

Analysis of Topics and Iconography related to the Immaculate Conception Controversy Prior to Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks.

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Abstract

This article provides a concise examination of the Immaculate Conception debate before the 16th century, focusing on the unique roles of John the Baptist, Jeremiah, and Mary in medieval understandings of human genesis. Central to this analysis is the rivalry between the Franciscans and Dominicans, particularly that of Dominican scholar Vincenzo Bandello against Pope Sixtus as articulated in his 1481 treatise. Bandello argues for Mary's transition from sanctification in the womb to an immaculate state at the Annunciation, aligning with St. Bernard and Thomas Aquinas' views. His interpretation underscores the complexities in the terms 'sanctification' and 'immaculacy,' crucial in shaping the arguments of both sides of the controversy.

Thomas Aquinas' significant influence is also explored, emphasizing baptism's role in the Church's sanctification and unity. Aquinas analogizes the Holy Spirit's descent upon Christ as a dove during His baptism to the Church's collective growth, integrating Marian doctrines into the narrative of the Church's sanctification. This symbolism, linked to the dove-like Bride of Canticles, is often referenced in discussions about Mary's immaculate conception.

The article also addresses the 15th-century celebration of the Immaculate Conception feast, highlighting the Florentine Thomist perspective on the Church of Rome's tolerance of the feast as recognition of Mary's sanctification.

Various symbols and iconography such as The Visitation -- where Mary visits Elizabeth and John recognizes Jesus in the womb -- is analyzed for its theological implications in the Immaculate Conception debate. This event enriches the understanding of Mary's role in Christian theology. Additionally, the study investigates the Madonna della Misericordia iconography, popular among 15th-century confraternities. This motif, of Cistercian origin, depicts Mary as a protective figure with her mantle covering the faithful, symbolizing her role as a compassionate guardian and intercessor. This imagery underscores Mary's nurturing nature and her pivotal role in the spiritual community, affirming her importance in the Immaculate Conception discourse.

Dominican vs Franciscan or Thomist vs Scotist?

The Dominicans, officially named the Ordo Praedicatorum or the Order of Preachers, were founded by St. Dominic in 1216. Their inception was a response to the urgent need for informed preaching against heresies, particularly those of the Cathars in Toulouse, France. Central to the Dominican ethos were the core ideals of study, preaching, and teaching, with a strong emphasis on orthodoxy to effectively combat heresy. The Dominicans dedicated themselves to the intellectual defense of Scripture and tradition, honing their skills in disputation to successfully engage in public debates against heretical beliefs.

In 1219, the Dominicans established their first house in Paris, situated in a chapel dedicated to St. James the Great (St. Jacques) on the Rue Saint Jacques, adjacent to the University of Paris.[1] The chapel's dedication to St. James the Great and the Order's rapid scholastic growth led to the expansion of the chapel into a functioning convent. This proximity to the University of Paris played a pivotal role in the Dominicans' educational development, and they soon became known as Jacobins, a name derived from their association with the chapel of St. Jacques.

By 1227, a second Dominican convent was founded in Toulouse, known as the Church of the Jacobins. The Dominicans' proficiency in theological disputation led to their appointment by the Pope as the Church's chief inquisitors, a role they embraced with pride. They were colloquially referred to as the "Hounds of the Lord" (Domina-Canes), a moniker symbolizing their vigilant defense of the faith against heretical influences. The Dominicans were seen as spiritual guardians, protecting the innocent flock from heretical deception.

Their commitment to preaching and teaching was not merely a duty but a way of life, rooted in the belief that reason and the spoken word were powerful tools in defending the

[1] St. James the Major (Greater) and St. James the Minor (Less) are two distinct figures in early Christian tradition. St. James the Major, son of Zebedee and brother of John, was one of Jesus' closest disciples, witnessed key events like the Transfiguration, and was the first apostle martyred. St. James the Minor, son of Alphaeus, is less prominent in the New Testament. He is one of the Twelve Apostles and although mentioned less frequently, he is frequently identified as James, the "brother of the Lord," a leader in the early Jerusalem church.

authority of Scripture and tradition. The Dominicans trained themselves to excel in theological debates, emerging as formidable opponents and chief inquisitors of the Church. They were considered spiritual warriors, wielding the word of God as the sword of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation to their neighbors.

A significant figure within the Dominican Order was Thomas Aquinas, born in 1225 in Roccasecca, Italy. Aquinas joined the Dominicans and dedicated his life to preaching, teaching, and writing. His most influential work, the Summa Theologiae, is a comprehensive study of Catholic doctrine and belief, incorporating insights from the Bible, Greek philosophers, and early church fathers. Aquinas' work became a cornerstone of Catholic theology, and he was revered as the Angelic Doctor within the Order.

Aquinas' method of systematic questioning and answering, known as ‘quaestio disputata,’ was a popular form of dialectic in medieval scholasticism. His teachings, collectively known as Thomism, became a dominant force within the Dominican Order. The early Dominicans, including Thomas Aquinas, who studied at the convent of St. James at the University of Paris, were popularly known throughout Europe as Jacobins, further solidifying their reputation as intellectual and spiritual leaders in the medieval Church.

The Franciscans, formally known as the Ordo Fratrum Minorum (Order of Lesser Brothers), were established in 1209 by St. Francis of Assisi. Embracing a life of poverty, prayer, chastity, and service, they epitomized the virtues of compassion and humility. The order took root in Assisi, Italy, where St. Francis, moved by a sermon on the Commissioning of the Twelve, renounced his possessions to dedicate himself to Christ and a life of poverty. The Franciscan movement, characterized by its Greyfriars and Barefooted monks, rapidly expanded from Italy to other regions, with the Portiuncula in Santa Maria degli Angeli remaining the foundational site of their Order.

