

# THE ART BULLETIN

A Quarterly Published by  
The College Art Association  
of America

March 1989  
Volume LXXI  
Number 1

The Art Bulletin (ISSN-0004 3079) is published quarterly by the College Art Association of America, Inc., 275 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10001. Printed by Intelligencer Printing Co., Lancaster, Pa. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to the College Art Association, 275 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10001.

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# Michelangelo and Nicodemism: The Florentine *Pietà*

Valerie Shrimplin-Evangelidis

*A new interpretation of Michelangelo's Florentine Pietà argues that in the artist's identification with the figure of Nicodemus through the self-portrait he imposed, Michelangelo was representing himself as a Nicodemist. The Nicodemists, active in Italy in the 1540's and early 1550's, showed interest in some of the ideas of the Protestant reformers but sought to act within the existing Catholic order, thus preventing schism in the Church. The hypothesis presented here reinforces the existing evidence of Michelangelo's involvement with the Catholic Evangelist Reform movement in Italy. It also provides an alternative explanation for Michelangelo's attempted destruction of the sculpture in 1555.*

The poet Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo's friend and confidante, died in 1547.<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter the artist began work on a *Pietà*, intending it, as Vasari tells us, to grace his own tomb memorial.<sup>2</sup> It is the contention of this paper that Michelangelo's relationship with Vittoria Colonna might be of more significance for the work than simply heightening the artist's awareness of his own mortality and desire for salvation.

The *Pietà*, now in Florence Cathedral (Fig. 1), is unusual in terms of the traditional iconography of the *Pietà* or the Lamentation, since it comprises four figures: the dead Christ, Mary and Mary Magdalene, and the dominant figure of Nicodemus, who seems to tower over and embrace the group. The work poses two major questions. The first concerns Michelangelo's identification with Nicodemus through the

self-portrait that Vasari says he imposed on that figure (Fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> The second relates to the reasons for Michelangelo's strange attempt to destroy the work in 1555, after having worked on it intermittently for at least eight years.<sup>4</sup>

In comparison with Michelangelo's other versions of the theme,<sup>5</sup> the Florentine *Pietà* stands apart. His earlier *Pietà* in St. Peter's (1498-99), for example, adheres more closely to a recognized tradition of the devotional image.<sup>6</sup> His later, Rondanini *Pietà*, while unusual in composition, also limits the figures to Christ and Mary. The Florentine *Pietà*, with the inclusion of extra figures, perhaps has additional overtones of the Lamentation or the Descent from the Cross. This extended theme is far more usual in painting<sup>7</sup> than in sculpture, and thus Michelangelo's expansion of the sculptured group, especially his inclusion of the tall hooded fig-

I wish to thank the *Art Bulletin's* anonymous referee for valuable criticism and suggestions, and also Professor E. Rankin for helpful discussion. The financial assistance of the Human Sciences Research Council and a research grant from the University of the Witwatersrand are also gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>1</sup> On 25 February. The date of Michelangelo's meeting with Vittoria Colonna is usually set around 1535-36 (Tolnay, 1975, 184), but McAuliffe has recently argued in favor of a meeting when they were both at the court of Leo X, 1517-21 (D.J. McAuliffe, *Vittoria Colonna. Her Formative Years as a Basis for Analysis of Her Poetry*, New York, 1978, 47-49).

<sup>2</sup> Vasari, 218; cf. Condivi, 239. Vasari also provides the evidence for dating the work since it appears in the first edition of the *Lives* (1550), the draft of which was completed by 1547 (T.S.R. Boase, *Giorgio Vasari. The Man and the Book*, Princeton, 1979, 45).

<sup>3</sup> Vasari, letter to Michelangelo's nephew Lionardo, dated 18 March 1564 (K. Frey, *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*, Munich, 1930, No. cdxvvi; passage quoted by Pope-Hennessy, 339). Vasari refers to Michelangelo's intention to use the sculpture for his own tomb in S. Maria Maggiore, and adds that this intention was also known to Daniello (Volterra), Cavalieri, "e molti altri suoi amici."

<sup>4</sup> Vasari, 243-244. Also referred to at 281-282; it was obviously still intact in the reign of Pope Julius III (1550-55).

<sup>5</sup> Other versions of the theme by Michelangelo are the *Pietà* (St. Peter's, Rome), 1498-99; the *Pietà*, presentation drawing for Vittoria Colonna (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston), 1540-47; and the Rondanini

*Pietà* (Museo del Castello Sforzesco, Milan), 1546-64. The painting of the *Lamentation* (National Gallery, London), ca. 1511, and the Palestrina *Pietà* (Accademia, Florence), 1550-60, are of very doubtful attribution. There are also a number of surviving sketches, perhaps for the sculptured works (Louvre and Ashmolean); see Tolnay, 1975, Nos. 232 and 251; also F. Hartt, *Michelangelo's Three Pietàs*, New York, 1975, 70-73.

<sup>6</sup> See G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. J. Seligman, London, 1972, II, 164-183, and L. Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, Paris, 1959, II, 513-528.

<sup>7</sup> In Renaissance Italy, painted examples of the *Pietà*, *Lamentation*, or *Deposition* with large groups of figures include those by Fra Angelico (1436-40); Fra Filippo Lippi (1450's); Ghirlandaio (1473); his pupil Bartolommeo di Giovanni; Botticelli (1490 and 1495); Perugino (1495); Raphael (1507); Fra Bartolommeo (1515-16); Rosso Fiorentino (1521); Andrea del Sarto (1524); Pontorno (1526), and Titian (1525-30) (see Tolnay, 1943-60, v, 86f., and J. Beck, *Italian Renaissance Painting*, New York, 1981). Later works by Bronzino (1545); Vasari (1536, 1540, and 1548), and Salviati (1548) are discussed by M. Hall, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta. Maria Novella and S. Croce, 1565-1577*, Oxford, 1979, 36f., and pls. 17-24. Vasari also painted a *Cristo morto, tenuto da Nicodemo* (now lost) for the Bishop of Vasona in 1551-53 (Vasari, 695). In sculpture, Bandinelli's group was made for his own tomb in direct emulation of Michelangelo's concept (1555-59) and the figure at the left is unquestionably Nicodemus (Pope-Hennessy, 58f., 364, and Vasari, VI, 188-189). Later painted versions by Titian (1559) and Caravaggio (1602-04) are discussed below, nn. 16 and 79.



