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Caravaggio's 'Seven Works of Mercy' in Naples The relevance of art history to cultural journalism*

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ABSTRACT

The artistic heritage of the Catholic Church still attracts attention all over the world. For almost 2000 years, it has provided aesthetic access to spiritual meaning, together with the Church's text communication, both spoken and written. Christian art and architecture, therefore, rank among the oldest communication media. Even today, they can empower a culture of reflection and high-content communication. This article about Caravaggio explains why Christian art offers opportunities for religious correspondents, Church media relations, as well cultural and arts journalists.

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Especially during major Church events, like the Jubilee Year of Mercy (2015–2016), many media editorial boards will take an interest in art which refers to such events, fostering reader interest through current affairs. For the Jubilee Year proclaimed by Pope Francis, the communication of mercy seemed appropriate, because in God's pardon and mercy people can find the core of the Gospel. The works of mercy (Matthew 25:31–46) are a human response to this mercy of God. They are an important element of social responsibility for the poor in Christianity, and have also been depicted in art.

Readers of this article gain insights into the famous altarpiece by Caravaggio (1606/07) in Naples, which is a major example of the 'acts of mercy' in art. Research has found out that Caravaggio's light, amidst a dramatic chiaroscuro, can be decoded as a metaphor for mercy. It probably attests to the artist's own desire to receive pardon after killing someone in Rome (1606) as the result of a duel. This study aims to build a cultural awareness that Christian art offers a wide range of semantic meaning, and Caravaggio's painting in a very personal way. These references to human life can

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help the media audience to explore mercy in their own lives. The multiple meaning of Christian art is one more reason why Church events continue to provide prime time for cultural journalism.

1. Visual and verbal communications of Christian identity

Issues of aesthetics and creativity are essential to media communications. The Catholic Church is no exception. During its 2000-year history, the Church has been communicating with texts, both spoken and written. On the other hand, the Church communicates the Gospel through non-verbal means, in many cases with liturgical signs or artistic expressions, like paintings, sculptures or church architecture.¹ They rate among the oldest communication media of the Church.

The cultural heritage of the Church still attracts attention all over the world, confirmed by the inflow of an international mass tourism in churches, museums, sanctuaries and charitable institutions (Stausberg 2011; Galindo García 2009; Vukonić 1996). This is a huge heritage, with which the Catholic Church has gained great experience. Since the third and fourth centuries, she has communicated meaningfully through sacred spaces and the visual arts, especially through images (Guastini 2014; Verdon 2012; Verdon 2009; Weitzmann 1979).

This use of images in 'religious instruction' and 'education' became generally established in the Church towards the end of the Late Antiquity. Its legitimacy was reaffirmed several times by authorities, at the latest in the two letters of Pope Gregory (599, 600)², who defended the right use of images as 'litterae laicorum', and again during the Middle Ages (Decretum Gratiani, 1140)³, the early modern era (Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso*, 1582)⁴ and contemporary times (Vatican II, 1962–1965)⁵.

Even today, the Church should be aware of the tremendous potential in this complementary cooperation between visual and verbal communication. It permits an efficient provision of information about Christian faith and identity, which can effectively stimulate the external and internal communication of the Church. Unfolding the meaning of Christian art and architecture, might even inspire a new culture of dialogue within multireligious and secular societies. Distinguished works of Christian art, in particular, can grant aesthetic access to spiritual meaning, empowering a culture of reflection and high-content communication.

2. Integrating the Christian message into media culture

In this regard, the Italian Bishops' Conference in 2004 published some encouraging statements about the inclusion of artistic language in pastoral practice in its 'Directory on Social Communications in the Mission of the Church'.⁶ The first section of the directory ('Communicating the Gospel in Media Culture', nos. 1–92) sets out the principles, with Subsection III devoted to the integration of the Christian message into media culture (nos. 47–72). Communicators of the faith 'should be able to pull out all the stops of communication: verbal and also non-verbal language'.⁷ Particular attention should be paid to the cultural heritage of the Church, states the directory: Italy, e.g. 'is privileged to possess an extraordinary wealth of artworks, mostly of religious content'.⁸

According to this, the catechesis and institutional communication of the Church present good opportunities 'to draw on the cultural, historical and artistic patrimony, proposing to explore the religious traditions and expressions.'⁹ Therefore 'beauty as a way to the mystery' should be a 'constant dimension of every catechesis'.¹⁰

The Italian directory relates this to cultural and religion journalism, given that the artistic and architectural heritage (cathedrals, churches, abbeys, monasteries) as well as museums and music can be experienced (physically and virtually) through the media (photographs, audio and video files, cinema and television movies).¹¹ Finally, the second, operational section of the directory ('Pastoral ways and initiatives', nos. 93–203) recalls that 'taking into consideration the existing heritage ... easily becomes an opportunity for evangelization and deepening of the faith'.¹²

