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From Ponte Sant'Angelo to Basilica di San Pietro: Figuration and Sensation in Bernini's Pilgrimage Route in Rome

Øyvind Norderval

According to the medievalist Niklaus Largier, one important hermeneutical key to understanding Christian mysticism in the Middle Ages is the combination of spiritual sensation and emotion linked to the passion of Christ:

[...] the emotional engagement of the soul with God and Christ implies not only a transformation of the passions but in most cases sensual experience as well, [...] a perception of the divine in terms of a highly emotional experience of taste and touch. (Largier 2009: 1, 6–10)

According to Largier, this combination of spiritual sensation and emotion was the basis for the spiritual programme that Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) later drew up in his *Exercitia Spiritualia*, written 1522–4 (Largier 2009: 13). The goal of his 'Spiritual Exercises' is reached when one experiences being in spiritual contemporaneity with the *locus* where everything happened in the story of Jesus. In what follows, I shall argue that Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1690), in his layout for the approach to the Vatican, followed a holistic schema inspired by Jesuit spirituality. It was elaborated with its starting point in the idea that Saint Peter's, with the tomb of Peter, was the goal of the pilgrims' visit to Rome. The path starts at the bridgehead of the Ponte Sant'Angelo and ends in the high choir with the *Cathedra Petri*.

Jesuit theology played a central role in the development of the Roman baroque, in which Bernini was a very important actor. Can one argue for the probability of a close link between Jesuit mysticism and Bernini's art? Was his project a visualization of revelation through the emotional dimension, with the emphasis on the 'here and now' – the encounter between the individual and the divine? This question is hotly debated in Bernini scholarship. Some see a link (Kuhn 1970: 297–9; Bukdahl 1999: 53), but few have attempted to analyse in depth the connection between Ignatius's text and the forms of artistic expression in Bernini's individual projects. Others maintain that there is no clear link and that Bernini's views and his artistic profile were determined eclectically (Mormando 2011: 241). In this chapter, I shall attempt to interpret Ignatius's

Latin edition (1548) and Bernini's art alongside each other in order to see whether the *Exercitia* could have inspired Bernini to create sculpture and architecture that open the door to spiritual sensation and emotion as one walks from the Ponte Sant'Angelo to Saint Peter's. It goes without saying that such a link cannot be positively demonstrated, since Bernini himself said nothing on this subject. Still, the relationship between text and monument is interesting, in the form of a hermeneutical reflection on the interpretation of texts and monuments. In fact, H. G. Gadamer opens the door to such an interpretation through the emphasis he places on 'the classical' in philosophical hermeneutics. This category embraces everything from art and literature to theology, jurisprudence and philosophy (Gadamer 1990: 107–75). This is a demanding task, but with the gain of shedding new light on the history of the impact (in the broad sense) made by both the monuments and the texts.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) was one of the most important artists in the Italian high baroque, and his activity as architect and sculptor enjoyed canonical status for a long time in Italian Counter-Reformation art. One central portion of his work was his long-lasting involvement as the chief architect for Saint Peter's Church and the Vatican area, which covered roughly fifty years. He worked during the reigns of eight popes, three of whom – Urban VIII, Alexander VII and Clement IX – were his most important patrons. After Carlo Maderno died in 1629, Bernini was appointed chief architect for Saint Peter's, at the age of thirty-one. The first commissions he received in this project were inside the church itself: the baldachin over the papal altar was his first major task (1623–34), together with the *Cathedra Petri* (1647–53). Saint Peter's Square (1656–67) and the decoration of the Ponte Sant'Angelo (1667–9) were among his last commissions.

There is much to indicate that Bernini must already at a rather early date have had a complete plan of construction, which was developed and expanded over time. Several historians of art and architecture have made this affirmation, without undertaking a complete iconographic analysis or investigating the sources of inspiration that underlie a holistic interpretation of this kind. It is simply presupposed, without any great effort to demonstrate the connections. In his standard work on architectural history, Spiro Kostof points out that Bernini had a complete plan for the Vatican area from the entrance at the Ponte Sant'Angelo up to Saint Peter's Square and Saint Peter's Church itself, but he does not discuss the ideological aspects of this gigantic baroque site (Kostof 1995: 506–7; Cf. Sedlmayr 1985: vol. II, 23 ff.; Wittkower 1955: 17ff; Hibbard 1965: 205; Kuhn 1970: 297; Weibel 1909). But what constitutes the conceptual framework for this holistic project?