John Duns Scotus, a pivotal figure in the Franciscan scholastic tradition during the early 14th century, was a philosopher and theologian celebrated for his profound insights into the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the field of metaphysics. Known by the surname "Scotus," indicative of his Scottish origins, he quickly rose as a youthful and influential master at Paris. Traditionally believed to have died at the early age of 34, Scotus was a

Franciscan friar deeply influenced by the ethos and teachings of his order. His philosophical and theological explorations, rooted in Franciscan values, significantly impacted his approach to various doctrinal subjects.

Scotism, the intellectual framework formulated by John Duns Scotus, focused on the uniformity of existence and the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. These concepts resonated with Franciscan values, highlighting the uniqueness of all creation and its connection to concepts like Original Sin and Original Justice. In Scotus's time, intense competition existed between the Franciscans and Dominicans, fueled by their mendicant roles, the quest for patronage, and ties to influential political factions.[2] This contention frequently emerged in theological discussions, particularly in debates centered around Scotist doctrines.

Scotus's perspective on the Immaculate Conception of Mary markedly contrasted with that of Thomas Aquinas, a preeminent Dominican theologian and philosopher of the medieval era. Aquinas held that Mary was conceived with Original Sin but was sanctified in the womb. In contrast, Scotus presented a unique interpretation, advocating for Mary's conception entirely devoid of sin. He argued that Christ's perfect atonement for Adam's sin necessitated the preservation of at least one descendant of Adam from sinning, and that Mary was this preserved individual. Scotus contended that preventing a person from falling into sin was a greater grace than allowing them to sin and then redeeming them. This perspective directly challenged Aquinas's stance that Mary was conceived with

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[2] In the early 1300s, Pope Boniface VIII, reigning from 1294 to 1303, found himself embroiled in a conflict with King Philip IV of France, known as 'The Fair'. The Dominicans in Paris, commonly referred to as Jacobins, backed King Philip, leading to the expulsion of many Franciscans (including Scotus) from Paris who were aligned with Pope Boniface. Boniface, troubled by the growing secular power exemplified by royal authorities like Philip, famously asserted the dual nature of worldly power: the papal and the royal. His discomfort with secular authorities wielding equal or greater influence than the Church led him to excommunicate King Philip. In his notable and contentious papal bull Unam Sanctam (1302), Boniface declared the necessity of subjugation to the Roman pontiff for salvation, thereby establishing the doctrine of Papal primacy and, in effect, overshadowing Christ's role in salvation. Utilizing this newfound authority, Boniface controversially elevated his own family members to the rank of Cardinals. This papal action and Boniface's stance did not sit well with Dante Alighieri, a Florentine profoundly influenced by the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella. Dante, in his literary masterpiece, consigned Boniface to the eighth circle of hell, reserved for simonists, as a critique of the Pope's actions and the broader Church politics of the time. Coincidentally, St. Bernard, as the patron of the Florentine Signoria and original voice against the Immaculate Conception of Mary, is exalted as Dante's guide in the Empyrean, the highest realm of heaven.

Original Sin, highlighting the theological divide and fomenting anger between the Franciscan and Dominican friars (brothers).

Again, the Franciscan Order, officially known as the Ordo Fratrum Minorum or the Order of Lesser Brothers, received its name presumably because of its emphasis on humility and simplicity, akin to being 'lesser' in status. This title, "Lesser Brother," intriguingly suggests a contrast with "Greater Brother," a concept that can be linked to the early Christian tradition of St. James the Major (Greater) and St. James the Minor (Lesser). St. James the Major, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, was a prominent disciple of Jesus, witnessing significant events like the Transfiguration and being the first apostle to be martyred. In contrast, St. James the Minor, the son of Alphaeus, is a slightly less prominent figure in the New Testament. He is one of the Twelve Apostles and is often identified as James, the "brother of the Lord," playing a key role in the early Jerusalem church. The parallel between James the Major and James the Minor aptly symbolizes the dynamic between the Franciscans and Dominicans, two mendicant orders often perceived as theological siblings in rivalry within the Church. As seen above, the Dominicans, also referred to as Jacobins, are linked with St. James the Greater (Major), a connection rooted in their early establishment in Paris. In contrast, the Franciscans, known as the "Lesser Brothers" (Ordo Fratrum Minorum), would naturally align with St. James the Lesser (Minor), reflecting their ethos of humility and simplicity. This symbolic association between the two orders and the figures of St. James underscores their differing theological perspectives, which became particularly pronounced during Scotus' disputation on the Immaculate Conception in Paris. The Franciscans' subsequent exile from Paris, orchestrated by King Phillip who was aligned with the Dominicans against Pope Boniface, further highlighted the deep-seated differences between these two influential orders of 'brothers' (friars).

The Medieval Perspective on Human Genesis: A Threefold Process

At the outset, to understand the nature of the controversy over the Immaculate Conception, it is imperative to grasp the medieval conceptualization of human genesis, which can be roughly delineated into three discrete stages:

1) Carnal Conception (Origin): This initial stage occurs on the first day in the womb, marking the instant of physical conception from the sexual union of male and female. This natural process signifies the beginning of human life in its most primal form.
2) Animation (Days 40 to 80): This phase is characterized by the 'animation' of the person, a term used to describe the ensoulment process. It is during this period that the soul begins its journey of development within the flesh, evidenced by physical movements such as the baby's kicking. It is crucial to distinguish this natural phenomenon of ensoulment from the supernatural act of sanctification, which involves the reception of the Holy Spirit.
3) Spiritual Conception (Days 81 to post-natal Baptism): Anytime between day 81 in the womb to the sacrament of infant baptism, this stage encompasses the conception of the Spirit, wherein the Holy Spirit enters the soul. This sanctification, a divine act, was first termed as 'spiritual conception' around 1100, possibly by Anselm, to contrast it with the conception of the flesh.

