

BERNINI'S *SANGUE DI CRISTO* REDISCOVERED

Irving Lavin

Institute for Advanced Study

Princeton NJ

[\(click here for first page\)](#)

BERNINI'S *SANGUE DI CRISTO* REDISCOVERED

Irving Lavin

Institute for Advanced Study

Princeton NJ

Bernini's famous composition of the *Sangue di Cristo*, which he had reproduced in a painting and in a print by his favorite engraver François Spierre, is described in their biographies of the artist by his son Domenico, and the great Florentine critic and historian Filippo Baldinucci ([Fig. 1](#)). Their descriptions of the subject have been set aside by some modern commentators with a contradictory reading of the engraving, which bears two inscriptions.

Baldinucci

He always kept fixed in his mind an intense awareness of death. He often had long discussions on this subject with Father Marchese, his nephew who was an Oratorian priest at the Chiesa Nuova, known for his goodness and learning. So great and continual was the fervor with which he longed for the happiness of that last step, that for the sole intention of attaining it, he frequented for forty years continuously the devotions conducted toward this end by the fathers of the Society of Jesus in Rome. There, also, he partook of the Holy Eucharist twice a week.

He increased the alms which he had been accustomed to give from his earliest youth. He became absorbed at times in the thoughts and in the expression of the profound reverence and understanding that he always had of the efficacy of the Blood of Christ the Redeemer, in which, he was wont to say, he hoped to drown his sins. He made a drawing of this subject, which he then had engraved and printed. It shows the image of Christ Crucified, with streams of blood gushing from his hands and feet as if to form a sea, and the great Queen of Heaven who offers it to God the Father. He also had this pious concept painted on a great canvas which he wanted to have always facing his bed in life and in death.¹

¹ Quoted from Lavin 1972, 160. Emphasis mine.

Domenico

this same nature carried him to such a sublimity of ideas in matters of devotion that, not content with the ordinary routes, he applied himself to those which are, so to speak, the shortcut to reach heaven. Whence he said that ‘in rendering account of his operations he would have to deal with a Lord who, infinite and superlative in his attributes, would not be concerned with half-pennies, as they say’; and he explained his thought by adding that ‘the goodness of God being infinite, and infinite the merit of the precious Blood of his Son, it was an offense to these attributes to doubt Forgiveness.’ To this effect he had copied for his devotion, in engraving and in paint, a marvelous design which shows Jesus Christ on the Cross with a Sea of Blood beneath, spilling torrents of it from his Most Holy Wounds; and here one sees the Most Blessed Virgin in the act of offering it to the Eternal Father, who appears above with open arms all softened by so piteous a spectacle. And he said, ‘in this Sea his sins are drowned, which cannot be found by Divine justice except amongst the Blood of Jesus Christ, in the tints of which they will either have changed color or by its merits obtained mercy.’ This trust was so alive in him that he called the Most Holy Humanity of Christ ‘Sinners’ Clothing,’ whence he was the more confident not to be struck by divine retribution which, having first to penetrate the garment before wounding him, would have pardoned his sin rather than tear its innocence.²

Both authors describe the woman kneeling before the Crucified Christ as the Virgin Mary. So also does S. Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi in her words inscribed on the engraving, beneath a passage from Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews in which Christ offers his own blood to God: (Fig. 2)

hebr./9.14 SANGVIS CHRISTI, QVI SEMETIPSVM OBTVLIT
IMMACVLATVM DEO, EMVNDABIT CONSCIENTIAM NOSTRÃ

(The blood of Christ, who offered himself without spot to God, will purge our conscience)

2 Ibid.

S. M. Magd./de Pazzis uit./p. 2. C. 6/ Vi offerisco il sangue dell'umanato Verbo, ò Padre Eterno: e se manca cosa alcuna, l'offerisco a voi, o Maria, accioche lo presentiate all'aeterna Trinita. (I offer to you, eternal Father, the blood of the incarnate word; and if anything is wanting I offer it to you, Mary, that you may present it to the eternal Trinity.)

Eq.s Io. Lauren. Bernini inuen.

Franciscus Spier Sculp.

