

## ***The Reformation of a Plague Saint: Sebastian in Early Modern Europe***

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THROUGHOUT THE LATE MEDIEVAL and early modern periods of European history, the cult of saints was a prominent aspect of European Christianity. According to the late medieval view of the divine, there existed a gulf between the heavens and earth that the laity could not breach of their own accord. One of the functions of the medieval church was to help the laity connect with the divine; thus, the cult of saints was devised as one way through which common Christians could reach God. Saints were individuals, now deceased, who could intermediate between heaven and earth on the basis of their special status they had achieved through their actions while on earth. Medieval Christians believed that “saint[s], on the basis of his or her holiness...[could] command the power to meet the needs of people who encountered signs of their own helplessness and impotence at every turn.”<sup>1</sup> Medieval Christianity taught that while direct contact with God was unattainable for the common Christian, the aid of saints who could in turn communicate the concerns of the laity was readily available.

The cult of saints is considered to have originated in the fourth century following the fall of the Roman Empire, and found wide appeal with the masses as means for the laity to connect with a distant deity. An individual could come to be regarded as a saint by a number of different means; one manner through which many individuals achieved sainthood was by dying for their profession of their Christian beliefs, that is, by becoming martyrs. Martyr saints held a particularly special place within the celestial hierarchy of the late medieval period; Peter Brown explains that “their intimacy with God was the *sine qua non* of their ability to intercede for, and, so, to protect their fellow mortals.”<sup>2</sup> Because of the elevated status martyr saints held in the late medieval celestial hierarchy, there exist many artistic representations of martyred saints that offer insight into the manner in which their stories were interpreted throughout the late medieval and early modern periods.

This paper will use the example of one martyr saint—Sebastian—to illustrate one manner in which martyr saints were interpreted by the art of European Christianity throughout the late medieval and early modern periods. This study will also show how these interpretations reflect the innovations of the Church just prior to and within the different factions of Christianity that developed during the Age of Reform. Relying heavily on paintings and official church publications from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, it will be demonstrated that Saint Sebastian’s changing roles serve as a window into the larger transition from the late medieval Latin Church to various manifestations of Protestant Christianity and the Tridentine Catholic Church. While many of these transitions resulted in different interpretations of Saint Sebastian’s role as a plague saint, later innovations in Catholicism separated Saint Sebastian’s image from that of exclusively a plague saint, and used his image to create educational images about female piety in the early modern Church.

Saint Sebastian was martyred in the third century within the context of Diocletian’s Rome, and he became commonly known and depicted as a plague saint following the outbreak of the Black Death in continental Europe around 1348. Patron saints were different

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 6.

from the major saints in the medieval church; while divine figures such as the Virgin Mary could be called upon for aid in all situations, the aid of patron saints was usually reserved for cases in which they were believed to have a special influence before God. Despite the fact that neither his martyrdom nor his death was related to pandemic disease of any kind, the Black Death emphasized the idea that Saint Sebastian was believed to hold special influence with God concerning matters of pandemic disease.

When the Black Death struck Europe around 1348, it was not the first time that the continent had been faced with a deadly pestilence; however, more than six centuries had passed since the sixth-century Justinian plague. Over the course of those six hundred years that separated the two plagues, Christianity had not only come to Europe but had become the dominant influence upon the worldview of contemporaries—this fundamentally changed the manner in which the late medieval population dealt with the onslaught of the disease.

In medieval Europe, the Black Death was viewed as a form of divine retribution for the sins of mankind, much akin to the Genesis flood; this idea was supported by the humanist view of the celestial hierarchy as distant and oftentimes wrathful. Medieval Christians worshipped a God who “was not really a father at all, not a *paterfamilias*, but absolute power”<sup>3</sup> and who was punishing humankind by means of a terrible pestilence. Due to this view of the divine, medieval Christians sought the help of intercessors such as Mary or Saint Sebastian when they took steps to appease a deity who they believed was punishing them with widespread plague; these efforts were documented in paintings created in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Much scholarship has been devoted to determining how he came to be associated with disease; this paper will assume that Saint Sebastian was regarded as a patron saint of the plague due to the iconography of the arrows with which he was depicted in art, which have long been iconographical metaphors for plague.<sup>4</sup> In the years following the initial outbreak of plague in continental Europe, Saint Sebastian’s role in the religious lives of medieval Christians expanded to fit the needs of a suffering laity; during the age of reform, Saint Sebastian’s image was again altered so as to be acceptable to non-iconoclastic Protestants and to reflect the goals and realities of the Catholic reform movements.

When speaking to the explosion of plague-themed art which featured figures such as Saint Sebastian in the two centuries following the Black Death of 1348-1352 as opposed to the lack of artistic sources that came out of the sixth-century Justinian plague, Christine Boeckl comments that “illness was not of universal interest before the advent of humanism.”<sup>5</sup> This sentiment of the universal nature of the plague and the suffering it caused was evident in art through the iconography of the pestilence that was commonly used in art created in the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard C. Trexler, “Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972): 36.

<sup>4</sup> The beginnings of Saint Sebastian’s cult can be traced back to his martyrdom c. 288 CE; the end of the fourteenth century marked the beginning of his strong presence in art. As this paper is concerned with the interpretation of Saint Sebastian in response to the Black Death and the reform movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a discussion of the early development of his cult is largely outside the scope of this paper.

Many scholars have, however, attempted to provide answers to this question. Henry Sigerist suggests that the plague cult was simply transferred to Saint Sebastian from the pagan god Apollo in his book *Civilization and Disease* (Manchester, Ayer Publishing, 1970). Sheila Barker’s article “The Making of a Plague Saint: Saint Sebastian’s Imagery and Cult before the Counter-Reformation” in *Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque*, ed. Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2007), 90-131, credits the need for political alliances for the rise of Saint Sebastian’s cult, while Louise Marshall’s ideas pertaining to a combination of arrow imagery with Christian views of martyrs as laid out in her article “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy” (*Renaissance Quarterly* 47, #3 1994): 485-532 will be referenced throughout this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Boeckl, “Giorgio Vasari’s ‘San Rocco Altarpiece’: Tradition and Innovation in Plague Iconography,” *Artibus et Historiae* 22, no. 43 (2001): 31.

centuries following the fourteenth-century Black Death. According to Boeckl, plague iconography was unique because “although the topos pestilence was well established in Western literature, beginning with Homer and the Bible, there was no counterpart in the visual arts until the middle of the fourteenth century.”<sup>6</sup> The iconography most commonly associated with the plague in late medieval art consisted of arrows, clouds, and buboes.

The iconography of the arrow is most important for the purposes of this paper because of its close association with Saint Sebastian. While its origins are disputed, the iconography of the arrow is important in identifying the different roles Saint Sebastian played in the lives of late medieval Christians.<sup>7</sup> Boeckl argues that “the plague arrow in God’s hand exemplifies the oldest and most commonly used symbol signifying pestilence.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Louise Marshall points out that “in the Old Testament, as in Graeco-Roman myth, the arrow is a potent weapon in God’s armory, the instrument of suddenly, divinely-inflicted misfortune, disease, and death.”<sup>9</sup> Medieval Christians who were seeking Saint Sebastian’s aid in deferring the effects of the pestilence would have recognized arrow imagery as being symbolic of plague.

Saint Sebastian was always depicted with arrows in some form; these arrows could have pierced his body, been flung at him by archers or an absent power, or he could have been simply holding them as an attribute. While analyzing the different roles of Saint Sebastian in the lives of late medieval and early modern Christians, this paper will treat the iconography of the arrow as the reason for Saint Sebastian’s designation as a patron saint of the plague, while recognizing that some scholars feel that accrediting his cult entirely to his association with arrows is too simplistic.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the periods with which this paper is concerned, Saint Sebastian was often depicted as a nearly nude young man. It would be easy to dismiss the plethora of works portraying his story simply as a means for early and high Renaissance artists to flaunt their capabilities in representing an idealized human form; while true to some extent, that explanation is far too simplistic to account for his strong presence in art all the way from the late middle ages through the early modern period. It is interesting that many major artists such as Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431-1506), and Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445-1510) chose to represent Saint Sebastian at least once over the course of their careers, and that they all chose to represent Saint Sebastian in an idealized manner emphasizing his physical qualities.

Another possibility for the idealized manner in which Saint Sebastian was depicted throughout the Renaissance is the idea that Saint Sebastian was an offering to God and should therefore be shown as the best offering possible. Sheila Barker acknowledges this idea by arguing that as “it was a widely accepted principle that the more precious the offering, the more God would be placated, [therefore] the attractiveness of Sebastian’s imagery may have been regarded as a factor in attaining divine mercy.”<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Saint Sebastian continued to be portrayed in somewhat of an idealized manner even in paintings

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<sup>6</sup> Boeckl, “San Rocco Altarpiece,” 29.

<sup>7</sup> Arrows have been used in art to signify divinely-sent pestilence in sources that date as far back as Greek mythology (i.e. Apollo and Diana using arrows charged with disease to punish humans); the Christianization of this form of iconography is both disputed and also outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Boeckl, “San Rocco Altarpiece,” 31.

<sup>9</sup> Louise Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 493.

<sup>10</sup> Sheila Barker argues that Saint Sebastian’s association with the plague had nothing whatsoever to do with arrows, while Louise Marshall insists that arrow iconography must be considered alongside the Christian view of martyrs as heavenly beings who enjoy special favor with God as an explanation for the rise of Saint Sebastian’s cult.

<sup>11</sup> Barker, 114.

that would have been theologically acceptable to both early modern Protestants and Catholics. These paintings and many others like them will be further discussed throughout this paper, but will be evaluated based upon the level to which they exemplify the contemporary ideals of religious factions, rather than simply the skill of the artist in depicting the human form.

It is the ultimate goal of this paper to shed light upon the overall manner in which Saint Sebastian's role in late medieval and early modern Christianity was interpreted in light of the Black Death and the Age of Reform.<sup>12</sup> By demonstrating that Saint Sebastian was depicted in many different ways from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, it will be established that the late medieval Roman Church, its Protestant offshoots, and then its Tridentine manifestation all used images of Saint Sebastian to communicate larger messages about Christian theology and piety, as well as to provide guidance to believers seeking to live a pious life grounded in those theological ideals. Furthermore, the evolving nature of these images offers insight into the nature of each of these institutions as a major cultural influences on the lives of late medieval and early modern European Christians.

Utilizing paintings of Saint Sebastian completed in the years before the Protestant Reformation, this paper will first explore the three clear roles and one less certain but possible role Saint Sebastian played in the lives of late medieval Christians in the years preceding the Protestant Reformation; these roles were illustrative of the Roman Church's efforts to bring comfort to the suffering laity in the face of the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of plague. When faced with the enormity of the pestilence and the suffering to which it led on all levels of society, the late medieval church was forced to devise new methods of teaching the laity of appropriate Christian behavior in the face of what was believed to be a divinely-sent disease. Thus, emphasizing and expanding Saint Sebastian's cult as a plague saint was one way in which the late medieval Church responded to the challenges of the Black Death.