The Exceptional Cases: John the Baptist, Jeremiah, and Mary

Before the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was formally established as dogma in the 19th century, it was a widely held belief that only a select few, namely John the Baptist, Jeremiah, and Mary, received the Holy Spirit in the womb and were sanctified before birth. This belief stood in contrast to the general populace, who were thought to receive the Holy Spirit postnatally through the sacrament of Baptism. In contemporary Catholic thought, the notion of denying the Immaculate Conception of Mary is virtually inconceivable. Mary, hailed as "full of grace," is seen as inherently special, possessing a unique quality that predestined her to be the Mother of God. This quality, as theologians and believers assert, is her conception without the stain of Original Sin.

The doctrine of Original Sin posits that humanity has inherited a sin nature from Adam and Eve, a legacy of concupiscence that predisposes us to sin. This theological framework, however, presented a significant dilemma: If Mary was conceived with Original Sin, even if

cleansed momentarily thereafter, she would have been momentarily tainted. This brief taint would not only categorize her as a sinner but also risk passing this blemish to Jesus at His conception. To resolve this, theologians and mystics postulated that Mary, to bear the sinless Christ, must have been conceived without Original Sin.

The Development of the Immaculate Conception Doctrine

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, concerning Mary's state of sinlessness, emerged gradually within the Church, initially gaining attention in the Eastern Orthodox Church before influencing Western Roman theology.[3] By the year 390, Augustine, a key figure in formulating the doctrine of Original Sin, posited that Mary was free from personal sin, a belief that underscored the sanctity of God. This led to complex theological questions: Was Mary sinless from the moment of the Annunciation/Incarnation, or was she born without sin? If she was born sinless, was this due to her being sanctified in the womb, or was her very conception immaculate? As theologians explored these questions it led to two primary interpretations:

1) Mary was preserved from Original Sin: This viewpoint argues that Mary was shielded from Original Sin by virtue of Christ's merits, implying she was conceived without sin.
2) Mary was sanctified in the womb: This perspective maintains that Mary, though conceived with Original Sin, was sanctified and cleansed in the womb prior to birth.

The Protoevangelium of James: Shedding Light on Mary's Early Life

The concept of the Immaculate Conception gradually solidified over the centuries, drawing support from the apocryphal Protoevangelium (Gospel) of James, believed to be written by St. James the Minor.[4] This text is crucial in clarifying the doctrine, especially

[3] Andrew of Crete (ca 700 AD) was to first seriously preach that that Mary was immaculately conceived, and wrote several homilies to that effect. It is unclear, precisely, how his concept of Mary's Immaculate Conception migrated from Greece (ca 700 AD) to England/Scotland (1000 AD) and circumvented Italy/France/Spain, but it is a known fact that Andrew of Crete was so well known that he became a 'Saint' of both the Roman Catholic and Greek orthodox church.

[4] St. James the Minor (Less) and St. James the Major (Greater) are two distinct figures in early Christian tradition. St. James the Major, son of Zebedee and brother of John, was one of Jesus' closest disciples,

through the story of Mary's parents, Anne and Joachim. It offers essential insights into Mary's extraordinary sanctity and her central role in the Christian salvation narrative. The Protoevangelium presents us with varying accounts of Anne and Joachim's experience, each version carrying profound theological implications. Common to all versions is the portrayal of Anne and Joachim as an elderly, childless couple, perceived as bearing the mark of God's displeasure. In one narrative strand, their infertility is met with rejection by the temple priest during the annual sacrifice, leading Joachim to retreat into the mountains in a state of prayerful fasting. It is here that an angelic visitation brings the promise of a daughter, Mary, conceived wondrously, although naturally, upon Joachim's return to Anne.[5]

However, an alternate version of this narrative introduces a critical theological shift: the timing of Mary's conception. In this rendition, Anne conceives Mary miraculously prior to Joachim's return, with their subsequent embrace serving merely as a symbolic affirmation of this divine act. This subtle yet significant alteration transforms Mary's conception from a natural to a supernatural event, effectively bypassing the process of concupiscence and, by extension, the transmission of Original Sin.

Theological Ramifications of Mary's Conception

This shift in narrative emphasis from a natural to a supernatural conception of Mary is not merely a textual variation but a theological watershed. It positions Mary, much like Christ, as a being conceived without the stain of Original Sin. In the theological landscape of northern Europe, particularly by the early 12th century, this understanding began to crystallize, casting Mary as a wholly sinless human, mirroring Christ's sinless conception. This raises a profound theological question: if Mary was conceived supernaturally and was wholly sinless, what then was her need for a savior? This question strikes at the heart of

witnessed key events like the Transfiguration, and was the first apostle martyred. St. James the Minor, son of Alphaeus, is less prominent in the New Testament. He is one of the Twelve Apostles and although mentioned less frequently, he is frequently identified as James, the "brother of the Lord," a leader in the early Jerusalem church.

[5] The Dominican Jacobus Voragine relates this version in his hugely popular ‘Golden Legend’, ca 1260.

Christian soteriology and Christology, challenging us to reconcile Mary's unique sanctity with the universal need for redemption through Christ.

