

PACHAMAMA 2

## In Linz, catto-feminism doesn't even spare the Madonna

ECCLESIA

04\_07\_2024



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A, to say the least, irreverent statue of the Virgin Mary on display in Linz Cathedral, also called *Mariendom* since it is dedicated to Her. The work in question is **Esther Strauß's** *Crowning*, which has been on display since June 27 in the same cathedral, where the *Turmkapelle West*

is used as an art space (*Kunstraum*) and let's just say an ideological one. The exhibition would have gone on until July 16, except that someone thought to vandalize it on July 1. A new "Pachamama case," and surely the hitherto unknown hand is not that of the Austrian who threw the idol of discord into the "blond Tiber": here the statue was directly decapitated, instead of thrown into the "beautiful blue Danube." Of course, following a script already seen *in Italy as well*, the diocese of Linz expresses dismay: but only at the damage, certainly not at the insult to the Virgin Mary constituted by that statue.

**The occasion is the centenary of the cathedral**, completed in 1924. To celebrate the anniversary a series of events under the title of *Donna Stage* that transforms the temple "into a place for discussion on contemporary issues related to the role of women, the image of the family, and gender equality"; discussion in the round, since on p. 18 of the catalog we also find the *Trans* issue *in the context of theology and the Church*, where we can read "that the Church is not able to speak and act in this sense [of a recognition towards these people, ed.] Moreover, doctrinal positions make pastoral practice more difficult and fuel resentment."

**The most controversial installation in the series is that of Esther Strauß**, which depicts the Virgin Mary (recognizable by her halo and "canonical" red robe with a blue mantle), *naked* from her pregnant belly down and with her legs spread apart in the act of giving birth-and in pain, despite the fact that the Church has always believed anything but about Mary's virginal birth. The title *Crowning* not only means "crowning," but is also a technical term relating to a specific stage in the emergence of the offspring from the womb. True, all mothers give birth, but there is no record of anyone keeping a picture of their mother in their home portrayed during childbirth.

**In any case, the one displayed in Linz is certainly not the most suitable way to render a human motherhood, let alone a divine one.** "An image – while scientifically, indeed gynecologically correct – is not only in very bad taste (and already therefore unsuitable to be housed in a cathedral), but also strongly connoted by a blasphemous ideological purpose completely foreign to the Catholic artistic tradition and – dare we say it – also contrary to doctrine." observes the blog *Messainlatino*, reporting in Italian the statement of the Linz diocese that Strauß's work would complement "from a feminist perspective" the historic nativity scene by Sebastian Osterrieder (1864-1932) present in the cathedral.

**"In addition to the two figures of Mary that are part of the cathedral nativity scene** – the kneeling Mary with clasped hands next to the baby in the cradle, which is

set up on Christmas Eve, and the seated Mary with the baby Jesus on her lap, which appears on Epiphany – Esther Strauß created a third figure of Mary: Mary giving birth." This was to compensate for the *diminutio* that Christianity allegedly brought to the ancient mother-goddesses, transforming them "into an a-sexual Mother Goddess" (i.e., the Madonna), explains art historian Ann-Katrin Günzel (also quoted in the diocesan statement), which was of course functional to "patriarchal power relations."

**This "third Mary" would compensate for the previous poor Marys**, of Osterrieder and the entire Christian tradition, since "she is completely herself. She is at the center of her power – and also at the center of her independence," Strauß claims. A perspective also reiterated in the diocesan **statement** following the beheading of the statue, read not as mere vandalism but as "brutality against the female figure." Statues are also "victims of patriarchy," and theologian Martina Resch makes this clear: "Whoever removed the head of the sculpture was very brutal. To me this violence is an expression of the fact that there are still people who question women's rights to their own bodies." But what if it is an expression of the fact that a work, besides being ugly, is also considered sacrilegious and irreverent? And that it disrespects precisely a Woman, capitalized, whom Catholics venerate to the point of drawing the (false) Protestant charge of "Mariolatry"?

**"Dismayed," needless to say, even Johann Hintermaier, episcopal vicar** for education, art and culture, who condemns "the violent act of destruction and the rejection of dialogue, as well as the attack on the freedom of art." Dialogue and artistic freedom, which for him, a priest, are worth the risk of offending religious sentiment, which he also admits to having foreseen: "We were aware that with this installation we would also provoke discussions. If we have hurt people's religious sentiment with it, we are sorry, but...." But the rest matters more to certain complacent clerics – in Austria as in Italy – toward an art that seems to use the sacred (and only the Christian, mind you!) as a pretext for its own expressive whims. And in turn turning sacred spaces into ideological pulpits and religion into a courtesan of the most "shouted" buzzwords that allows them to present themselves to the public with the reassuring face of chaplains of ecologism, of rights (the more "fashionable" ones), of the fight against patriarchy. After all, it is enough for them to turn the other cheek: not their own, but that of Christ, Mary and the many disappointed Christians who would expect from them words of eternal life but who too often receive in response those same cheap words that already pass the world by.