



1997.009

Defense of the Eucharist by Philip V of Spain

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

Ca. 1700-1746

Oil on canvas, 64 x 48 inches

On 17 June 1572 a village in the province of Holland was attacked by sea pirates who made their way into the town church. One of the marauders took the consecrated hosts from the altar and trampled on them. Miraculously, one of the hosts began to bleed, and the heretical pirate immediately converted to Catholicism. This miraculous wafer, known as the "Sagrada Forma," was given to Philip II of Spain in 1594, where it joined an already prodigious collection of religious relics at El Escorial. His great grandson, Carlos II (ruled 1665-1700) is

pictured adoring the Sagrada Forma, held aloft in a magnificent monstrance, in a painting by the court artist Claudio Coello; it is still *in situ* in the sacristy of the monastery of El Escorial near Madrid.ⁱ Carlos had a new altar created for the sacristy that would be suitably grand for the venerated relic, and he and his wife Mariana of Neuburg were present when it was transferred there during a sumptuous ceremony in 1684, when the monastery was illuminated with 36,000 candles.ⁱⁱ The painting and the iconographic details of the altarpiece emphasize the personal piety of Carlos II and his dedication to the Eucharist through the symbol of this particular relic.

Soon afterward, in January of 1685, Carlos II was returning to court after a hunting trip when his carriage came upon a priest hurrying along the road. When the king discovered that the priest was carrying the Eucharist to a dying man, he “quickly got down from the coach, and prostrated himself on the ground to adore the sacrificed Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ The king himself helped the priest into the coach, walked on foot to the house of the dying man, and reverently attended the last rites. Reports of this event and poems lauding the king’s actions were quickly published and distributed, sold by blind beggars throughout Spain, and were surely also sent to the colonies in America: “For a moment, the piety of Carlos II was able to eclipse the most popular subject in the printed matter of those years: news of the war against the Turks in the kingdom of Hungary.”^{iv} The event had political impact, as it enhanced the king’s reputation as a Christian Prince and thus his legitimate rule over the Spanish Monarchy.

The Habsburg dynasty had long claimed the Eucharist as a special devotion, beginning with Count Rudolf in the fourteenth century. When Carlos II died in 1700 without a direct heir to the Spanish throne, the Bourbon dynasty that would rule the Spanish empire for the coming centuries continued to appear in Andean paintings as defenders of the sacrament. The Thoma painting represents Philip V, who ruled from 1700 to 1746, and there are many similar representations, even through the reign of Carlos IV who died in 1819, only a few years before his dominions in Spanish America achieved their independence.

The iconography is a colonial invention. While it may be related to a print of 1630 in which King Philip IV is pictured as the armed defender of the Eucharist, the theme in paintings such as this one also references popular theatrical presentations that epitomize the triumphalist tone of Corpus Christi celebrations.^v In the famous series of paintings representing the Corpus Christi procession from the church of Santa Ana in Cuzco, there is a representation of an ephemeral altar with Carlos II atop, unsheathing his sword in order to defend a monstrance set upon a column from the depredations of the infidel standing on the other side (fig. 1).^{vi} The turbaned Moor represents himself and, by extension, all infidels. The fact that Carlos II’s devotion to the Eucharist was first widely publicized in 1685 suggests a *terminus post quem* for the processional paintings.



Fig. 1. Unidentified artist (Cuzco), *The Processional Altar of the Confraternities of Santa Rosa and "La Linda,"* c. 1680s, oil on canvas. Archbishop's Palace, Cuzco.

The composition of the Thoma *Defense of the Eucharist* is representative of the type, an iconography that changes little over time except that the portraits of the kings of Spain become more individually recognizable. King Philip V, in his richly embroidered French eighteenth-century dress, holds his sword on the ready. He is backed up by two helmeted archangels. An elaborate gold monstrance glitters from atop a pedestal, at the base of which is a globe surmounted by a crown and scepter. Three Moors or Turks – they are generic infidels – to the right of the composition wear elaborate robes and turbans, and one brandishes a shield bearing the crescent that symbolizes Islam.

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ⁱ For the whole story, see Edward J. Sullivan, *Baroque Painting in Madrid: The Contribution of Claudio Coello with a Catalogue Raisonné of his Works* (Columbia: Missouri University Press, 1986), 67-79.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 74.

iii Antonio Alvarez-Ossorio Alvariño, “Virtud coronada: Carlos II y la piedad de la casa de Austria,” in *Política, religión e inquisición en la España moderna* (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma, 1996), 39.

iv “Por un momento, la piedad de Carlos II logró eclipsar el tema más popular de los impresos de aquellos años: la novedades de la guerra contra los turcos en el reino de Hungría.” *Ibid.*, 40.

v See Ramón Mujica Pinilla, “The Pillars of Hercules in Charcas: Imperial Visual Politics in the Viceregal Art in Bolivia,” in *The Art of Painting in Colonial Bolivia*, ed. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2017), 98-100, figs. 3.13-3.16. In a version of *Carlos II Defending the Eucharist* in the Franciscan Monastery in La Paz, Bolivia (fig. 3.13), the globe at the bottom of the composition, which is very like the Thoma painting, offers an image of the Cerro Rico, the rich silver mines of Potosí, over which the king asserts his sway from faraway Madrid.