3. Communicating the core of the Gospel during the Jubilee of Mercy

These proposals from the Italian Bishops, e.g. with reference to the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (8 December 2015–20 November 2016)¹³ and its relevance to the history of art, indicate how explaining the centuries-old Christian culture through journalism and multimedia communication can motivate the audience 'to open heart and mind to the contents of faith and to religious experience'.¹⁴

The communication of mercy seems especially appropriate in this respect, because in God's pardon and mercy people can find the core of the Gospel and of Christian faith.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the culture of our day seems to have lost sight of mercy, as St John Paul II described in his Encyclical 'Dives in misericordia' in 1980:

The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of 'mercy' seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it. This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy.¹⁶

In the Christian tradition, however, mercy is a major component of God's plan of salvation. In this spirit, the Holy Year of Mercy began on 8 December 2015 with its motto 'Merciful Like the Father'. Pope Francis, in his bull of indiction of the Jubilee Year, reminded all people of good will that they too, touched by God's mercy towards mankind, can show mercy to others day by day.¹⁷ Here, Francis desired 'that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy'.¹⁸

The Pope's suggestion offered a prime time opportunity for religious correspondents, the media relations and communications offices of the Church, as well as for cultural and arts journalists. By reporting and discussing current events or special features of Christian art, they keep the public informed and could also raise aspects of the Good News. Cultural journalists can raise matters, which would otherwise never be present in the media, particularly today, when the 'landscape of arts journalism is changing, with fewer full-time critics' (Groves 2010). At international level, the cultural journalism is gradually disappearing from traditional media [Green 2010; Zanchini 2009 (2013); Zanchini 2016].

Nevertheless, cultural and arts journalism can still provide useful information on faith and religion to a broader audience. While sharing the core issues of the Church, it can strengthen the identity of its members, which is an important consideration for the communications offices of the Church. Moreover, media editorial boards will take an interest in quality journalism devoted to current affairs, because it will preserve the audience's attention. The anniversaries of important artists and works of art, or the openings of exhibitions or newly built architectures offer sufficient opportunities. In what follows, this approach will be performed by analysing and interpreting a masterpiece painting by Caravaggio in Naples (Figure 9).

4. The 'Works of Mercy' by Caravaggio

Ever since Late Antiquity, the corporal 'works of mercy' have been an important element of social responsibility and relief for the poor in Christianity (Oexle 2015, 52–73; Angenendt 2015, 40–51; Dresken-Weiland 2015, 106–113; Grünbart 2015, 114–119; Sternberg 2015, 120–129; Uerlings, Trauth, and Clemens 2011; Sternberg 1991, 20–307; Vonhoff 1987, 39–43). They are a human response to the mercy of God. In theological terms, they are external acts of charity ('caritas'), the Christian love of God and love of neighbour.¹⁹ Their literary origin is the biblical pericope (Matthew 25:31–46), where Jesus Christ sets out six works as precepts for the Last Judgment: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned (Gnilka 1988, 365–379; Sand 1986, 510–514; Schweizer 1985, 310–315). Medieval writers added a seventh work, 'burying the dead', to this biblical list which is to be understood as a series of examples (Bühren 1998, 11–12).

From the 12th century onwards [Dietl 2015, 180–190; Pacelli 1984 (2014, 53–57); Griffith 2012, 292–315; Botana 2011; Ritzerfeld 2007; Helas and Wolf 2006; Bühren 1998, 31–54; Chiellini Nari 1991, 415–446; Schweicher 1968, 245–250; Bonifazi 1952, 1082–1085], and especially from the 16th century (Dietl 2015, 190–193; Goetz 2015, 194–203; Pacelli 2014, 57–73; Silver and Luttikhuisen 2008, 216–248; Bühren 1998, 55–224; Schmitt, 1937, 1457–1466; Muller 1985; *Werken van barmhartigheid. 650 jaar Alexianen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden* 1985; Stein 1966), the works of mercy were also depicted in art (Figures 1–9). These images represented and promoted the charitable activity of the Christian communities. A major example of this iconographic tradition is the famous altarpiece (Figures 8 and 9) in Naples by Caravaggio (1571–1610) [Vodret 2015, 86–87 (fig.); Hilaire 2012, 61; Kientz 2012, 326–327 (fig. 2); Bolard 2010, 166–170; Treffers 2010, 14–15 (fig. 5); Milesi 2010, 154–155 (fig.); Ebert-Schifferer 2009 (2012, 201–203, fig.); Schütze 2009, 186–193 (fig.), 275 (no. 47); Dusio 2009, 185–188 (fig.); Filippetti 2005, 62–62 (fig.); Cottono 2005, 148–149 (fig.); Caravaggio. *L'ultimo tempo* 2004, 107–108 (fig.); Zuffi 2004, 119 (fig.); Pacelli 1999, 49–50 (fig.); Bühren 1998, 193–210, 268–271 (fig. 147); Prater 1992, 81–84, 106–112; Calvesi 1990, 355–362 (fig. 221); Marini 1987, 60–65, 248–249 (no. 68; fig.), 494–497; *L'allegorie dans la peinture. La représentation de la charité au XVII^e siècle* 1986, 16, 40–43 (fig.); Calvesi 1986, 50–53 (fig.); Pacelli 2014; Bardoni 1978, 165–173; Bovi 1975, 272–277 (fig.), pl. 19; Marini 1974, 38–41, 214–217 (fig.), 320–321 (fig.), 421–423; Fagiolo Dell'Arco 1968, 37–61 (figs. 1–5); Stein 1966, 73–75 (fig. 29)].