The baroque and the Jesuits

There is a clear link between baroque art and architecture and the Jesuit order with regard to theology and philosophy. In its origins, the Roman baroque was an expression of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, in which the Jesuit order supplied the ideological presuppositions for the decisions that were taken at the Council of Trent. This was where the Catholic Church drew up its strategy for responding to the

Protestant Reformation. This strategy included uniform modes of artistic expression as it is programmatically stated in the twenty-fifth session (Waterworth 1848: 232). Jesuit churches in Rome such as Il Gesù and S. Ignazio mark a fundamental epochal transition with their clear ideological forms of expression in order to awake emotions in the believers.

The baroque marks a new orientation with regard to the harmonious and balanced ideals of the Renaissance. The Catholic baroque had its foundation in the ideals of the Counter-Reformation, which found it important, in a changing word, to underline Catholicism's victory and its awareness of its power (Bukdahl 1999: 43–68). The goal was to exercise influence and to awaken people to a religious decision and consciousness. We find here exaggerated movement and dynamic rhythms of motion, and a prominent place is given to the imposing expressions. We see this clearly in sculpture and architecture, which were to be Bernini's chief occupation. In church architecture, the programme of the Counter-Reformation often finds expression in buildings with colossal elements, and magnificent façades that employ dramatic, contrary or strongly contrasting forms of expression – such as the interplay between convex and concave forms, a frequent use of colonnades and cupolas, the interplay between light and darkness, and between the building and empty space. Sculpture is characterized by a modelling of the human body that vibrates with life, and with a dramatic language of gestures that expresses movement and energy. A sculpture may be concentrated around its own centre, or it can be given a spatial expansion (Gardner 2001: 721). It was also essential that the sculpture could be looked at from several sides, thereby giving dynamic various optic facets to the message it was meant to express. In this way, the religious truths could be made visible with a strong emotional and sensational impact, and the church could appear in the eyes of the beholder as the victor in the contemporary battle for minds. There was a conscious play on feelings. Baroque inspired by Jesuits is religious propaganda; visual propaganda was a means of carrying conviction to the believers (Levy 2004: 110). Heinrich Wölfflin describes the difference between Renaissance and baroque in this way:

[T]he pathos of the post-classical period is in the desire to be sublimated in the infinite, in the feeling of overwhelmingness and unfathomableness. The comprehensible is refused, the imagination demands to be overpowered. It is a kind of intoxication with which the Baroque architecture fills us, particularly the huge church interiors. We are consumed by an all-embracing sensation of heaviness, helpless to grasp anything, wishing to yield totally to the infinite. The new religious fervor kindled by the Jesuits finds a perfect outlet in the contemplation of the infinite heavens and countless angels and choirs. It revels in the imagining the unimaginable, it plunged with ecstasy into the abyss of infinity. (Wölfflin 1966: 86; cf. 137–43)

This clearly was a development of Ignatius's ideas about the human person's encounter with the holy through meditation, as found in his *Exercitia Spiritualia*, a text meant as a guide in meditation techniques, to be followed over the space of four weeks (Woodrow 1995: 31–63; O'Malley 1993: 37–50). It reviews the life, death and resurrection of

Jesus, with the aim of testing oneself. The emphasis lies on the human person's insight into himself through religious empathy, the recognition of one's sins, discipleship and obedience to God and the Church, which is represented by the hierarchy: 'We shall understand this [...] as any method of examining our own conscience, and also of meditating, contemplating, praying mentally and orally, and finally of dealing with any other spiritual activities' (ES §1).¹ Ignatius appeals to the believers' co-creative activity, and inspires them to experience the gospels' stories about Jesus. The believer is present in what happens; this strengthens the life of faith and creates an intense space for meditation and interior visualization. This emotional contemporaneity is expressed through the importance of 'a certain mental recreation of the place [...], during any meditation [...] for example of Christ, we shall see with a sort of imaginary vision a physical place representing what we are contemplating' (ES §47; cf. Bukdahl 2017: 68–9).²

The goal of this insight is the interaction between what Christ has done for the human person through his suffering and the return that the human person makes to Christ. One is to imagine 'Jesus Christ in front of me, attached to the cross. Then I should look within myself for the reason why the infinite Creator Himself became a creature, and deemed it worthy to come from life eternal to a temporal death for my sins' (ES §53).³

The Italian art philosopher Mario Perniola describes the Jesuit aesthetics as a position between the traditional opposition between iconophilia and iconoclasm. The Jesuit aesthetics represents a simulacrum – a likeness – not a copy of the real, that becomes truth in the contemplation of the viewer (Perniola 2001: 164–70; cf. Bukdahl 2017: 67–9).