1 Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1547-55. Florence, S. Maria del Fiore



2 Detail of Fig 1

ure, which displaces the Virgin Mary in importance, seems to be significant. Debate has raged over the identification and meaning of this figure supporting Christ, and agreement has not been reached that it represents Nicodemus, in spite of both Vasari's<sup>8</sup> and Condivi's<sup>9</sup> assertions to that effect. The figure's identification as Joseph of Arimathea has also been proposed. In 1964 Stechow examined the problem in depth in a paper entitled "Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea?", but was unable to resolve the issue conclusively.<sup>10</sup> He points out the discrepancies in different references to the figure, showing that few reasons are given for the variations. In traditional iconography, he notes, Joseph is more often placed at Christ's head, while Nicodemus handles the nails and crown of thorns, but these po-

sitions are often reversed. Nicodemus more often wears headgear than does the usually bare-headed Joseph of Arimathea. Stechow also proposed an apocryphal tradition which refers to the lamentation of Mary, the Magdalene and Joseph as a possible source for the group, but he concludes that the biblical references to Nicodemus seem better matched to Michelangelo's interpretation. He stresses Vasari's and Condivi's unequivocal identification of the figure as Nicodemus.

Some authors acknowledge the problem that Stechow discusses.<sup>11</sup> A few, such as Steinberg, conclude in favor of Joseph of Arimathea, but without presenting a detailed argument.<sup>12</sup> On the whole, however, most art historians have followed Vasari and Condivi in identifying the hooded fig-

<sup>8</sup> Vasari, 217.

<sup>9</sup> Condivi, 237.

<sup>10</sup> Stechow, 289-302. Stechow weighs both sides of the argument, but the scales appear to tip in favor of Nicodemus (p. 298).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Tolnay, v, 1960, 86f. and 150; cf. Tolnay, 1975, 119; L. Murray, *Michelangelo*, London, 1980, 200; H. Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, London, 1975, 280f. See also Stechow, n. on p. 289.

<sup>12</sup> Steinberg, 1968, 345. No argument in favor of this conclusion is presented other than the author's admittedly uncertain reading of Stechow (as in n. 10). It is interesting to note that Liebert, n. on p. 397, acknowledges the figure as Nicodemus for the same reason, namely his reading of Stechow, who, according to Liebert, "convincingly concluded Nicodemus." Hartt (as in n. 5), 73, also favors Joseph, because of the "inaccuracies of Vasari and Condivi," whose testimonies are, however, accepted elsewhere.

ure as Nicodemus,<sup>13</sup> and there seems little reason to doubt the evidence of Vasari and Condivi on this point. Although their views elsewhere are not totally reliable, in the case of Michelangelo, and the events with which they were personally acquainted, it seems inappropriate to ignore them without sound evidence to the contrary. Vasari's testimony is particularly important since he provides us with the source for Michelangelo's own features in the face of Nicodemus (letter from Vasari to Lionardo Buonarroti, dated 18 March 1564)<sup>14</sup> and also for the artist's attempt to destroy the work in 1555.<sup>15</sup> These parts of Vasari's evidence have not been questioned by art historians, and there is not sufficient reason to prefer conjecture to Vasari's identification of the hooded figure as Nicodemus.

The inclusion by artists of portraits or self-portraits in major works is not uncommon in the fifteenth and sixteenth century in Italy, but artists usually depicted themselves (or donors) in the guise of minor figures — bystanders at the Nativity or Crucifixion — rather than as major protagonists. The tradition is thus more common in painted group scenes than in sculptured works.<sup>16</sup> It would seem out of character for Michelangelo simply to follow an established convention here. We know from his attitude to portraiture in general, and his other well-known self-portrait in the flayed skin of the *Last Judgment* (1533-41), that such an inclusion is more likely to be significant than incidental.<sup>17</sup> An interpretation of Michelangelo's spiritual identification with Nicodemus through the self-portrait may be con-

nected with the biblical role and contemporary interpretation of the figure.

Biblical references to Nicodemus are few.<sup>18</sup> He was Pharisee and "ruler of the Jews" who came to Jesus by night (John 3:1-21) to learn his teaching. His spiritual anxieties about death and salvation appear similar to those expressed by Michelangelo toward the end of his life.<sup>19</sup> Nicodemus had difficulty understanding Christ's teaching that "except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God (v.3). Jesus taught him how man was to be reborn of the spirit (v.5) for, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit" (v.6). The contrast between flesh and spirit, the death of the one and the immortality of the other, is an idea emphasized by the Christian Neoplatonists and frequently expressed by Michelangelo in his poetry.<sup>20</sup> It is also an idea likely to have been in Michelangelo's thoughts following the recent death of Vittoria Colonna.

Christ's teaching "of Heavenly things" to Nicodemus continues (from v.15) as he explains: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Thus the message received by Nicodemus from Christ and an idea implicit in this text is that of justification by faith alone. The expression of this concept elsewhere in the art as well as the poetry of Michelangelo has been widely acknowledged.<sup>21</sup> Michelangelo's spiritual identification with the biblical figure of Nicodemus and the figure's biblical

<sup>13</sup> For example, L. Goldscheider, *The Sculptures of Michelangelo*, London, 1940, 21 (who quotes H. Thode, *Michelangelo und das Ende der Renaissance*, Berlin, 1962, v, 278, who "sees no reason for doubting Vasari's statement"); J. Wilde, *Michelangelo. Six Lectures*, Oxford, 1978, 181; H. von Einem, *Michelangelo*, London, 1959, 244; R. Schott, *Michelangelo*, London, 1964, 239-242. Pope-Hennessy, 338; Hartt, 55; U. Baldini in M. Salmi, ed., *The Complete Works of Michelangelo*, London, 1965, 135-140; R. Salvini, *The Hidden Michelangelo*, London, 1978, 173; Murray, 216; Liebert, 397.

<sup>14</sup> See above n. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Vasari, see above n. 4.