Figure 1. *Madonna della Misericordia*, 1364, painting, Bartolomeo di Fredi (photo: © Pienza, Museo Diocesano).

The huge and complex painting is still in its original location, where it was commissioned by the ‘Confraternità del Pio Monte della Misericordia’ in 1606/07 as a canvas painting for the reredos behind the main altar of their church (253, Via dei Tribunali) at the side of the Duomo [Pacelli 2014, 16, 19 (figs. 1, 4), 94 (fig. 61); Spike 2010, 184–190 (cat. 53 in CD-ROM “Catalogue”, 295–301), here 186]. In 1658, the confraternity commissioned Francesco Antonio Picchiatti to build a larger church on an octagonal plan, where Caravaggio’s painting is still above the main altar.²⁰

In 1601, the confraternity was founded by seven young noblemen of Naples (‘Nobiltà di Seggio’) who practiced the corporal works of mercy. They met every Friday at the Hospital of the Incurables, an important charitable institution in Naples, ‘to serve and succour those poor invalids with food and sweetmeats’.²¹

In 1602, the confraternity decided to establish an institution to practice the works of mercy and to build a church. In 1605, the charitable organization received an apostolic letter of papal recognition from Paul V, who in 1610 also accorded privileges to the main altar of their newly erected church [Pacelli 2014, 24; Langdon 1998, 327–333, here 327; Vodret 2009, 194–198 (figs. 116–117), here 194]. Caravaggio had come to Naples in 1606, just when the church of the lay confraternity had been consecrated. The noblemen ‘were looking for a painter to give permanent visual expression to their sense of charitable mission’ [Graham-Dixon 2010, 340; cf. Pacelli 2014, 15, 21–26, 39–40 (note. 9); Bologna 1992, 221–225]. Caravaggio painted the ‘Seven

Works of Mercy’ in three months at most: between late September 1606, when he arrived in Naples, and 9 January 1607, when he was paid 400 ducats²² for his trouble. It was the artist’s most important Neapolitan altarpiece.

Caravaggio, a native of Lombardy who operated primarily in Rome, is one of the most significant painters in the history of European art. As Mannerism gave way to the Early Baroque, this artist ‘revolutionized’ the contemporary style of painting [Strinati 2010; *Caravaggio e l’Europa* 2005; Brown 2001; Spike 2001 (2010); Gregori 1991; O’Neill and Schulz 1985]. His monumental and realistic figures, emphasizing the characters amidst a dramatic play of light and dark, triggered an international stylistic phenomenon that lived on in what became known as Caravaggism [*Caravaggio and his followers in Rome* 2012; *Corps et ombres. Caravage et le caravagisme européen* 2012; Papi 2010; Cappelletti 2007; Strinati and Vodret 1999].

In his painting for Naples, Caravaggio represented the seven works of mercy simultaneously, and not in a picture cycle as otherwise customary for this theme (Figures 2 and 3), sometimes even in the 16th century (‘Christ with the Cross and the Six



Figure 2. *The Last Judgment, the Seven Works of Mercy, and the Seven Deadly Sins*, between 1490 and 1500, painting, unknown artist (Antwerp, Maagdenhuismuseum, 134; origin: Antwerp, Aalmoezenerskamer; photo: © KIK-IRPA, Brussel/Jean-Luc Elias).



Figure 3. The Seven Works of Mercy, 1504, painting, Master of Alkmaar (probable origin: Alkmaar, church St Lawrence) (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, SK-A-2815; photo: © Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum).

Works of Mercy', ca. 1580/90, engraving, Hendrick Goltzius, [Figure 7](#)).²³ This new type of composition had been introduced by Flemish artists of the late Renaissance. The first was Pieter Bruegel the Elder ([Figure 5](#)) in 1559 with his drawing 'Charity and the Seven Works of Mercy' (Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen), which was widely known and appreciated from the engraving by Philip Galle, edited in 1559 in the publishing house 'Aux quatre vents' of Hieronymus Cock in Antwerp ([Figure 6](#)). Between 1558 and 1560 Philip Galle worked on a series of the 'Seven Virtues and Vices' (after design by Pieter Bruegel the Elder), of which the said engraving was the third sheet [Bühren 1998, 74–78, 260–261, 291–292 (figs. 48–49)].

