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Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza: The Wisdom to Obey

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"All wisdom comes from God" (Ecclesiasticus I:I) is the statement chosen by the final patron of S. Ivo alla Sapienza, Alexander VII, to commemorate the chapel's completion.¹ While various scholars have deduced Francesco Borromini's Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza (S. Ivo) to be a "house of wisdom," the wisdom it intends to convey is not discernment with one's faith but the wisdom to abide by religious authority.² Appointed in 1632 by Pope Urban VIII Barberini to create a chapel for the palace of the University of Rome, La Sapienza, Borromini's tenure would continue over three successive pontificates from 1642 to 1660.³ The papal saint of S. Ivo, Ivo of Kermartin, is seen as the "advocate of the poor" and demonstrates the virtues the papal patrons strove to synonymize with their reign.⁴ The dichotomy between Borromini's experimental design yet cautious and time-proven structures is a testament to the "theatricality" of Baroque architecture; the notion that external extravagance may conceal internal motifs lingers throughout the chapel's heraldic and scripture-based iconography.⁵ Under the guise of virtuous wisdom, Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza asserts papal authority; Borromini's heraldic bee imagery and the triple-crowned papal tiara intend to solidify the notion that true wisdom is to fear Divine power.

It is important to note that Borromini inherited the construction of the Sapienza from Giacomo Della Porta, who worked on the Sapienza University building and double loggia courtyard until his death twenty-five years later.⁶ Della Porta's 1581 proposal is credited with the creation of the Sapienza's distinct parti: "three-story, U-shaped palace surrounding the two-story arcaded courtyard; a main entry centered on the west facade, planned dual secondary entries from the eastern rear facade toward Piazza Sant' Eustachio; and a centralized church behind a curved exedra on the eastern end of the courtyard."⁷ Although Della Porta's contribution to the chapel consists of the two-story exedra, Borromini constructed most of St. Ivo, immortalizing the

¹ John Beldon Scott, "S. Ivo alla Sapienza and Borromini's Symbolic Language," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 41, no. 4 (1982): 316, <https://doi.org/10.2307/989801>.

² Louise Rice, "The Pentecostal Meaning of Borromini's Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza," in *Francesco Borromini Proceedings of the International Conference Rome 13-15 January 2000*, ed. Christoph Luitpod Frommel and Elisabeth Sladek Sladek (Milan: Elemond Associated Publishers, 2000), 259, accessed February 20, 2023,

https://www.academia.edu/4058884/The_Pentecostal_Meaning_of_Borrominis_SantIvo_alla_Sapienza.

³ Julia M. Smyth-pinney, "Borromini's Plans for Sant'Ivo Alla Sapienza," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 3 (2000): 316, <https://doi.org/10.2307/991646>.

⁴ Scott, "S. Ivo alla," 309.

⁵ Fabio Dacarro, "A Comparison between Francesco Borromini's Architectural and Structural Design - Focusing on the Churches of San Carlo Alle Quattro Fontane and Sant'Ivo Alla Sapienza -," *Korean Institute of Interior Design Journal* 25, no. 5 (October 31, 2016): 82, <https://doi.org/10.14774/JKIID.2016.25.5.082>.

⁶ Joseph Connors, "S. Ivo Alla Sapienza: The First Three Minutes," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 55, no. 1 (1996): 40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/991054>.

⁷ Smyth-pinney, "Borromini's Plans," 315.

building with nuanced architectural references to the Barberini Bee and the triple-crowned papal tiara.

To enter the Sapienza, the viewer must first surpass an interior courtyard surrounded by two layers of arcaded porticoes.⁸ The Sapienza's facade has a two-story curving exedra with five windows traversing each layer as an optical elongation to the courtyard's double loggia.⁹ The support of the building's culminating cupola is generated through the pilasters of the exedra, as the dome's ribs push the vault's weight to the pilasters of the six exedra corners.¹⁰ While Doric pilasters flank the first-level exedra, the second level switches to Ionic.¹¹

The theme of wisdom by subverting authority to a higher power is evident in the ascension of the interior. Borromini uses a hexagonal bee floor plan, inspired by the six dimensions of bee cells, as both an architectural apparition of Barberini power and a mode of stability, with the vault's angular interior stabilizing the dome's mass.¹² Within the interior vault, Borromini changes three of the six segments of the vault from convex to concave, creating a pattern of concave segments where the cupola's weight distributes to the radial ribs.¹³ This strategy alludes to an early renaissance system known as a "crest and sails" dome or "umbrella vault," a further testament to Borromini's preference for time-proven architectural strategies with design-based innovation evident in the hexagonal floor plan.¹⁴ The vault's ascension is adorned by a crowning cupola with stucco decorations above the windows to conceal the discontinuity of the upper dome's six concave segments.¹⁵ The spire of the building culminates in the three crowns of the papal tiara surrounded by the flaming terminus.¹⁶