While art historians have traditionally neglected the art inspired by the Protestant Reformation due to its overtly didactic nature, it would be remiss for this paper to ignore the art that either came from or reflected the ideals of these movements. Thus, a brief section about the art of the Protestant Reformation will argue that Protestant art was created for the same purposes as that of Catholic art—to instruct new Protestants about vital aspects of their newly adopted form of Christianity. Citing the example of Jusepe de Ribera, this section will acknowledge the possibility that images of Saint Sebastian were altered by artists in ways that made them acceptable to Protestants as well as Catholics.

The third section of this paper will focus on Saint Sebastian's roles in early modern Catholicism, the Catholicism that not only responded to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation but also emerged from the sixteenth century with a new vision of its mission in early modern Europe. In this final section, three specific roles will be discussed; two roles served as visual means by which the Tridentine Church sought to redefine Saint Sebastian's cult. The third role served as a didactic tool for early modern Catholics through which they could learn how to live out their lives as pious Christians. While none of these roles were newly developed during the Catholic reform movements, one was vastly more popular than the other two; this emphasis is illustrative of the aspects of Catholicism on which the reform movements focused, as well as the goals set forth by the Church for moving forward as the Tridentine Church into the seventeenth century and beyond.

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<sup>12</sup> As this paper seeks to provide an overall survey of the ways in which Saint Sebastian was interpreted by major movements in European Christianity, little attention to regional differences was paid except in evaluating the motivations of particular artists in depicting Saint Sebastian in a specific manner. Future research on this subject would do well to complete a more regionally focused study of how a particular area or nation interpreted Saint Sebastian over the same period.

This final section will argue that the Tridentine Church acknowledged that the interpretation of Saint Sebastian's cult had reached astronomical proportions during the years following the Black Death; as part of the effort to reaffirm Catholic theology, the Church reduced his official role in the lives of early modern Catholics to that of a martyr and a model for Christian Death. However, the Church also recognized that Saint Sebastian was a familiar, even comforting, figure to many Catholics who had invoked his cult during times of pestilence. Based on this idea, the Tridentine Church used the image of Saint Sebastian to educate believers about other aspects of Tridentine theology, including the role of women in the church.

PRIOR TO THE BEGINNINGS of the Lutheran Reformation in 1517, Saint Sebastian had three definitive roles and one possible additional role in late medieval Christianity. These roles can clearly be seen in paintings from the period following the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348 through the first half of the sixteenth century. Drawing upon the previous introduction concerning the rise of plague art in late medieval Europe and Saint Sebastian's place within that movement, it will first be demonstrated that Saint Sebastian's multiple roles within the late medieval church included that of a martyr and model for Christian behavior in the face of certain death. He was consistently recognized as a martyr throughout this time period, but the idea of Saint Sebastian as a model for Christian death became popular only near the end of the fifteenth century, and remained so into the sixteenth century.

Scholarship pertaining to Saint Sebastian has largely focused on the two roles that will be first discussed in this section; the last part will explore a lesser-discussed role and suggest the possibility of a fourth role. The first of these roles—his identity as an active intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy—was consistent during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but was subject to much artistic interpretation that has been acknowledged but not discussed in much detail. When depicting his role as an active intercessor, Saint Sebastian was represented either during his martyrdom or as a model for Christian death in which he was made to mirror imagery of Christ as the “Man of Sorrows”.

The last section will address the possibility that Saint Sebastian was able to autonomously halt the plague by his own merit. As opposed to the roles that were either consistent or had origins that can be traced to a specific time within the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, this role seems to have gradually developed over time and has not been previously addressed by historians utilizing artistic sources. Due to a shortage of artistic sources, this section about Saint Sebastian's possible role as an autonomous plague-halter will incorporate written sources from prior to and from the time of the fourteenth century Black Death to provide further insight into this possible role that is demonstrated in art from the centuries following the Black Death.

*The most consistent image* of Saint Sebastian in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries prior to the Protestant Reformation was paintings that illustrated his status as a Christian martyr. Variations within these paintings were reflective of artistic license rather than changes in Saint Sebastian's role in the lives of late medieval Christians. Though there are often similarities, it is important to differentiate between works that portrayed Saint Sebastian simply as a martyr and those that used his image as the Christ-like “Man of Sorrows” in a devotional manner, which will be discussed later in this section.

When Saint Sebastian was pictured as a martyr, the image documents the event of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom. In c. 288 CE, the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered that Sebastian was to be shot to death, and the *Golden Legend*, an influential medieval hagiographic text, reported that “the archers shot at him till he was full of arrows as an urchin

is full of pricks” and left him to die.<sup>13</sup> This event was relevant to the lives of late medieval Christians because it was “at the shrines of the martyrs [that] Christianity dramatically breached the ancient barriers and joined together earth and heaven, the living and the dead.”<sup>14</sup> Through martyred figures such as Saint Sebastian, medieval Christians believed they gained access to the distant deities.

Fifteenth and early sixteenth century artistic representations of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom varied in the manner in which they emphasized or de-emphasized the role of the archers, the manner in which the arrows were depicted, and the appearance of the saint himself. Two examples of these paintings serve to illustrate these different criteria; one example comes from the 1475 painting *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, which told the story of a dramatic martyrdom. In this painting, archers were very much prominent, as many of them are positioned so that they are ready to pelt the saint with arrows.

What is more, Saint Sebastian has very few arrows that are already piercing his barely-clothed body, suggesting that even more are to come. Saint Sebastian is depicted on a level above the archers, so that the arrows are being directed upwards from earth. This is significant in the classification of this painting because the arrows were not sent from the heavens, which would have suggested overtones of “Man of Sorrows” imagery. Also, Saint Sebastian was painted in a way so that his body is more defined, suggesting the influence of the Renaissance ideal of the human body. He looks worriedly heavenwards, his face not betraying any pain, and is represented with a halo around his head.



Figure 1.1 Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, 1475, oil on wood, 9’7” x 6’8”.

<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps interesting to note that Saint Sebastian did not die as a result of being shot with the arrows, but rather by being clubbed to death after surviving the arrow wounds inflicted by the archers. Therefore, scenes depicting his martyrdom by and large do not represent the actual manner in which Sebastian finally died after proclaiming his Christian beliefs within the context of pagan Rome. Over the course of this project, I came across only a few paintings in which Saint Sebastian’s actual death by clubbing was depicted; for an example, see Josse Lieferinxe, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, c. 1497, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall, 493.



The 1532 painting by Jan de Beer entitled *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* is another example that had many elements in common with its fifteenth century counterpart, but differed slightly in terms of spatial organization and in the appearance of Saint Sebastian himself. This painting depicted the dramatic scene of Sebastian's martyrdom as something of a social event, as there were several finely-dressed bystanders in the vicinity of the archers, who were once again in the midst of flinging arrows at the motionless saint. De Beer portrayed Saint Sebastian on the same spatial level with the archers, and in this image the saint appeared powerless. His halo-less head was bowed and he looked down at the ground, and de Beer placed a much greater emphasis on the pain that Sebastian endured during the archers' attack—blood from the arrow wounds was visible, and the saint weakly slumped against a tree.



Figure 1.2 Jan de Beer, *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, 1532, oakwood, 25.5 x 41.5 cm.

Paintings such as these firmly established Saint Sebastian as a martyr within the late medieval church; late medieval Christians would have recognized Saint Sebastian as an individual whose actions had earned him special favor with God within the framework of the late medieval celestial hierarchy. Near the time of the fifteenth century *quattrocento*, artists began to interpret Saint Sebastian's martyrdom in an additional light—this interpretation led to representations of Sebastian that recall images of Christ suffering on the cross, and served as a model for a pious Christian death. It is important to note that these new images did not replace the creation of images that simply depicted the event of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom, but were instead created alongside the images that portrayed the manner by which Diocletian ordered his death.

*Though images of Saint Sebastian* that illustrated his role as a model for Christian death were being created as early as the first years of the fifteenth century, they exponentially multiplied near the end of the *quattrocento*, and represent the overwhelming majority of artistic representations of Saint Sebastian that exist today. Paintings of Saint Sebastian that recalled the "Man of Sorrows" devotional image became increasingly popular during the last years of the fifteenth century, a popularity that Louise Marshall claims was "due to the way in which the image allows the worshipper direct access to the promise of salvation from the plague

contained in Sebastian's wounded but living body."<sup>15</sup> Through representations that recalled the images of Christ on the cross as the "Man of Sorrows", images of Saint Sebastian in a similar pose served as devotional objects for late medieval Christians in which Saint Sebastian modeled exemplary Christian behavior in the face of a divinely-sent pestilence.

In paintings in which Saint Sebastian assumed the role of the "Man of Sorrows", the saint was shown in an isolated environment pierced with arrows, yet very much alive. These images of Saint Sebastian created an artificial moment in which "historical time [was] suspended and inverted, transforming the narrative into a devotional image that exist[ed] outside of time and place."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Louise Marshall maintains that this imagery "celebrates his [Saint Sebastian's] resurrection as proof of his inexhaustible capacity to absorb in his own body the plague arrows destined for his worshippers."<sup>17</sup> It is important to separate these images from paintings in which Saint Sebastian is actively interceding on behalf of humankind.

As the "Man of Sorrows", Saint Sebastian is shown in an artificial, artistically created moment. In these paintings, Saint Sebastian exists as a model for Christians, proof that the arrow wounds—or an onslaught of pestilence—could be overcome. Due to the amount of existing scholarship pertaining to Saint Sebastian as the "Man of Sorrows", this section will use examples from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to focus on the differences between these paintings that were charged with devotional meaning for those individuals facing the threat of pestilence and those that simply portrayed Sebastian's martyrdom story."<sup>18</sup>

Images of Saint Sebastian were popular devotional items in the centuries that followed the Black Death; believers would have looked to these images for an example of a late medieval Christian approach to death.<sup>19</sup> According to one widely-distributed late medieval English manual entitled "The prepared death", the manner in which individuals were encouraged to take death was "when God wills, willingly and gladly, without any grudging or contradiction, through the might and boldness of our soul, virtuously disposed and governed by reason and true discretion, though the lewd sensuality and frailty of our flesh naturally grudge or strive against it."<sup>20</sup> Late medieval Christians in the years before the Protestant Reformation would have looked to these images of Saint Sebastian in the wake of a plague outbreak as an example of how to follow this advice—by the time of the fifteenth century *quattrocento*, images of the saint that echoed the "Man of Sorrows" were being composed by a multitude of artists, and would have been widely visible across Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Sandro Botticelli's 1484 painting entitled *Saint Sebastian* exemplified the idea of welcoming death "without any grudging or contradiction"; in this image, Saint Sebastian was shown with arrows piercing his body, but staring serenely towards the viewer with a halo around his head. This image differed from paintings that documented the scene of Saint

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>18</sup> This section draws extensively upon the work of Louise Marshall, who used images of Saint Sebastian as the "Man of Sorrows" to shed light upon the attitudes of late medieval contemporaries in relation to the pestilence. Her work has focused upon the relationship between individual worshipper and image. Richard Trexler addresses this larger issue in his article "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image" *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972), 7-41.