Caravaggio's painting ([Figure 9](#)) summarizes the acts of mercy within a tight frame. Twelve characters gathered on a dark street corner play their parts on a narrow stage against a monumental architectural backdrop. The result is a crowded composition in the foreground where the works are arranged in dense sequence.²⁴ For the viewers of the painting, the various actions seem to be almost inevitably a 'hidden object game' [Brauchitsch 2007, 98; Held 1996, 23, 75, 162–166, 185, 207 (pl. 13), here 163–164]. 'Seen above the flickering candlelight of the altar in the dark interior, the painting makes the church appear to have been invaded by the crowded, animated Neapolitan street squalor that must have impressed Caravaggio, newly arrived from Rome' [Moir 1982, 28, 44, 136–138 (fig.), here 136; cf. Spike 2010, 188, 190].

Dispensing in this way with spacious landscapes or urban settings ([Figures 2–7](#)) was new in the iconography of the works of mercy. Caravaggio had to respect the upright rectangle dictated by the shape of an altarpiece around 1600 ([Figure 8](#)) (Hecht 2008, 323–325). That is why he also opted against the composition scheme of a picture cycle.

5. The seven corporal works of mercy in the lower section

The upper section of the painting shows the Virgin and Child with two angels ([Figure 10](#)), while the lower section describes seven works of mercy ([Figure 9](#)). There in the foreground, a beggar on the ground is given half a cloak by a young man. The benefactor is dressed as an officer or nobleman. He wears a red cloak, a yellow-sleeved tunic with long dark stripes, yellow breeches, a feather hat and brown gloves ('clothing the naked' following the example of St Martin of Tours cutting his cloak). This well-dressed figure could also be meant as 'an alter ego for the seven young Neapolitan noblemen who had founded the Pio Monte. Like them, he is an aristocrat helping those who have been struck down by sickness and poverty' (Graham-Dixon 2010, 343).



Figure 4. Death of the just and unjust man with the Six Works of Mercy, ca. 1540, woodcut, Jörg Breu the Younger, probably after design by Heinrich Vogtherer the Younger (Wien, Albertina Inv. DG1960/967; photo: © Albertina, Wien, <https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/1drmB5ug6evmhl?domain=albertina.at>, www.albertina.at)

As if emphasizing this connotation, the naked beggar in the foreground may derive from antique sculpture, e.g. the Hellenistic statue of the ‘Wounded Galatian’, also known as ‘Wounded Gaul’ (Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale) [Papa 2009, 126, 173, 202–214, here 204 (fig.), 206], which is a Roman copy of a Pergamum original.



Figure 5. Charity and the Seven Works of Mercy, 1559, drawing, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, N 18 – PK; photo: © lent by Stichting Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen 1940, former collection Koenigs).

It had previously been part of the Farnese Collection, so Caravaggio may have been familiar with it, whereas the ‘Dying Gaul’ (Rome, Musei Capitolini) [Wilson-Smith 1998, 100 (fig. 34)] was not recorded until 1623, when the Ludovisi family undertook an inventory of their collection.

Behind the lower part of the officer’s body, brightly lit, one can see a leg. It belongs to the second of two pilgrims in the mid-ground, who are standing opposite a stout innkeeper. The landlord, recognizable from Caravaggio’s ‘Emmaus’ paintings, points their way left to the inn. Behind St Martin, the hidden foot traveller on the right can only be detected by parts of his upper body. On the left another traveller is recognizable. On his head with shoulder-length hair he wears a hat displaying the scallop shell of St James the Greater and the pilgrim’s cross. He clasps his staff with both hands. His bearded, dignified face resembles some contemporary depictions of Christ: ‘sheltering the homeless’, perhaps with Christ in disguise, taken from the example of the disciples and the resurrected Christ on their way to the inn at Emmaus (Luke 24:28–29). ‘This is an appropriate reference to the gospel wherein Christ identifies himself with the needy’ (Spike 2010, 188).

Behind the landlord, an athletic man with a beard is drinking water (‘giving drink to the thirsty’, based on the example of Samson, who – after the battle against the Philistines – was able by a divine miracle to quench his thirst from the jawbone of an ass; Judges 15:15–19). X-ray images, taken after the cleaning and restoration by E.



Figure 6. Charity and the Seven Works of Mercy, 1559, engraving, Philipp Galle. (London, British Museum, 1873,0510.224; photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0] licence)

Masini (1962–1963) at the Capodimonte in Naples, reveal that during the first stage of this work Caravaggio planned to place Samson at the centre of the composition [Spike 2010 (CD-ROM “Catalogue”, 300); Pacelli 1984, 76 (fig.)], just below the ‘protecting’ hand of the angel in the upper section.

On the right edge of the picture, a young woman leans against the barred window of a prison. She is offering her bare breast to an old man who has stuck his head through the bars. The scene is conspicuously bright, as if to highlight a key motif. The woman turns her head away, worried that her secret deed might be discovered (‘visiting the imprisoned’, ‘feeding the hungry’ and ‘giving drink to the thirsty’ as exemplified by a legend known in Ancient Rome as the story of Pero breast-feeding her aged father Cimon, also called ‘Caritas romana’, or ‘Roman Charity’, told by Valerius Maximus (A.D. ca. 30) and Pliny the Elder (A.D. 77).²⁵ The classical scene is an example of filial piety which can be seen as a secular prefiguration of the Christian spirit of mercy (Graham-Dixon 2010, 345).

