The iconography of St Charles Borromeo (1538–84) contains some interesting instances of the kneeling saint in the immediate vicinity of the recumbent figure of the deceased Christ. The Saviour’s largely nude body, head sometimes still crowned with thorns, is placed on a catafalque or marble slab. An example is a painting executed after 1615 for the Church of Santi Carlo e Giustina in Pavia, by the Milanese artist Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1574–1625), now in Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera (Fig. 9.1). The work represents St Charles, dressed as a cardinal, kneeling and looking up to an angel who is pointing at the body of Christ.1 What is especially striking in this painting and images like it is that they suggest the real presence of the sixteenth-century Milanese archbishop at Christ’s bier. By uniting the figures of Christ and St Charles in one and the same space, realistically proportioned to each other, the painters emphasize that, to the saint, the body of the dead Christ is almost tangible. It is as if, long after the biblical events of Christ’s crucifixion and burial, Borromeo found a miraculous way to go back in time some one-and-a-half millennia to find the Saviour’s body inside the hermetically closed tomb.

However improbable the scene may appear, these paintings reflect a specific religious experience and practice, as they are documented in the earliest written accounts of Charles Borromeo’s life. In 1610, Giovanni Pietro Giussano became the first hagiographer of Borromeo, who was canonized in that same year. On several occasions, the author stresses the fact that the cardinal cherished a special devotion to Christ’s Passion. According to Giussano’s account and other biographical sources, in October 1584 Borromeo travelled to a pilgrim’s sanctuary known as Sacro Monte (‘Holy Mountain’) near the town of Varallo Sesia in Piedmont, some one hundred kilometres northwest of the archiepiscopal see in Milan. In Varallo, St Charles visited the chapels where paintings and sculptures depicted episodes from Christ’s Life and Passion, to which the chapels were dedicated. Borromeo turns out to have given special

1 For the iconography of Charles Borromeo, see e.g.: Carlo Borromeo 1997 (for the theme St Charles at the bier of Christ: pp. 248–50); Carlo e Federico 2005.
attention to the theme represented in the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. In the legend of the Saint, this devotional exercise became closely linked with his own death, which occurred days later, on 4 November 1584, when he was back in Milan. Indeed, St Charles prayed in this chapel on the Sacro Monte ‘as if he