Renewal of faith: Examining Piero Della Francesca’s *Baptism of Christ*

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“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. Then heaven was opened to him, and saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and lighting on him. Then a voice said from heaven, ‘This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased.’” (Matthew 3:16-17).1

Throughout the years, this passage has invited many different artists to bring forth their interpretation and project it towards the world. One such interpretation includes the 1430 painting entitled *Baptism of Christ*, by Piero della Francesca. This piece forms part of the altarpiece in the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in the town of San Sepolcro. San Sepolcro was the beloved hometown of Piero della Francesca; a town that shaped him profoundly.

“Through Piero’s childhood until his departure in early manhood, San Sepolcro provided the context for his perception of political and social relationships, his understanding of Christian ritual behaviours as specifically practiced in the town and his labour in the flourishing local market.”2 Growing up in San Sepolcro influenced Piero’s painting of the *Baptism of Christ* as seen in the stillness of Jesus’ body in prayer, an ideal practised by the Camaldolese monks of his native town.3

The *Baptism of Christ* depicts Jesus in the centre, with John the Baptist on his left ready to baptise him in the shallow part of the river Jordan. Directly over Jesus is a dove descending from the sky. On Jesus’ right stands a tree and on the other side of the tree are three angels, witnessing the baptism. Behind John is a person removing his garments,

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3 John Drury, *Painting the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 88
getting ready to be baptized. Further back are four elders walking from the right edge of the painting towards the left edge, with the leader of the group pointing towards the sky. The background of the painting is of rural hillside.

There are many different scholars who have commented on the *Baptism of Christ*, including John Drury, Timothy Verdon and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin. John Drury comments on the contrast between stillness and motion in the painting⁴, while Timothy Verdon notes the variety of symbols found in the painting.⁵ Marilyn Aronberg Lavin writes of three figural groups in the painting:⁶ the angels in the foreground, the catechumen bending over in the middle ground, and the elders in the background. One of her arguments is that the painting alludes to the Feast of Epiphany.⁷ Previous painters of this feast day would have depicted this feast as three different scenes portrayed by separated bands. In comparison, Piero della Francesca portrayed the three scenes but did not separate them. “He alludes to all three miracles of the day and arranges them in a sequence, moving from the background forward...”⁸ The painting holds special meaning to Piero for it situates the baptism in his town of San Sepolcro, providing an intimate connection with the town and its faithful. Piero’s painting of the *Baptism of Christ* is a representation of Jesus because it embodies the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, each sacrament holding a profound connection with Christ.

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⁴ Ibid, 86
⁷ Ibid, 71-73
⁸ Ibid, 73-75
The first sacrament of the Catholic Church is Baptism; often called the entrance sacrament. Baptism is the symbolic cleansing of the soul with the Holy Water, and through this action people enter a new life as part of God’s family. The Baptism of Christ retells the story of Christ’s baptism in the river Jordan, creating the impression that this sacrament is the main focus of the painting. The painting has several images that represent the existence of Baptism. The most evident image being Jesus himself participating in the sacrament in the river. It is important to note that the river represents Holy water. Lavin further elaborates on the age-old argument of the elders in the background are the Magi travelling to Bethlehem. In the Bible it is written that the Magi brought with them gold, frankincense and myrrh. Traditionally myrrh represents death; baptism, however, is seen as starting a new life through Jesus, and the myrrh carried by the Magi alludes to the death of your non-spiritual life. “Christian baptism is... a ritual death which is a passing-over into new life,” a new life as the child of God. Lavin also points out the figural group of the single catechumen shedding off his clothing, which further suggests the sacrament of Baptism. The act of removing his clothes is symbolic of the shedding off of his old life, as noted by Lavin. Verdon also notes that river is associated with “the source of life”. The sacrament of Baptism is a representation of Jesus because it operates just as He does; He gives way to a new spiritual life for his followers.