Beyond the prison wall, a young man carries a corpse, of which we see only the small feet and the shroud. He is accompanied by a bearded priest (cleric regular) or deacon, singing probably the funeral office, in a biretta and white tunic who lights the way with a double candle (‘burying the dead’). The candle is the only clue to the hour at which this work of mercy is carried out: here it is night.



Figure 7. Christ with the Cross and the Six Works of Mercy, ca. 1580/90, engraving, Hendrick Goltzius (photo: © Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-10.373).

The work of 'visiting the sick' appears to be missing, although art historians [Pacelli 2014, 73–78 (with further references); Spike 2010, 188; Graham-Dixon 2010, 343; König 1997, 120–123 (fig.), here 123; Held 1996, 163; Hibbard 1983, 217; Dell'Acqua 1971, 133–134 (C 12), 197–198 (note 484–494), pl. XXIX–XXXII, here 134; Wagner 1958, 143–146, 219, here 144; Friedlaender 1955, 131, 207–210, pl. 49, 49 a–d, here 209] debate whether it is personified by the barely discernible figure in



Figure 8. Main altar of the church of the Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples (photo: © Lars Nilse, Freiburg).

the left half of the painting: the young man with his hands clasped in supplication lying in the shadow. He has put down his crutch, but his legs seem to be twisted. Probably this is why 17th-century sources refer to the painting as the ‘Seven Works of Mercy’ [Pacelli 2014, 35; Marini 1987, 494–495 (testified by Giovan Pietro Bellori 1672, Luigi Scaramuccia 1674 and Filippo Baldinucci 1681)].

6. The benevolent gaze of the ‘Mother of Mercy’ in the upper section

At the top of the painting, Caravaggio depicts Mary and Child Jesus (Figure 10), kindly looking down on the works of mercy, carried aloft by a pair of angels who fly through the air like acrobats locked in an embrace [Bologna 2004, 23; Bona

Castellotti 1998, 108–110 (fig. 37); Longhi, Caravaggio 1968 (2009, 86, fig. 44); Longhi 1952, 39 (fig. 28), 42–43, pl. XLIII, XLIV, here 43]. This group of figures in the upper part gives an excited and powerful impact to the whole composition painted in a dramatic chiaroscuro style.

The two angels are truncated by the frontal perspective so that only their upper areas are visible. By spreading their wings they form a compositional ‘plinth’ for the Madonna and Child, who appear in a bust-like format. As if catching his balance, the angel on the left reaches out with both arms towards the two groups of works on the right. The gesture of his right hand seems to express a kind of benevolent protection [Zuffi 2010, 200–203 (fig.), here 201; Mariani 1973, 106–110, pl. 49–50, here 108]. Maybe this gesture, derived from Michelangelo’s fresco ‘Conversion of St Paul’ in the Cappella Paolina (Vatican), also refers to the transmission of God’s grace that inspires people to be merciful [Spike 2010, 190 (CD-ROM “Catalogue”, 300)]. The other angel looks down in an attitude of embrace. Both pairs of wings fan out with feathers of white and brown.

It is correct to assume that the embracing angels represent a ‘celestial vision of fraternal love’ [Graham-Dixon 2010, 344; Cf. Puglisi 1998, 262–268 (fig. 133), here 264]. Furthermore, it might be possible to recognize in the baldachin-like form of the outspread wings a reference to the iconographic tradition of the ‘Madonna della Misericordia’ (‘Virgin of Mercy’), a devotional image especially popular among charitable institutions in Italy during the Middle Ages (Biscottini 2015). The ‘Madonna della Misericordia’ (1364) by Bartolo di Fredi is such a painting (Figure 1), where the suppliant people crowd beneath the outspread mantle of the Virgin Mary and two angels assist with holding up her cloak. In Caravaggio’s painting, the wings of the angels take the place of the cloak, which the iconography of the Virgin of Mercy usually represents spread out over the sheltered supplicants. This is why the drapery of Mary’s cloak is ostentatiously hanging downwards (Figures 9 and 10).

Caravaggio was renewing an old tradition in iconography. Just as in the conventional medieval manner, Christ arrives with his angels to observe the works of mercy. Caravaggio, however, presents Jesus not in his eschatological role as the Judge of the world [Pacelli 2014, 91–92; Bühren 1998, 198, 207; Knipping 1974; Harbison 1976, 112, 114–115, 294, 297; Réau 1957, 748–750], but as a – quasi smiling – infant with his mother in calm contentment (Figure 10). That was new. From the 12th to the 16th centuries, almost all representations of the works of mercy included the Last Judgment, closely linked to the biblical text source (Matthew 25:31–46), especially the altarpieces in churches (‘The Seven Works of Mercy’, 1504, Master of Alkmaar; Figure 3), catechetical images in charitable institutions (‘The Last Judgment, the Seven Works of Mercy and the Seven Deadly Sins’, between 1490 and 1500, from the Aalmoezenierskamer in Antwerp; Figure 2) and religious prints (‘Death of the just and unjust man with the Six Works of Mercy’, ca. 1540, Jörg Breu the Younger; Figure 4).