<sup>16</sup> A tradition of identifiable portraits in the figures of Joseph or Nicodemus appears in painted examples of the subject. For example, the Nicodemus of Fra Angelico's *Deposition* is held to be a portrait of Michelozzo (Stechow, 300). This particular identification seems to derive from an association between Nicodemus and sculptors, since, according to legend, Nicodemus was thought to have carved the *Volto Santo*, the famous wooden miraculous image of Christ preserved at Lucca. Michelangelo, so far as we know, never visited Lucca, and thus such a tradition cannot really be claimed as his inspiration. A theological association seems far more likely. Subsequent portrayals of artists in the guise of Nicodemus, such as Titian's in his Prado *Entombment*, 1559, also intended for his own tomb, can be read as similar to Michelangelo's in significance. Caravaggio's *Entombment*, 1602-04, includes a figure of Nicodemus, which curiously seems to bear Michelangelo's features (Stechow, 301-02). See below n. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Michelangelo's lack of interest in portraiture is well known. The circumstances of the two generally accepted self-portraits (the Nicodemus and the Flayed Skin) may be usefully compared. In both cases, the inclusion of the self-portrait seems to be highly significant, reflecting spiritual and religious feelings. The flayed skin apparently alludes to the legend of the flaying of Marsyas, popular among the Neoplatonists (E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, New Haven, 1958, 142-147). For the Christian Neoplatonist, the flaying is an ordeal of purification in which

the Christian is wrenched free of his earthly form, of his flesh, in order to be reborn in spirit alone. The ugliness of the outer man is thrown off to reveal the inner beauty of the soul. This fits in well with what we know of Michelangelo's approach to religion; cf. his letters to Vittoria Colonna (Ramsden, II, 237-243) and also his various poems referring to the agony of mortal man before spiritual resurrection (C. Gilbert, *Complete Poem and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, Princeton, 1980, Nos. 150 and 159). Compare also Steinberg's description of the flayed skin as "a dejected sheath lacking body," which thus appears inappropriate (L. Steinberg, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," *Art in America*, November/December 1975, 52).

<sup>18</sup> John 3:1-21; John 7:50 and John 19:39. Nicodemus later assisted in the preparation of Christ's body for burial. The Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus (see M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1969, 94-146) was known in Italy at the time (Stechow, 298) and may be viewed as another important source. It places an increased emphasis on the role of Nicodemus and of his bravely interceding for Christ at his trial before the Crucifixion.

<sup>19</sup> See esp. the psychological interpretation of Michelangelo by Liebert chap. 20, and the interpretation of Michelangelo's poems by R. Clements *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, London, 1966, chaps. 11 and 17.

<sup>20</sup> It has been argued that Ficino's influence was responsible for the adoption of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul as dogma by the Catholic Church at the Fifth Lateran Council (1513) (see N.A. Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, London, 1935, chap. 3; P. Shore, *Platonism Ancient and Modern*, Berkeley, 1938, chap. 5; and P.O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, New York, 1943, chap. 15, 32-50). For Michelangelo's expression of such ideas, see n. 17 above.

<sup>21</sup> See esp. Tolnay, 1975, 104f.; Steinberg (as in n. 17) and M. Hall, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*: Resurrection of the Body and Predestination," *Art Bulletin*, LVIII, 1976, 85-92. For references in Michelangelo's poetry, see Clements (as in n. 19), 41ff., 120-126, and Gilbert (as in n. 17), No. 162, 288, 300.

significance thus suggest that Nicodemus would be a particularly apt figure to double as Michelangelo in the sculptor's funerary monument. Michelangelo's possible awareness of such doctrines has also been traced through Vittoria Colonna and, through her, to the Viterbo circle known as the *Spirituali*. This group included such well-known figures as Cardinals Pole, Morone, and Contarini and Bernardo Ochino, leader of the austere Capuchin order of Franciscans.<sup>22</sup> Their ideas, collectively, were derived in the main from the writings of the reformer Valdés, of Spanish origin, who was active in Rome, Naples, and Viterbo in the 1530's.<sup>23</sup>

The fact of Michelangelo's involvement, to some degree at least, with the Catholic Reformation has received much comment in the literature and does not need to be further argued here. It has been widely discussed in connection with many of his later works and in particular the *Last Judgment*. De Tolnay<sup>24</sup> dwells at length on the idea, as does Redig de Campos.<sup>25</sup> Clements<sup>26</sup> seeks evidence for Michelangelo's interest in reforming ideas, especially in the poetry. De Maio's definitive work assesses Michelangelo's thinking in the historical context of the Counter-Reformation, and other writers like Salmi, Salvini, Hibbard, Murray, Liebert, and Von Einem also dwell extensively on Michelangelo's connections with the Viterbo group and Valdésian thought.<sup>27</sup> This is largely traced through his links with Vittoria Colonna and often based on his apparent adherence to the concept of justification by faith. In a well-known

paper,<sup>28</sup> Steinberg assesses the possible expression of such ideas in the *Last Judgment* (completed 1541) as heretic in spite of the fact that the Council of Trent did not address the doctrine of justification by faith alone until 1546 and did not condemn it as heretical until the decree of 13 January 1547, rendered after six months' discussion.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Hall,<sup>30</sup> concentrating again on the *Last Judgment*, argues for a position on Michelangelo's part that was in line with the stance taken by the Church at the time of the commission.

It is important to bear in mind that members of the Viterbo group with whom Michelangelo was associated were not regarded as heretics and schismatics at this time. They were in close contact with the Pope, Paul III (1534-49), who had created them cardinals in 1536 with their reforming mind and had confirmed the Capuchin Order the same year.<sup>31</sup> In 1537, these cardinals were included in the commission for the drawing up of the important report *Cosilium de emendanda ecclesia*, the specified aim of which was to reform the Church and thus prevent an irrevocable split between Catholics and Protestants.<sup>32</sup> Contarini headed this commission and he was also Papal Legate at the Colloquy of Regensburg with the Protestants in 1541 — another milestone in the attempt to reconcile the two groups (on points of both doctrine and abuses). The basic theological issue of justification by faith alone was, of course, a major stumbling block but, even at this date, many Catholic reformers in Italy still dearly hoped to prevent schis-

<sup>22</sup> For background on the Catholic Reformation in Italy, see Brown; F.D. Church, *The Italian Reformers, 1534-64*, New York, 1932; H. Daniel-Rops, *The Catholic Reformation*, London, 1962; A.G. Dickens, *The Counter-Reformation*, London, 1968; H.O. Evensnett, *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation*, Cambridge, 1968; B.J. Kidd, *The Counter-Reformation 1550-1600*, London, 1933; S. Ozment, *The Age of Reform*, New Haven, 1980. For Cardinal Pole, see Fenlon, *passim*; for Ochino, see R.H. Bainton, *Bernardino Ochino; Esule e riformatore senese del cinquecento*, Florence, 1940; and *idem*, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, London, 1953, chap. 6.