The Scholastic Debate and Resistance

Despite the narrative support from the Protoevangelium of James, the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception encountered significant resistance, particularly in the 13th through 15th centuries. This resistance was rooted in the scholastic tradition, which heavily relied on rigorous intellectual inquiry and scriptural exegesis. The first notable opponent of this doctrine was St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian monk, whose writings not only reflect the early skepticism surrounding the concept of Mary's sinlessness from conception, but also fueled later Dominican opposition.

The Franciscan Order, known for its acceptance of the opinion, also grappled with this doctrine. Notably, no Franciscan Doctor before John Duns Scotus dared to dispute publicly the idea of Mary being preserved from Original Sin.[6] Even St. Bonaventure, a towering figure in Franciscan theology, found himself in a quandary. While personally inclined towards the doctrine, he could not fully embrace it due to the lack of scholastic support and scriptural backing.[7] For Bonaventure and many of his contemporaries, the crux of the argument against the Immaculate Conception hinged on the interpretation of several key scriptural passages. Romans 3:23-24 and John 1:29 were pivotal in this debate. These verses underscore Christ's perfection and his sacrificial role as the propitiator for humanity's sins, emphasizing His uniqueness as the universal redeemer and savior (Salvatore Mundi). The theological challenge was to uphold this Christocentric focus while exploring the possibility of Mary's exceptional sanctity.

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[6] Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum, 1902, p. 403-404. In 1480 Pope Sixtus IV commissioned Bernardo Bustis, a Milanese Franciscan, to write a new Office for the Immaculate Conception of Mary. In this Office, Bustis relates a story about Scotus concerning the first ever public disputation over the Immaculate Conception at Paris. Scotus alone defended the Immaculate Conception so intelligently and bravely against his [Dominican] adversaries that he earned the title 'The Subtle Doctor'. Bustis cites scripture verses which imply that Scotus is a type of persecuted martyr speaking truth in the face of a multitude of God's enemies. Luke 21:13-15, 2 Chronicles 20.15; O'Conner, The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, p. 196

[7] Hugolinus, The Immaculate Conception, p. 98. Bonaventure: *"…no one has been set free from the guilt of original sin except the Son of the Virgin alone. For as the Apostle says in Romans 3 – "All have sinned and need the glory of God"….. St. Augustine says this same thing when treating words of St. John, '**Behold the Lamb of God**', commenting 'He alone could take away the sins of the world, he who came without sin, because he is free from every sin. And this opinion is more common, more reasonable and safer"*

Maculist and Immaculist

By the early fourteenth century, there were two competing opinions concerning Mary's conception, each of which had its avid proponents. The Maculist position, which held sway as the majority opinion and was deeply entrenched in the Church's teaching and university theology, is a fascinating study in doctrinal continuity and scriptural interpretation. The Papacy in general, but most specifically the Dominicans were bastions of this viewpoint. The Maculists adhered to the Augustinian and Thomist understanding that Mary, like all humans, was conceived with Original Sin. However, in a divine act of sanctification, she was cleansed of this sin while still in the womb, a process akin to the sanctification of John the Baptist and the prophet Jeremiah, as suggested by scriptural accounts. This theory, heavily influenced by the teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas, towering figures in medieval theology, underscores a continuity with traditional Christian thought. Aquinas, whose contributions to theology we shall revisit, provided a framework that harmonized the doctrine of Original Sin with the sanctity of Mary, positioning her as a unique but not exempt participant in the human condition.

The Immaculist Position: Emerging Thought

In contrast, the Immaculist opinion -- though a minority view and lacking in rigorous scholastic formulation at the time -- was gaining traction with the laity and represented a new and emerging theological perspective. This viewpoint found its early echoes in the Theotokos concept of early Greek commentators and had begun to resonate in northern Europe by the end of the 12th century. The Immaculists proposed a radical idea: Mary was endowed with a special grace at the very instant of her conception.

This grace was conceptualized in various ways. A popular belief among the laity, influenced by the apocryphal narrative of Anne and Joachim in the Gospel of James, was that Mary's conception was supernatural. On the other hand, scholastic theologians, following Augustine's lead, posited that Mary's conception was natural, through the usual means of human procreation, but she was miraculously preserved from the stain of Original Sin.

The lack of robust scholastic support for this miraculous preservation led the Immaculists to employ subtle reasoning and explore theological loopholes. They focused on Mary's unique privilege and her suitability as the mother of the Messiah. It was in this context that the concept of 'redemptive preservation' emerged, a nuanced doctrine that was later refined and promoted by the influential Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus. Scotus played a pivotal role in advancing the Immaculist argument. His theological acumen and philosophical insights provided a more refined and intellectually robust framework for understanding Mary's unique grace. Scotus argued that Mary's preservation from Original Sin was a preemptive act of redemption by Christ, a concept that would later become central to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as it is understood today.

Scotus' Argument: Preservation vs. Redemption

The concept of Mary's preservation from Original Sin was first contemplated by William of Ware, a Franciscan lecturer at Oxford in the late 13th century.[8] Ware's initial ruminations set the stage for a more elaborate and logically coherent formulation by his young student, John Duns Scotus. Scotus, later known among his Franciscan brothers as the Subtle Doctor, expanded upon Ware's ideas, developing a robust argument that would challenge the prevailing Thomist perspective and reconcile the pervasive Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin with the universal redemption offered by Christ.