In this form the composition follows the traditional theme of the intercession of the Virgin, in which Mary, through her compassionate sharing of Christ's sacrifice, receives and conveys her son's blessing on the worshipper (**Fig. 3, Fig. 4**).³ The Virgin might even be portrayed in a sacerdotal capacity, cloud-borne, kneeling before an altar and offering the chalice and wafer to God the Father and the Holy Spirit above (**Fig. 5**).⁴ The inscription specifies that Mary offers to God her son's flesh and blood, consecrated by the priests:

MARIA TANQUAM MEDIATRIX OFFERT DEO PATRI QUOD
CONSECRATUM EST A SACERDOTIB' SCILICET [C]ARNEM
VIRGINEAM ET SANGUINEM PRETIOSUM FILI EIUS DOMINI NOSTRI
IESU CHRISTI.

Mary as intermediary offers to God the Father what has been consecrated by the priests, that is, the Virgin flesh and blood of her son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The print was included in a volume of devotions intended to guide the faithful to a full appreciation of Christ's sacrifice as the one and only way to salvation. The book was published in 1670 by the artist's nephew, the Oratorian priest Francesco Marchese (ca. 1623-1697). In his preface Marchese

3 On this theme see Panofsky 1927; Williamson 2000. See also on the subject of Bernini's death Lavin 2009, I, 387-353.

4 On this engraving see Lavin 2009, II, 1056, 1070f.

says explicitly that the text was written to explain the engraving, and that the faithful should either fix his eye on the image or read the book.⁵ At the same time, and no less important, Bernini thought of the engraving as a special kind of votive offering: in contrast to the many designs he had made for popes, kings, and princes, this one was intended for the benefit of everyone.⁶ Indeed, the small octavo volume with its folded illustration served as a handy pocket-size manual (17 x 11 cm.) for continuing devotions, while the large engraving itself (45.4 x 22.1 cm.) was suitable for framing. The idea of practicing for death and contemplating the apparition of the Crucifixion from the deathbed was endemic to and often illustrated in the *Ars Moriendi* tradition (as is implicit in its name) (**Fig. 6, Fig. 7, Fig. 8**). This tradition was explicit in another devotional work Marchese published in the same year, entitled *Ultimo colpo al cuore del peccatore*, conceived as the final call to the hard of heart to accept the gift of grace offered by the Crucifixion. A third work by Marchese, published posthumously in 1696, belongs explicitly to the genre of the *Ars Moriendi*; the *Preparamento a ben morire* is a spiritual guide to salvation through penitence, devotion to the Eucharist, invocation of the Virgin, the saints and angels, and through prayer.⁷

5 "Sangue di Giesù Crocefisso al Cuore di chi legge . . . Ah che l'huomo carnale non penetra le cose superne, e che da Dio prouengono : perciò à farle meglio capire, l'infinita carità del Signor Iddio hà ora con particular prouedimento disposto, che da mano di diuoto artefice sia delineata l'Imagine del Salvatore Crocefisso, grondante Sangue in tanta copia, che se ne formi un ampio mare, e che per le mani della Beatissima Vergine Maria conforme al pio sentimento di S. Maddalena de Pazzi io sia del continuo offerto all'eterno Padre à fauore de' peccatori, (per la cui esplicatione si è composto il presente libro) affinche con tali mezzi agli occhi dell'huomo carnale rappresentati, il tuo cuore sia più facilmente disposto à udire, e ad ubidire à suoi celesti ammaestramenti. Apri adunque l'orecchio del cuore, mentre fissi l'occhio alla diuota imagine, ò leggi questi fogli."

6 "1671. Il Sig. Cavalier Bernino dice che havendo in vita sua fatti tanti disegni per Pontefici, Re, e Principi, uole sigillare con fame uno a gloria dell'offerta che si fa al Padre Eterno del pretiosissimo Sangue di Christo; stanto in questo pensiero gli e parso, che si possi pregare la gloriosissima Vergine, a fare lei per noi, a Padre Theologi, et altri spirituali. Il pensiero glie parso bellissimo, e molto utile per tutti; stante questo ha fatto il presente disegno, et in sua presenza l'ha fatto intagliare per poterne dare a molti, e mandarne per Il mondo a gloria del Sangue di Christo"; a dispatch to the court of Modena, first published by Imparato, 1890, I42f., then by Fraschetti, Bernini, 420, n. 2 .

The sometimes vituperative discussion whether Bernini intended his large print to be folded into a small book (only two such copies are known, in the Vatican Library and in the British Library, whereas there are many copies of the book alone) is simply otiose. Marchese, who was Bernini's close friend and spiritual advisor, says in his preface, which appears in every copy, that the book was written to explain the print, to which Bernini obviously agreed.