In his painting, Caravaggio included Mary and Child as an afterthought, presumably at the request of his patrons. Even before the recent cleaning of the painting in 2004–2005 (Bruno Arciprete) [Spike 2010 (CD-ROM “Catalogue”, 300); Arciprete 2009, 31–34 (fig. 239–241); Pagano 2005], radiographs taken in 1969 reveal that Caravaggio originally planned to include three angels in the upper section. During the second or third stage, he replaced one of the angels by the Infant Jesus and added



Figure 9. Seven Works of Mercy, 1606/07, painting, Caravaggio (Naples, church of the Pio Monte della Misericordia, main altar; photo: © Naples, Archivio fotografico del Pio Monte della Misericordia).

Mary, resulting in the picture we see today [Pacelli 2014, 109–123; Marini 1987, 248 (fig.), 496; Marini 1974, 320–321 (C 28); Dell’Acqua 1971, 134; Causa 1970, 26–28].

The painting has also been known since 1743 as ‘Nostra Signora della Misericordia’, or ‘Our Lady of Mercy’. This naming dates back to the entry of Alessandro Corona in the ‘Razionale del Monte’.²⁶ Previous authors preferred ‘Le Sette Opere’ or ‘Le Sette Opere della Misericordia’, such as Francesco de’ Pietri 1634, Carlo De Lellis 1642, Giovan Pietro Bellori 1672, Luigi Scaramuccia 1674 and Filippo Baldinucci 1681 [Pacelli and Forgione 2012, 394; Spike 2010 (CD-ROM “Catalogue”, 297); Caraffa 2007, 122; Bologna 2004, 24; Marini 1987, 494–495; Friedlaender 1955, 207–208]. ‘Nostra Signora della Misericordia’ or ‘Santa Maria della Misericordia’ is also the title of the



Figure 10. The Virgin and Child (detail of the upper section of the *Seven Works of Mercy*, 1606/07, Caravaggio, Naples; photo: © Naples, Archivio fotografico del Pio Monte della Misericordia).

church for whose main altar Caravaggio painted the ‘Seven Works of Mercy’. In both theology and popular piety, Mary is known as ‘mater misericordiae’ [Pacelli 2014, 82–84, 87, 90; Kälin 1994], as it was the Son of God, to whom she gave birth, who revealed God’s mercy (cf. John 3:16–18). Jesus Christ is, after all, the very incarnation of God’s mercy.²⁷ Accordingly, in Caravaggio’s painting the good works are performed beneath the benevolent gaze of the ‘Mother of Mercy’ (Bühren 1998, 199–200). Her subsequent incorporation may have been influenced by the traditional hymn:

Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To you do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To you do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us, and after this exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary (Szövérfy 1964, 376–377).

7. Light as a metaphor for mercy

Two important questions now arise: Why do the heavenly company not interfere in the earthly proceedings? We can only see, on the prison wall on the right, the great shadow of the angel’s wings, but nobody notices. Why do the earthly figures not react to the heavenly manifestation? The candle flame, in the centre of the painting, is being pushed aside by the drapery of Mary’s cloak (Figure 10). The cloth does not catch fire, which indicates the metaphysical difference between both spheres. Without displaying amazement, making devotional gestures or turning their gaze towards heaven, they continue to practice the works of mercy.²⁸ Maybe the multiple meaning

of light offers answers, because Caravaggio did, indeed, present this deeply traditional theme in an entirely new light.

The light descends from the upper left. Through the powerful contrasts afforded by chiaroscuro, Caravaggio's light makes bodies more realistically visible, letting them stand out in a three-dimensional manner. The picture is painted in a 'full-bodied, sharply defined style', so the 'contrast between light and shade' is 'without half-measures and without "sweetening" the context' [Strinati 2007, 146–148 (fig.)]. But the composition does not include the path of the falling light, it shows only its white reflections on skin and cloth. Hence, the relief that is granted to the poor and distressed, which would remain in the dark were it not illuminated in this manner, is brought to light. It is this spotlight, which indicates – 'Zeigelicht' (Schöne 1954, 137–142) – and allows mercy to shine as a virtue (Bühren 1998, 201–202, on the rhetorical meaning 208–209). With the aid of his compositional light, Caravaggio introduced a major innovation to the iconography of the works of mercy.

At this point, the Holy Scriptures must be mentioned as a literary source. Caravaggio's light is in many ways a metaphor for mercy: 'He who loves his brother abides in the light' (1 John 2:10). The relationship between light and physical objects is that of a flare rather than a glow. This flare might be interpreted as a metaphor for Divine Grace. The merciful helpers play a part in God's Grace. They can be like a bright light of solace for the beggars and those who suffer in wretched darkness. The merciful are not, however, the source of this light. Rather, they pass on a light they have received, for in the painting the source of light manifests only indirectly in the form of a dazzling reflection (Bühren 1998, 201–202; Wagner 1958, 168–170).

