

The Council of Trent (1545–63) and Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1541)¹

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MICHELANGELO'S *Last Judgment* is one of the world's most famous paintings, located in one of the world's most famous rooms, the Sistine Chapel. It was Pope Clement VII (1523–34) who commissioned Michelangelo to paint “the resurrection” for the rear wall of the chapel, behind the altar. By resurrection he did not mean the resurrection of Christ but the resurrection of the blessed on “the last day,” as professed in the Creed, which concludes, “I believe in the holy Ghost, the holy Catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.”

Clement died before Michelangelo could begin the project, but his successor, Pope Paul III (1534–49) renewed the commission. The artist completed the fresco in 1541 to great acclaim. It was admired for its religious power. Paul III allegedly fell on his knees when he first saw it and exclaimed, “O Lord, charge me not with my sins when you come on the day of Judgment.” It was equally admired for the genius Michelangelo showed in rethinking and executing a standard subject in medieval painting. Cardinal Francesco Coronaro wrote that if Michelangelo gave him a painting of even one of the figures he would pay him whatever he asked.

Although commissioned as “the resurrection,” the painting has always been known as *The Last Judgment*, which is appropriate because the resurrection and the judgment are in Christian tradition but two aspects of the same reality. You will note that the painting displays plenty of naked flesh, which is of course a hallmark of Michelangelo. The display here is, however, appropriate according to the Latin version of the Creed that Michelangelo and all associated with the papal court would have known—not “resurrection of the body,” as the English has it, but “resurrection of the flesh,” *carnis resurrectionem*.

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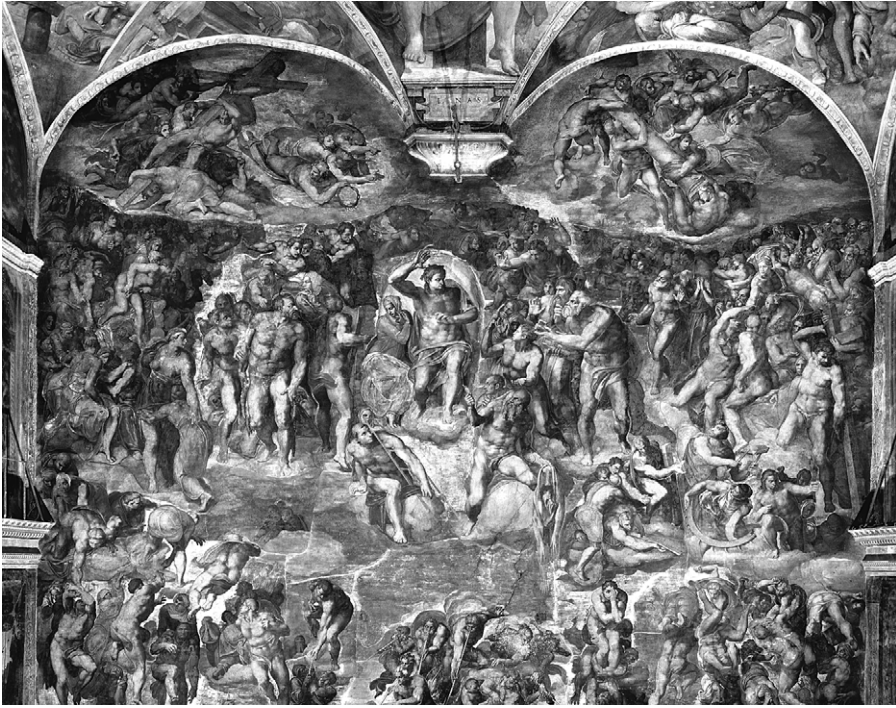


FIGURE 1. Sistine Chapel. *The Last Judgment*, 1538–41 (fresco). Michelangelo Buonarroti/The Bridgeman Art Library/Getty Images. Saint Catherine is the figure with the wheel fragment a little more than halfway down the fresco on the far right of the viewer.

But the painting as we see it today is not quite what was seen in 1541, when it displayed even more flesh, including full frontal nudity of some figures. We have a good idea of what the painting originally looked like from a contemporary engraving by Giulio Bonasone. Although much praised the moment the public was allowed to view it, it was also heavily criticized for the nudity. Critics also found especially distressing the configuration of the figures of St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Blaise, off to the left below Christ's left hand. Catherine seemed to be looking warily over her shoulder as if intuiting that Blaise was contemplating something naughty regarding her (fig. 2).

Among the critics was the papal master of ceremonies, Biaggio da Cesena, who supposedly remarked to Paul III that the painting was more fitting for a tavern or a bathhouse than the pope's chapel. Pietro Aretino, the poet and satirist, was another. He pronounced a well-publicized criticism of the painting's indecency in "the most sacred chapel in all the world." Nonetheless, the *Judgment* remained untouched



FIGURE 2. [*The Last Judgment*], engraving by Giulio Bonasone, done sometime before 1564, showing the fresco before the over-painting. Courtesy of the British Museum.

for more than two decades, through the pontificates of Paul III, Julius III, Marcellus II, and Paul IV, and most of the pontificate of Pius IV.