The biography published by Gian Lorenzo Bernini's son Domenico in 1713 makes it clear that Gian Lorenzo had a close relationship to the Jesuit order from the age of forty onwards. The Jesuit church Il Gesù in Rome became his spiritual home. Every Friday for forty years, he attended devotional services there on the theme of how to attain a blessed death. He received Communion in this church at least once a week. He visited the church every day after his work was finished, and took part in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. He recited the rosary of the Blessed Virgin and prayed her Office on his knees, as also the seven penitential Psalms. And he did this regularly until his death (Bernini 2011: 229). One of his closest friends and spiritual guides was Giovanni Paolo Oliva, the general of the Jesuit Order at the time, and the successor of Ignatius Loyola. Oliva used to say that, in discussing spiritual matters with the Cavaliere, he felt obliged to prepare himself carefully, just as if he were going to a doctoral thesis defence (Bernini 2011: 229). Oliva was also in charge during the construction of the Jesuit church S. Andrea al Quirinale that Bernini had been commissioned to design (Marder 1998: 196; Bernini 2011: 370 n. 35).

Ponte Sant'Angelo

At the bridgehead of the Ponte Sant'Angelo, the magnificent and elegant transition to the Borgo area, with its many sculptures the visitor walks into the realm of the Vatican

(Weil 1974; Avery 2006: 162–73). As so often in Rome, artists and architects were obliged to take account of what had survived from the past; this was true not least of Bernini's many commissions in the Vatican area. The Ponte Sant'Angelo and the surrounding area had a number of important symbolic features. This applied first of all to the bridge itself, which is one of the oldest in Rome, the Pons Aelius that was built by Emperor Hadrian, in addition to Hadrian's mausoleum on the Borgo bank of the river. The Pons Aelius was the chief artery linking the city centre and the Vatican area for fifteen centuries. The fact that this was the entrance to the Vatican area is also made strongly visible by the huge loggia looking onto the bridge that Julius II erected in 1505. When the pilgrims reached the Vatican area from the centre, they met the imposing bridge with the mausoleum, while the pope could welcome them and greet them from the loggia.

The bridge as we see it today is Bernini's work. Clement IX gave him the commission to renew the bridge as soon as he became pope in 1667, and the work was completed in 1669. The bridge's importance as a transition to the pope's own territory was highlighted and given a completely new programmatic orientation through Bernini's linkage to the triumphalism of the Counter-Reformation and to the contemporary ideals of piety. Earlier decorations had messages that were partly unclear, but here, Bernini created an entire programme that includes both the bridge and Hadrian's mausoleum. It also contains references to the goal of the pilgrimage, Saint Peter's Church. The theme that binds everything together is based on the motif of angels, a motif that had been connected to this place since the early Middle Ages (*Legenda Aurea* XLVI, 4; Maggioni 1998).

Bernini retained the statues of Peter and Paul that Clement VII had set up at the bridgehead in 1534. In this way, Peter and Paul appeared as the guardians of the bridge and of the Vatican area for travellers reaching the point of entry from either of

Figure 12.1 Ponte Sant'Angelo and Hadrian's mausoleum, Rome (Wikimedia Commons). Author: Jean-Pol Grandmont.

the three medieval roadways that converged here at the Zampa d'oca (goose foot), the Via Papalis, Via Recta and Via Peregrinorum/Mercatoria (Nykjær 2004: 21–2). The statues thus stand guard over the entrance to the Vatican area and have programmatic inscriptions: Peter has *Hinc humilibus venia* (Here there is pardon for the humble) and Paul *Hinc retributio superbis* (Here there is punishment for the proud). Both texts allude to 1 Pet. 5.5. Peter and Paul have their well-known attributes, Peter the keys to bind and loose (Mt. 16.18–19) and Paul the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6.17).

Here, at the end of the pilgrimage routes, therefore, the visitors are made aware from the very outset that they have reached the point of transition to the Vatican area, the gate to penitence and salvation. The bridge collects all believers and sets them on a path caught in the tension between pardon and punishment. The path over the bridge is meant to kindle a religious recognition of one's own shortcomings and to make visible Christ's suffering and Christ's grace (Kuhn 1970: 299; Sedlmayr 1985: 23ff). Bernini develops this further in his design for the ten angels that stand on the bridge's balustrades. In this way, he exploits the legendary history and name of the citadel and of the bridge for this penitential program. But as Ignatius said at that same time, the angels are first and foremost bringers of the message of the divine truth. He writes:

Figure 12.2 The angel with the superscription I.N.R.I., Ponte Sant'Angelo, Rome (Wikimedia Commons). Author: Marie-Lan Nguyen.