Scotus daringly posited that denying Mary's Immaculate Conception detracted from Christ's role as the most perfect Redeemer.[9] He argued that it is a greater act to preserve someone from evil than to allow them to fall and then rescue them.[10] This line of

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[8] Wolter, John Duns Scotus, p. 62; Scotus: *"What Jesus could do, it was fitting that He should do, and from this it follows that He did do it; for the Son should honor the Mother…therefore….Mary needed the Passion of Christ, not on account of any sin that was in her, but on account of that which would have been in her, had her Son not **preserved her** through faith…."*

[9] O'Conner, Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, p. 207

[10] Scotus: *"Because Mary committed no sin, she had the greatest need to be redeemed; for by reason of her procreation which followed the natural order of things she would have, at a minimum, contracted Original Sin - had she not been **prevented** from it by the grace of the Mediator. And just as others are in need of Christ's merit for the remission of sin which they have already committed, so too Mary, being completely sinless (other than Original Sin), would have a greater need of the Mediator, namely the need to be **prevented** from contracting Original Sin….. therefore…..The most perfect mediator exercises the most perfect act of mediation possible, with respect to the person for whom he mediates, and with nobody did Christ have a more excellent form of relationship than with his mother Mary. But this is only be because He merited to **preserve** her from original sin….[therefore]….Christ would not have appeased God in the most perfect manner for the fault of Adam if He did not **prevent** at least one descendant of Adam from offending Him, and save at least one descendant of Adam*

reasoning led him to draw a parallel with the angels, who, as created beings, are exempt from Original Sin and thus 'innocent.' Scotus suggested that if angels could be created free from Original Sin, then Mary, also a creature, could have been similarly 'preserved'. This was a significant departure from the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who held that figures like Mary, John the Baptist and Jeremiah were sanctified in the womb and not preserved from Original Sin from conception.

Scotus employed a popular analogy, comparing humanity's fall into Original Sin to falling into a pit. He argued that while Jesus' death allowed for the redemption of mankind from this pit, as the perfect redeemer, it would be fitting for Jesus to prevent at least one person – Mary – from ever falling into it. This act of preservation would both honor Mary as the Mother of God and align with the notion of Christ performing the most perfect and excellent deed.

Thomistic Opposition and the Concept of Redemptive Preservation

However, Scotus' argument was met with harsh criticism. Thomistic theologians pointed out what they saw as a fundamental flaw in his reasoning. They argued that the concept of 'redemptive preservation' was an oxymoron; if someone is preserved from sin, then what are they redeemed from? This critique was forcefully articulated by Vincenzo Bandello in the 15th century. In his treatise, Bandello, leveraging scriptural references and the authority of church fathers, argued that only Christ and the angels are created innocent without Original Sin, placing them in a unique category. Mary, conceived as a completely fallen human, could not be equated with them.[11] Bandello's argument was a direct

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who has offended Him. It is a more excellent benefit to ***preserve*** *a person from evil, than to permit him to* ***fall into it*** *and then deliver him from it.... If Christ merited grace and glory for so many souls, who, for these gifts, are indebted to Christ as Mediator, why should no soul be His debtor for the gift of its innocence?* ***And why, since the blessed Angels are innocent, should there be no human soul in heaven (except the soul of Christ) who is innocent, that is, never in the state of original sin?.....****[therefore].... "The Blessed Mother of God... was never at enmity with God either on the account of actual, committed sin, or on the account of inherited original sin. However, she would have been at enmity with God had she not been* ***preserved*** *from original sin"*

[11] Bandello, Tract p. 99, 193, 164, 173. *"Any who are immune to all sin have been preserved. These are preserved from the punishment that comes from the debt and penalty of sin, like in the case of the holy angels. However, since the Blessed Virgin was not preserved from the punishment due for the guilt of all mankind, she was therefore not preserved from Original Sin."* The angels and Christ alone are capable of perfect innocence.

challenge to the Scotist perspective, asserting that the notion of Mary being preserved from Original Sin was not only oxymoronic, but heretically inconsistent with the established understanding of human nature and redemption.[12] Bandello then curved and leveraged the words of the current Pope Sixtus IV -- a Scotist Franciscan who heavily promoted the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception -- to argue that even the Pope implicitly acknowledged Mary's human nature and, by extension, her participation in fallen humanity.[13] In his treatise, Bandello quoted Sixtus IV's bull concerning the newly approved Feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception, using it to support his argument that Mary, like all flesh and blood, was part of fallen humanity and thus born with Original Sin. Bandello's interpretation of Sixtus' bull disturbed the Pope greatly and caused significant uproar among the Scotists, who saw in John Duns Scotus' formulation a reconciliation of Mary's unique role in salvation history with the doctrine of universal redemption.

The Feast of the Conception

By the mid-12th century, the veneration of Mary's Immaculate Conception had begun to crystallize into a distinct festival, particularly noted in the prominent Church of Lyons in France. This development caught the attention of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a formidable scholastic figure and a Cistercian monk renowned for his theological acumen. Bernard, in

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According to Augustine's commentary on John, he says that Christ alone is innocent, for he is the only one without sin….therefore…it is evident that perfect innocence is found where there is no sin, and that is in Christ alone, and in the Blessed Virgin, but only after her Sanctification….But the angels and Christ are the only creatures which have perfect original innocence. .. And he [Bartholomew] began arguing, crying out and yelling 'Its heretical to say that Christ is a 'creature…Yes, t*he Blessed Virgin exceeded the angels in purity, but not at the time of her conception, but only after her conception, when she was sanctified and prepared to be the mother of God…. Original Sin was impossible for the angels or Adam & Eve because they did not progenerate naturally, and …since the Blessed Virgin was only preserved from committing 'actual sin' (and not Original Sin) she is purer than Adam and Eve who committed 'actual sin'*