Caravaggio, of course, refrained from idealizing the saints in any way when performing his commissions for the Church. This realism also applies to the works of mercy (Robb 2001, 392–398, here 393). The artist combined the strong contrasts of chiaroscuro with muted colours (Prater 1992, 105, 109; Schöne 1954, 137–138). Besides, the emotional mood among the poor and their benefactors is serious. 'No one looks up in hope or joy' (Langdon 1998, 330). Possibly their earnest expressions indicate the human need for redemption, as creatures dependent on material and spiritual support (Bühren 1998, 197, 202–204; Prater 1992, 109–112).

The same can be said for receiving God's Grace. Significantly, the origin of the consoling light in Caravaggio's painting lies outside the field of artistic depiction. In the words of Isaiah 58:6–8 it is the 'gloria Domini':

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.²⁹

The altarpiece 'Works of Mercy' is one of the few Caravaggio paintings to include an internal source of illumination [Brauchitsch 2007, 98; Varriano 2006, 48; Hibbard 1983, 213–219 (fig. 138–141, 143), here 219; Moir 1982, 44]. This is also the case with the single-lighted candle burning on the altar in 'Martyrdom of Saint Matthew' (1599–1600) in the Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, and also with the lantern held by the man at the right in the painting 'The Taking of Christ'

(1602; Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland). In the Naples painting, the ‘earthly’ light of the candle flame (‘Burying the dead’) is opposed, maybe intentionally, to the ‘consoling’ light as a metaphor for life and mercy which descends from the upper left, in fact from outside the field of depiction.

One last thought: the Madonna and the angels do not bring their own heavenly light, distinct from the light of the earthly benefactors. They are painted in the same stylistic mode and subject to the same relationship between light and dark as the humans (Bühren 1998, 197–198; Prater 1992, 104, 106). In this respect, Heaven and Earth merge into a unified composition painted in ‘realist’ fashion. This metaphysical unity expressed in the composition is not visible to the characters in the painting, only to us as viewers. In other words, Caravaggio’s art visualizes something that Christian benefactors cannot see, but only grasp in faith (cf. Romans 8:24; 2 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:8): no good work is performed beyond the gaze of Heaven.

8. Helping the audience to explore mercy in their own lives

This reality is what Pope Francis wanted to confirm when in 2015 he convoked an extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, because ‘not only in history, but for all eternity man will always be under the merciful gaze’³⁰ of God. From this point of view, the Holy Year of Mercy has been an excellent opportunity for cultural and arts journalism, and this for a very specific reason which should be mentioned here in closing.

Caravaggio’s picture confirms the timelessness of mercy, which is a great virtue. It is a painting ‘that collapses time and space, drawing the whole world and all the world’s history into its dark centre. Classical antiquity, the Old Testament, the New Testament, the early Middle Ages and the present day – every epoch is symbolically represented in the different episodes that crowd the canvas. “Naples is the whole world”, Capaccio wrote, and in Caravaggio’s painting a corner of the city has been transformed into precisely that’ (Graham-Dixon 2010, 344).

At the same time, the painting includes some matters very personal to Caravaggio. He himself had hope for mercy on his mind, since he had killed Ranuccio Tomassoni in May 1606, maybe unintentionally, as the result of a duel between the two men in Rome. Outlawed, he asked for pardon from the Roman authorities and fled to Naples, where he arrived in late September 1606. From there he went to Malta in July 1607.

The possibility cannot be ruled out that the altarpiece attests Caravaggio’s own urgent desire to receive pardon. For a social outsider, being commissioned by the ‘Confraternità del Pio Monte della Misericordia’, a noble and public authority in Naples, was already a kind of benevolence. Maybe this favour inspired the artist to give his best. And in fact, the ‘Seven Works of Mercy’ are the artist’s most important Neapolitan altarpiece, as already indicated.

Looking at the centre of the painting (Figure 9), it can even be assumed that the merciful officer (or nobleman), with a thoughtful face while drawing his sword, might hint at the said incident in Rome. If so, this benefactor with a dark red cloak holds a ‘concealed or disguised symbolism’³¹, whose personal meaning could be decoded only by the artist himself as a ‘secret pictorial script or cryptogram’ [Pächt 1977 (english ed. 1999, p. 71)].

Drawing on the preceding analysis, Caravaggio's painting could be useful for arts journalism. The reference of the picture to human life can help the audience to explore mercy in their own lives.

Someday everybody needs help or mercy, especially common people, who live on the 'periphery' or 'fringes' of society and are 'in need of the light of the Gospel'³². Indeed, in Caravaggio's painting the charitable works are taking place with common people and – probably – among the busy streets of Naples as a kind of metaphor for the tumultuous human condition (Spike 2010, 188, 190). Even though arts journalism is usually concerned, in an objective way, with reporting and discussing cultural works, it does not preclude exploring the subject in greater depth. In Caravaggio's case, giving air to the artist's own desire to receive the grace of mercy is helpful for the journalist's audience. It can build a cultural awareness, that works of art in christianized societies offer a wide range of semantic meaning, and sometimes in a very personal way.