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10 Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Piero della Francesca’s Baptism of Christ (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 64
12 John Drury, Painting the Word (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 86
13 Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Piero della Francesca’s Baptism of Christ (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 5
14 Ibid, 112
15 Timothy Verdon, The Spiritual World of Piero’s Art, ed. Jeryldene M. Wood (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 47
The next sacrament displayed in the painting is the sacrament of reconciliation, also known as confession. It is important to note that Baptism occurs only once in a lifetime and acts as the initial cleansing of sins, while reconciliation is the act that humans undergo continuously to be freed from sins committed after receiving Baptism. Reconciliation is a declaration of one’s sins to a priest, who acts as a representative of Jesus. Through confession to a priest, one’s sins are absolved and thus one gains forgiveness from God. The sacrament is represented in Piero’s painting through Jesus himself. “He is separate, holy and being washed for his holy work of redemption...”16 The image of Jesus allows the audience to envision what he will endure later on in his life because of us and our sins. For it was Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross that allowed all of humanity to experience redemption; his death reconciled the world with God. For “only a being able to pay the penalty (by being human) but capable of making a payment that was of infinite worth (by being divine) could simultaneously carry out the imperatives of divine mercy and satisfy the demands of divine justice... Jesus’ death on the cross made it morally possible for God to forgive.”17 The Sacrament of reconciliation is thus a representation of Jesus because through His redeeming act, humanity has been forgiven.

The following sacrament in the Catholic Church is the Eucharist. It is considered a remembrance of the last meal shared between Jesus and his disciples before his crucifixion. It was during the Last Supper that Jesus established the first communion amongst his closest followers. The painting shows this sacrament through the depiction of Jesus situated at the central foreground. It is written in the Bible that Jesus gave the disciples the bread and said,

16 John Drury, Painting the Word (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 86
17 Jaroslav Pelikan, Jesus Through the Centuries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 107
“This is my body”. The painting indirectly references the Eucharist since it reminds us that Jesus himself is “the bread” that is consecrated and consumed in remembrance of his death. As previously mentioned the painting is the backdrop of an altar in San Sepolcro. It is at the altar where the priest consecrates the bread into the Body of Christ. The placement of the painting is a constant reminder of Jesus’ body as the Eucharist. “The panel's primary function as a backdrop for the Eucharist is absolutely clear in the central figure, which is quite literally the “body” of Christ. Interestingly, it has been written that the Emperor Constantine did not consider icons to be true images of Christ if they were not a part of him. By using Constantine’s interpretation of a true image, Pelikan concluded that the only true image of Christ is the Eucharist. “The only image of Christ that could be said to be 'one in being' with Christ was the Eucharist, which contained the real presence of the body and blood of Christ.” This demonstrates that the sacrament of Eucharist is a representation of Jesus himself.

The Sacrament of Confirmation, which follows Eucharist, is also represented in the painting. It is through confirmation that the baptized receive the Holy Spirit and they are therefore more unified with the Church. In turn, the confirmed are required to share and support the Word of the Lord, hence continuing the work that Jesus started. The Holy Spirit, which is crucial to the sacrament of confirmation, is represented in Piero’s Baptism of Christ through the dove. The dove traditionally represents the Holy Spirit, a fact supported

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19 John Drury, Painting the Word (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 85  
20 Timothy Verdon, The Spiritual World of Piero’s Art, ed. Jeryldene M. Wood (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43  
21 Jaroslav Pelikan, Jesus Through the Centuries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 86
by Lavin\textsuperscript{22} and Verdon.\textsuperscript{23} However, another interpretation of the dove is its symbolic connection as a messenger, seen in the story of Noah’s Ark. In the story, Noah released a dove to observe whether the flood had subsided or not. There the dove acted as a messenger for it relayed information back to Noah. The dove returned with an olive leaf,\textsuperscript{24} a sign which Noah understood as good news. For this reason, the dove is interpreted as a messenger of good news, a role taken up by Christians at the Sacrament of Confirmation. Lavin points out, “As the Western liturgy...came to emphasize the joy of the revelation of the Infant Christ to the world of the Gentiles.”\textsuperscript{25} Spreading the Good News is what confirmation calls the confirmed to do. This is a representation of Jesus because through the Sacrament of Confirmation, individuals become Christ-like and continue what He began.