<sup>19</sup> It is a considerable testament to the popularity of Saint Sebastian's cult that he was depicted as a devotional image; this type of imagery was normally reserved for depictions of Christ.

<sup>20</sup> "The prepared death" in Rosemary Horrox, ed., *The Black Death* (Manchester University Press, 1994), 346.

<sup>21</sup> The image of Saint Sebastian as the "Man of Sorrows" remained a popular subject, so much that these images are so numerous that it now seems that one cannot enter a major art gallery in Western Europe (or at least in Berlin, Dresden, or Paris) or the United States (in Washington, D.C. or New York City) without seeing at least two or three representations of Saint Sebastian as the "Man of Sorrows".



Sebastian's martyrdom because the onlookers and archers were absent, having already completed the task of shooting Saint Sebastian and leaving him for dead. Louise Marshall refers to this type of imagery by saying that in these paintings, "plague is divinely ordained, but God has withdrawn from the task of punishing humanity. Such an identification also shifts the focus of appeal from the supreme deity to more accessible intermediaries...[who were] sufficiently powerful to control demonic activity."<sup>22</sup> These paintings served to remind late medieval Christians that although they could not access the divine of their own accord, there existed figures above themselves in the celestial hierarchy who held more power in the eyes of God.



Figure 1.3 Sandro Botticelli, *Saint Sebastian*, 1484, tempera on panel, 77 x 30 in.

One fifteenth century example of the "Man of Sorrows" devotional image that emphasized the "frailty of our flesh" against which Saint Sebastian fought when he was martyred was Andrea Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian*, which was completed around 1460. In this painting, Sebastian was depicted with an expression looking toward heaven with a painful grimace while his body was pierced with multiple arrow wounds, including an arrow that had been shot directly through the saint's head. The pain Saint Sebastian experienced from these wounds was evident by the manner in which the saint's body was contorted and the blood that was streaming from his wounds. Depictions of Saint Sebastian that focused upon the pain he felt were supposed to be representative of the suffering incurred by individual European Christians over the course of the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of plague, but in the context of these images it was recognized that just as Saint Sebastian had survived the arrow

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<sup>22</sup> Marshall, 515-516.

wounds, so could late medieval Christians have survived—or at least weakened—the onslaught of plague by invoking figures such as Saint Sebastian to intercede on their behalf.



Figure 1.4 Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*, 1457-1459, oil on poplar wood, 68 x 30 cm.

Saint Sebastian's many representations as the "Man of Sorrows" that served as devotional images for late medieval Christians who dealt with the effects of the Black Death hinted at his role as an active intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy, but did not explain this role as fully as did other images of Saint Sebastian from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

*Of all the roles he played* in the lives of late medieval Christians, the one most open to artistic interpretation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was his role as an active intercessor within the celestial hierarchy of late medieval Christianity. Within this role, he could appeal to those who held higher places in the hierarchy, such as Christ, the Virgin Mary, and perhaps God, to shield humanity from the plague. However, this capability did not elevate him to a higher status within the celestial hierarchy than patron saints of other issues; according to these images, he was only powerful in manners that pertained to pestilence. Images from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries represented Saint Sebastian in his capacity as an active intercessor in both very dramatic and very subtle ways.

One painting that dramatically illustrated Saint Sebastian's intercessory capabilities within the celestial hierarchy in cases of plague was Paolo Calari Veronese's sixteenth century painting entitled "Christ Arresting the Plague with the Prayers of the Virgin, St. Rocco, and St. Sebastian." In this painting, Christ sat atop a cloud surrounded by heavenly figures; Mary, Saint Sebastian, and Saint Roch (also referred to as Saint Rocco) were

pleading with Christ from various positions within the painting.<sup>23</sup> The Virgin Mary was positioned closest to Christ—her maternal relationship with Christ made her the “greatest intercessor”. Saint Roch—the other patron saint of the plague—and Saint Sebastian were on the same level with each other below the Virgin Mary and Christ, and each looked heavenward. In this painting, the saints and the Virgin Mary do not have the ability to individually halt the plague, but simply to pray to Christ on behalf of humankind for its ceasing.



Figure 1.5 Paulo Caliari Veronese, *Christ Arresting the Plague with the Prayers of the Virgin, St. Rocco, and St. Sebastian*, 16<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 340 x 220 cm.

Another painting that dramatically illustrated Saint Sebastian’s ability to intercede on behalf of the laity is Josse Lieferinxe’s c. 1497 *Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken*. This painting gives a more concise perspective of the celestial hierarchy than does Veronese’s *Christ Arresting the Plague*; only Saint Sebastian is positioned between God and the laity, with a demon and an angel fighting below the main intercessory action. Although Lieferinxe never went to Italy, this painting is set in Pavia, where Saint Sebastian was supposed to have aided in halting a seventh-century pestilence.

By depicting a group of Christians who were experiencing or witnessing the sudden death that was characteristic of the Black Death, this painting highlights Saint Sebastian’s intercessory capability as well as other important aspects of iconography associated with pestilence. Lieferinxe’s Saint Sebastian is approaching a God who is buoyed on a gathering of dark clouds, which were iconographic metaphors for God’s anger; late medieval Christians would have understood that God’s anger caused the plague from which the Christians in the painting were suffering. While the Christians below are suddenly succumbing to the plague, Saint Sebastian is kneeling before and pleading with God. Although he has arrows already

<sup>23</sup> Saint Roch was the other well-known patron saint of the plague. In comparison to Saint Sebastian, Saint Roch’s cult developed rather late in the chronology of the spread of the pestilence; he became associated with the plague due to his reputation for devotion to the ill, as well as the presence of the bubo-type growth on his left leg.

absorbed in his body suggesting that he is stopping the arrows destined for the laity, Saint Sebastian is not autonomously halting the onslaught of the pestilence. Upon closer examination, it can be seen that God is not holding any arrows; thus, the arrows protruding from Saint Sebastian's body are simply attributes. This painting helps to illustrate the larger mindset of late medieval Christians pertaining to the cause of the Black Death, as well as to illustrate Saint Sebastian's role as an intercessor.



Figure 1.6 Josse Lieferinxe, *Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken*, c. 1497, oil on wood, 81.8 x 55.4 cm.

In addition to these paintings, there existed many other paintings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that less dramatically illustrated Saint Sebastian's role as an intercessor within the late-medieval celestial hierarchy. Oftentimes, these paintings were not created to specifically address issues of or provide commentary on the spread of plague, but nonetheless shed light upon Saint Sebastian's position within the heavenly workings of the celestial pecking order.

An example of one such painting was Lorenzo de Credi's "The Virgin and Child with Saint Sebastian and Saint John the Evangelist" from 1516 that depicted the Virgin Mary flanked by both Saint John and Saint Sebastian. In this painting, Saint Sebastian is fully clothed, a marked difference from the images that depicted his martyrdom or showed him as a model for Christian death as the "Man of Sorrows". What is more, this painting is an example of an instance in which Saint Sebastian was depicted with the arrow as an attribute rather than with arrows that pierced his body. Saint Sebastian appears as if he could be conversing with the Virgin Mary and perhaps Christ as well—this once more illustrated his ability to communicate with those above him in the celestial hierarchy.





Figure 1.7 Lorenzo di Credi, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Sebastian and Saint John the Evangelist*, 1516, 175 x 176.5 cm.

Another painting from the sixteenth century that illustrated Saint Sebastian's place within the late medieval celestial hierarchy was Girolamo Bedoli's 1532/33 painting entitled *The Virgin and Child with Saint Sebastian and Saint John the Evangelist*. In this painting, the Virgin Mary was seated with the Christ child on her lap, and was surrounded by the figures of Saint Sebastian, Saint John, and Saint Francis—prominent saints within the church, as opposed to being simply patron saints of one issue or another. Saint Sebastian is depicted mostly naked and pierced with arrows, just as he was in images that recalled “Man of Sorrows” imagery as well as paintings of his martyrdom. By being pictured in a scene with other saints that had had nothing to do with plague or disease of any kind, this painting suggested that Saint Sebastian had equal standing with other saints within the celestial hierarchy; his ability to intercede on behalf of those suffering from the plague did not elevate him to a higher position than the others who were able to intercede on behalf of other issues.



Figure 1.8 Girolamo Bedoli, *Maria mit dem Kind und Heiligen*, 1532-33.

These paintings illuminated the many ways in which Saint Sebastian's role as an active intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy were interpreted; however, these images suggested that in times of plague Saint Sebastian had only the power to plead with the heavenly higher-ups to set in motion a chain of events that would eventually lead to the end of the spread of pestilence, not to stop the plague of his own accord.

*Found in only one example*, the possibility of the development of a fourth role in Saint Sebastian's cult can be seen in the fifteenth century; according to the artist, he appears to have possessed the ability to autonomously halt the spread of pestilence. If it existed, this ability to individually halt the plague was a later development in his cult. In order to contextualize the development of Saint Sebastian's capability to halt the plague of his own accord, a brief survey of written sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is necessary.

Jacopo da Voragine's c. 1275 retelling of Saint Sebastian's life in the *Golden Legend* speaks to Saint Sebastian's ability to intercede with the Trinity in efforts to halt the pestilence, but gives him no authority to independently stop the onslaught of pestilence. Concerning the capabilities of Saint Sebastian during times of plague, da Voragine wrote, "then let us pray to this holy martyr S. Sebastian that he pray unto our Lord that we may be delivered from all pestilence and from sudden death, and so depart advisedly hence, that we may come to everlasting joy and glory in heaven."<sup>24</sup> As the *Golden Legend* was considered a highly authoritative source concerning the biographies of saints during the late-medieval period; this source affirms the role—Saint Sebastian as an active intercessor within the late-medieval celestial hierarchy—which the previous section of this paper discussed, but does not assign Saint Sebastian with the independent authority to halt the plague.

<sup>24</sup> *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints (Aurea Legenda)*, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, 1275. Translated by William Caxton, 1483, in the Internet Medieval Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/index.htm>, (accessed 19 September 2010).