7 Unica speranza del peccatore che consiste nel sangue del N. S. Giesu Cristo spiegata con alcune verità, con le quali s'insegna all' anima un modo facile d' applicare a se il frutto del medesimo sangue . . . , Rome, 1670 ; *Ultimo colpo al cuore del peccatore*, Rome, 1670 ; *Preparamento a ben morire* opera postuma del Vener.Servo di Dio Francesco Marchesi preposto della Congregatione dell' Oratorio di Roma . . . , Rome, 1697.

The biographers emphasize the many intimate colloquies between Bernini and Marchese, whose ministrations included the recommendation that the artist keep a painting of the *Sangue* propped up at the foot of his bed to contemplate and help to insure that his death would be a good one. The essence of Marchese's method was that the reader should actually practice for achieving a good death, to learn the art of dying. This idea of a visual aid to a Good Death, *Bona Mors*, was a medieval tradition that was revived by the Jesuits in the form of a Confraternity of the *Bona Mors* at their church of the Gesù in Rome in 1647. Domenico records that Bernini attended the devotions of the *Bona Mors* for forty years, that is, from its inception. The occasion for the publication and creation of the print was undoubtedly the canonization of the Carmelite nun Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi in 1669. This fact has led some scholars to identify the kneeling woman as the saint, rather than the Virgin, and thus to an utter misinterpretation of the meaning and composition of Bernini's spectacular invention.⁸

Recently the true import of Bernini's work has been retrieved by the discovery of a large painting by an unknown artist in the Discalzed Carmelite monastery church of the Santissima Trinità in Iesi founded (and paid for) by the Oratorian Cardinal (as of 1686) Piero Matteo Petrucci (1636-1701)([Fig. 9](#)).⁹ The picture clearly follows Bernini's design and resolves many of the doubts that have been voiced about the biographers' explanation of the composition. Some have argued that the kneeling figure is not the Virgin but S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi herself, whereas at Iesi the kneeling figure before the cross wears the blue raiment common portrayals of the Virgin, and the kneeling figure elevated to the clouds nearby wears the white cloak proper to the Carmelite order; she is shown contemplating her vision, her outstretched hands mimicking those of the Virgin. The vision at Iesi includes the third person of the Trinity, the dove of the Holy Spirit, and S. Maria

⁸ See the excellent discussion of the iconographical vicissitudes of the *Sangue di Cristo*, in Maria Grazia Bernardini's entry on the Genoa painting in this volume; and in the contributions of Gaia Bindi in Bernardini and Fagiolo dell'Arco 1999, 443-48, although some of her arguments and conclusions are vitiated by the discovery of the Iesi picture. It is not inconceivable that the Iesi picture was intended to correct the ambiguities that may have been, as I have suggested elsewhere, deliberate in Bernini's version: Lavin 2009 II, 1054f.

⁹ The painting was published in the catalog of an exhibition dedicated to the saint in 2007 and its relation to Bernini's composition was recognized in 2012 by Valeria Di Giuseppe Di Paolo in the catalogue of an exhibition of paintings of the *Sangue* edited by Francesco Petrucci 2013.

Maddalena de'Pazzi who witnesses the shedding of the ocean of sacramental blood, as does the viewer.

The Iesi painting not only restores the essential meaning of Bernini's composition, it also reveals a vast horizon of its larger contemporary significance.¹⁰

So far as I am aware the first to suggest that the kneeling figure might be the saint rather than the Virgin was Anthony Blunt, in a brilliant article in which he argued that Bernini's famous and idiosyncratic employment of radically innovative illusionistic devices was integral with the imagery of supernatural mystical import that flourished in his later work.¹¹ Blunt related this iconographical-visual technique to the deeply pietistic turn of mind the biographers emphasize in Bernini's later years. Blunt also perceived that that during the last decade of Bernini's life there was a distinct evolution of the nature of his piety that reflected the current efflorescence of the mystical piety of Miguel de Molinos, whose Quietist prayer of absolute contemplation and submission to divine will offered a direct (and, as he said, brief) way to a state of spiritual perfection.¹² Molinos was in Rome 1663-1675, when he developed a wide and devoted following. His ideas were published in his best-selling *Guia Espiritual*, 1675. Bernini's beloved nephew became an important figure in the spiritual life of the city, and rose rapidly in the administrative and religious life of his order, of which he became prefect in 1656. He doubtless met Molinos and sought to promote a more profound and inward form of spirituality. He had misgivings, however, about Molinos's emphasis on the efficacy of internal contemplation as an efficient and self-generated path to spiritual perfection and quietude. The great risk was that it side-stepped the church, through which, as mother church, the salvific blood of Christ was distributed to the deserving faithful. Pier Matteo Petrucci, who was named Bishop of Iesi in 1681, was strongly

10 Including the many copies that have been preserved and collected in the exemplary work of Francesco Petrucci 2013. Petrucci has recently called my attention to a new painting, also in Genoa, another of the few examples that show the miraculous effusion of water from the chest wound: Terminiello 2008, 110-111, n. 66.

