

## SUMMARY

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SEALED BOOKS, SIGNS OF GOD'S PRESENCE,  
AND MEANS OF REMINDING ABOUT DIVINE  
BLESSINGS. ON CHARLES BORROMEO'S  
PROBLEMS WITH DETERMINING THE PLACE  
OF IMAGES IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The *Instructiones fabricae et supellectiles ecclesiasticae*, issued in 1577 by the Archbishop of Milan Charles Borromeo (1538–1584), was one of the earliest and most important expositions of sacred art formulated during the Counter-Reformation period. Among rules concerning the furnishings of the church interior, there appear also remarks related to paintings in the church. This fragment of the instructions (which has aroused particular interest of art historians) is strikingly terse and imprecise in comparison with other parts of the work, which seems to be an evidence of Borromeo's reservations about formulating teachings about the place of images in the life of the Church.

This hierarchy was one of the most influential participants of the last session of the Council of Trent (4 December 1563) when a resolution was taken that ordered to place images inside churches and to venerate them. Yet, in the *Instructiones* the archbishop did not justify such practices, but enumerated many dangers related to them (they introduced to the churches secular elements, false and inappropriate, which could be harmful to the true piety because of their extravagance). While criticising improper iconographic solutions, he did not, however, give any hints for the proper ones, and limited his remarks only to rather general recommendations that scenes depicting the life Christ should avoid elements taken from the apocrypha and that the saints represented in them should bear their proper attributes. Very meaningful was Borromeo's instruction that the images whose iconography was not obvious, should be elucidated by means of inscriptions placed within them. Such a solution was likely inspired by Borromeo's ancient predecessor on the Milanese archbishopric throne, namely St Ambrose (c. 339–397), and also St Paulinus of Nola (c. 353–431). Both these hierarchs not only ordered that the wall paintings they commissioned be complemented with inscriptions, but also justified this practice by stating that an image represents religious contents imprecisely and it is only the word that can guarantee that the message of the images be unequivocal.

Borromeo's pastoral works, which present his views on the role of images in the Christian life more precisely than the *Instructiones*, escape the attention of researchers. In the *Libretto dei ricordi al popolo della città e diocesi di Milano* (1578), addressed to his lay diocesans, he recommended that they should have sacred images in their homes and workshops and that they should stop before them for a moment of pious contemplation while entering or leaving the premises. Yet, the iconography of these images

would have played a rather limited part in inducing this contemplation, since the archbishop stated that this part could have been played by 'any image'. Sainly images were to remind the faithful exclusively about God's presence, while the object of their reflection in front of the image were to be the articles of faith they learned verbally, especially by means of the popular religious literature disseminated by Borromeo. In his Lent sermons in 1584 the archbishop encouraged the faithful to contemplate the image of the Crucified Christ (as he did himself as well), but he did not forget to instruct his listeners to move from the emotional meditation on Christ's suffering to studying the biblical teachings on the salvific role of his Passion and to fulfil the obligation of every Christian to imitate Christ's renouncement of himself.

Although Borromeo ascribed a relatively important part in stimulating piety to images hung in secular interiors, he decidedly belittled their role if they were pious images within the church building. The archbishop declared, namely, that in the latter space God is present in a special form in the sacraments, and therefore the most important elements of church furnishings that remind about this extraordinary grace, are those related particularly to administering sacraments: the altar and baptismal font. It seems therefore, that in the *Libretto dei ricordi* Borromeo consciously did not draw the attention of the congregation to church paintings, in order not to distract them from the much more eloquent visible signs in the church.

A similar attitude was characteristic of many bishops and clerical humanists in the dioceses in the north of Italy (Paolo Gustiniani, 1476–1528; Gian Matteo Giberti, 1495–1543; Vittore Soranzo, 1500–1558) who made attempts at an internal reform of the Church aimed, above all, at consolidating the Catholic sacramentology. It may be therefore assumed that Italian Catholics, who were not directly confronted with the iconoclasm of the Reformation, did not consider the cult of images as one of the most important traits defining the identity of the members of the Roman Church. Important enunciations justifying this practice and indicating the typically Catholic iconographic solutions should not, then, be looked for in the writings of Borromeo and other Italian hierarchs, but rather in the works of Catholic theorists from Northern Europe who were deeply involved in opposing the arguments of Protestants who often described Catholicism as 'popish idolatry'.