Major Church events will doubtless, therefore, continue to provide prime time for arts and cultural journalism. In 2015 and 2016, the 'Jubilee Year of Mercy' issued a call to journalists, multimedia experts and social media communicators to report on facts, people, ideas and evangelization by using Christian art to explore benevolence, pardon, and mercy.

Notes

1. On Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, cf. Frese 2013; Altripp and Nauwerth 2006; Warland 2002. On the early modern era, cf. Bühren 2014, 93–119; Wegmann and Wimböck 2007.
2. Pope Gregory I, *Letter to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles (July 599)*: Registrum IX, 209; in Norberg 1982, 768. Pope Gregory I, *Letter to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles (October 600)*: Registrum XI, 10, in Norberg 1982, 873–876. Cf. Wolf 1990, 148–156, 291–294.
3. *Decretum Gratiani (Concordia discordantium canonum)*, pars 3: De consecrazione. Cf. Friedberg 1879 (1959).
4. Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, 1582. Cf. Hecht 2016; Della Torre 2002.
5. Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 4.12.1963, no. 122, 127; *Lumen Gentium*. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21.11.1964, no. 67. Cf. Bühren 2008, 213–251, especially 226, 231, 235, 247–248.
6. Italian Bishops' Conference. *Comunicazione e missione*. Direttorio sulle comunicazioni sociali nella missione della chiesa, 2004.
7. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 57.
8. *Ibid.*, no. 58.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, no. 59.
11. Cf. *ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, no. 168.
13. Pope Francis, "Misericordiae Vultus". Bull of indiction of the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, 11.4.2015.
14. Italian Bishops' Conference, *Comunicazione e missione*, 2004, no. 168.
15. Pope Francis, "Misericordiae Vultus", 11.4.2015, no. 9.
16. Pope John Paul II, "Dives in misericordia". Encyclical on Divine Mercy, 30.11.1980, no. 2.
17. Pope Francis, "Misericordiae Vultus", 11.4.2015, no. 14.
18. *Ibid.*, no. 15.
19. Cf. Noye 1980, 1329–1330; Thomas of Aquinas is important for medieval theology. He examined the corporal works of mercy in relation to the concept of almsgiving: *Summa Theologica* II-II, 32, 1–10.

20. Cf. Spike 2010, 186. On the first church of the Pio Monte della Misericordia cf. Gazzara 2003, 51–52 (fig. 1).
21. C. de Lellis, *Aggiunta alla «Napoli Sacra» dell'Engenio Caracciolo*, Napoli 1654–1689, here quoted from vol. I. Cf. Pacelli 2014, 23; Spike 2010, 184; Graham-Dixon, 2010, 340; Caraffa 2007, 119–120; Gazzara 2003.
22. Napoli, Archivio Storico del Banco di Napoli, *Giornale copiapolizze dell'Antico Banco della Pietà*, matr. 3, f. 25, D. 370, 9.1.1607; cf. Spike 2010 (CD-ROM “Catalogue”, 296); Pacelli 1984, 103.
23. Cf. the art historical overview of the works of mercy from the 12th to the 16th centuries in Bühren 1998, 31–210.
24. On the rhetorical meaning of this form of composition cf. Bühren 1998, 207–208. On theatre as a probable reference cf. Spike 2010, 190: the “picturesque actors, blacked-out background, and theatrical lighting are Caravaggio’s homage to the Neapolitan fascination with the stage”.
25. Valerius Maximus, *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri novem* 5, 4. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* VII, 121. Cf. Poeschel 2015, 292–295; Spike 2010, 186; Bühren 1998, 209, 270; Seibert 1968, 352; Braun 1954, 356–362.
26. Alessandro Corona, *Razionale Del Monte*. Origine, statuti e progressi Del Monte, volume manoscritto compilato nell’anno 1700 da Alessandro Corona lo aiutante di razionalia, ed indi razionale dello stesso Pio Monte della Misericordia, Napoli 1745, fol. 101; cf. Spike 2010 (CD-ROM “Catalogue”, 298).
27. Cf. the biblical, catechetical and rhetorical references in Bühren 1998, 199, 206.
28. “Neither blessing nor interceding, the infant Christ and his mother silently bear witness as the acts of mercy are performed with grim urgency and, paradoxically, in utter ignorance of any inducement from heaven” (Puglisi 1998, 265); cf. Zuffi 2010, 200.
29. Translation from: *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* 2010.
30. Pope Francis, “Misericordiae Vultus”, 11.4.2015, no. 7.
31. This concept was introduced by Panofsky 1953, 141.
32. Cf. Pope Francis, “Evangelii Gaudium”. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, 24.11.2013, no. 20, 30, 63 and final prayer in no. 288.

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