That changed in 1564 when Pius IV employed Daniele da Volterra, an important painter and disciple of Michelangelo, to address the problem. In the process the genitals were discreetly covered and the

Catherine/Blaise group was reconfigured. The result was the painting more or less as we see it today.

The Council of Trent ended in 1563, the year before the over-painting. What is the connection between these two events? Answering that question is the burden of my talk today. I am certainly not the first to address it. In fact, discussion of the relationship is a staple of art-historical literature.

Influential in that regard has been the judgment of the Italian historian Romeo De Maio, who in his *Michelangelo e la Controriforma*, 1978, said, "The Judgment was discussed during the debate on sacred images, which took place at Trent during the Twenty-Fifth Session of the council, November 11 until December 3 [1563]. . . . The fact that just after the council was concluded the 'revision' of the Judgment was ordered . . . shows that at Trent discussion of the painting was lively" (p. 39, my translation).

De Maio's book reflected and gave powerful impetus to the idea that at the council Michelangelo's painting got singled out for special criticism, and it even suggested that the painting incited the council to issue its decree on images. That idea became received wisdom in much of the literature about the painting and has persisted down to the present. I will now try to show that scarcely a single word in De Maio's statement is true, which does not mean, however, that there is no connection between the council and the painting.

The Council of Trent was convoked by Pope Paul III in 1545 at the insistence of Emperor Charles V. It called together the Catholic bishops of Europe to respond to the Protestant Reformation and met over the course of eighteen years in three distinct periods: 1545–47, 1551–52, and 1562–63. Three different popes convoked each of the three periods, but none of them ever set foot in Trent. They instead appointed legates to preside in their names.

The council had an extraordinarily troubled history, suggested by the fractures into three periods, and it lurched from major crisis to major crisis. Popes, kings and queens, the Holy Roman Emperors, bishops, and Protestants threw obstacles of every kind in its way, including war and the threat of war. The choice of the then-small city of Trent as the meeting place was itself the result of a difficult compromise, satisfactory to none of the parties involved. (The Latin name for Trent is *Tridentinum*, hence the English adjective Tridentine.)

Regarding Trent's decree on sacred images, the first thing to note is that it was occasioned not by a desire to regulate the quality or decorum of the art in question, but to affirm the legitimacy of such art in the face of severe outbursts of iconoclasm. The second thing to note is that the council, though it passed a decree on sacred images, never in

plenary session discussed it. Why was this the case? In brief, the council was occupied with other business that it deemed more important—the great doctrinal issues raised especially by Luther and the more urgent problem of reform of the church, especially of the episcopacy (which meant, basically, getting bishops to reside in their dioceses and do their jobs).

Moreover, the vast majority of prelates at the council were from Italy—more than two-thirds during the last period of the council, followed at great distance by prelates from Spain, and then Portugal. In these countries iconoclasm was virtually unknown. Contrary to what art historical literature sometimes suggests, images were not only not an important issue at the council, but until the final hour were not an issue at all for the vast, vast majority of the council's participants.

The same was not true for France, where iconoclasm had broken out as early as the 1520s. That outburst was little more than a symptom of the more general and early infiltration of Protestant ideas into France and especially into the capital. In response to the situation, Antoine Duprat, cardinal-archbishop of Sens, convoked in 1527 the most important local synod (or council) of the sixteenth century before Trent. Although its decrees were binding only in the local environs, they were broadly known and respected by Catholic reformers, as is confirmed by their invocation at Trent even by Italian and Spanish prelates when it served their purpose.

Held in Paris, the Council of Sens, as it is known, issued a large number of decrees on a wide range of subjects. Two of the decrees pertained to sacred images. The first was a long but traditional justification of them as useful for instruction and devotion. The second, much shorter, dealt with their quality: "So that nothing improper take place in the church of God, it seemed right and reasonable [to decree] that, because of the sensuality of some images [*lascivas*] and their deviation from the truth of Scripture, in the future none be placed in the churches unless the bishop or his vicar approve beforehand and visit the church." This was the first time in the period that this issue was raised in an influential way in an official, though local, ecclesiastical document.

Despite the religious unrest in the kingdom, the French had tried from the very beginning to prevent the convocation of Trent and virtually boycotted it once it finally opened in 1545. King Francis I saw the council as strengthening the hand of his enemy, Emperor Charles V. His son and successor, Henry II, saw it the same way and boycotted the second period, 1551–52. But ten years later, in November 1562, after the death of Henry and after the third period of the council had already been under way for ten months, a relatively small but important delegation led by Cardinal Charles de Guise finally arrived at Trent.