It is proper to God and to his good angel to fill up the soul, which they move, with true spiritual gladness after taking away all sadness and trouble (ES §329). The good spirit does it gently, peacefully, and delightfully, like a drop of water falling on a sponge. (ES §335).⁴

[...] the angels, carrying the sword of divine justice, have supported me without quivering, have protected me and even helped me with their intercessions. (ES §60)⁵

Bernini himself carved only two of the statues, but the draft for the entire series is his; he gave younger pupils the task of carving the other sculptures. All the figures are angels bearing symbols linked to the story of Jesus's passion – the so-called *arma Christi* – with inscriptions drawn primarily from the Vulgate. The angels face inwards to the path over the bridge, so that they meet the believers' gaze and awaken gravity and repentance in them. The angels were mounted on plinths like those of Peter and Paul at the bridgehead. This means that the beholder is required to lift up his eyes in order to get a view of God's messengers. Besides this, each angel is placed on a little cloud that emphasizes the angels' heavenly origin, while their garments ruffle in the wind.

But Bernini's intention here is not only to refer to Jesus's passion as a historical event: in the spirit of Ignatius, the angels are messengers as they stand on their little clouds, and they are meant to make Christ's passion a present reality that bears witness to the believers' redemption. In this way, the beholder who looks at the instruments of torture will look into himself and experience a religious awakening through the recognition of his sin and through the gift that he makes of himself to God (Kuhn 1970: 299). When we compare this with Ignatius, we find that he argues for self-examination as follows: '[...] according to our goal, [I shall] ask for sorrow, tears, anguish and other similar interior pains, so that I suffer with Christ suffering for me' (ES §203).⁶

When one begins to walk from the bridgehead, the angels show the way by means of the story of Jesus's passion, and create sensation and emotion through what one sees: a pillar ('My throne was in a pillar of cloud': Sir. 24.4), a scourge ('I am ready for the scourge,' Ps. 37.18; see Mk 15.15), a crown of thorns (Mk 15.17), Veronica's veil, the cross with the inscription 'INRI', nails (Zech. 12; Jn 19.37), clothes and dice ('They cast lots for my garments'; Ps. 22. 18; see Mk 15.24), a sponge on a rod, and a lance (Jn 19.34-5).

There are many medieval texts that meditate on the passion of Christ – on the *arma Christi* (Venatus Fortunatus/web) – as well as pictorial and sculptural representations of the symbols of this suffering. The number of symbols could vary from eight to twenty-one (Cooper and Denny-Brown 2013). A comparison with §§292–7 in Ignatius's *Exercitia* displays a striking correspondence to Bernini's sculptural interpretation of those instruments of Jesus's torture that are the starting point when one sets out on the pilgrimage route:

He remained bound all that night. [Here, the pillar too is included.] The guards around Him ridiculed and maltreated Him. (ES §292)⁷

Pilate ordered that Jesus be scourged; the soldiers crowned Him with thorns and clothed Him with a purple garment, and then laughed at Him, saying: 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and hit his face. (ES §295,2)⁸

Christ carried his cross. (ES §296,2) ⁹

He was crucified between two brigands; the sign said: 'Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews.' (ES 296,3) ¹⁰

And his garments were divided. ¹¹

He shouted 'I'm thirsty' when they gave him vinegar. (ES §297,2) ¹²

His side, perforated by the lance, put forth water and blood. (ES 297,3) ¹³

Taken on its own, this is not a clear indication of influence from Ignatius or the Jesuits, but there is an obvious agreement in the motifs and in the underlying spirituality, whether we read the *Spiritual Exercises* or look at Bernini's sculptures. The only motif we do not find in Ignatius is Veronica's veil. Here, Bernini probably chose to draw a line from the bridge to the relic of the veil in the cupola area in Saint Peter's.

The concentration on Jesus's sacrificial death is also a clear allusion to the Counter-Reformation understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrificial action – a re-presentation of Jesus's sacrifice that is meant to give the beholder insight into his own sinfulness in the light of death and judgement, and of the redemption in which one can receive a share. This perspective is central in Ignatius: Christ 'instituted the holy sacrament of the Eucharist, as a sign of the supreme love' (ES §289; cf. O'Malley 1993: 152–5).¹⁴ Participation in the Mass, and thereby in the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood, is seen here as necessary for the human person's salvation (Weil 1974: 158–9; Nykjær 1999: 296–7). Christ's death was *sacrificium*, and the sacrifice of the Mass is *sacrificium*. Ignatius puts this as follows: '[...] tears are shed, provoking that love, either because they come from sorrow with regard to sins, or from the meditation of Christ's passion' (ES §316).¹⁵

In this way, as Mogens Nykjær emphasizes, the bridge becomes not only a Via Crucis, but also a Via Triumphalis, that is to say, the path to salvation (Nykjær 1999: 294). It is the beginning of the penitential path that leads to Saint Peter's. The human person can thus achieve clarity in his existential choices and attain perfection through concentration on the sacrifice of Christ.