11 Blunt 1978, 81.

12 Weibel 1909, 9-11, already referred the *Sangue di Cristo* to Molinos, and referred to Hippolyte Taine's connection between Molinos and Bernini's St. Theresa (1896-17, I, 299f.); also Brauer and Wittkower, 1932, I, 167f. The shift in Bernini's late spirituality from mediation to contemplation was formulated by Maurizio and Marcello Fagiolo dell'Arco 1967, 155-7.

affected by the mystical spirituality of the Carmelite saints Theresa of Avila and Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi, and the teachings of Molinos, and wrote many books in the Quietist vein. Francesco Marchese and Petrucci were well acquainted and frequent correspondents. In 1684 Petrucci founded the Discalzed Carmelite convent in Iesi dedicated to the Trinity, following the rule of S. Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi. He must shortly thereafter have commissioned the altarpiece following Bernini's composition, of which he doubtless became aware through his relations with his Oratorian brother in Rome.

Molinos and Cardinal Petrucci were ultimately convicted of heresy, they recanted, their offensive books were placed on the Index of the Inquisition and burned, and they were sent to prison in monastic convents.¹³

Marchese greatly appreciated the value of prayer and contemplation, but he was suspicious of the radical views of Molinos and of what he had learned about Petrucci's attitude from their exchange of letters expressing their discordant opinions. Eventually Marchese became a vocal opponent and was appointed to the committee that examined and condemned the cardinal's work to the Inquisition. The visionary mysticism of the Carmelite saints Theresa of Avila and Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi were seminal in the mystical current that culminated in the condemnation of the heresy of Molinos and Petrucci. This was perhaps the reason the Iesi painter portrayed Pazzi with the same gestures as the Virgin, hands open, turned up and fingers spread, as if she, too, though not a priest, would receive the blood and pass it on the believer.

It was clearly no accident of chronology or even of subject matter that Bernini's biographers spoke of Bernini's death, his bust of the Savior and his image of the *Sangue di Cristo*, all in the same breath, so to speak. They were intricately interwoven in the spiritual, political and monumental life of the period, which found and sought to express new depths of psychological and social

13 In fact, all three were central figures in the Quietistic movement in Italy and the literature about them is vast. Marchese is the subject of an extensive essay by Lattanzi 2009, in the catalogue of an exhibition edited by Bruno Contardi devoted to the role of Bernini's bust of the Savior in the great project for a hospice for the homeless of Rome, in the papal palace at the Lateran, no less, to which I also contributed (Lavin 2009, II, 849-916). All three figure largely in what remains the fundamental work on Italian Quietism, by Dudon 1921. I have also profited from the work of Petrocchi 1948, Urieli 1977, Malena 2003.

meaning in life. Francesco Marchese was the promoter and director of a great action of modern social welfare, to gather the poor and homeless of Rome into a hospice, the papal palace at the Lateran, no less, to be cared for and helped to become normal citizens— under the sign, as it were of Bernini's bust of the Savior.¹⁴

The painting for Father Petrucci's convent at Iesi restores to the *Sangue di Cristo* its proper role in this development. The vision is seen obliquely *di sotto in su* and *per angolo* above an endless and panoramic view of the sea— the kind of grandiose perspective displays then coming much into vogue in stage settings.¹⁵

The *Sangue di Cristo* is deeply imbued with quietistic thought. The promise of St. Paul and the offering of Maria Maddalena speak to the viewer through the inscriptions, and we view the apparition exactly as would moriens preparing for the end on his deathbed. The vision is thus, above all, for all concerned, contemplative, and a sublimely mystical illusion.