The religious situation in the kingdom had become desperate, and even Henry II's widow, the regent, Queen Catherine de' Medici, realized that recourse to the council was unavoidable. Iconoclasm had meanwhile broken out once again as the French Calvinists, the Huguenots, grew stronger.

Even in the rapidly deteriorating religious and political situation in France, the queen regent had earlier unrealistically hoped to calm the waters by bringing leaders of the Huguenot and Catholic parties together so that through conversation they might resolve their differences at the Colloquy of Poissy, 31 July to 9 October 1561. Among many other issues, image-veneration was hotly debated. The colloquy resolved nothing.

In desperation Catherine called another colloquy, which met in her own quarters at the Château-de-Saint-Germain a few months later. The first item on the agenda was the veneration of images, for which the theologians of the faculty of theology of the University of Paris had prepared a *sententia* (an "opinion" or "position paper"). The *sententia* was fundamentally a long justification of sacred images. However, it included the following caveat, possibly or probably in echo of Sens: "It is also by no means a small abuse if images are painted and depicted in an indecent and sensually alluring form [*impudica et lasciva*] and one at odds with the chastity and upright character of the holy men and women the images represent."

The Château colloquy was, however, an utter and immediate failure, breaking down on the first item on the agenda, the veneration of images, which Catherine had considered among the easier issues to resolve. As mentioned, a new rash of iconoclasm then broke out, as France headed for thirty years of civil war, the "French Wars of Religion." Catherine was now convinced that she had no alternative but to support French participation in the council.

On 13 November 1562, therefore, "the cardinal of Lorraine," Charles de Guise, arrived at Trent with twelve bishops, three abbots, and eighteen theologians. This small delegation, which was later somewhat enlarged, proved extremely influential, due largely to the forceful personality of de Guise, who from this point forward played a role at the council second only to that of the papal legates themselves. On 3 January 1563, little more than six weeks after the French arrived, they presented the legates with a memorandum of thirty-four articles on reform, one of which (no. 29) dealt, not surprisingly, with images:

29. Because iconoclasts have arisen in our times, men who believe images must be destroyed, which has resulted in grave public disturbances in many places, the council must take measures to ensure that the faithful are properly instructed in church teaching regarding the

eneration of images. The council should likewise take measures to eliminate the abuses and superstitious practices that have grown up in that regard.

The legates took the French proposals extremely seriously and in early February sent to Rome an article-by-article report drawn up by an eleven-person committee as their own considered response. On number 29, the committee said simply, "Let the matter be treated in the catechism." That is, the council should not take it up. It would be difficult to minimize an issue more effectively than that.

The pope, Pius IV, responded to the legates as quickly as they could have desired. On 13 February his reply to each of the thirty-four articles arrived in Trent. The comment on some of them was lengthy, but on number 29 it was simply, "The most reverend legates responded well," that is, they relegated the matter to the catechism. One thing is clear: neither the legates at Trent nor the pope in Rome saw "images" as a concern.

The French proposals, like similar documents from the Spanish bishops and from Emperor Ferdinand I, Charles V's brother and successor, never made it to the floor of the council, nor were they distributed to the bishops for their perusal. Images, therefore, were still not on the agenda of the council. Other matters took precedence through the rest of the year and absorbed everybody's attention.

As the months passed, Pius IV pressed the legates to bring the council swiftly to conclusion. Even though many issues still had to be resolved, the legates succeeded in the middle of November in setting 9 December as the terminal date for the council, which meant that in only three weeks all business had to be completed, a goal that to many at the council seemed highly unrealistic. But still no action was taken on images.

Finally, on Sunday morning, 28 November, Cardinal Charles de Guise, seeing that time was fast running out, appeared in legates' quarters and categorically demanded that the council enact a decree on the veneration of images. The next morning, 29 November, the legates established a committee under the chairmanship of de Guise to deal with that subject as well as a number of other matters such as indulgences, fasting, and the veneration of saints and relics. At that point only eight working days remained if the council was to finish on 9 December. During those days the council had much other business to handle besides the matters committed to the new deputation. The agenda was overloaded almost to the point of absurdity.

Late in the evening of the next day, 30 November, however, news arrived from Rome that Pope Pius IV was so seriously ill that his life was in question. On the following morning, 1 December, the legates

insisted that the council be concluded immediately, that the next day, 2 December, be the council's last working day, and that the final solemnities of the council be held on 3 and 4 December, known as Session Twenty-Five. ("Session" designated a day or, in this extraordinary case, two days, principally ceremonial, when documents already debated, amended, and in principle approved were formally accepted.)