The next sacraments depicted are Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders. They are grouped together since they have the same underlining essence of matrimony. However, unlike the other sacraments, Christians have the choice to fulfill only one of the two. Holy Matrimony is the marriage between a man and a woman, while Holy Order is the ordination of priests, a marriage between priests and the church. Piero shows these marital sacraments through his portrayal of the Angels. Lavin argues that the Angels in Piero’s painting represent the Wedding at Cana (Bethany).\textsuperscript{26} Lavin further mentions that the hand fastening of the Angels and the crowns on their heads were understood as marriage.\textsuperscript{27} The crowning

\textsuperscript{22}Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, \textit{Piero della Francesca’s Baptism of Christ} (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 122
\textsuperscript{23}Timothy Verdon, \textit{The Spiritual World of Piero’s Art}, ed. Jeryldene M. Wood (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43
\textsuperscript{25}Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, \textit{Piero della Francesca’s Baptism of Christ} (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 65
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid, 71
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid, 82,84-85
of the couple during the matrimonial ceremony is still practiced in other Christian
denominations such as Greek Orthodox. The sacrament of Holy Orders is embodied
through the Magi’s gift of Frankincense, since Frankincense represents priesthood. Jesus
can be considered the original “priest,” therefore the frankincense alludes to the marriage of
Jesus to the Church. As priests are modern day representations of Jesus, the Sacrament of
Holy Orders directly represents Him. The Wedding at Cana (the Sacrament of Holy
Matrimony) is a representation of Jesus because it exemplifies the love He has for His bride,
the Church.

The final sacrament is the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, commonly known
as the Final Rites. This sacrament is administered to give spiritual blessing and physical
strength to those who are extremely ill, nearing death. Piero’s painting symbolizes the
Anointment of the Sick though the image of the Magi carrying the myrrh. As previously
mentioned, Myrrh symbolizes death. Although this sacrament has to do with a person’s
passing away, it is also a sacrament of spiritual healing; it heals the sick of the worries created
by future uncertainties and increases their faith in God, reassuring them that Jesus is with
them during their time of need. According to Lavin, the idea of “healing” is symbolized in
Piero’s painting by the tiny plants around the tree and river, which were used as medicinal
herbs. “The arboreal premonition of divine healing is carried forward to the worshiper… by
the small inelegant plants depicted on the riverbanks. All these plants had medicinal use.”
This supports the claim that the painting provides hints of physical healing. Hence this

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29 Ibid, John 2:1-12
30 Ibid, Matthew 2:11
31 Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Piero della Francesca’s Baptism of Christ (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 115
sacrament is a representation of Jesus because it heals people physically and spiritually, just as He did during His three-year ministry.

Since Piero’s painting is an altarpiece, it is also a narrative painting. Jesus’ whole life can be seen through the course of the seven sacraments. Each sacrament, some not as vividly obvious in Piero’s *Baptism of Christ*, creates a deeper understanding of the human and divine aspect of Jesus. Through such a display of His human side, He becomes more “real” and more relatable to the viewer. By viewing the seven sacraments this way, the sacraments are no longer just mandatory stages Christians must follow. Instead, they begin to take on powerful meaning by allowing the viewer to understand how each sacrament ties in with the other and fulfills an entire spiritual lifetime. The painting “invites reflection on Piero’s use of form to symbolize spiritual truth.” As agreed by Verdon and Langan, this painting “shed light on the “world” for which the work was made, and each distinct world was part of the artist’s own personal universe.”

In the picture, Jesus is calmly staring outwards to the viewer, inviting further contemplation of one’s Christian life. The *Baptism of Christ* mediates an experience that is not only “religious” but spiritual and mystical as well. J.V. Field noted that Christ is mathematically situated in the most central part of the painting; the painting is not only a summary of Jesus’ life, but it is also a summary of all of humanity’s life. Jesus being in the centre of the painting means that he must be at the centre of our lives. For this reason, it is the union of the seven sacraments witnessed under the very first Christian event of the *Baptism of Christ* that creates this religious participation and inspiration.

33 Ibid, 32
34 Ibid, 44
35 J.V. Field, *Piero della Francesca A Mathematician’s Art* (New Haven: Yale University, 2005), 5
Bibliography