Moving into the fourteenth century, a prayer from the time of the Black Death very clearly illustrates that some contemporaries of the plague believed in Saint Sebastian's ability to autonomously halt the pestilence. The prayer implored, "O martyr Sebastian! Be with us always, and by your merits keep us safe and sound and protected from plague. Commend us to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary, so that when we die we may have our reward: to behold God in the company of martyrs."<sup>25</sup> At this point in time, Saint Sebastian appears to have developed the independent authority to shield humanity from bouts of plague; however, he could only intercede on the behalf of humanity in matters of salvation after death—his saintly capabilities never reached complete Christ-like proportions.<sup>26</sup>

The painting which very clearly articulated the makeup of the late medieval celestial hierarchy as well as Saint Sebastian's ability to autonomously halt the arrows of plague which were being directed towards humanity was Benozzo Gozzoli's 1464 work entitled "Saint Sebastian Intercessor". Despite its name suggesting that it simply illustrates Sebastian's role as an intercessor, it actually suggests at his larger, more developed role as an individual who could halt plague of his own accord. According to this painting, God sat atop the celestial hierarchy with a gigantic arrow in hand, flanked by figures who were also wielding arrows, poised to hurl them at humanity.

Christ and the Virgin Mary kneeled directly below God, and below those two stood Saint Sebastian with a blue and gold cape spread wide; it was with this cloak that he deflected the arrows being flung at humanity. Unlike the images of Saint Sebastian which depicted him as either a martyr or the Christ-like "Man of Sorrows", this image showed Saint Sebastian fully dressed with a halo around his head. The figures below Saint Sebastian were praying to the saint and being shielded by his efforts; the divinely-flung arrows were depicted as shattered after they had been deflected away by Saint Sebastian's cloak.

Louise Marshall has argued that this painting recalls images of the Virgin Mary as the *Madonna della Misericordia*<sup>27</sup>, and that this painting simply reflected the idea that invocation of Saint Sebastian's aid against the plague would set "in motion a systematically pursued joint effort that proceeds inexorably upwards through the celestial hierarchy."<sup>28</sup> However, when other sources which date from the centuries preceding as well as the time of the Black Death are taken into consideration in connection with this image, it becomes possible that in the eyes of late-medieval Christians, Saint Sebastian may very well have developed the ability to autonomously halt bouts of pestilence alongside his other roles as a martyr, model for death, and an intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy.

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<sup>25</sup> A prayer made to Saint Sebastian against the mortality which flourished in 1349. (Horrox 129-30): here at 129-130.

<sup>26</sup> At this point in my research, it is not clear whether or not this capability of Saint Sebastian to autonomously halt the spread of pestilence developed out of ideas among the lay people, or if it was an idea that was officially endorsed by church officials either during the Black Death or in the centuries following the outbreak of plague. In the third chapter concerning the Catholic Reformations, I argue that the Tridentine Church sought to redefine Saint Sebastian's official roles in the Tridentine Church, thus suggesting that this role was not endorsed by church officials.

<sup>27</sup> This type of image portrayed a larger than life Virgin Mary who used her cloak to shield humanity from the effects of God's wrath.

<sup>28</sup> Marshall, 527.



Figure 1.9 Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saint Sebastian Intercessor*, 1484, fresco, 527 x 248 cm.

The four different roles—martyr, model for Christian death, active intercessor, and autonomous halter-of-plague—which this paper has discussed all represented ways in which the idea of Saint Sebastian brought comfort to late medieval Christians who were experiencing death on an unprecedented scale. It is also important to note that not all of these four roles were apparent at the disputed beginnings of Saint Sebastian’s cult; this clearly demonstrates that medieval Christians were constantly examining the ways in which they understood the world and the heavens. The fourteenth century church “had inherited a strong institutional framework from the ecclesiastical reforms and the process of centralization that had been among the great legacies of the previous century.”<sup>29</sup> However, this did not mean that the beliefs of the church were static; in fact this strong internal structure aided the church in early responses to the plague. These responses included modifying practices to meet the needs of the catastrophe; the development of additional roles for Saint Sebastian, patron saint of the plague, is an example that is very visible in the art from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

AFTER THE BLACK DEATH devastated Europe from 1348-52, the disease continued to ravage parts of Europe roughly every ten years on a much smaller scale; this is one reason that images of Saint Sebastian continued to be produced after the initial onslaught of the plague. Christine Boeckl argues that Christians in the early modern period continued to

<sup>29</sup>William J. Dohar, “The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership,” in *The Black Death*, Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005): 152-159, here at 158.

believe that “God sent the scourge because of human frailties; most Christians still regarded plague as divine retribution for sin.”<sup>30</sup> However, when the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, newly formed ideas about the nature of man’s relationship with the divine would shape Protestant thought pertaining to the cult of saints, which in turn affected the manner in which saints such as Sebastian were depicted. This chapter will first address the context in which a Protestant definition of “saint” developed, and will then provide two examples of Saint Sebastian paintings that would have been theologically acceptable to both Protestants and their Catholic counterparts as means of demonstrating the complicated process by which reform ideas were implemented in early modern Europe.

Led by Martin Luther and other reformers, the Protestant movement as a whole shunned the medieval cult of saints.<sup>31</sup> In his 1520 “Open Letter to the German Nobility”, Luther offered a critical assessment of the institution, claiming that:

Although the canonizing of saints may have been good in olden times, it is not good now; just as many other things were good in olden times and are now scandalous and injurious, such as feast-days, church-treasures and church-adornment. For it is evident that through the canonizing of saints neither God's glory nor the improvement of Christians is sought, but only money and glory, in that one church wants to be something more and have something more than others.<sup>32</sup>

Luther saw the veneration of saints as one more example of the ways in which the medieval church had gone astray, and worked to reform the term “saint” in a manner consistent with his theology.

Luther devised a definition of saint that declared all Christians simultaneously sinners and saints, and eliminated the role of intercessors, save for Christ. He claimed that “God’s forgiving Word bestowed full and complete holiness on all God’s chosen believers; all believers therefore were the true saints of God.”<sup>33</sup> In true fashion of many of Luther’s theological ideas, there was a contradiction inherent in this idea; namely that “all these saints were also sinners, their lives permeated by the failure to fear, love and trust in God above all things that prevented human life on earth from enjoying the perfection of Eden.”<sup>34</sup> By declaring that all Christians were at once saints and sinners, the Protestant movement “reclaimed providential power over daily human life for God alone, and they insisted that mediation with him is provided by Jesus Christ alone.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, Christ was now the only intercessor, and other holy figures—namely saints—were unnecessary figures. This also meant that, in a marked difference from the late medieval church, Christ was personally accessible to all Christians. This new interpretation of saints, along with iconoclastic Protestant ideas about art, meant that any images—let alone images of the medieval saints—were largely unacceptable in these movements.

The Protestant Reformers had varying ideas about the role of images in the lives of Christians; Luther, Melancthon and Karlstadt in particular were strong proponents of the iconoclast movement at the beginning of the German Reformation. However, Luther adopted

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<sup>30</sup> Christine Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2000), 107.

<sup>31</sup> For purposes of brevity, this section will largely address the role of Martin Luther and other figures of the German Reformation, such as Melancthon and Karlstadt, pertaining to the production of Protestant art; much research remains to be done about the effect of other Protestant Reform movements on art.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520, trans. C.M. Jacobs, accessed 3 March 2011, URL.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 4.

a more moderate view as the movement progressed and finally adopted a view in which he “tolerated and finally even encouraged church art if it served to instruct.”<sup>36</sup> It is from this didactic perspective that much Protestant art was created. Joseph Leo Koerner emphasizes in his book *The Reformation of the Image* that both Protestant and Catholic art of this period was created with education as well as the cultivation of personal piety in mind.

This is not to say that all art that would have been formally and theologically acceptable to Protestants was intentionally created as Protestant art. For purposes of clarity, this section will treat art that was known to have been created by or commissioned by Protestants as Protestant art, while art for which an artist’s theological persuasion is ambiguous or unknown will not be assumed to be Protestant art based solely on its composition. This definition also applies for art with an unknown patron; while the subject of such a work could have been acceptable to Protestants, it is impossible to discern whether or not it was intended to be Protestant art without explicit information about the patron. As Saint Sebastian would have been an easily recognizable figure to Christians living at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, his image could have been easily adapted to paintings that reflected ideals that were common to both the Protestant movement as well as the existing Church.

*Citing its overtly didactic nature*, art historians have traditionally shunned Protestant Reformation art that survived or was created in spite of the iconoclastic movement. Koerner argues that art inspired by the Protestant Reformations was at once iconic and iconographic, that it depicted the living church that was itself largely opposed to images. It is a well-established fact among art historians that art was used by the Catholic Reform movements to communicate messages about theology to the laity, and the Protestant movement was no different. In the case of the Protestant movement, important theological ideas that were being transmitted through art pertained to the idea of justification by grace alone, *sola scriptura*, and the relationship between law and gospel.<sup>37</sup>

While the Protestant movement put forth images heralding those ideas, artists such as Lucas Cranach were also producing images affirming ideas common to both the Protestant and Catholic Reform movements. Catholic as well as “Protestant theology stressed the necessity of prayer and the sorrowful recognition of sin,”<sup>38</sup> and both factions emphasized the idea that “repentant sinners were obliged to open their hearts to God in prayer, examining their sins and expressing their contrition.”<sup>39</sup> Using Rembrandt and his depictions of Saint Jerome as an example, Catherine B. Scallen argues in her article “Rembrandt’s Reformation of a Catholic Subject: The Penitent and Repentant Saint Jerome” that artists in this period recognized that paintings that utilized imagery that were acceptable to both factions of Christianity would receive a wider scale of distribution.

Two paintings of Saint Sebastian completed in the seventeenth century show that this methodology was applied to Saint Sebastian as well; but this is not to suggest that this imagery was officially accepted or endorsed by the Protestant movement. Saint Sebastian did not become a Protestant saint, but his image could be manipulated in a way that would have been theologically acceptable to Lutherans and other factions of Protestantism, suggesting

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>37</sup> A well-known example of this type of art is Lucas Cranach the Elder’s *Allegory of Law and Gospel*, 1529.

<sup>38</sup> Catherine B. Scallen, “Rembrandt’s Reformation of a Catholic Subject: The Penitent and the Repentant Saint Jerome” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 #1 (Spring 1999): 77.

<sup>39</sup> Scallen, “Rembrandt’s Reformation of a Catholic Subject”, 78.

that artists and patrons were actively examining ways in which to adapt tenants of traditional Christianity to meet the changing circumstances of the sixteenth century.

Jose de Ribera was a Spanish painter who completed two paintings of Saint Sebastian that emphasized theological principles similar to both the Protestant and Catholic movements. Ribera spent extensive time in Italy and became a follower of Caravaggio's trademark tenebrist style; it is especially interesting that he created these theologically ambiguous images as part of a career in traditionally Catholic areas. When examining his motivations for creating art with ambiguous iconography, both economic and religious factors must be taken in to account. Any analysis of art created in the early modern period—or any other—must consider economic as well as religious motivations for creating artwork. For example, Lucas Cranach the Elder is regarded as a leading painter of the Protestant Reformation, yet he also created images affirming Catholic theology when his patrons requested them.<sup>40</sup> It appears that Ribera followed this trend as well; his other works include dramatic images of other saints as well as mythical scenes, all created in varying styles.