[12] Bandello,, p. 182 "You say that the most perfect redeemer, mediator and reconciler must perform the most perfect act of mediation and reconciliation by **preserving** somebody from all sin, and in this way Christ was the perfect redeemer, for by **preserving** the Blessed Virgin from Original Sin he performed the perfect act of **redemption** and reconciliation. However my response to this is that your rational is derived from **Scotus**, which I reject because the argument is false and destroys itself. For the concept of **preservation** from sin would necessitate no need for **redemption**, mediation or reconciliation, etc

[13] Bandello, Tract, p. 154, "[Sixtus writes] 'Because of the fall of humanity into eternal death, the Almighty God, from eternity, looked to prepare the humble Virgin for its restoration, and through the Holy Spirit, by assuming the flesh of our mortality, made her as a habitation……', therefore from Sixtus own words, it can be concluded that the Blessed Virgin had some sin, for all those, before the incarnation of Christ, were part of the fall of the first human, and liable to eternal death. Therefore, since the Blessed Virgin was conceived before the incarnation of Christ, and part of the fall of the first human and liable to death, she must have had 'some' sin. And if not actual sin, then original sin."

a move that was quite unprecedented at the time, penned a letter around 1140 to the Canons of the Church in Lyons, articulating his concerns and objections to this emerging festival.[14]

Bernard's letter is historically significant as it represents not only the first documented critique of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, but it was extremely influential amongst the Dominicans in subsequent centuries. He approached the subject with a critical eye, viewing the festival as an illegitimate and irrational innovation, one that was gaining traction not because of rational apostolic approval but due to its popularity among the laity. Bernard expressed concern that this new festival was transforming the venerable and honorable worship of Mary into what he termed a worship of a 'Mother of Rashness,' 'Sister of Superstition,' and 'Daughter of Levity.'

Bernard's Theological Argument: Upholding the Dignity of Mary and Christ

In his letter, Bernard was not merely dismissive of the new festival; he sought to defend the dignity of both Mary and Christ within the framework of Christian redemption. He posited that Christ, as the Redeemer, held the unique and sole privilege of being completely without sin. In contrast, Mary, while conceived with original sin, received a special blessing. She was made holy before birth, sanctified in the womb in a manner akin to John the Baptist and Jeremiah, thus cleansing her of Original Sin.[15] This perspective

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[14] Addressing Sixtus' Office, Bandello quoted Bernard letter in full. See Tract p. 160 and Epilogue. Bernard: *"I cannot but wonder why there should be among you at this time some who wish to tarnish the splendid fame of your Church by introducing a new Festival, a rite which the Church knows nothing of, and which reason does not prove, nor ancient tradition hand down to us.... The royal Virgin does not need false honor, since she is amply supplied with true titles to honor and badges of her dignity..... [therefore]....willingly the glorious Virgin will be without honor, by which either [original] sin seems to be honored or a sanctity supposed which is not a fact. And, besides, she will by no means be pleased by a presumptuous novelty against the custom of the Church, a novelty which is the mother of rashness, the sister of superstition, the daughter of levity.*

[15] Gasquet, Some Letters of Saint Bernard, p. 300-308, Bernard: *"...before her conception she [Mary] could not possibly be sanctified, since she did not exist, nor in the conception itself, because of the [original] sin which inhered in it. Therefore, it remains to be believed that she received sanctification when existing in the womb after conception, which, by eliminating sin, made her nativity holy, but not her conception..... And indeed I read concerning **Jeremiah**, that before he came forth from the womb he was sanctified, and I think no otherwise of **John the Baptist**, who, himself in the womb of his mother, **felt the presence** of his Lord also in the womb .... these holy persons whom God has sanctified, and brought forth from the womb with the same sanctification which they have received in the womb, I do not hesitate to say that the taint of original sin which they contracted in conception, could not in any manner take away or fetter by the mere act of birth, the blessing already bestowed..... Therefore, although it has been given to some [Jeremiah, John the Baptist and Mary] of the sons of men to be born with the gift of sanctification, yet to none has it been given to be conceived with it. So that to One*

placed Mary in a unique position of honor and sanctity, yet still within the bounds of human nature like John the Baptist and Jeremiah as understood in Christian doctrine.

Bernard's argument was deeply rooted in the theological understanding of his time, which emphasized the universality of Original Sin and the unique sinlessness of Christ. By asserting that Mary was conceived with Original Sin but sanctified in the womb before birth, Bernard sought to maintain a balance between honoring Mary's special role in the Christian narrative and upholding the traditional doctrine of Original Sin.

Bernard's Influence and Legacy in the Dominican Tradition

Although Bernard himself was neither a Franciscan nor a Dominican, but a Cistercian, his writings and stance on the Immaculate Conception would later become a cornerstone for the Dominican order's theological position. His critique of the Immaculate Conception as promoted by the Scotist Franciscans positioned him as an authoritative figure in the Dominican resistance to this doctrine. The Dominicans, following the scholastic tradition and the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, found in St. Bernard's writings a robust theological foundation to argue against the Immaculate Conception.