This change in closing date meant that the deputation had only a day to complete its many tasks. For the decree on images, however, de Guise had with him the *sententia* the Paris theologians had prepared for the colloquy at Saint-Germain. Had it not been for him it is not at all certain the council would have taken up the issue, or, if it did, that the decree would have been formulated the way it was, that is, that it would have included a provision about removing from images all "sensual allurements" [*lascivia*]. The long decree the committee formulated and the council later approved is, however, in substance a resounding validation of images. It reads in part:

And they [the bishops] must also teach that images of Christ, the virgin Mary, and the other saints should be set up and kept, particularly in churches, and that due honor and reverence be shown to them, not because some divinity or power is believed to lie in them . . . but because honor showed to them is referred to the persons they represent. . . .

All superstition must be removed from the invocation of the saints, the veneration of relics, and the use of sacred images. All aiming at base profit must be eliminated. All lasciviousness [*lascivia*] must be avoided, so that images are not painted or adorned with seductive charm [*procaci venustate*].

No record survives of the deliberation of the committee that formulated the decree. But when the decree is examined in its totality, its textual dependence upon the *sententia* of Saint-Germain is clear. In particular, the *lascivia* ("sensual allurements") in the Tridentine text, a word much discussed in art historical literature, is a simple reworking of *impudica et lasciva* in the Saint-Germain text, which itself was probably an echo of the *lascivas* in the decree from the Council of Sens.

On the afternoon of 2 December the council in a plenary working session received the decree along with so many others that no time could be allowed for comment on any of them. Nonetheless, it deemed them all worthy of final approval.

Thus, all we know about the construction of a text that had such influence on artists and patrons and has in the past hundred years generated so much scholarly comment is that it was virtually the exclusive product of French concern; that Charles de Guise was the principal agent in its evolution; that it was in a general way based on the *sententia* of Saint-Germain; that it was put together in almost desperate haste; that

it was passed by the council without examination or debate; that iconoclasm, not a desire to regulate artistic decorum, was the motivating force behind it; and that in the records of the council there is not a single mention of a painter or a painting—not even of Michelangelo and his *Last Judgment*.

After 4 December the bishops left Trent for home with the self-imposed mandate to implement the council's decrees. Pope Pius IV as bishop of Rome felt himself under the same mandate, of course, but perhaps in an even more urgent way because of the preeminence of his bishopric and because of the need he surely felt to reassure the world that the harsh criticism the papacy had received at the council and especially the bitter criticism he himself had received for being the major obstacle to reform was not justified. Now fully recovered from his illness, he on 30 December 1563 created a deputation of cardinals to review the council's many decrees to see what could and should be put immediately into practice in Rome. The deputation met three times between 18 and 21 January and dealt with a wide spectrum of issues.

In its final meeting, 21 January 1564, it, among many other matters, issued a short recommendation about images: "The pictures in the Apostolic Chapel are to be covered, as [is to be done] in other churches [of Rome] if they display anything obscene or obviously false, according to the decree of the council."

What followed was basically what we saw, the painting over of some of the figures in the *Last Judgment*. In the literature about the relationship between the council and that action, there has been considerable confusion. Some scholars have mistakenly identified the action of the Roman deputation as an action of the council itself. Others up to the present follow De Maio by asserting that the *Judgment* was discussed by name at the council. Mistakes like these unfortunately became established verities in scholarship about the painting and have been passed on to innumerable tourists who visit the Sistine Chapel. Aside from article 29 in the French memorandum on reform and the correspondence between Trent and Rome concerning it, sacred images and art in general were a non-issue at Trent until the curtain was already descending on the council.

The notoriety of the *Judgment* easily accounts for the Roman deputation's action after the council. From the moment of its unveiling twenty-three years earlier, it had, though much admired, been harshly criticized for its nude figures and been the object of public controversy at least since the publication of Pietro Aretino's letter of 1545 deploring the indecency of the images "in the most sacred chapel upon the earth." The offending painting in the Sistine Chapel was the *Judgment*, even though there were of course other nudes in the chapel—in the

ceiling not only Michelangelo's *ignudi* but the frontal nudity in his "Drunkenness of Noah"—that escaped such criticism and escaped over-painting.

Not until 21 January 1564, a month and a half after the council ended, do we have a document that relates the council's decree to the *Judgment*. That is the moment, moreover, that the more general application of the decree to the diocese of Rome got officially set into motion. Although artists and patrons there were made to feel the pressure of the regulation, there is no instance of any other painting in Rome being defaced as a result of it.

At about the same time other conscientious bishops set to work implementing the new duties the council imposed upon them. The bishops in Italy acted in accordance with the decree on sacred art by continuing their enthusiastic patronage for themselves and for the churches over which they presided. There are only a few isolated instances of any defacing of art already in place. That is far from saying, however, that the warning in the decree about "sensuous images" remained a dead letter, or that it did not provide the grounding for the important cultural phenomenon known as "Tridentine art."