Ribera was baptized Catholic in 1591, but it is not known if he maintained his Catholicism throughout his adult life. What is more, one of his greatest patrons was the Duke of Osuna of Naples, a territory that was occupied by Spain during this period and who was presumably Catholic.<sup>41</sup> Assuming that Ribera followed the contemporary trend and completed works for both Catholics and Protestants regardless of his personal persuasions in order for his paintings to have a wider spectrum of distribution, this section will address two of his works as examples of how Saint Sebastian's imagery was adapted to de-emphasize "penitence, physical chastisement, or the performance of works" and to reflect penitence that was "understood as inward contrition."<sup>42</sup> While these images were not accepted by all Protestants or the Protestant movement as a whole, the imagery of these paintings would have reflected theological ideals championed by the different reform movements.

Ribera completed was *S. Sebastian* in 1628; this work emphasized a Saint Sebastian who appears personally repentant before God. By this time, multiple Protestant movements had taken hold in Europe, and clear divisions had been drawn between Protestantism and Catholicism as a result of the Council of Trent, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. This painting shows Saint Sebastian in an isolated environment already pierced with arrows, a setting that is very similar to images in which he is shown as the Man of Sorrows. Furthermore, Sebastian is kneeling with outstretched arms and his face is directed upwards at a subject—presumably God—who is absent from the painting.

Furthermore, Saint Sebastian appears to be having a conversation with God, but this is not the *sacre conversazione* that characterized earlier paintings of him as an intercessor within the celestial hierarchy. Rather, this painting shows an isolated Saint Sebastian who is praying directly to God—this can be interpreted as an affirmation of both the power of prayer and of a personal relationship with the divine. Arrows are present, but they serve only as an attribute by which to identify Saint Sebastian, and are not the emphasis of the painting. Also interesting to consider is the fact that Saint Sebastian is kneeling in this painting—this is the only example in which that type of stance is depicted. As a common theme of Saint Sebastian paintings is the overtones of Christ-like imagery, it is not too much of a stretch to observe

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<sup>40</sup> Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg was a notable Catholic patron of Lucas Cranach the Elder; Cranach's paintings for both factions were often very formally similar, but close formal analysis betrays the theological differences between works created for Catholic patrons and Protestant patrons such as Frederick the Wise of Saxony.

<sup>41</sup> This could not be confirmed, but as the Duke was an official in a Catholic-dominated area, it follows that he would have officially affirmed Catholicism.

<sup>42</sup> Catherine B. Scallen, "Rembrandt's Reformation of a Catholic Subject", 71.

that Saint Sebastian appears similar to images of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>43</sup> This painting would have been acceptable to both Catholic and non-iconoclastic Protestants; Catholics would recognize it as another manifestation of Saint Sebastian, but Protestants would have acknowledged that the painting portrayed a repentant Christian personally praying to God, thus in alignment with the Protestant ideal of a sinner who was saved by a grace through a personal relationship with the divine.



Figure 2.1 Jusepa de Ribera, *S. Sebastian*, 1628, oil on canvas, 179 x 130 cm

The other painting by Jusepa de Ribera that walked the line between Catholic and Protestant imagery was his 1636 painting entitled *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*. Given Ribera's fascination with "compelling drama... which often embraced brutal themes", it is somewhat surprising that Ribera chose to depict Saint Sebastian in a quiet, repentant manner at least twice over the course of his career.<sup>44</sup> As no information could be found for the patron(s) of these pieces; this goes to further suggest the possibility that these paintings were commissioned by a Protestant-leaning individual or group. Acknowledging this possibility allows for a wider interpretation of this second Ribera representation of Saint Sebastian in Europe during the years when the Council of Trent's decrees were being implemented across Europe.

While *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* could be interpreted as the presence of a separate role for Saint Sebastian in the lives of early modern Protestants, it illustrates how Ribera possibly interpreted the events of Sebastian's martyrdom in a way that aligned with aforementioned Protestant ideals of repentance. This painting is formally similar to the previous image in that Saint Sebastian is shown in an isolated environment; a key difference is that this painting is intended to be a depiction of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom. In a marked

<sup>43</sup> For an example of Christ in the Garden of Gethsamane, see Filippo Tarchiani, *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, c. 1625, Museo Di San Marco, Florence, Italy.

<sup>44</sup> Fred Kleiner, ed. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global History* 13<sup>th</sup> ed (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2009), 667.



difference from late medieval depictions of his martyrdom—and even from early modern depictions, which will be discussed in the next chapter—this martyrdom image takes place after the archers have left, leaving Saint Sebastian alone with God. More arrows are present in this image than in the other Ribera example cited in this section; this can be attributed to the setting of the painting. What is more, blood is visible, but neither the arrows nor the suffering is the main message of this painting. Whereas late medieval images of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom were intended as history paintings, to document the actual event of the archer's attack, this painting is intended to reflect Saint Sebastian's personal interaction with God following the arrow onslaught.



Figure 2.2 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, 1636, oil on canvas.

Thus, the work of Jusepe de Ribera illustrates a different interpretation of Saint Sebastian than was seen in the late medieval church; by carefully eliminating visual elements (save for the identifying iconographic arrows) that were blatantly Catholic in nature, Ribera created images of Saint Sebastian that emphasized quiet prayer directly between God and believer. In Ribera's images, Saint Sebastian is not performing any works, he is not appealing to any higher spiritual being such as the Virgin Mary or Christ, and in one image, he is even kneeling before God. Because of the emphasis on an individual believer and his personal interactions with God, these images would have not offended Protestants, but were not officially embraced by the movement. These images were being created contemporaneously with images of the Catholic Reformations, further showing that Saint Sebastian's image could be manipulated to meet the wishes of individual patrons who either did not fully understand or disregarded the theological nuances of the various reform movements.

DURING THE REFORM MOVEMENTS that occurred within the Roman Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Saint Sebastian's image was again modified to meet the changing needs of the Church. It was during this time that "art was placed in the service of the Church to preach the Roman Catholic faith and was an important factor in creating the

Baroque style in the early 1600s.”<sup>45</sup> As a saint of the Tridentine Church, Saint Sebastian was depicted in at least three different ways; these roles will be more fully explored after a brief summary of the transition of the themes of art in which Saint Sebastian was depicted. By exploring these roles, it will be shown that Saint Sebastian went from being regarded as exclusively a plague saint after the beginnings of the Reformations to a figure that the Tridentine church also utilized to educate contemporary Christians about larger issues of piety, pertaining particularly to women.

Two of Saint Sebastian’s roles in this period were reprisals of his late medieval roles of a martyr and a model for Christian death, and were intended to affirm the continuity of and the Church’s support for these roles. Saint Sebastian’s third role in the Tridentine Church was rather indirect; depictions of him being aided by holy women after the arrow attack served as didactic examples of female piety within early modern Catholicism, as well as a commentary on women in the Tridentine Church. This final role in particular represents the shift from Saint Sebastian’s image as exclusively a plague saint to a holy figure whose image was utilized in order to enable early modern Catholics to better understand what was required of the individual as a believer, as opposed to earlier paintings meant to offer comfort to struggling believers in the face of pestilence.

As mentioned in the previous chapter about Protestant interpretations of Saint Sebastian in the years after the Black Death, pestilence continued to be a legitimate threat to the lives of Europeans until the seventeenth century. This is significant for the study of art of the Catholic Reformation because the fear of dying suddenly without the aid of the church was a major motivation for late medieval Christians in seeking the aid of figures such as Saint Sebastian. However, by the time of the Catholic Reformation, “the fear of dying and hell lessened because the lucid judiciary system of the Ten Commandments had replaced the rather vague concept of the Seven Deadly Sins.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, “Catholic clergy [now] emphasized a more merciful passage through Purgatory; formerly perceived as almost like hell, Purgatory was now presented as a place of purification where angels served the sacraments to the suffering souls.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, early modern Christians were still concerned about the effects of plague outbreaks, but their fear of a bad death had been somewhat pacified by these theological developments that offered a concrete view of how to live a good life, as well as a new interpretation of purgatory that was less frightening than the late medieval version.

Although the three different roles Saint Sebastian fulfilled in the period of Catholic reform were not new creations, some images produced during the formation of the Tridentine Church display signs of innovation to roles that had been created during earlier years of Saint Sebastian’s cult as a plague saint. For his roles as martyr and a model for Christian death, the visual changes in these roles were largely cosmetic; paintings of these roles from the period of Catholic reform show no real theological development, only a determined return to an official, theologically appropriate interpretation of a patron saint of the plague. In a marked difference from pre-Reformation times, images of Saint Sebastian being helped by Saint Irene were extremely popular in the period of Catholic Reform; these images were not necessarily reflective of theological innovations so much as a commentary on the role of women in the Tridentine Church. The first two roles were illustrative of the Church’s attempt to reestablish the official nature of Saint Sebastian’s cult that had grown to epic and

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<sup>45</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 109.

<sup>46</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Related to the idea of angels serving sacraments to souls in purgatory, I did find one example of a painting in which Saint Sebastian is depicted with an angel that is gesticulating towards Saint Sebastian, seemingly with the intent of removing an arrow from his side. Perhaps Hendrik Goltzius’s *Saint Sebastian* from 1615 was an attempt to illustrate a contemporary view of purgatory?

theologically problematic proportions following the outbreak of the Black Death, while the last role is an example of how the Tridentine Church used familiar figures to emphasize various tenants of Catholicism.

The basis of the didactic nature of Catholic paintings of Saint Sebastian produced in the years following the Protestant Reformation can be traced to the Council of Trent. Meeting in three periods between 1545 and 1563, the Council of Trent was a major turning point in the history of early modern Catholicism. The first period was lead by Pope Paul III, the second by Julius III, and the third by Pius IV. Although there is copious evidence showing that attempts at reform from within Catholicism had been taking place ever since the fifteenth century, Trent constituted the church's official response to the Protestant Reformations.<sup>48</sup> Based upon the topics discussed during the sessions, the Council released decrees and canons designed to reassert the authority of Catholicism in the face of the powerful Protestant movements.