14 I have written on the hospice and the role of Marchese and Bernini's bust of the Savior in Lavin 2009, II, 849-916

15 On the development of these scenographic techniques from the late seventeenth century see Dotson 2012.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Sangue di Cristo*, engraving by F. Spierre, 473 x 290mm, frontispiece of F. Marchese, *Unica speranza del peccatore*, Rome 1670, Vatican Library

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)

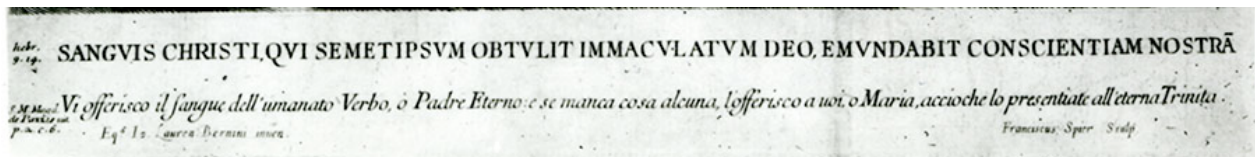


Fig. 2 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Sangue di Cristo*, engraving, detail of inscription

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)



Fig. 3 Filippino Lippi, *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin*. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)



Fig. 4 Lorenzo Monaco (attributed), *Double Intercession*. New York, Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)



Fig. 5 *Mary as Priest offering the Chalice of the Sacrament to the Trinity*, engraving. Brussels, Jumpers Collection

(after Missaglia, *et al.*, 1954 102, p. 111)

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)



Fig. 6 *The Death of Moriens*, woodcut from *Dell'arte del ben morire*, Naples 1591. New York Public Library

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)