Bernard's critique, centered on the idea that the festival lacked apostolic approval and deviated from traditional Christian teaching, resonated with the Dominicans' commitment to doctrinal purity and adherence to the teachings of the Church Fathers. His emphasis on the sanctification of Mary in the womb, rather than her being conceived without Original Sin, aligned with the Dominican emphasis on Christ's unique role as the sole figure born without Original Sin.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the 'Angelic Doctor', played a pivotal role in shaping the Dominican perspective on the Feast of the Conception. Drawing inspiration from St. Anselm, Aquinas nuanced Bernard's antagonism towards the celebration of the feast. Anselm had subtly suggested that since the Church had not specifically ordained the celebration of the Feast of the Conception, individuals were at liberty to observe it at their discretion. However, this observance came with a crucial caveat: it should be done with the understanding that

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[Jesus Christ] alone should be reserved this privilege, to Him who should make all holy, and coming into the world, He alone, without sin should make an atonement for sinners."

the exact timing of Mary's sanctification in the womb was unknown. Therefore, the celebration of her Conception should be viewed as a celebration of her Sanctification. This distinction made by Aquinas was profound. It allowed for the observance of Mary's Conception on December 8th, but with the understanding that this was not a celebration of her physical conception through concupiscence, but rather her spiritual conception – the moment her soul was sanctified and cleansed of Original Sin in the womb by the Holy Spirit.[16]

By the 15th century, this nuanced understanding had become a defining feature of the Dominican approach to the feast. The Thomist Dominicans, following the teachings of Aquinas and the guidance of the Apostolic See, celebrated December 8th as the day of Mary's sanctification in the womb – her cleansing from Original Sin. In stark contrast, the Scotist Franciscans, without Apostolic approval, began to observe the same day as the celebration of Mary's Immaculacy – her conception without Original Sin. This dichotomy between the two orders was not merely a matter of liturgical preference but represented a deep theological divide over the nature of Mary's conception and sanctity.

Interestingly, this divide was not without its detractors, particularly within the Franciscan order. The first among these was the 13th century scholastic Franciscan St. Bonaventure, who opposed the feast. Additionally, St. Bernardino of Siena, a renowned 15th-century Franciscan preacher, exhibited caution in his approach to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Bernardino advised his fellow Franciscans to refrain from preaching about the Immaculate Conception in regions where Dominican friars were present, reflecting an awareness of the contentious nature of this doctrinal issue and a desire to maintain ecclesiastical harmony.

In the intricate and often politically charged world of 15th-century Florentine theology, the distinction between the Thomist and Scotist interpretations of the Day of Conception

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[16] Aquinas, Summa 3.27.1 *"Although the Church of Rome does not celebrate the Conception of the Blessed Virgin, yet it tolerates the custom of certain churches that do keep that feast, wherefore this is not to be entirely reprobated. Nevertheless the celebration of this feast does not give us to understand that she was holy in her conception. But since it is not known when she was sanctified,* ***the feast of her Sanctification, rather than the feast of her Conception, is kept on the day of her conception."***

was not merely a matter of doctrinal debate but also one of civic and cultural identity. This controversy surround the Feast of the Conception is finely illustrated in an edict issued on April 12, 1440, by the Florentine Signoria, the governing body of Florence, which was deeply influenced by the writings of its saintly patron, St. Bernard of Clairvaux.[17]

The Florentine Signoria and St. Bernard's Influence

In their daily rituals of devotion, the Florentine Signoria demonstrated a profound reverence for St. Bernard, their esteemed patron saint. This reverence was not only embodied in the prominent placement of his chapel and sacred effigy within the Palazzo Vecchio, the heart of Florentine civic and political life, but also in the lifelong office held by the Cistercians as 'arms bursars' and ballot counters for the Signoria.[18] This homage extended far beyond mere symbolism; it was a reflection of the Signoria's deep-seated resonance with St. Bernard's theological insights, particularly his views on the Virgin Mary. It is noteworthy that St. Bernard himself is said to have experienced a divine visitation from Mary, further cementing his connection to her and influencing his theological viewpoints.

St. Bernard's belief, that Mary, much like John the Baptist – the revered patron saint of Florence – was conceived with Original Sin and subsequently sanctified in the womb, was surely held in high regard by the Signoria. They undoubtedly saw his teachings as a cornerstone of doctrinal authority. This theological perspective of Bernard's found a striking parallel in the spiritual womb of Florence. The massive Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, dedicated to Mary, and the ancient Baptistery of San Giovanni, honoring John the Baptist, stood adjacent to each other on the same piazza in the heart of the city, symbolizing a profound theological and spiritual connection. The pairing of these monumental edifices, in their grandeur and proximity, served as a tangible, monolithic

[17] It is likely that the Priors chose this date to publish the edict in order to subtly reinforce the idea that the Immaculate Conception of Mary is a heresy. April 12th was the Feast of St. Julius. As a champion of orthodoxy, Julius was known as one of the first Popes to protect the divinity of Christ and squash heresy. Not only did Julius establish December 25th as the date of Christ's birth, but he also confronted and eliminated Arianism. Also, 1440 was during the Council of Florence, when Medici / San Marco / Santa Maria Novella / Antoninus / Eugene, etc.. had hegemony over the city and this edict must have been influenced by them and their patron, St. Bernard.

[18] Trexler, R. C. (1991). Public Life in Renaissance Florence. Italy: Cornell University Press, p.29-32.

parallel to Bernard's teachings, seemingly intertwining the destinies of Mary and John in the same womb, harmonious with the theology of Florence under the Signoria's rule.

The Medici, the Council of Florence, and the 1440 Edict

In the 1440s, Florence was under the significant influence of the Medici family, who were ardent supporters of Dominican interests and wielded substantial control over the Signoria.[19] The Medici's alignment with Dominican theology and their influence over the Signoria were instrumental in shaping the religious and political landscape of Florence during this time. This period also was marked by a pivotal ecclesiastical event: the Council of Florence. This Dominican laden council -- which included John Torquemada -- split from the Council of Basel and was notable in its disagreement on several theological matters, including Basel's support for the Immaculate Conception of Mary.[20] [21]

It was in this context that the 1440 edict of the Florentine Signoria was promulgated.[22] Following the teachings of Bernard and Thomas Aquinas, and influence of Torquemada and Antoninus, the edict declared that the Day of Conception on December 8th was to be observed not as a celebration of Mary's immaculate conception but as a commemoration of her sanctification.[23] This was understood as the moment when Mary was cleansed of

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[19] In the 15th century, despite the Medici family's extensive and varied patronage of various orders and churches, their support and involvement with the Dominicans were far more significant.