As an instrumental aspect of late medieval Christianity, the cult of saints was one of the topics addressed by the Council of Trent. Peter Burke explains that the Council devised a three-fold manner by which to repair the abuse of the cult of saints that had occurred in the years preceding the Reformation. The first step of this movement was to be an attempt to "emend the accepted accounts of the lives of saints and to replace these accounts with something more reliable, judged by the criteria of humanist historical criticism."<sup>49</sup> The next step was a series of regulations that made it much more difficult for new saints to be canonized. In fact, no new saints were canonized for sixty five years after Saint Benno and Saint Antonio of Florence were admitted in 1523.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, the Church created the Congregation of Sacred Rites and Ceremonies in 1588 that was intended to oversee the process by which new saints were canonized, but this responsibility grew more connected to the papacy in the early seventeenth century. All of these measures together were intended to implement the decree of the Council of Trent that "affirmed the desirability of venerating the images and relics of the saints and of going on pilgrimage to their shrines."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the Council of Trent issued three decrees specifically pertaining to the images of saints, and the influence of these decrees can be seen in depictions of Saint Sebastian created after Trent.

When speaking to the motivation behind creating art depicting saints as well as other religious subjects, the Council decreed that:

By means of the histories of the mysteries of our redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed and confirmed (in the habit of) remembering and continually

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<sup>48</sup> Much of the historiographical debate surrounding the reactionary nature of the Roman Church's response to the Age of Reform is outside the scope of this section, which seeks to understand the didactic nature of Christian art created in the years following the Council of Trent. For an excellent historiographical sketch of the transformation of Roman Catholicism in the early modern period, see John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002). Elisabeth Gleason argues that there were three distinct periods of Catholic Reform in her article "Catholic Reformation, Counterreformation, and Papal Reform in the Sixteenth Century." In *Handbook of European History 1400-1600 Volume 2*, Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy, ed. 317-342. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995). Also relevant is Hubert Jedin's classic article "Katolische Reformation oder Gegenreformation? Ein Versuch zur Klärung der Begriffe nebst einer Jubilaeumsbetrachtung ueber das Trienter Konzil" (Luzern: Verlag Joseph Stocker, 1946): 7-38.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Burke, "How to Become a Counter-Reformation Saint" in *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. David M. Luebke (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 131.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Burke also notes that this so-called canonization hiatus did not affect the unofficial rise of other saints, particularly Saint Roch. Saint Roch was canonized in Venice in 1576, but the papacy allowed the official state of his cult on a church-wide level to remain rather ambiguous during the period of Catholic reform.

<sup>51</sup> Burke, 131.

revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; that so they may give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety.<sup>52</sup>

The Council thus justified that sacred images allowed the laity to see physical depictions of benefits and gifts from God, and to see the miracles of the saints that God had performed through those holy people; these images were argued to be ways in which lay Christians could observe and study the actions of holy people in order to model their own lives after the actions of the saints. Therefore, Saint Sebastian was to be redefined in a manner consistent with these decrees that still allowed him to be a recognizable figure to contemporary Christians so that his images could serve as a means of encouraging Christians to “adore and love God, and to cultivate piety.”

Furthermore, the Council sought to oversee the visual aspects of the subject matter of paintings in order to ensure that newly created images were purporting the approved image of the Tridentine Church. When speaking to depictions of saints, the Council decreed that “in the invocation of saints...every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished; finally, all lasciviousness be avoided; in such a wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust.”<sup>53</sup> For images of Saint Sebastian, this meant that the miraculous nature of his survival was to be explicitly explained; in the years prior to the Reformation, his survival of the arrow onslaught was often ascribed to a miracle; the Council of Trent sought to ensure that Saint Sebastian’s miraculous survival was understood as having been orchestrated by God, and not by Saint Sebastian’s own actions. Furthermore, the violent nature of his martyrdom story was no longer to be emphasized as it so often was in the late medieval period. Interestingly, artists continued to depict him as a nearly-naked young man, despite the decree that figures not be painted with “a beauty exciting to lust”.<sup>54</sup> This section will assume that this was due to the value that Renaissance and Baroque artists placed on the ability to depict the human form; furthermore, this form of representation helps to illustrate the often-ambiguous nature of reform implementations.

In an effort to decrease the amount of ambiguity in implementing the reforms laid out at the Council of Trent, the church also decided that artists commissioned to create religious images were to be closely overseen. Post-Trent, the church exercised “detailed theological supervision of painters, [assigning] subjects and themes to counter Protestant teachings and glorify Catholic doctrines and institutions.”<sup>55</sup> The Council of Trent’s decrees were intended to guide the church into the next century as a forward thinking body of believers; while origins of Catholic reform can be traced to Trent, the implementation of these reforms took time and additional legislation before they were manifested in art.

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<sup>52</sup> Reverend J. Waterworth, trans. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent Celebrated Under the Sovereign Pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV*. (Chicago: The Christian Symbolic Publication Society, 1848), 235.

<sup>53</sup> Reverend J. Waterworth, trans. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent Celebrated Under the Sovereign Pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV*, 233.

<sup>54</sup> There are a few instances of Saint Sebastian paintings in which he was shown clothed, but these images were a shocking minority in his many depictions throughout the periods examined in this paper. Typically, an image of Saint Sebastian in which he was clothed was typically meant to show him as a Roman soldier.

<sup>55</sup> R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 169.

Despite the amount of sacred legislation and guidelines for implementing reforms pertaining to the cult of saints that were created at or inspired by the Council of Trent, Christine Boeckl argues that changes in Saint Sebastian paintings did not begin to reflect the decrees of the Council until after the first edition of the *Rituale Romanum* (Roman Ritual) was issued in 1584. The official edition of the *Rituale Romanum* was issued in 1614 by Pope Paul V, and was intended to be a guide to rituals in the Tridentine Church such as the rite of ordination, prayers at meals, and other official ceremonies.<sup>56</sup> While the *Rituale Romanum* was by no means a comprehensive guide to all of the rituals of the newly renewed Tridentine Church, it did include a section that offers insight into the Church's official interpretation of Saint Sebastian's saintly capabilities in the Tridentine era.

One of the ceremonies detailed in the *Rituale Romanum* was a "Procession in Time of Epidemic and Plague"; this ceremony includes prayers to Saint Sebastian that demonstrate his reevaluated role as a saint in the Tridentine Church. This ceremony is designed as a litany between priest and congregation, and concludes with a prayer to be said collectively by all participants:

Hear us, O God, our Savior, and by the prayers of glorious Mary, Mother of God, and ever a Virgin, of St. Sebastian, your martyr, and of all the saints, deliver your people from your wrath, and in your bounty let them feel certain of your mercy... We beg you, Lord, to hear our sincere pleas, and graciously to avert this plague which afflicts us; so that mortal hearts may acknowledge that such scourges come from your wrath and cease only when you are moved to pity; through Christ our Lord.<sup>57</sup>

By emphasizing Saint Sebastian's lesser spiritual role in the celestial hierarchy and by affirming that plague scourges could be stopped only by Christ's efforts, this prayer clearly demonstrates that Saint Sebastian's role had been returned to that of a Christian martyr who had the ability to intercede on behalf of humanity in times of plague. This prayer can be seen as a reflection of the Church's attempts to reorganize after the Black Death; it was recognized that Saint Sebastian's cult had grown to unexpected proportions and the Church sought to clearly define his position in the celestial hierarchy. Before experimenting with new ways in which Saint Sebastian's image could be used in service to the Tridentine Church, the church first sought to emphasize that Saint Sebastian was first and foremost a Christian martyr whose actions had earned him special favor with God.

*Paintings of Saint Sebastian* completed after the Council of Trent and the issuance of the *Rituale Romanum* showed of Saint Sebastian's status as a Christian martyr in the Tridentine Church; this role was a holdover from the years before the Reformation. Paintings of Sebastian's martyrdom created or commissioned after the Council of Trent had cosmetic differences from those created before Trent. However, these differences suggested an emphasis on the aspects of Saint Sebastian's identity that were officially endorsed by the late medieval Church in the years following the Black Death and were not reflective of any real theological innovations. Using one example of a painting depicting the cosmetic changes that characterized paintings of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom after the Council of Trent, this section will show how Saint Sebastian's role as a martyr saint in the Tridentine Church was affirmed in art created after the Council of Trent.

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<sup>56</sup> Due to the insurmountable language barrier existing between myself and Latin, this section will utilize a version of the *Rituale Romanum* that was translated in 1962; this version also includes a document called the Instruction of September 1954.

<sup>57</sup> *Procession in Time of Epidemic and Plague* in the *Rituale Romanum* (Roman Ritual), 1962, translated by Philip T. Weller, in the Sancta Missa, <http://www.sanctamissa.org/en/resources/books-1962/rituale-romanum/56-rites-for-processions.html> (Accessed 1 April 2011).

Jacopo da Empoli's c. 1616-18 painting entitled *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* depicts the event of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom; in contrast to many late medieval representations, this painting takes place at the very beginning of the event. This is a marked cosmetic difference from late medieval representations such as Jan De Beer's work (Figure 1.2) where the archers are well into the process of flinging arrows at Saint Sebastian, but is similar to Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo's painting (Figure 1.1) in which the archers have just begun their task. Saint Sebastian has no arrows absorbed in his body, and the Roman soldiers are still in the process of securing him to the post. This is in a nod to the Council of Trent's decrees concerning the nature of images of saints, one of the methods by which the Council aimed to restore credibility to the cult of saints.

This work is clearly in line with the decree that "all filthy lucre be abolished" from religious paintings in that this painting is not inherently violent; in fact, no blood can be seen anywhere in this work.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps most interestingly, Saint Sebastian is already a martyr in this painting; although he has not yet been shot with arrows, he has a halo over his head, and he is looking heavenward. Far from the action-filled paintings created prior to the Reformations, this painting is a deliberate attempt to emphasize Saint Sebastian's divinity he had earned as a result of his actions in pursuance of a pious Christian lifestyle.