With St. Ivo serving as the chapel extension of the University of Sapienza, Borromini was aware of the university's scriptural elements; notably, the line atop the primary student entryway reads: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" in English.¹⁷ The insight that scholars were passing beneath a verse promoting strong religious adherence likely contributed to Borromini's thematic inspiration for the chapel. Borromini alludes to Divine wisdom and the

⁸ Smyth-pinney, "Borromini's Plans," 315.

⁹ Pier Racioppi, "Sant' Ivo Alla Sapienza," Museum With No Frontiers, https://baroqueart.museumwnf.org/database_item.php?id=monument;BAR;it;Mon11;16;en.

¹⁰ Dacarro, "A Comparison," 89.

¹¹ Deniz Ozbek, *Tools and Methods for Historical Research*, ed. Prof. Antonio Russo (Sapienza University of Rome, n.d.), 16, 18.

¹² Scott, "S. Ivo alla," 299.

¹³ Dacarro, "A Comparison," 88.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 87

¹⁶ Scott, "S. Ivo alla," 302.

¹⁷ Ibid., 296

darker undertone of religious subservience through the architectural apparitions of the Barberini Bee and triple-crowned papal tiara.

As a testament and insinuation of power to the first patron of the chapel, Pope Urban VIII, Borromini designed the floor plan around the heraldic emblem of the Barberini bee. Inspired by the hexagonal shape of bee cells, the insect within the pope's family crest, Borromini's ground plan presented to Pope Urban in 1640 rendered the "house of wisdom" to be built upon the "Barberini hexagon."¹⁸ This hexagon establishes "both the shape of the interior wall and the structural system of the dome - the four wings, head, and abdomen conforming to the six lobes of the plan."¹⁹ The symbolic choice to have a bee as the church's foundation commemorates the building's initial patronage and draws parallels between the virtues synonymous with the insect and Pope Urban's reign: "religiosity, and the organization and architecture of its hive."²⁰ While alluding to wisdom and patronage, the hierarchical nature of bees may be a subsequent motif, as these insects are known to strictly obey their ruler. Among relevant scripture equating wisdom with bees are Divine wisdom's own words from Ecclesiasticus: "For my spirit is sweet above honey: and my inheritance above honey and honeycomb" (24: 27). Therefore, the bee structure facilitates the motif that wisdom is the acknowledgement of a higher power beyond one's own. Borromini's use of a floor plan replicating the bee shape is an ode to the heraldry of its first patron and a potential omen that wisdom is to abide by the existing religious order.

Secondly, the spire atop the cupola culminates in a triple-crowned papal tiara, an ode to the chapel's lineage and morality. Alexander VII ordered the chapel's completion in 1655, which prompted a survey of the work up to that date; the entries regarding the three-turn spiral used terms like "jewels" and referred to the spiral as "crowns."²¹ The nuance of Borromini's creation is evident in the unification of the bands to represent three realms of papal authority: "priestly, royal, and imperial"; Borromini's close ally, Fioravante Martinelli, subsequently describes the spiral as a "commodious stairway for climbing up to the cross."²² These motifs of unification and ascension solidify the building's notion that true wisdom is to render God as the overarching source of authority. Borromini's collaboration of three individual crowns into one distinct unit is

¹⁸ Smyth-pinney, "Borromini's Plans," 330.

¹⁹ Scott, "S. Ivo alla," 299.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 301

²¹ *Ibid.*, 304

²² *Ibid.*, 306

an ode to the papal patrons, retaining their identities yet asserting the notion that true wisdom is to render God as the overarching source of authority.

In this essay, I have argued that under the guise of virtuous wisdom, Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza is an assertion of papal authority; the usage of heraldic bee imagery and the triple-crowned papal tiara intends to solidify the notion that true wisdom is to fear the all-knowing and Divine power. While the heraldic bee and whimsical crown appear to convey a bare testament to the structure's papal patronage, the depth of these motifs depicts a heightened, sharp notion carried over from the university. Returning to Alexander VII's final verse synonymous with the building, true wisdom, as conveyed by the St. Ivo, is not self-reason but total adherence to God and his virtues as they are subsided upon man.

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