

"Michelangelo's Pieta," Christianity and the Arts

Don Hudson

BY DON MICHAEL HUDSON

Michelangelo's *Pietà*

It was the summer of 1984, the American dollar was strong, and this was my first venture to Europe. I found her and didn't even know I was searching for her. Mysteriously she crossed my path one day in Rome. I should confess though—at this point in my life, I am an uneasy Protestant.

I have been warned about Mary; and yet, I am drawn to her. But I was different back then. Standing before Michelangelo's sublime interpretation of the *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica—there she was. Until then, for me, Mary was a point of division between Protestant and Roman Catholic worship, a theological construct to propose or denounce. I was really there to see Michelangelo and his High Renaissance masterpiece. More secular than sacred, Michelangelo tempers his grand and majestic vision with a sensual grace. I was struck immediately, though, by the simple elegance of his vision. The folds and the flows of the garments articulate the irrepressible beauty that is interlaced with her immeasurable loss. This worldly sculpture expresses tragedy and rhapsody in a single, holy moment.

I noticed that this *Pietà* is not about that grand war between good and evil but rather about the simplicity of human passion. She is not concept but rather flesh and blood. Flesh and blood caressing flesh and blood. Here before me was a mother and her son. For the first time in my life, I began to gain an intimate glimpse into the private saga of Mary and the incomprehensible death of her child. She tenderly bows her head with eyes closed or at the least, her eyes downcast. Is this a gesture of reverence? Of humility? Of grief? Does she bow her head to this moment or to the God of this moment? Michelangelo's vision spurred my perennial question, "Where is God in this moment?" I began to understand that she is a trace of my answer. On the cross, God turned away from the suffering son, the crucified God. Mary, the mother of Jesus, with arms wide open, embraces her son of sorrows. Arms full of the death of God. Holding the rejected son—rejected by God and human alike, Mary holds her child not only with her arms but also with the strength of her body. And yet, her body slumps. If she is holding him up, who then is holding her up?

On Mary we can see no tensely defined muscle—merely graceful folds. With Christ, we encounter a dissonant vision. His body, almost nude and fully exposed, ripples with muscular vitality. Who has truly died in this scene? Can son die and mother continue to live? There is complete acceptance of her misery; and yet, her left hand stretches out to supplicate the omnipresent Father who seemingly abandons her son. She will now be the mediator; the human strand between the all-powerful Father and every human loss. We look upon her as one who ascends, as one who rises above suffering without leaving the scene. She is there in the darkest hour. And she embodies the fleshy presence of compassion. She is the only human to suffer the death of God and the loss of her son in the same moment.

Who better than Mary to intercede on our behalf? That day in Rome I walked away a different man. Mary rounds out the picture of redemption for us—we can retain our deepest sorrows and still yearn toward the all-powerful Father.

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