<sup>23</sup> For Valdés, see J. Nieto, *Juan Valdés and the Origins of the Spanish and Italian Reformation*, Geneva, 1970; Fenlon, chap. 5; Williams, 529-536; and A.J. Schutte, *Pier Paolo Vergerio. The Making of an Italian Reformer*, Geneva, 1977. Valdésian ideas were especially popularized in the 1540's through the *Beneficio di Cristo* (1543) written by the monk Benedetto da Mantova in conjunction with Valdés's follower Flaminio (Fenlon, 69ff.). B. Collett, *Italian Benedictine Scholars and the Reformation*, Oxford, 1985, chap. 8, includes a summary of it. See also the complete transcript by R. Prelowski in J. Tedeschi, *Italian Reformation Studies in Honor of Laelius Socinus*, Florence, 1965, 23-94; and E. Gleason, *Reform Thought in Sixteenth Century Italy*, Ann Arbor, 1981, chap. 7. A first edition of the *Beneficio di Cristo* exists in the library of St. John's College, Cambridge. The main theme is justification by faith and the same, Nicodemist, passage of the Bible is emphasized: John 3:16-18 (Prelowski, 58). Vasari, vii, 271, Condivi, 247, and the *Dialogues* of Francisco de Hollanda (1548) confirm the direct association of Michelangelo with Pole and the Valdésians, apart from Vittoria Colonna.

<sup>24</sup> Tolnay, v, 1960, chaps. II and III; and Tolnay, 1975, 103-108, 114, and 184f.

<sup>25</sup> D. Redig de Campos, *Michelangelo. The Last Judgment*, New York, 1978, chap. iv, sect. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Clements (as in n. 19).

<sup>27</sup> R. de Maio, *Michelangelo e la Controriforma*, Rome, 1978, esp. chap. 1, 2, 3, and 9; Salmi, ed. (as in n. 13), 261-263; Salvini (as in n. 13), 137-142; Hibbard (as in n. 11), 254-263; 284; Murray, 1984 (as in n. 13), 151; Von Einem (as in n. 13), 158; Liebert, esp. chaps. 17, 18, and 20, and most recently, A. Chastel, J. Shearman, *et al.*, *The Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo Rediscovered*, London, 1986, 200f.

<sup>28</sup> Steinberg (as in n. 17).

<sup>29</sup> G.R. Elton, *Reformation Europe 1517-1559*, London, 1963, 196f., and Fenlon, 195. Although, as Steinberg points out, such ideas in the *Last Judgment* were "soon to become heretical," at the time of the completion of the *Last Judgment* they were not, and it is unlikely that Michelangelo would have deliberately gone against ecclesiastical authority (cf. Hall, *et al.*, in n. 21, n. on p. 85). The fresco does not seem heretical, but rather a precise reflection of Vatican thought at the time, which was strongly influenced by Catholic Reformers and hopes for compromise. Until the Council of Trent condemned the theory, it was not officially excluded and, for Catholics, it had its basis in Augustinian and Thomist doctrine: Fenlon, 137f. (Church, as in n. 22, 2, argues that Ficino was a source for Luther's justification by faith.)

<sup>30</sup> Hall (as in n. 21).

<sup>31</sup> Elton (as in n. 29), 183-186. Also Pastor, xi, 94ff.

<sup>32</sup> H. Jedin, *History of the Council of Trent*, Edinburgh, 1957, I, 424-427.

in the Church.<sup>33</sup>

This phase of the Catholic Reformation should be distinguished from the later phase of the Counter-Reformation. In the 1530's and early 1540's, the so-called movement of Italian Evangelism included men who evidently favored some of the current reforming ideas. They wanted to reform the Church from within and thereby bring the Protestants back into the fold. Many looked to a Church Council (eventually held at Trent, 1545-47, 1551-52, and 1562-63) as the means to solve the religious dilemma. By contrast, the later, militant phase of the Counter-Reformation gathered momentum from the 1540's under the direction of men like Cardinal Carafa (later Pope Paul IV, 1555-59) and sought to fight and forcibly to suppress the Protestant heresy.

The main doctrinal interests of Italian Evangelism as expounded by Valdés and his followers have been outlined by Jung.<sup>34</sup> Among these were a preoccupation with the question of salvation through Christ's sacrifice, a lack of confidence in the efficacy of good works alone, and an emphasis on the supremacy of faith.<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere, Jung discusses the direct role of Vittoria Colonna in this movement, and Bainton also accords her a great deal of attention as one of its major proponents and the link between Michelangelo and the group.<sup>36</sup> Although the concepts of members of this group did have some affinity with certain aspects of Lutheranism, it is important to remember that Solafideism was also an Augustinian idea and, for members of the Catholic Reformation, Augustine in the fifth century, not Luther, was the source of this doctrine. Also, for this group, there was never any question of setting up a rival church and thus of schism with Rome. The group itself saw the movement as by nature transitory. (It would cease to be necessary once the Church was reformed.) The problem was that in such times any reformer who paid attention to anything other than the letter of Roman Catholicism ran the risk of being labeled Lutheran and heretic. The Italian

evangelists, however, wished to act within the existing ecclesiastical order and embraced a wish to return to the earlier, purer forms of Christianity, freed from those trappings and abuses of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance which had brought so much criticism.<sup>37</sup> In sum, the main emphasis of the Catholic Reform movement lay on an intense spirituality — hence they were known as the *Spirituali*. What is of special significance for our argument is that members of this group were also known as "Nicodemists."

Nicodemism was the term used to describe a particular Catholic Reform group in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century. Cantimori has written: "Among those Italians of the sixteenth century who accepted the doctrines of the Protestants, the heretics or Valdésians, there were many who assumed an attitude that was largely practical, though it was occasionally provided with a rudimentary justification. This attitude was called Nicodemism."<sup>38</sup> This movement, Cantimori explains, although seeking reform of the Church, never questioned obedience to Rome and could never tolerate Lutherans or Calvinists because their action had precipitated a split in the Christian Church. Thus, while being in favor of reform and adhering to ideas partly shared by the Northern reformers, they continued to remain members of the Catholic Church and to conform outwardly to Catholic rites.<sup>39</sup>

Information about the Nicodemists is rather scanty.<sup>40</sup> The term "Nicodemist" or "Nicodemite" was propagated by Calvin himself from the name of the Pharisee of the Gospel who visited Jesus only by night for fear of discovery.<sup>41</sup> Such people who secretly adhered to doctrines outlawed by the Catholic Church and concealed Protestant sympathies behind an outward show of conformity were, according to Calvin, like Nicodemus, whose secretive behavior devalued Christianity — the religion of light and truth. To the Nicodemists themselves, however, the stance was not a cowardly one, for Nicodemus was an honorable man. At the Crucifixion, he behaved as a faithful and courageous