Saint Peter's Square

Bernini had envisaged a new access to Saint Peter's Square by means of a restructuring of the Borgo area down towards the Tiber, since that was the only point from which one could see Michelangelo's cupola in its totality (Avrey 2011: 211–5; Kostof 1995: 506ff; Lees-Milne 1967: 270–8; Nykjær 1999: 243–73; Hibbard 1965: 151–6). But although work on this project was stopped, it is an impressive sight when one enters the colossal oval square that opens to embrace and include the visitor. There can be no doubt that one is entering here the centre of the Roman Catholic Church.

In his work on the Square itself, Bernini had to take account of a number of factors that limited his options. The Vatican palace to the north with its entrance was an obvious limitation, as was the wall that led to the Borgo. It was also necessary for the

Figure 12.3 Overview from St. Peter's basilica towards Ponte Sant'Angelo and Hadrian's mausoleum, Rome. Statues of the saints of the church are placed on the top of the colonnades (Wikimedia Commons). Author: David Iliff.

Square to accommodate as many people as possible with a free visual opening both onto Saint Peter's Church with its loggia and onto the papal palace. To the east, Bernini had to take account of existing buildings. And the construction of the Square had to attempt to provide a visual framework for Carlo Maderno's broad façade.

The Square, which had not been given an architectonic form at that time, contained two other elements that Bernini had to take account of. The obelisk had originally been placed in the central spina of Caligula's stadium, but it was moved by Pope Sixtus V in 1586 from its location on the south side of Old Saint Peter's to its present position in the Square. There was also a fountain on the square, which had been erected by Carlo Maderno in 1614. The fountain could be moved, but not the obelisk, which therefore had to form the centre in the new Square.

There was already an ideological programme connected to the obelisk, and it was easy for Bernini to develop this further. The obelisk had a long history of tradition, since it came from Heliopolis in Egypt, where it was erected by Pharaoh Mencares in 1835 BCE. It was brought from Egypt to Alexandria by Augustus. Caligula brought it to Rome in 37 CE and set it up in his stadium. When Pope Sixtus V moved the obelisk from the south side of the church, he consecrated it in a comprehensive ritual of exorcism, in order to place it in its new context (cf. Cole 2009: 57–76). The ball on top, which according to tradition contained Caesar's ashes, was replaced by a bronze cross. The exorcism that was performed marked a rejection of the obelisk's Egyptian and Roman pagan background; but in the contemporary context, this was also a demarcation against the Protestant Reformation, as we can see in the inscriptions that Sixtus V had carved into the new base for the obelisk. These express a very clear Counter-Reformation programme. To the east, he had the following inscription carved: 'Behold the cross of the Lord. Flee, o adversaries. The lion from the tribe of Judah has

conquered.’¹⁶ On the west side of the obelisk, which faces the façade of Saint Peter’s, the message is addressed to those who leave the church: ‘Christ conquers. Christ reigns. Christ rules. May Christ defend his people against all evil.’¹⁷ This applies to the true believers: it is for them that Christ has conquered everything, and he protects them. At the same time, the inscription declares that the pope is the universal ruler in both the religious and the political spheres. This was the ideological framework on which Bernini had to build further.

How did Bernini resolve the extremely complicated task of uniting existing buildings and monuments with a new structuring of the Square? The centre became the obelisk with its programmatic inscriptions. He rebuilt Maderno’s fountain and moved it. He also set up an identical fountain, so that the two now flank the obelisk. Bernini conceived of the Square as a construction that would embrace the believers and usher them into the Holy of Holies, as the final point of the pilgrim journey.

The Square is divided into two. First of all, one enters a broad oval space garlanded by two semicircular arms with four rows of columns in depth, placed in such a way that if one stands in the south or north centre of the oval, the columns will cover each other, and one will see only those in the front row. In the continuation of the oval space up towards the church, Bernini constructed two corridor wings that create a separate space in front of the façade of the basilica. This part of the Square is formed as a trapezoid, so that the wings incline outwards towards the façade, the so-called *piazza retta*. This makes possible an entrance to the papal palace to the north through the colonnades, while the trapezoidal form makes Maderno’s façade look narrower than it really is. Most of this space consists of a colossal staircase construction with steps that have the form of an arc in the middle and are straight on each side. This marks the final ascent to the Holy of Holies before one enters the colossal vestibule.

The entire Square thus appears as a unified whole, since the half-circular porticoes have the same height as the lateral wings of the upper Square. Bernini’s theological message is clear: the one hundred and forty statues of the church’s martyrs that Bernini set up on the two sides of the Square lead up to the façade of the church. On the top of the façade are statues of Christ and the apostles, except for Peter, since he is inside, in the sacred room. It is Christ and his saints who meet the visitors and embrace them and lead them into the sanctuary (Kuhn 1970: 300).

