose slowly over the Roman skyline, it must have seemed a defiant symbol of a resurgent and triumphant Catholic Church.

Even before the building was finished, the popes turned their attention to the outfitting and decoration of its interior. Readyng the altars to accommodate liturgical activity was the first order of business. Already by the late sixteenth century, a number of altars were installed and a handful of them provided with permanent altarpieces. But it was only in the seventeenth century, after construction finally came to a end, that the majority of the altars – including the apse altar and the many side altars in the nave chapels, transept chapels, and corner chapels – were assigned titles, equipped with relics, and furnished with appropriate images reflecting their dedications. This book is a history of the altars and altarpieces of the new basilica, with particular emphasis on the group of altarpieces commissioned and installed in the half-century immediately following the completion of construction. The series begins with Guercino's *Burial of St. Petronilla*, executed between 1621 and 1623, and concludes with Algardi's St. Leo altarpiece and Bernini's *Cathedra Petri*, erected over the last two altars still without permanent altarpieces. Although the former was commissioned by Pope Gregory XV (1621–23) and the latter two by Popes Innocent X (1644–55) and Alexander VII (1655–67) respectively, it was in fact Pope Urban VIII (1623–44) who was chiefly responsible for the campaign to outfit the altars of the new basilica. Shortly after his election, eager to leave his mark on the foremost church in Christendom, he directed "that images be made for every altar in St. Peter's."<sup>9</sup> The twenty-one years of the Barberini pontificate saw the creation of more than two dozen major altarpieces and related works of art. It is hard to exaggerate the significance of the achievement. Probably never before or since have so many top-ranking artists been involved in a single enterprise of this kind. When the campaign was at its peak, in the second half of the 1620s and the first half of the 1630s, a visitor to St. Peter's might have encountered, in addition to Gianlorenzo Bernini directing the construction of the *bal-dacchino*, any number of celebrated painters, among them Giovanni Lanfranco, Domenichino, Guido Reni, Simon Vouet, Andrea Sacchi, Pietro da Cortona, Nicolas Poussin, Valentin, Giovanni Baglione, Cavaliere d'Arpino, Domenico Passignano, Agostino Ciampelli, Gaspare Celio, Paolo Guidotti, Antonio Pomarancio, Spadarino, Angelo Caroselli, Andrea Camassei, and Gianfrancesco Romanelli, all of whom held commissions there during those years.

The spirit of competition as much as the prestige of the site brought out the best in most of these artists, and the works they produced for St. Peter's include a striking percentage of masterpieces familiar to every student of Roman Baroque art. Some of the altarpieces have, of course, received considerable art historical attention before now. The tendency, however, has been to study them individually, usually in the context of a particular artist's oeuvre. The premise of this book is that, commissioned as they were as part of a concerted campaign to outfit the new basilica, the altarpieces of St. Peter's are best considered collectively. Only by investigating them as a group, reconstructing the historical, physical, liturgical, and devotional contexts for which they were created, can we appreciate the multiplicity of factors involved in realizing a project of such magnitude. Adopting an approach of this kind, we confront certain fundamental questions. In a church from which private patronage was barred, who were in charge of overseeing the campaign, and what agenda did they promote? What principles governed the distribution of titles among the various altars, and how was it determined which dedications were perpetuated from

<sup>9</sup> "... è mente di Nostro Signore si facciano le imagini a tutti li altar di S. Pietro" (Pollak, no. 74).



the old basilica and which were introduced for the first time in the new? How were the subjects of the altarpieces chosen, and to what extent did they reflect a coordinated iconographic program? Who selected the artists, monitored their progress, and assessed their finished works? What did it mean to be assigned an altarpiece in St. Peter's, and what effect did it have on the future development of Baroque art that so many of the most talented painters of the day contributed to the project, working in close proximity and in conditions bound to foster creative exchange? In tackling these and other questions of the kind, we not only gain insight into the history and meaning of an important group of images commissioned for the mother church of Catholicism, but in broader terms extend our understanding of the intricate connections between art, religion, and the cultural policies of the papacy in early modern Rome.

The topic is a large one, and I have had to limit it in certain ways. For example, I have omitted a detailed analysis of the bronze baldachin Bernini erected over the high altar in the crossing, in part because the high altar, with its papal privilege, is distinct from the other altars and its history in certain ways independent from theirs, and in part because the *baldacchino* has already been the subject of several in-depth investigations.<sup>10</sup> For similar reasons, I have excluded from my discussion the altars of Helen, Longinus, Andrew, and Veronica in the *sacre grotte*, linked as they are to the decoration of the high altar and crossing piers.<sup>11</sup> The mosaics adorning the vaults of the side aisles and corner chapels are another aspect of the basilica's decoration that I have treated only superficially. Although these mosaics often reflect the dedications of the altars and the subjects of the altarpieces nearest them, it should be noted that most of them are of a later date. Thus, while a knowledge of the altars and altarpieces is crucial to an understanding of the vault decorations, the reverse is not necessarily true.<sup>12</sup> While restricting the scope of my investigation in these areas, I have expanded it in another, devoting an entire chapter to the *sopraporti*, the series of six large altarpiece-like paintings over the doors in the *navi piccole*. Conceived and produced at the same time as the altarpieces, these images constituted an essential extension of the iconographic and artistic program and need to be included in any discussion of the campaign as a whole.

Few buildings have been as intensively studied as St. Peter's. Yet for all the countless books and articles that have been devoted to it, there are still important aspects of its construction and design, its decoration and furnishings, its function and identity that have yet to be explored. This book, I hope, will supply one missing chapter. But the fascination of the monument is inexhaustible, and its power to engender fresh questions seemingly unlimited. "You can come here every day of your life, and never risk wearying of it," wrote Charles de Brosse in the mid-eighteenth century; "there is always some new observation to be made."<sup>13</sup> Henry James perhaps came closer to the heart of the matter. "They went a great deal to St. Peter's, and Mary" – the gentle heroine of *Roderick Hudson* – "easily recognised that [to enter the basilica and] find oneself a mere sentient point in that brilliant immensity, was an act that had its way of remaining a thrill."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On the *baldacchino*, see in particular Thelen, 1967 (b); I. Lavin, 1968; 1984; Kirwin, 1981; Schütze, 1994, esp. pp. 219–55. Additional bibliography is cited in Schütze, 1994, p. 219, n. 20.

<sup>11</sup> On the four altars at the bases of the crossing piers, and their matching altarpieces by Andrea Sacchi, see I. Lavin, 1968; Sutherland Harris, 1977, pp. 71–74 and pls. 63–66. In addition, on the statues in the crossing piers, see Fransolet, 1933; Preimesberger, 1983; 1989; 1993.

<sup>12</sup> For a useful if somewhat perfunctory treatment of the mosaic decoration of St. Peter's, see DiFederico, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> "Vous pouvez y venir tous les jours de votre vie, sans crainte de vous en lasser; il y a toujours quelque nouvelle remarque à faire." (Brosse, 1931, II, p. 155.)

<sup>14</sup> *Roderick Hudson*, chpt. XVIII.