<sup>33</sup> Pole's stance on justification by faith is discussed by Fenlon, esp. 53f., 96-97, 174-194, and 200-208. Pole's famous advice to Vittoria Colonna, "to believe as if her salvation depended upon faith alone and to act on the other hand as if it depended on good works" (Fenlon, 96), is typical of the Catholic Reformers' attempt to find a solution amenable to all parties concerning this dilemma. This was not, however, just a frightened reaction to Protestantism and an attempt to achieve reconciliation in the face of hardening divisions, but also a genuine movement in itself to reform the Church. Contarini's proposal of "Double Justification" at Regensburg, 1541, is dealt with by Fenlon, 54f.; see also O.M.T. Logan, "Grace and Justification: Some Italian Views of the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xx, 1, 1969, 69f., and M.W. Anderson, "Luther's *Sola Fide* in Italy, 1542-51," *Church History*, xxxviii, 1969, 17-33.

<sup>34</sup> Jung, 1953.

<sup>35</sup> Compare E. Gleason, "On the Nature of Sixteenth Century Italian Evangelism," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, ix, 3, 1978, 3-26; A. Schutte, "The *Lettere Volgari* and the Crisis of Evangelism in Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly*, xxviii, 1975, 639-688, esp. 662; and G.R. Elton, ed., *New Cambridge Modern History*, II: *The Reformation*, Cambridge, 1958, chap. viii: "Italy and the Papacy" by D. Cantimori.

<sup>36</sup> Jung, 1951, 158: "She was neither Protestant in the same sense of the Reformers, nor Catholic in the sense of the Counter-Reformers. . . . She

was a true representative of Evangelism." R.H. Bainton, "Vittoria Colonna and Michelangelo," *Forum*, ix, 1, 1971, 35-41, repr. in *idem*, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy*, Minneapolis, 1971. See also P. Partner, *Renaissance Rome, 1550-1559*, Berkeley, 1976, 217-222; H.A. Enno van Gelder, *The Two Reformations in the Sixteenth Century. A Study of the Religious Aspect and Consequences of Renaissance Humanism*, The Hague, 1964, 92-105.

<sup>37</sup> Bainton (as in n. 36), 40: "He [Michelangelo] was in line with a general tendency of the Catholic liberal reform to restore primitive Christianity." Also *idem*, *Early and Medieval Christianity*, Boston, 1962, 180f. Fenlon chap. 1, describes the phenomenon as a return "ad fontes" — to the Bible and early Church Fathers.

<sup>38</sup> Cantimori, 244.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-245; Fenlon, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, 173; Cantimori, 244-265; Cantimori in Elton (as in n. 35); *idem*, *Eretici italiani del cinquecento*, Florence, 1959, esp. chaps. xiv and xxxii. Collett (as in n. 23) 11f.; Eire, 1979; Fenlon, 20-21, 33, 220-222, and 264-266; Jung, 1953, 519; Ginzburg; Nieto (as in n. 23), 166, 181; Ozment (as in n. 22), 356-357; Partner (as in n. 36), 214-217; Schutte, 1975 (as in n. 35), 641 and nn. 646-647, 674; Schutte, 254, 267; Williams, 519, 577-579, 598-605.

<sup>41</sup> Cantimori, 244; Eire, 47.

Christian. This type of behavior, like that of Nicodemus, was strengthened by its scriptural foundation.<sup>42</sup> Disagreeing vehemently with Calvin over the necessity of splitting the Church, but at the same time having genuine aims of reform, the Nicodemists adopted their name as an honorable and proud defense.<sup>43</sup>

The precise origin of the term Nicodemite is difficult to ascertain. Calvin's major treatise against the Nicodemites was written in French in 1544.<sup>44</sup> In it, he ascribes the creation of the name to the reformers themselves, which suggests they adopted the name because of its positive associations with Scripture, reform, and justification by faith, rather than because of the negative associations with secrecy. Nevertheless, it is primarily through Calvin's attacks on the Nicodemists that information can be gleaned of their existence. Calvin's treatise was not published in Latin until 1549 with a view to its dissemination in Italy,<sup>45</sup> but this does not preclude Michelangelo's knowledge of it in 1547 since there were very strong links between the French reformers and reform circles in Italy.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Calvin had written other letters and treatises attacking the Nicodemist stand of compromise as early as 1536.<sup>47</sup> Other evidence also suggests that the term originated earlier, and described a common attitude among Catholic reformers throughout Europe as early as the 1520's and thirties.<sup>48</sup> Eire concludes: "By 1532 the use of the term was apparently widely accepted. . . . The figure of Nicodemus was widely recognized and variously employed in reference to dissembling behavior during the early years of the Reformation."<sup>49</sup> Most significant for the Italian connection is Calvin's mysterious and secretive visit to Italy. Williams actually proposes that "The

first tract against the Italian Nicodemites was written in 1537 while Calvin was among the Evangelicals at the court of Margaret of Navarre's cousin, Duchess Renée, in Ferrara."<sup>50</sup> As it happens, Vittoria Colonna spent "about ten months" with her friend the Duchess in Ferrara the same year.<sup>51</sup>

Dealing more specifically with the phenomenon of Nicodemism in Italy itself, Cantimori<sup>52</sup> and Ginzburg<sup>53</sup> give clear indications of the existence of the group in Italy in the 1540's and 1550's. The phenomenon was related to the changing situation of the Catholic Reformation between the early and late 1540's, as mentioned above. Whereas Pole, Morone, and Contarini had previously exercised great power and influence at the papal court,<sup>54</sup> and Italian evangelism flourished, the position changed somewhat around 1542.<sup>55</sup> Valdés died in 1541, Contarini in 1542. The same year, Ochino disregarded a summons to Rome and fled to Geneva, converting to Protestantism. The foundation of the Roman Inquisition under Cardinal Carafa took place in July of 1542 and this marked the beginnings of criticism and even persecution of the *Spirituali* and Nicodemists.<sup>56</sup> It was at this time that the movement of Italian Evangelism was forced to become more secretive and to go, to a certain extent, underground. Its members were pursued by militants like Carafa and his supporters, who feared the existence of crypto-Protestants in Italy.<sup>57</sup> Although the Nicodemist idea of secrecy became an increasing characteristic of the movement, it did not collapse after 1542. There is evidence for the continued flourishing of evangelism in Italy for at least a decade after the watershed of 1542.<sup>58</sup> Cantimori shows that this was the period in which its adherents