Figure 3.1 Jacopo da Empoli, *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, 1616-1618,

Therefore, this painting shows the influence of the decrees of the Council of Trent; the Church reasserted Saint Sebastian's proper role as a martyr saint in the celestial hierarchy while obeying the decree to refrain from depicting excessive. To followers of early modern Catholicism, Saint Sebastian was regarded as a martyr, an example of a faithful individual who had done exceptional actions in the service of God. This type of painting was not rare during the period of Catholic reform, but was not nearly as popular as it was in the years preceding the Age of Reform. This could be due to the fact that martyr saints were not

<sup>58</sup> Reverend J. Waterworth, trans. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent Celebrated Under the Sovereign Pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV*, 235-6.



particularly emphasized or celebrated in the Tridentine Church as compared to other periods in Christian history; however, the cosmetic changes in imagery when depicting Saint Sebastian's martyrdom were more likely due to the Church's desire to once again gain control of the interpretation of Saint Sebastian's cult.<sup>59</sup>

*The second manner in which* Saint Sebastian was represented during the period of Catholic Reform was a further innovation on the "Man of Sorrows" image that was so popular in the late medieval period. Just as the Tridentine Church sought to use art reassert Saint Sebastian's approved role as a Christian martyr, his role as a model for Christian death was also affirmed in the art of the Catholic Reformation. In order to explore these developments, this section will examine "Man of Sorrows" paintings created by Paolo Veronese and Peter Paul Rubens. These paintings are similar to earlier "Man of Sorrows" representations of Saint Sebastian in that they show Sebastian in the same moment as the late medieval "Man of Sorrows" representations—following the archer's attack in which historical time was again suspended and inverted, and in that the artists each chose to show Saint Sebastian as a young, bearded, and largely nude young man.<sup>60</sup>

Both of these paintings were created after the Council of Trent, and showed a strong influence of both the Italian and Northern Renaissance artists desire to return to the classical ideas of naturalism and perfection when depicting the human body. As previously discussed, this type of visual depiction was not necessarily in line with the intentions of Trent; however, images of Saint Sebastian as the Christ-like "Man of Sorrows" did not overstep the boundaries of Saint Sebastian's spiritual capabilities as outlined in the *Rituale Romanum*. In fact, the Tridentine Church more than likely embraced imagery of Saint Sebastian as a model for Christian death in spite of his blatantly nude representation because of its didactic nature that encouraged early modern Christians to follow the example of a holy figure. What is more, this type of imagery assured early modern Catholics that in a time in which the idea of saints as heavenly beings was being roundly attacked by the Protestant reformers, Saint Sebastian remained a model for Christian death in the face of disease.

Paulo Veronese's 1565 painting entitled *Saint Sebastian* was completed only two years after the final session of the Council of Trent; its imagery has much in common with images completed before the Council, yet some influences of the Council's decrees are evident in Veronese's work.<sup>61</sup> Recalling themes of classical art that were valued in the High Italian Renaissance, this work shows Sebastian slumped against a column with his wrists tied to either side of his body; the positioning of his arms recalls further imagery of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, the rest of his body is contorted in somewhat of an s-curve, but his feet are not bound. Saint Sebastian's face does not reflect any pain, there are only two arrows absorbed in his body, and the blood from those wounds is present, but not emphasized.

By depicting Sebastian in this way, Veronese was most likely working to convey themes of Christ on the cross while also showing his prowess at representing the human body in realistic manner in the tradition of the High Italian Renaissance artists. The ideals of the

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Burke observes that the Tridentine Church was far more likely to affirm the sanctity of founders of religious orders, missionaries, individuals known for their charitable activities, pastors, and mystics (or ecstasies) than martyrs when canonizing saints.

<sup>60</sup> Marshall, 496.

<sup>61</sup> Veronese is a particularly interesting artist to discuss in the context of the age of Catholic Reform; only eight years after he completed his *Saint Sebastian*, he was called before the Inquisition to defend his *Last Supper*. This further demonstrates that the officials of the Tridentine Church took their decrees about art very seriously, and was actively seeking those who were believed to have overstepped artistic boundaries. Veronese's *Saint Sebastian* goes to illustrate that some artists were already affirming the decrees of the Council of Trent before the *Rituale Romanum* was issued, yet the abundance of paintings in the seventeenth century affirming the decrees shows that Boeckl's argument is valid.

Council of Trent are apparent in this image; in accordance with the canons and decrees, the violent aspects characteristic of earlier Saint Sebastian “Man of Sorrows” paintings are visibly de-emphasized. Saint Sebastian is gazing upwards, but he does not appear to be communicating with the viewer or any other character—even God—in the painting. This type of gaze recalls images such as Andrea Mantegna’s *Saint Sebastian* from c. 1457 that was referenced in Chapter One; whereas some images of Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows” from the pre-Reformation period featured a saint who gazed in the direction of the viewer, images post-Trent tended to feature a Saint Sebastian whose gaze was focused heavenward.



Figure 3.2 Paolo Veronese, *Saint Sebastian*, 1565, oil on canvas, 114 x 71 cm.

Another example of “Man of Sorrows” imagery following the Council of Trent comes from Peter Paul Rubens, who completed a painting entitled *Saint Sebastian* around 1618. Rubens showed a great attention to naturalism, and spent much more effort on creating a distinctive setting for Saint Sebastian’s suffering. In this painting, Saint Sebastian is bound to a tree in a direct nod to Christ-like imagery; unlike Veronese’s painting where Sebastian’s arms are stretched out to the side, the saint’s hands are tied behind him in Ruben’s work. Rubens showed off his ability to depict the human form through the slight s-curve in which Sebastian is positioned, and arrows are sticking out of Sebastian’s body, yet very little blood is visible. Saint Sebastian is in much more visible pain in Ruben’s work, yet his gaze is still directed heavenward.



Figure 3.3 Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Sebastian*, c. 1618, oil on canvas, 200 x 128 cm.

Thus, paintings of Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows” created after the Council of Trent were very visually similar to those created before Trent, and affirmed the continuity of his role as a model for Christian death in the face of the plague. Besides the paintings referenced in this section, many other artists undertook depictions of Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows”, demonstrating the enduring popularity of this type of imagery during the period of Tridentine Reform. By continuing Saint Sebastian’s role as a model for Christian death in the face of the ever-recurring plague, the Tridentine Church was also following a visual tradition first established during the Black Death. In the Tridentine as well as the late medieval Church, Saint Sebastian was an example of how to face death when the traditions of Catholicism could not be executed, thus providing comfort to believers. However, these devotional images likely decreased in popularity as early modern Christians were given access to more specific guidelines for how to live a pious life, as well as new interpretations of purgatory that were not nearly as terrifying as the hell-like late medieval manifestation became widely accepted.

*Images of Saint Sebastian* being helped by women were extremely popular in the years following the Council of Trent and the issuance of the *Rituale Romanum*; far from communicating a message about Saint Sebastian himself, these paintings sought to emphasize the Council of Trent’s decrees about the role of women in the Tridentine Church. Though this imagery was present prior to the Age of Reform, it became much more popular following the Council of Trent.<sup>62</sup> Images of Saint Sebastian being helped by women helped the Church to both de-emphasize the miraculous aspect of Saint Sebastian’s survival of the arrow onslaught as well as to illustrate what were seen as acceptable roles for women in the Tridentine Church. This section will use three paintings of Saint Sebastian in which the saint is being

<sup>62</sup> An example of a painting in which Saint Sebastian is being aided by Saint Irene that was completed in the years preceding the Age of Reform, see the Master of Saint Sebastian, *Saint Irene Nurses Saint Sebastian*, 1497-98, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

aided by either Saint Irene or other holy women to argue that this type of imagery was part of the larger movement to mold Saint Sebastian's cult and iconography into more than that of exclusively a plague saint.

In *The Golden Legend's* account of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom, Saint Irene appeared after the archers shot Saint Sebastian and left him for dead. She is purported to have nursed him back to health from his arrow wounds before he was finally clubbed to death by the Roman soldiers. *The Golden Legend* reported that "the night after [the archer's attack] came a christian woman [Irene] for to take his body and to bury it, but she found him alive and brought him to her house, and took charge of him till he was all whole"<sup>63</sup> This part of Sebastian's martyrdom story was known in the years following the Black Death, but art of the late medieval period largely supported the idea that Saint Sebastian had miraculously survived the arrow onslaught, paying no attention to Saint Irene's role in the matter. The Council of Trent officially addressed the idea of miracles in the same decree as it addressed sacred images and decided that "no new miracles are to be acknowledged... unless the said bishop has taken cognizance and approved thereof."<sup>64</sup> By showing images of Saint Sebastian being cared for after the archer's attack, the Church was attempting to provide appropriate context for Saint Sebastian's martyrdom story as a whole, rather than attributing his survival to a miraculous coincidence.

By including Saint Irene in paintings of Saint Sebastian and depicting her role in his martyrdom story, the Church and the artists it employed also used these paintings to depict women in a manner consistent with their new role in the Tridentine Church, and to inspire other Christians to adopt the ideal of service to one another in times of need. These same paintings were an important didactic commentary on the role of women in the Tridentine Church; the Council of Trent's decrees mandated "all monasteries subject to them, and in others, by the authority of the Apostolic See, they make it their especial care, that the enclosure of nuns be carefully restored, wheresoever it has been violated, and that it be preserved, wheresoever it has not been violated".<sup>65</sup> Although this decree ordered that all female religious orders be cloistered, many examples of female orders that functioned among and served the public welfare existed, and the popularity of these paintings affirmed the importance of their work.

Susan E. Dinan has written a survey of these early modern female religious orders in the years following the Council of Trent arguing that the Council's legacy for women was ambiguous; that some religious women were able to become active participants in offering to help the sick and poor of various communities in spite of Trent's decrees.<sup>66</sup> These orders were especially prominent in the initial decades of the seventeenth century, and again go to show that the European populace did not readily accept all of the Council's decrees, and that the actual implementations of reform were not as sudden and effective as the Church would have desired. In this case, the strict boundary between cloistered and secular life never became a reality as it was imagined at Trent. Dinan also argues that the Council's motivation for mandating the cloistering of female orders was another attempt to restore order to the Church where it had been lost in the previous centuries, citing instances of rape and promiscuity that had occurred in loosely cloistered Renaissance convents.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the

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<sup>63</sup> *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints (Aurea Legenda)*

<sup>64</sup> *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent Celebrated Under the Sovereign Pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV*, 236.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>66</sup> Susan E. Dinan, "Spheres of Female Religious Expression in Early Modern France" in *Women and Religion in Old and New Worlds*, Debra Meyer and Susan E. Dinan, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 71-92, here at 71.

<sup>67</sup> Dinan, 73.

same motivations that caused the church to adamantly establish Saint Sebastian's two official roles in art were also manifested in the Council's decrees about women.

An example of Saint Sebastian being helped by Saint Irene is Hendrik Terbrugghen's 1625 painting entitled *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*.<sup>68</sup> This painting depicts the moment at which Saint Irene is taking Saint Sebastian away from the scene of the arrow onslaught, after the archers had already left him for dead. Irene is joined by one other anonymous woman, who is helping her with the task of removing Saint Sebastian away from the post to which he was bound during the attack. Similar to other depictions of Saint Sebastian, there is a hint of Christ-like imagery; in this case, there is an argument to be made that this image recalls scenes after Christ was taken down from the cross. However, this image would have been recognized as a scene in which one Christian was aiding another, and it would have been particularly interesting that two females were aiding a male. This would have perhaps reminded early modern Catholics of the work of female religious orders such as the Daughters of Charity who were active in France after they were founded following the Council of Trent.



Figure 3.4 Hendrik Terbrugghen, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, 1625, oil on canvas, 150.2 x 120 cm.