On this point, there are no obvious references to the programmes of Ignatius or the Jesuits, but it is nevertheless interesting to see how Ignatius in the *Exercitia* affirms that the imagination, the ability to picture things, is decisive for the spiritual exercises. With the aid of the imagination, one can find oneself in the presence of God and the saints already in this life: ‘[...] a sort of imaginary re-creation of the place, where I see myself standing before God and all the saints with the desire, and persevering in it, of finding out the manner by which I could best please God Himself’ (ES §151);¹⁸ ‘[...] the saints have interceded for me’ (ES §60).¹⁹

Bernini has gone one step further, from an abstract idea to concrete art that *recreates* such a scene in the heart of the urban space. It is tempting, therefore, to read the programme of the square as an architectural implementation of the spiritual exercise prescribed by Ignatius. Saint Peter’s Square can be regarded as a heavenly tribunal where the saints appear, and can be petitioned to intercede for the believer making his way into the Holy of Holies. In Bernini’s version, the oval Square, with the colonnades

on each side crowned by the statues of the saints and the staircase leading up to the vestibule, embraces all the believers from the surrounding world 'in order to give a maternal welcome to the Catholics to confirm them in the faith, to the heretics in order to reunite them to the Church, and to the infidels in order to open their eyes to the true faith' – as he himself put it (Lees-Milne 1967: 272).

Saint Peter's Church

When Bernini began working in the Vatican, Saint Peter's was almost finished; it had been consecrated in 1626. A succession of architects had been involved, including Bramante, Rafael, Michelangelo, della Porta, Vignola, Fontana and finally Carlo Maderno, who erected the nave and the façade, which was completed in 1614. In the vestibule with the entrance to the papal palace, Bernini set up his equestrian statue of Emperor Constantine, the first Christian emperor, who built Old Saint Peter's. In the eighteenth century, an equestrian statue of Charlemagne was placed at the other end of the narthex. While this demonstrates the church's collaboration with the imperial power, these monuments also mark a boundary, since they stand outside the sacred room.

Leaving the vestibule, one goes in and encounters a harmonious room that draws one up towards the Holy of Holies. The original Renaissance interior was transformed by Bernini's plans into a baroque interior. In this connection I intend to shed light on his decorations in the central axis of the church – the nave and the choir. Sculpture and architectonic elements gave the interior serenity, with its balanced proportions, elements that express precisely the baroque ideal: it appeals intensely to both the intellect and the senses, and can therefore move the visitor and promote a religious emotion. Bernini's colossal baldachin, over the papal altar directly under the cupola, and Peter's alleged tomb are the central visual focus in the interior. At the same time, the baldachin also marks the point where one descends to Maderno's *confessio*. The altar is placed directly above Peter's supposed tomb, where the pallia, the honorific vestment worn by the archbishops who are the apostles' successors, are kept in a chest. It is here that power and tradition are handed on to others. Through the baldachin, Bernini's oval stained-glass window, depicting the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, shines above Peter's empty throne, the so-called *cathedra*. The visitor who enters the church is struck to see that the interior is constructed in such a way that, as one draws nearer to the central cultic point (the papal altar), the papal power is visualized more and more strongly through an escalation of the effects. As one makes one's way along Maderno's nave, one passes Bernini's reliefs of selected popes from earlier ages. These are executed in multicoloured marble and set in medallions on the columns. The ground plan is based on a strong artistic and ideological dramaturgy.

Bernini's project in the cupola area and in the choir behind it has a fundamental unified programme that should not leave the believer in any doubt: here one is at the foundations of the Catholic Church, here the truth and the unity of the Church are made visible, and here lies the basis of the claim to power that is made by the Church and the pope. Bernini's entire project in this part of the church interior stands for the

Figure 12.4 The baldachin and the papal altar, St. Peter's basilica, Rome (Wikimedia Commons). Author: Jean-Pol Grandmont.

self-consciousness that the church had regained after the setback it had suffered as a consequence of the Reformation.

It is only when one moves up through Maderno's nave that one gets an impression of the colossal dimensions of the church. When one enters the cupola space in the transept, one inevitably looks up at Michelangelo's and Domenico Fontana's cupola; at the same time, thanks to Bernini's design, the interior itself abolishes some of the loftiness. The baldachin is a colossal construction with deep foundations, which took ten years to build. The papal altar stands on an elevated base with stairs leading up to it from all sides. This makes the altar functional as a cultic site that is visible from every point, while the height of the base both allows everyone in the huge interior to see it and demonstrates that this is the central point for the Petrine tradition. The baldachin

frames the base of the altar, and four columns hold up the canopy of the baldachin. It is strikingly high in relation to its quadratic base; the construction is 28.5 metres in height.