<sup>42</sup> Eire, 46-47. It must be remembered that, at the Crucifixion, Nicodemus eventually appeared as a brave and courageous Christian.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Cantimori, 246; Eire, 47. The treatise is reproduced in Higman, ed., 131-153. Here Calvin sums up by describing four types of Nicodemists, (1) those interested in material profit as a result of a Nicodemist stance (pp. 136-138); (2) those who associate with the court and try to convert ladies of high birth (pp. 138-139); (3) those who reduce Christianity to a philosophy, full of Neoplatonic ideas (pp. 139-140); and (4) those who, especially among the common people, take the Nicodemist stance through cowardly fear (pp. 140-141). The first three categories in particular seem ones that Calvin might well have considered applicable to Michelangelo.

<sup>45</sup> Cantimori, 246; and Higman, ed., 42-44.

<sup>46</sup> Existing correspondence between the famous French Nicodemite Marguerite of Navarre and Renée, daughter of the French king and wife of the Duke of Ferrara, confirms these links. Correspondence also exists between Calvin and Marguerite, Calvin and Renée of Ferrara, and Renée of Ferrara and Vittoria Colonna (cf. Schutte). See also Bainton, *Women of the Reformation* (as in n. 36) on Renée of Ferrara, Vittoria Colonna, Giulia Gonzaga, etc., and Higman, ed., 22-25.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin's tracts against the Nicodemist position of compromise, 1536-62, are listed by Eire, n. 3 on p. 45. Eire also discusses at length the references to earlier "Nicodemite" treatises such as Brunfels's *Pandectae* (1527), claimed by Ginzburg as a source for the ideology (Eire, 52f.). Calvin's letters to Martin Luther and Melanchthon, both dated 21 January 1545, also refer to the Nicodemist stance; they are reproduced in J. Bonnet, ed., *Letters of John Calvin* (1st ed., 1858), New York, 1972, 1, 434-447.

<sup>48</sup> Eire, esp. 46-47 and 69; Nieto (as in n. 23), 166, categorically states

that Valdés was a Nicodemite; Schutte, 254, cites a letter by Ochino, dated 7 April 1543, in which he "frankly admitted that he had behaved in a Nicodemite fashion for several years"; the publisher Lodovico Domenichi was tried but let off by the Inquisition in 1548 for "having printed Calvin's *Nicodemiana* at Florence" (Brown, 173, and Cantimori, as in n. 35, 264).

<sup>49</sup> Eire, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, 602.

<sup>51</sup> Brown, 102, and K. Pfister, *Vittoria Colonna*, Munich, 1950, 100. W. Walker, *John Calvin, the Organiser of Reformed Protestantism, 1509-1564* (1st ed., 1906), New York, 1964, places Calvin's secretive visit to Italy in 1536 (pp. 149ff.). This, nevertheless, still precedes Colonna's documented visit and falls within the period of her close contacts both with Renée of Ferrara and Michelangelo himself.

<sup>52</sup> Cantimori, 247f.

<sup>53</sup> Ginzburg, *passim*.

<sup>54</sup> See above p. 61 and nn. 31-33.

<sup>55</sup> Jung, 1953, 518.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 518-519; Cantimori, 256; Fenlon, 33, 220f.; Schutte, 1975, 640.

<sup>57</sup> Jung, 1953, 518; Fenlon, 51f., 220f.

<sup>58</sup> Schutte (as in n. 35), esp. 645f. The very existence of the *Lettere Volgari* is cited as evidence: from the mid-1550's, the authors have a marked reluctance to identify themselves, *ibid.*, 674-676. Many Nicodemists continued to regard Pole as a kind of patron at this time (Fenlon, 248). Cantimori (pp. 249-250 and 258f.) refers to the years 1513 to about 1542 as the period of "Evangelism proper" and the 1540's and 1550's as "the crisis of Evangelism" — in which "Nicodemism is the key."



chose to keep their true feelings hidden, often "employing an indirect or oblique manner of communication."<sup>59</sup>

That Michelangelo at this time chose the figure of Nicodemus, in the guise of his own self-portrait, for his own tomb memorial can hardly be regarded as a coincidence. It may well signify his involvement with the Nicodemist movement and may act as confirmation of his views on justification by faith — in line with the Catholic evangelist reformers and based on such texts as Christ's teaching to Nicodemus in John 3. Since the term was apparently well known and recognized by contemporaries, the expansion of the Pietà theme into a sculptural group including a dominating Nicodemus figure (with a recognizable self-portrait) could almost be regarded as a public statement of his views as much as an expression of his inner feelings or a secret sign to the initiated. Reading the work as an indication of Michelangelo's affinity with this sincere and genuine movement for reform within the Catholic Church, we are thus forced to look at the secondary problem of his attempted destruction of the work in a new light.

If we are to accept that Michelangelo deliberately chose the role of Nicodemus as a symbol of his religious convictions and covert beliefs, this may well also provide us with the reason for Michelangelo's later attack on the sculpture. Concerning this, Vasari wrote, "He [Michelangelo] not only broke the group but would have dashed it to pieces if his servant Antonio had not advised him to restrain [himself]."<sup>60</sup> After years of work Michelangelo attacked the

sculpture, breaking the left forearm and hand and right forearm (these were subsequently repaired by an assistant). Christ's left leg also seems to be completely missing. It has been variously suggested that the mutilation occurred because of Michelangelo's dissatisfaction with the piece, technically and aesthetically (Vasari),<sup>61</sup> because of a sudden awareness of its sexual connotations (Steinberg),<sup>62</sup> or because of impatience over the imperfection of an added piece (the leg), precipitated by his anxieties over the ailing Urbino (Liebert).<sup>63</sup> Evidence suggests that the damage was inflicted late in 1555 but before the death of Urbino, on 3 December.<sup>64</sup> As has already been pointed out, from about 1542 the Church had hardened its attitude toward reform. During the later 1540's and more especially in the early 1550's, the Inquisition began to take measures against the followers of Valdés and Pole with almost the same vigor that it directed against the Protestants.<sup>65</sup> After a temporary reconciliation between Pole and Carafa in 1553, their rivalries increased and Pole returned to England in 1554.<sup>66</sup> Pole's chaplain Merenda fled the same year and Morone was eventually imprisoned.<sup>67</sup> In May 1555 Carafa was elected supreme Pontiff, Pope Paul IV.<sup>68</sup> In this context, Michelangelo's *Pietà* with its Nicodemist overtones may have seemed a liability and even a danger to its artist. Michelangelo was, in the end, left unmolested by the Inquisition,<sup>69</sup> but it can plausibly be argued that his sudden attempted destruction of the piece was perpetrated in the face of the threat of Carafa and the Inquisition.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Quoted by Schutte (as in n. 35), 647.