While many female religious orders did obey the Council's decree to be cloistered, the Daughters of Charity directly defied this guideline; as an order devoted to serving the poor and sick in various communities, they could not carry out their mission if cloistered. They were a rather industrious group, and by 1633 the "Daughters of Charity were not only

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<sup>68</sup> It is also interesting to note that Terbrugghen became a prominent painter of the Dutch Baroque period after studying in Italy, and this image very prominently portrays a Catholic image. As the Netherlands (and particularly Utrecht, where Terbrugghen completed much of his work) was officially Protestant in the seventeenth century, it is possible that images such as this one were created in direct contradiction to the overwhelming Protestant influence of the surrounding area, and were therefore "more Catholic" in nature than images created in Protestant-dominated areas.



serving the poor and sick in Parisian parishes, they were staffing hospitals, hospices, insane asylums, and prisons across northern France, including a huge orphanage outside of Paris.”<sup>69</sup> Based on the order’s history of performing services such as this to other Christians or indeed, simply other community members, in need would have made Terbrugghen’s image a familiar image of life during the age of Catholic Reform, but set in a martyrdom story with which early modern Catholics would have been familiar.

A second example of Saint Sebastian being aided by women is Georges de la Tour’s painting entitled *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene* that was completed in 1649. This painting is set after Irene had taken Saint Sebastian away from the scene of the archer’s attack, and she is joined by two other women in caring for his wounds. Chronologically, this painting takes place following the Terbrugghen example and three other women have joined Saint Irene; they are caring for Saint Sebastian as a team. Saint Sebastian is far from an active participant in his own survival in this painting, and there is nothing to suggest supernatural events in this work. This painting and others like it are striking in that there are no miracles being performed; furthermore, none of the excessively dramatic themes that are often thought to define religious art in the age of Catholic Reform are present in this painting that was completed during the Baroque years.



Figure 3.5 Georges de la Tour, *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene*, 1649, oil on canvas, 160 x 129 cm.

Completed between 1624 and 1626, Giovanni Battista Vanni’s *Saint Sebastian Cured by the Holy Women* has many elements in common with the previous two examples, but is the most theologically ambiguous of the three examples in this section. In addition to the figures of Saint Sebastian and the holy women, the painting also contains two angel-like figures coming from the clouds. As mentioned in the section pertaining to Saint Sebastian as an intercessor in the late medieval celestial hierarchy, clouds were also iconographic symbols for plague; therefore, this painting may be an example of a mix of plague iconography as well as a message about women—and Christians in general—helping each other in times of need.

<sup>69</sup> Dinan, 81.



Of the three examples used in this section, this painting is most illustrative of the religious ambiguity of the Age of Reform; like the images that would have been theologically acceptable to Protestants, this image could have been created for a patron who was not completely aware of all of the intricacies of post-Trent Catholic thought. It is unlikely that the iconographical ambiguity in this painting was a result of the artist's ignorance of the Council's decrees—Vanni studied under Jacopo da Empoli, who created the first martyr image that was analyzed in this chapter. All nuances aside, this painting does fall under the larger theme of paintings in which Saint Sebastian was aided by others, and would have been viewed by contemporary Christians as an example of how they should aid their fellow believers in times of need.



Figure 3.6 Giovanni Battista Vanni, *Saint Sebastian Cured by the Holy Women*, 1624-1626, oil on canvas, 220 x 140 cm.

Thus, images of Saint Sebastian being aided by Saint Irene or other holy women did not seek to establish a new role for Saint Sebastian himself, but instead sought to use his image to create didactic images that were at once an illustration of Christians aiding each other in times of need and a commentary on the success of un-cloistered female religious orders. This type of imagery was also an opportunity for the Church to provide context to Saint Sebastian's martyrdom story, thus eliminating some of the miraculous elements of the story. For the larger arc of Saint Sebastian's interpretation in the Catholic Reformation, this type of imagery is illustrative of the changes that were occurring in the secular as well as sacred spheres of early modern Europe. By creating a place for Saint Sebastian that did not directly associate him with any active role pertaining to plague, the Church was responding to the changing mindsets about the nature of pandemic disease that were a result of the beginnings of Enlightenment thought.

BY EXAMINING PAINTINGS OF SAINT SEBASTIAN that were created between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, it can be concluded that these paintings can offer a window into the changing ways in which martyr saints were interpreted throughout the reform movements that occurred in early modern Europe. Separating this larger period into three distinct sections—the late medieval Church, the Protestant Reformations, and the Catholic Reformations—allows for the themes of each period to be identified. This also allows for each period's interpretations of Saint Sebastian to be compiled together as a reflection of larger issues facing the early modern Church and its followers; namely, the Scientific Revolution and the development of Enlightenment thought.

Peter Burke suggests that “saints are indeed cultural indicators, a sort of historical litmus paper sensitive to the connections between religion and society.”<sup>70</sup> In the late medieval period, the development of Saint Sebastian's different roles was indicative of the late medieval Church's need to provide comfort to believers who were not only facing death on an unprecedented scale, but did so without the social and religious structures that had been devised to aid Christians in dying what was considered to be a good death. By being interpreted as a martyr who had survived an onslaught of arrows, the iconographical symbol of divinely-sent disease, late medieval Christians saw a metaphorical triumph over the plague. This idea was further explored in devotional images that featured Saint Sebastian in the guise of the “Man of Sorrows”; these images served as an example of how one could die a Christian death. These images were especially influential due to the collapse of religious hierarchies designed to educate late medieval Christians about how to die correctly when faced with pestilence.

What is more, the late medieval period also saw Saint Sebastian as a figure who could actively intercede on behalf of humanity to halt the spread of plague. This role was a further reflection of the idea that God was punishing human sin with the Black Death, but God could perhaps be persuaded to halt the scourge if holy figures such as Saint Sebastian appealed to God on behalf of humanity. The final way in which Saint Sebastian was possibly interpreted in the late medieval period was as an autonomous plague halter who could stop the spread of pestilence even after God had decided to make it descent on humankind.

As a form of “historical litmus paper” of the late medieval period, paintings of Saint Sebastian illustrate that the church did not fundamentally alter core theologies to meet the needs of the struggling laity, but the interpretation of his cult stretched the limits of what the late medieval Church officially believed. These roles are also indicative of the astonishing degree to which the Black Death devastated late medieval society as a whole. The church was actively interpreting traditional aspects of Christianity as means of comforting the laity in a time where societal structures were devastated. During this time, the laity was also actively examining the ways in which they understood the pestilence, and how to deal with its effects.

Moving into the Age of Reform, Saint Sebastian's various images also serve as a window into the nature of the Protestant Reformations and the way in which these movements affected the relationship between religion and society. The cult of saints and its inflated role in the late medieval Church was one of the reasons for which reformers such as Martin Luther attacked the practices of the Latin Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, the ever-present nature of plague outbreaks in early modern Europe meant that Saint Sebastian continued to be a popular spiritual figure even as the Protestant Reformations were well underway. In response to the church's view of the saints that he vehemently opposed, Martin Luther devised a new definition of saint that declared all Christians to be simultaneously sinners and saints.

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<sup>70</sup> Burke, 142.

This new interpretation, as well as the iconoclastic nature of many of the Protestant movements, should have theoretically resulted in an absence of Saint Sebastian images that were in line with Protestant ideals. However, individual reformers such as Luther adopted a moderate stance pertaining to religious art, and indicated that it was acceptable if it served a didactic rather than a purely aesthetic purpose. What is more, individual artists such as Jusepe de Ribera created images of Saint Sebastian that were not necessarily approved by any of the Protestant movements, but which were absent of overtly Catholic imagery to which the reformers were vehemently opposed. These images reflect ideals of repentance, humility before God, and a personal relationship with the divine built through prayer. These images of Saint Sebastian that are illustrative of the shared ideals of the Protestant and Catholic movements serve as a window into the ambiguous nature of reform implementations, as well as to the economic realities facing artists in the early modern period.

Concerning the Catholic Reformation movements, the Tridentine Church sought to redefine its own definition of what sort of duties a saint could perform, and applied this definition to individual saints. This effort was occurring around the same time in which artists such as Ribera were exploring ways to make images of Saint Sebastian that would be acceptable to multiple factions of Christianity. The reformation of individual saints was a topic of discussion at the Council of Trent, and the decrees resulting from the Council laid out specific steps for redefining the roles of each individual saint, as well as guidelines for the manner in which these newly reexamined saints were to be depicted in artwork that the Tridentine Church so effectively used in a didactic manner. Under the auspices of this new legislation, Saint Sebastian's four roles from the late medieval Church were reduced to two, with a new emphasis of one more in which he played a passive role.

Saint Sebastian was a sort of "historical litmus paper" to the Catholic Reformations in that his role was reduced as part of a larger effort to redefine the cult of saints in a manner consistent with core theologies, and the paintings in which he was being served help to illuminate the value of helping others propagated by the Tridentine Church. In the art of the Tridentine Church, Saint Sebastian was clearly established as both a Christian martyr as well as a model for Christian death. Both of these roles clearly illustrate that Saint Sebastian's heavenly capabilities were subservient to Christ and God; this was a possible response to late medieval interpretations of Saint Sebastian's cult that were believed to have stretched the boundaries of what was theologically acceptable in the Latin Church. Saint Sebastian's third role in the Tridentine Church was rather indirect; he was depicted as receiving aid from holy women after he was shot by the archers. This type of imagery helped to accomplish a number of the Church's goals; by ascribing to the Council of Trent's decree to de-emphasize unauthorized miracles, these paintings illustrated the value placed on the idea of everyday Christians helping each other in times of need.

The changing themes of Saint Sebastian paintings from the late medieval period, the Protestant Reformations and the Catholic Reformations reveal his changing role from that of a multi-purpose plague saint to a subservient member of the cult of saints whose image was used to support the ideal of helping one's neighbor. This reformation of Saint Sebastian's image can be seen as a "historical litmus paper" indicator of the changing relationship between the secular and sacred spheres as European society began to explore the ideas of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. This was especially significant when considering the effect that these movements had on how early modern European Christians viewed disease.

As the seventeenth century progressed, early modern Christians became less likely to believe that plague was divinely sent as punishment for sin. This was due to increased knowledge about the contagious nature of pandemic disease; new theories about how disease was spread helped discredit the idea that Saint Sebastian was needed to intercede in order to

stop the plague. Saint Sebastian's late medieval role as an intercessor was no longer emphasized in the later years of the Tridentine Church, and there was no longer any hint of the idea that Saint Sebastian himself could halt the onslaught of pestilence. Instead, Saint Sebastian served a visible example of how Christians should serve each other in times of sickness, rather than search for ways to appease God. Thus, the reformation of Saint Sebastian's image reflects the changing relationship between religion and society amid movements of religious reform in the late medieval and early modern periods.

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**Rachel Barclay '11** wrote this essay for the requirements of the Senior Honors Project (History 493). She used some of her time while enrolled in Luther's Münster Program to take photographs of relevant paintings and carry out some research toward this project. This essay won the Department's Fosso Prize for 2011.