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## Northern European Artist

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- 10 *Mass of Saint Gregory*, early 16th century  
oil on panel  
27 × 20½ in.

GIFT OF MR. HIMAN BROWN, 1961.570

A widely circulated image in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Northern Europe records a vision that occurred during a Mass performed by Pope Gregory the Great. According to one version of the legend, Christ appeared on the altar in response to a spectator who doubted his true presence in the Eucharist. In the *Mass of Saint Gregory*, Christ is portrayed as the Man of Sorrows. He is alive but bears the wounds of the Crucifixion, with blood streaming from his side into a chalice on the altar. Gregory kneels before it, a Crucifixion-imprinted Eucharistic wafer in his hands. He is accompanied by an entourage of assistants and church leaders. Dressed in copes similar to those of Saint Gregory, a deacon and subdeacon assist in the celebration of the Mass. At the end of the altar, two blond altar boys hold candles. The cardinal at lower left wears a red robe, his hat hanging down his back. Directly behind Gregory, a man in a red fur-lined robe holds his papal tiara, while to his right a bishop holds his crosier.

Several theories have been advanced to explain the great popularity of this subject at this time in history. Concurrent with this image's meteoric rise in prints and paintings, in the years leading up to the Protestant Reformation various groups challenged the claim that the bread and wine of the Mass became the actual body and blood of Christ. The illustration of this miraculous event, therefore, served as visual proof of this Catholic belief. The image also spoke to changing devotional practices and needs. A consistent feature of Saint Gregory's Mass imagery, the Arma Christi, or weapons of Christ, have a prominent place. Frequently appearing behind Christ, here they are scattered across the painting. In close proximity to the Man of Sorrows are the dice and nails, which rest on the edge of the altar table.

The other objects, including the ladder, whip, column, rooster, reed bundle, sponge, basin and pitcher, and lance appear at upper right. Onlookers, some in the gallery, represent Christ's tormentors. Together with Christ's wounded body, the Arma Christi, as representations of individual moments in his Passion, served as devotional aids. Theologians encouraged the faithful to vividly contemplate each episode of Christ's suffering as a path to salvation.

While Gregory Mass images upheld Eucharistic doctrine and permitted devotional contemplation of Christ's body and his human suffering, their soaring popularity should mainly be attributed to their connection to indulgences, which reduced the amount of time spent in Purgatory. By saying such prayers as the Paternoster and Ave Maria, penitents could have a specified amount of time deducted from their confinement in Purgatory, which was perceived as a place of torture and torment. Not present in all Gregory Mass images, two donors, presented by their patron saints, kneel in the lower right corner of the painting, their hands pressed together in prayer. A popular image for tomb monuments, the indulgence function was especially important to the donors. In this context, the image encouraged visitors to pray for them, thereby reducing their time in Purgatory.

The crowded composition and microscopic attention to detail identify this painting as Northern European. Strong illusionistic passages, such as the embroidered copes of the celebrants, coexist with spatial incongruencies. The artist tilted the space and employed oblique angles to give visual attention to all the components. The diminutive scale of the donors and Christ reflect their human and visionary status, respectively.

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