<sup>60</sup> Vasari, 244. Details of the damage are shown by Hartt (as in n. 5), 85-87.

<sup>61</sup> Vasari, 244.

<sup>62</sup> Steinberg, 1968. Steinberg bases his interpretation of the sculpture and the reasons for Michelangelo's attempted destruction of the piece on the position he argues for the "missing leg." It is hard to believe that Michelangelo would ever have considered "joining on" a limb, considering how widely this practice was despised (Wilde, as in n. 13, 181-184; Murray, 216; Pope-Hennessy, 339. See also R. Wittkower, *Sculpture, Processes and Principles*, London, 1977, 118). It thus seems quite possible that any such "slung leg" (from which prints and copies were later made) was the work of Tiberio Calcagni, who had "immediately" removed the statue and reconstructed it with "I know not what new pieces," according to Vasari, 244. (Tiberio "added God knows how many new pieces" — according to G. Bull, ed., *Giorgio Vasari, The Lives of the Artists*, Harmondsworth, 1971, 405.) This would also account for the leg's subsequent removal. A theory concentrating on the "missing" leg cannot by itself explain Michelangelo's attempt, attested by Vasari (n. 60 above), to destroy the whole group.

<sup>63</sup> Liebert, 397-407. This is connected with the rather evasive explanation given by Michelangelo himself.

<sup>64</sup> This dating is supplied by Michelangelo, letter to Lionardo Buonarroto, 4 December 1555 (Ramsden, II, 160, letter No. 408). This letter, and Nos. 407 and 409, reflect Michelangelo's "many anxieties," "confusion," and "unhappiness" late in 1555.

<sup>65</sup> See Fenlon, chap. 14 in general, for evidence of increasingly strict measures taken against the Viterbo group from about 1551.

<sup>66</sup> Fenlon, 250.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 276f. Cf. Cantimori, 263-264. Carnesecchi eventually chose death (1567) rather than flee north of the Alps to embrace Calvinism per se. The proceedings of his trial are a valuable source of information about Evangelism.

<sup>68</sup> Pastor, XIV, 90f.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Tolnay, 1975, 114: "Michelangelo remained faithful to his religious ideas. He was almost the only representative of this liberal humanist Catholicism to survive the establishment of the Inquisition. Out of all the public figures who had belonged to the circle of Valdés, Michelangelo alone was never bothered by the Holy Office. This privileged position was probably due to the universal admiration in which his art was held and to the fact that his great age and solitary life made him appear inoffensive." Tolnay (*ibid.*) also refers to rumors accusing Michelangelo of heresy and to an anonymous letter of 19 March 1549 that contained the accusation "Lutheran." As pointed out above, the word "Luterani" was simply used as a term of abuse in 16th-century Italy and applied to any non-conforming Catholic in a very generalized way. For Michelangelo's personal relations with Carafa, see Vasari, 241-242; Pastor, XII, 617, and Murray (as in n. 13), 204-207. Michelangelo did receive commissions from Paul IV Carafa but was generally put to work on the fortifications of Rome rather than on extensive theological schemes (Vasari, 241). It was Paul IV who instigated the movement to destroy the Sistine *Last Judgment* because it was "shameless" (Pastor, XII, 617; Vasari, 241-242), and who appointed Pirro Ligorio as papal architect in Michelangelo's stead (Murray, 204). Michelangelo was deprived, at this time, of office and income (Vasari, 240; Murray, 207).

<sup>70</sup> Michelangelo's evasive explanation for his destruction of the work appears to be matched by his evasive behavior during Vasari's visit while the work was in progress (Vasari, 281-282). The latter was evidently left with the impression that Michelangelo purposefully let fall the lamp in order to prevent him from seeing the sculpture while he was working on it at night. It is difficult to ascertain Vasari's stance on contemporary religious issues, but he seems to have adhered to a safe and standard Catholic position. (For example, in discussing the possibility of heresy in the *Assumption* by Botticelli [or Botticini] for Matteo Palmieri, National Gallery, London, Vasari wrote noncommittally, "as to the truth of which do not expect a judgment from me;" quoted by Boase, as in n. 2, 145.)

The *Pietà* was begun in 1547 during a relatively safe period when Pole and the *Spirituali* continued to exercise great power and influence. Indeed, Pole missed election to the Papacy itself by a single vote in the conclave of 1549.<sup>71</sup> The Roman Inquisition had been relatively moderate during the 1540's (under Paul III and Julius III, 1550-55, who were both very close to Michelangelo).<sup>72</sup> By contrast, when, after the three-week rule of Marcellus II Cervini, Cardinal Carafa was elected Paul IV on 23 May 1555, the atmosphere changed dramatically. Carafa immediately declared his main aim to be the suppression of heresy and false doctrine, and he announced his strict program of reform in his first consistory of 29 May 1555.<sup>73</sup> Pastor writes:

The very strict measures of the summer of 1555 were followed by others of a similar nature during the autumn and winter. . . . The terrible severity of the new Pope was shown in an edict issued in the year 1555 which threatened truly draconian punishments, such as the galley, hanging, scourging, loss of property and banishment for the abuses then prevalent in Rome.<sup>74</sup>

The election of such a man to the Papacy would obviously be of great concern to those not totally in line with the Counter-Reformation, and it was soon evident that proceedings were widely taken by the Inquisition against "quite innocent persons" and even bishops and cardinals as well as outright heretics. "An actual reign of terror began which filled all Rome with fear."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Pastor, XIII, 10-15; Fenlon, 227-229.

<sup>72</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, London, 1974, v, 366; Pastor, III, 65f., 216 and *idem*, IV, 90-91. For Michelangelo's relationships with the popes in this earlier period, 1540's to ca. 1555, see *idem*, XIII, 333, and Vasari, 203-228 (esp. Julius III).