In the cupola drum, in a flood of light, we read the celebrated words spoken by Jesus to Peter, which are the very axiom of the Catholic understanding of the papacy: 'Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam.' This is the caption for what Bernini has carried out in the space below: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church' (Mt. 16.18). This represents the authoritative interpretation of the papal altar and of the baldachin above it. This is in opposition to the Greek Orthodox piety where the mystery is veiled behind the iconostasis and curtains. In St. Peter's you experience the holy through the elevations of the visible elements.

The baldachin stands in an unbroken tradition that goes back to the early church, but the final product is entirely Bernini's own, a combination of an altar ciborium and a processional baldachin (Lees-Milne 1967: 250–3; Nykjær 1999: 163–75; Francia 1975: 80; Hibbard 1965: 75–80). The baldachin is full of symbols. The four helical columns with their décor of grape branches and bees – the latter a motif from Urban VIII's coat of arms – have their point of departure in the four pairs of columns from the grave complex in Constantine's Old Saint Peter's. These are still present in the church, in the small loggias on the four supporting pillars. The symbolic function is clear. The baldachin states in a compact manner what is involved here: this is the tomb of Peter, the prince of the apostles. Over this tomb is the altar on which only the pope celebrates Mass. The baldachin rises up in its enormous height and culminates in a globe supported by four volutes and adorned with a cross. Angels stand on the edge of the volutes. Two angels float on the draperies and hold the papal tiara between them. Under the canopy of the baldachin floats a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. Everything beneath this – the sacramental element, and ultimately the church's organization and power structure – is a result of Christ's victory and institution, which is administered by each pope in his pontificate.

This is intensified by Bernini's decoration of the cupola room. He has placed sculptures in niches on each of the four pillars that support the cupola, depicting Veronica with the veil, Empress Helena with the cross of Jesus, Longinus with the lance, and the apostle Andrew with his x-shaped cross. Bernini planned everything, but it is only the statue of Longinus that is the work of his hands. He gave friends and pupils the task of making the other sculptures according to his instructions, as was also the case with the sculptures on the Ponte Sant'Angelo: Francesco Mochi – Veronica; Andrea Bolgi – Helena; Francesco Duquesnoy – Andrew. Above each niche is a small loggia. According to tradition, the sacred relics to which the statues allude are kept in the room behind the loggia. Likewise, according to tradition, the helical Constantinian columns mentioned above are said to come from Solomon's Temple. Historically speaking, this is an impossibility, but the reuse of the pillars demonstrates Bernini's ability to reshape tradition and create it anew through renewal in his own days.

The sculptures in the cupola room look either towards the altar or towards heaven. The saints are important enough, but they point to the most important relic, namely, the tomb of the one who was appointed by Christ himself as the leader of the church, and whose successors are mediators between heaven and earth. This takes

place through Christ's presence in the Eucharist. In this way, what Ponte Sant'Angelo hinted at is brought to its fulfilment: here, the believer stands at the ultimate vision of Christ's sacrifice and of its consequences for the believer and for the church. Bernini has created a cupola room that points to the essentials in the tridentine Catholic self-understanding: the sacrifice of the mass celebrated by the pope as the successor of Peter. In the Eucharist the Catholic believers are invited to have the experience of the true belief through emotion and sensation. Ignatius describes this with an allusion to Lk. 24.13ff: the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus doesn't just break bread for them, he gives them Communion, and they recognized him (ES §303).²⁰

When one goes behind the high altar, one discovers that the stained-glass window with the dove, which one sees between the pillars of the baldachin when one enters the church, is part of a large bronze sculpture over the altar at the back wall of the choir, the so-called *Cathedra Petri* (Lees-Milne 1967: 278–81; Francia 1975: 87–90; Nykjær 1999: 191–201; Hibbard 1965: 159–62). The oval alabaster stained-glass window is part of this

Figure 12.5 The Cathedra, St. Peter's basilica, Rome (Wikimedia Commons). Author: Sergey Smirnov.