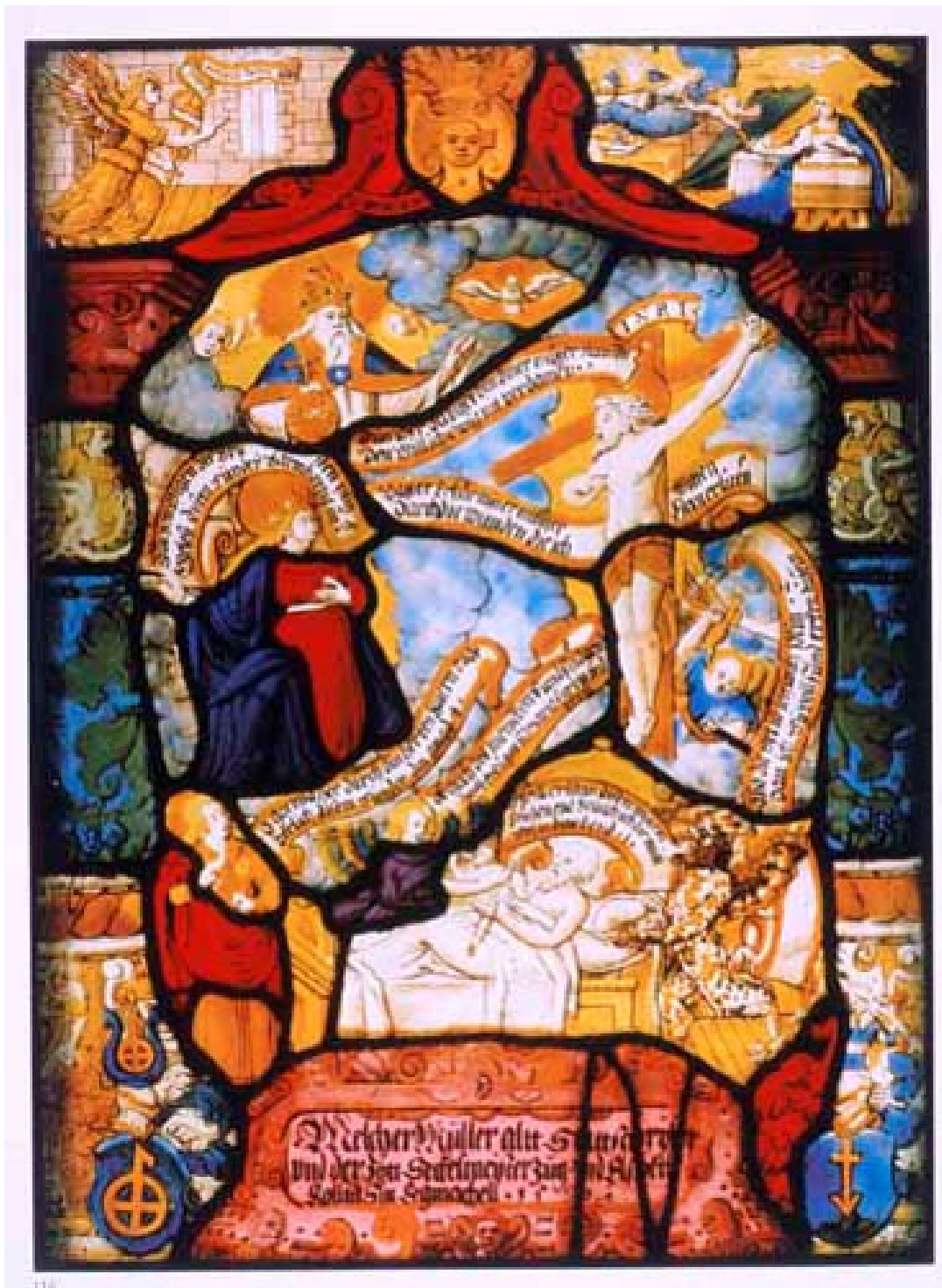


Fig. 7 *The Death of Mary and Intercession of Christ and the Virgin*, stained-glass votive window

Wettingen, Switzerland

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)



Fig. 8 *The Death of Moriens*, engraving by R. de Hooghe from D. de la Vigne, *Spiegel van een salighe Doodt*, Antwerp, 1763 (?) New York Public Library

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)



Fig. 9 Anonymous Master, *Sanguis Christi*. Jesi, Monastero della SS Trinita

[\(click here to return to text\)](#)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bernardini, Maria Grazia, and Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, eds., *Gian Lorenzo Bernini : regista del barocco*, Milan, 1999

Brauer, Heinrich, and Rudolf Wittkower, *Die Zeichnungen des Gianlorenzo Bernini*, 2 vols., Berlin, H. Keller, 1931

Blunt, Anthony, "Gianlorenzo Bernini: Illusionism and Mysticism," *Art History*, I, no. 1, 1978, 67-89

Dotson, Esther Gordon, *J.B. Fischer von Erlach : Architecture as Theater in the Baroque Era*, New Haven, 2012

Dudon, Paul, *Le quiétiste Espagnol, Michel Molinos (1628-1696)*, Paris, 1921

Fagiolo dell'Arco, Maurizio, and Marcello, *Bernini; una introduzione al gran teatro del barocco*, Rome, 1967

Fraschetti, Stanislao, *Il Bernini. La sua vita, la sua opera, il suo tempo*, Milano, 1900

Imparato, Francesco, "Documenti relativi al Bernini e a suoi contemporanei," *Archivio storico dell'arte*, III, 1890, 136-43

Lattanzi, Marco, "Padre Francesco Marchesi della Congregazione dell'Oratorio," in Contardi, Bruno, ed., *Le Immagini del SS.mo Salvatore : fabbriche e sculture per l'Ospizio Apostolico dei Poveri Invalidi*, exhib.cat., Rome, 1988, 272-283

Lavin, Irving, "Bernini's Bust of the Savior and the Problem of the Homeless in Seventeenth-Century Rome," in Lavin, *Visible Spirit*, London, II, 2009, 849-916

Lavin, Irving, "Bernini's Death," in Lavin, *Visible Spirit*, I, 2009, 387-353

Lavin, Irving, "Bernini's Death: Visions of Redemption," in Lavin, *Visible Spirit*, II, London, 2009, 1046-86

Lavin, Irving, *Visible Spirit. The Art of Gianlorenzo Bernini*, 3 vols., London, 2007, 2009, 20012

Malena, Adelisa, *L'eresia dei perfetti : inquisizione romana ed esperienze mistiche nel Seicento italiano*, Rome, 2003

Missaglia, Giuseppe, *et al., La Madonna e l'eucharistia*, Rome, 1954

Petrocchi, Massimo, *Il quietismo italiano del Seicento*, Rome, 1948

Petrucci, Francesco, *Il Sanguis Christi di Bernini*, Quaderni del Barocco, Numero Speciale, Ariccia, 2013

Williamson, Beth A., "The Cloisters Double Intercession. The Virgin as Co-redemptrix," *Apollo*, CLII, 48 - 54

Terminiello, G. Rotondi, *Il patrimonio artistico di Banca Carige. Dipinti e disegni*, Cinisello Balsamo 2008

Urieli, Costantino , "Il Card. Pier Matteo Petrucci il vescovo 'quietista' di Jesi," in *Ascetica giansenista e quietista nelle regioni d'influenza a Vellanita*, Atti del convegno del centro di studi avellaniti, Fonte Avellana, 1977, 127-188

Weibel, Walther, *Jesuitismus und Barockskulptur in Rom*, Strassburg, 1909