<sup>73</sup> Pastor, XIV, 176-179. The great creation of cardinals in December 1555 is taken as indicative of Paul IV's intentions for strict reform.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV, 178.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV, 286-287; n. on p. 313; Partner (as in n. 40), 45f. and 224; L. von Ranke, *History of the Popes* (1st ed., 1834), London, n.d., 79-81. The situation is complicated by the fact that Paul IV's unpopularity caused the mob, on his death, to storm the Vatican and destroy most of the Inquisition's records. Others were removed by Napoleon in 1815-17 and the remainder are difficult of access (Pastor, XII, 507; P. Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press*, Princeton, 1977, xviii). However, enough evidence does exist to show that burnings of heretics did start in Rome as early as June 1555 (Pastor, XIV, n. on p. 261). The places of execution (the Piazza Navona, the Campo di Fiore, and the Piazza Giudea; *ibid.*, 260) were sufficiently near Michelangelo's dwelling in the Macel de' Corvi on the Palatine Hill (Ramsden, II, map on p. 126) perhaps to cause him concern for the fate of others with shared ideas as much as alarm for his own safety.

<sup>76</sup> Grendler (as in n. 75), 85-89.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-102.

<sup>78</sup> G.R. Elton, "1555: A Political Retrospect" in J. Hurstfield, ed., *The Reformation Crisis*, London, 1965, 72-82. See also Ozment (as in n. 22), 259f.

<sup>79</sup> Although Michelangelo had often expressed a desire to be buried in his native soil in Florence (R. and M. Wittkower, eds., *The Divine Michelangelo: The Florentine Academy's Homage on His Death in 1564*, London, 1964, 10), the construction in Rome (1547-1555) of a large-scale work intended for his own tomb would indicate his wish for burial in Rome

Alongside Paul IV's use of the Inquisition, the *Index of Prohibited Books* also became a major repressive instrument for the control of heresy.<sup>76</sup> It too gained momentum after about 1554-55 mainly under the instigation of Carafa. Works by Valdés and Ochino and also the *Beneficio di Christi* had been banned by the Venetian Index of 1549, but the official Papal Index of 1554-55 demonstrated an increasingly strict approach and confirmed the ascendancy of the militants at Rome.<sup>77</sup>

In Europe in September 1555, the Diet of Augsburg conceded the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* among the states of the Holy Roman Empire, thereby marking as irrevocable the dreaded split in the Western Church by accepting the existence of both Lutheran and Roman churches. The division of Christendom between Catholic and Protestant was, in G.R. Elton's words, "the great fact of 1555"<sup>78</sup> and probably had a devastating effect on those Catholic reformers who had so long hoped for the prevention of this at all costs. These events and the prevailing atmosphere of 1555, both in the measures taken by Pope Paul IV Carafa and the international situation, could well have brought Michelangelo immense disappointment as well as despair not only for his own situation but for others who shared it. Regret at the failure of the long-term efforts of the Italian Reformers to prevent the Protestant/Catholic split could have caused a mood of despair as much as a specific fear for his own safety. Perhaps, the failure also seemed to reproach him as a Nicodemist for having not made a more open declaration of his beliefs.<sup>79</sup> Such anxieties could well

(especially considering the difficulties of transporting large-scale sculpture, known from the experience of the *David*; on which see R. Klein, *Italian Art, 1550-1600: Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966, 44). That Michelangelo's tomb was apparently to be at S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, is confirmed by Vasari (Vasari, VI, 188; Pope-Hennessy, 364; and Stechow, 289). In spite of this, four letters survive that relate to Michelangelo's possible final return to Florence. In the first two, of early 1555 (Ramsden, II, Nos. 398 and 402, dated 11 May 1555 and 22 June 1555), Michelangelo politely declined Duke Cosimo's offer to return to Florence, stating his involvement with St. Peter's as the reason. In two subsequent letters of 1557 (*ibid.*, Nos. 433 and 436, May and July 1557), his mood appears to have changed, expressing a definite desire and decision to return to Florence, regret over the delay, and anxiety over the fact that the completion of St. Peter's was preventing him, but asserting that he would come as soon as possible. Evidently at some point between late 1555 and 1557, Michelangelo reverted to his previously long-held desire to return to Florence and to be buried in the family chapel at S. Croce (as in fact happened). This wish was confirmed on his deathbed (see Murray, 211). In view of the association of the statue with his burial in Rome, it is possible that its attempted destruction was connected with the changed decision, to come to rest in Florence rather than in Rome — and that the decision, at this time, to return to Florence was precipitated by distress at the way things were going in Rome and the events of 1555.

Just after Michelangelo's death, Vasari attempted to retrieve the *Pietà* from Bandini in order to place it on Michelangelo's tomb, as the artist had intended. The letter to Lionardo of 18 March 1564 confirms this and also indicates that Michelangelo's wish to use it for his tomb was widely known (quoted by Pope-Hennessy, as in n. 3, 339). This is the same letter in which Vasari positively includes the identification of the self-portrait — i.e., it was written after the death of the artist, after the last session of Trent, and after the collapse of Evangelism and Nicodemism, and in a private communication, when it was presumably safe to do so. Caravaggio's later identification of Michelangelo and Nicodemus could be read as a cryptic reference to the same thing. (The *Pietà* did not reach Florence until 1674.)

have resulted in Michelangelo's sudden and forceful attack on the statue that signified these ideas, even if he was, happily, prevented from destroying it entirely.<sup>80</sup>

It is hoped that this reading of Michelangelo's attempted destruction of the Florentine *Pietà* in the light of contemporary historical and religious events will inspire further discussion. My suggestion that Michelangelo's identification with the figure of Nicodemus should be viewed within the context of contemporary attitudes toward the philosophy of Nicodemism implies a reciprocal reinforcement of the existing evidence of Michelangelo's involvement with sixteenth-century Italian evangelism.

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<sup>80</sup> If the religious connotation argued above was a reason for Michelangelo's attempted destruction of the work, it may be asked why he did not attack the significant self-portrait in the Nicodemus figure. This is explained by the fact that the statue is 226cm high (7'5") and that Michelangelo was of medium stature, and then an elderly man (nearly eighty-one) (Vasari, 285; Condivi, 256-257). Because he was also right-handed,

the damage mainly in the vicinity of Mary and Christ's left arm would appear natural to an irrational attack initiated in a moment of stress or anxiety. We do not know what damage may have occurred in the areas of the statue that were subsequently repaired by Tiberio Calcagni. It is important to remember that Michelangelo's aim was to destroy the work completely.