composition, and the rays of light from the dove – the symbol of the Holy Spirit – are materialized out from the window in bronze and radiate over Peter's empty throne, which truly hangs between heaven and earth. It is surrounded by a host of angels, two of whom hold the papal tiara above the chair. The throne is carried by four church fathers, two from the West (Ambrose and Augustine) and two from the East (Athanasius and John Chrysostom). The message is arranged in a very subtle manner: there had been a schism between the Western and the Eastern Churches since 1054, and Bernini has presented the papal power here as universal – one of the great points of contention that had led to the schism in earlier times. Here, the universal papacy is presented as inspired by the Holy Spirit, as if the schism had never occurred. Lees-Milne quite correctly points out that the depiction of the church fathers from East and West is meant to symbolize the Church's unity, by means of a reminder that the Eastern Church was subordinate to the universal rule of papal power. The Eastern Church has never accepted such an understanding; on the contrary, the pope's demand for supremacy was one of the most important causes of the breach. The group of sculptures thus constitutes a remarkable visualization of papal triumphalism. A further message is also given: Peter's chair is empty, but at the same time Peter is present thanks to his burial place under the high altar, and the reigning pope is Peter's vicar as the leader of the universal church *Summus Pontifex Ecclesiae Universalis*, 'High priest of the entire Church'.

The demand for power and the demand for truth merge here. But does the spirituality of that age offer any critical rejoinder to this demonstration of power? Is not that spirituality rather oriented towards the obedience and humility of the individual? There can be no doubt that the individual is called to obedience and humility in Ignatius's *Exercise*. But it also sheds light on this aspect of Bernini's work by means of Ignatius's Counter-Reformation view of the Church and of authority. What is the ultimate goal for the one who carries out the *Exercitia Spiritualia* as a penitential exercise? It is to recognize in one's sentiment that Catholic Christianity is the only true and correct Christianity. One is ultimately confronted with the *Ecclesia triumphans*, the power of the Church, and the final chapter in the *Exercitia Spiritualia* is a framework for the entire text:²¹ it concerns the true views one ought to hold in order to belong to the Church.

Here we are told, inter alia, that one must relinquish one's own judgement and obey the Church and its hierarchy (ES §353). One must go to confession, take part in the Mass, and receive Communion in accordance with the Church's regulations (ES §354). One must admonish other Christians to do the same (ES §355). One must praise saints, relics, and all that the veneration of the saints involves (ES §358). One must praise the laws about fasting and abstinence, and the days and times linked to these laws (ES §359). The particularly interesting point is that Ignatius links all this to honouring the church building and religious images because of what they represent (ES §360). For Ignatius, this is connected to the obligation to observe all the commandments of the Church. One must not oppose them, but should rather defend them and show respect for the church's teaching (ES §§361; 363). This culminates in a description of what agreement with the Church means: 'if the Church defines as black something that appears white to our eyes, we must in like manner declare it black' (ES §365).²² Human beings are thus meant to lead their lives within the boundaries set by the Church, in order thereby to discover how one can serve God and obtain salvation for

one's soul (see ES §§55–6). Faith is linked to the individual sphere through sensational and emotional experience with the sacred topography. The church complex designed by Bernini, therefore, was envisaged as playing a specific role in communicating and generating the spirituality and ideological programme of that age.

Conclusion

Bernini's great projects in the Vatican area, from the Ponte Sant'Angelo via Saint Peter's Square up to the *cathedra* in Saint Peter's, demonstrates his ability to combine architecture and sculpture. His greatest gift as an architect was the ability to work on existing architecture and urban space in a comprehensive transformation and new creation. He was first and foremost a sculptor. I believe that his architectonic interventions, for example in the case of Saint Peter's Square, support this claim, since even Saint Peter's Square, the only architectonic element in his work on the pilgrimage route, presents in many ways the appearance of a work of sculpture.

In light of the coherence of the complex detailed above, across installations that had decades in the making, it seems likely that there was a comprehensive plan guiding Bernini's throughout the decades in which he was the chief architect at Saint Peter's. His entire project with the pilgrimage route, Saint Peter's Square, and Saint Peter's Church is marked by a profound empathy with the Catholic Church's dogmas, praxis and organization, as this is expressed in the type of spirituality and the kind of metaphysical thinking characteristic of the Jesuit order (Lees-Milne 1967: 280–1). When we interpret the sculpture and architecture in the light of Ignatius's *Exercitia*, we catch sight of a spiritual vision that they shared, although there is no basis for asserting that Bernini simply wanted to translate Ignatius's text into a work of art. Indeed, the work of art seems to break open the parameters of the subjective inwardness in Ignatius's text, and to establish a visual and spatial vision for the whole of society, understood as the fellowship of believers. Nevertheless, Ignatius and Bernini arguably share a common vision for their work: namely, to go out beyond the rational and to awaken the inner religious sentiment in the beholders that will move them to recognize themselves as sinners in the encounter with the Church as the authoritative mediator of the Christian faith. In this way, one can say that Bernini was both an artist and a theologian (Kuhn 1970: 317). His art and architecture were thus a result of the spirit of the Council of Trent, but mediated through his own artistic talent, which came to set a decisive imprint on the baroque as an epoch (Lees-Milne 1967: 280–1).