[20] Kappes, C. W. (2014). The Immaculate Conception: Why Thomas Aquinas Denied, While John Duns Scotus, Gregory Palamas, and Mark Eugenicus Professed the Absolute Immaculate Existence of Mary. United States: Academy of the Immaculate, p.10-13

[21] Hinnebusch, The Dominicans, chapter 5; So great was the Dominican presence in Florence that Mortier called it the 'Dominican Council'.

[22] Migliore, Firenze citta nobilissma, p. 318; The edict reads: "*Moved by piety and religion, the splendid and powerful Priori and the Gonfaloniere of Justice of the people and Commune of Florence deliberated on the twelfth day of the month of April in the year 1440, Indict. 3: That the Day of the Conception, or more truthfully, of* ***the Sanctification of the Conception*** *of the most glorious perpetual Virgin Mary, which is the eighth day of the month of December, is to be celebrated each year in the City of Florence by the closing of shops, under the penalty of 25 lira for whoever does not observe this, to be taken away and applied to the Commune of Florence. Also that the Priori and the Gonfaloniere of Justice, together with their Guilds, should be required to go each year on the sixth day to the Church of Santa Maria del Fiore for an offering with small torches lit, according to the custom which is observed on similar occasions; and it should be observed in this way each year under the penalties contained in the ordinances. Also that the eighth day of the month of December should be understood to be celebrated as a holiday each year, in all things and by all things, and for everyone, and all things in this way and form, just as Sunday is celebrated according to the statutes and ordinances of the aforementioned Commune."*

[23] Aquinas, Summ 3.27; "*Although the Church of Rome does not celebrate the Conception of the Blessed Virgin, yet it tolerates the custom of certain churches that do keep that feast, therefore this custom is not to be entirely*

Original Sin in the womb. The edict reflected not only the theological position of Signoria's St. Bernard, who was revered for his belief in Mary's sanctification, but also the combined religiopolitical influence of all involved at the Council. The 1440 edict thus stands as a testament to the complex interplay of religious beliefs, political power, and cultural identity in Florence. Following the dedication of the Observant Dominican convent of San Marco and its esteemed library, the city of Florence experienced a notable strengthening of Thomist doctrine.

The doctrinal landscape of Florence during the Renaissance was significantly influenced by the Medici family, particularly through their association with San Marco and three key Dominican figures: Antoninus and his later successors, Bandello, and Savonarola. The Medici's involvement in shaping religious and intellectual thought began with Cosimo Medici's patronage of San Marco and the strategic marriage arrangement in 1444 for his eldest son, Piero, to Lucrezia Tornabuoni, a member of a noble family entrenched in the Dominican quarter of Santa Maria Novella. This union not only strengthened the Medici's social and political ties but also deepened their connection with the Dominican Order.

In 1446, a crucial development occurred when Antoninus, who had been serving as the Dominican Prior of San Marco, was appointed Archbishop of Florence. His tenure at San Marco had already established a strong bond with the Medici family, leading to his significant role as godfather to Cosimo Medici's grandchildren, including the future statesman, Lorenzo de' Medici. Antoninus' elevation to archbishop marked a turning point in the integration of Thomist doctrine into Florentine religious and intellectual circles. Bandello later assumed the role of Prior of San Marco, continuing the legacy of Thomist thought and influence in Florence. Under the auspices of the Medici, both Antoninus and Bandello played instrumental roles in embedding and upholding Thomist theology within the fabric of Florentine society.

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reprobated. Nevertheless, the celebration of this feast does permit us to understand that she was holy and without original sin in her conception. But since it is not known when she was sanctified, ***the feast of her Sanctification, rather than the feast of her Conception****, is kept on the day of her conception..... and though the parents of the Blessed Virgin were* ***cleansed from original sin*** *after their birth, nevertheless she still contracted original sin, since she was conceived by way of fleshly* ***concupiscence*** *and the intercourse of man and woman"*

A fervent Thomist and an ardent opponent of the Immaculate Conception doctrine, Antoninus' influence was profound and far-reaching. His seminal work, "Summa theologica moralis," published posthumously in 1477, was a testament to Thomism, and surely maintained Thomist opposition to the Immaculate Conception in Florence.[24] Bandello, who later succeeded Antoninus as the prior of San Marco, continued this Thomist tradition with vigor. In 1481, he published a treatise that not only echoed Antoninus' opposition to the Immaculate Conception but also cited both Antoninus and St. Bernard of Clairvaux as authoritative figures.[25] This treatise, which ferociously attacked the papal support for the Immaculate Conception, resonated powerfully across Italy, bolstering Bandello's reputation among the Dominicans, and reinforcing the Thomist perspective within the broader theological discourse.

The cultural and theological significance of Bandello's treatise is further highlighted by the existence of a unique handwritten copy, dated 1483 and preserved at San Marco. This copy is particularly notable as it was specially commissioned and bound together with an earlier philosophical letter written by Bandello to Lorenzo de' Medici. This letter, likely composed during Bandello's journey to Rome in 1475 for his disputation with Pope Sixtus IV over the Immaculate Conception, underscores the intricate relationship between Bandello and the Medici family.[26] It also reflects the interconnectedness of theology, politics, and culture in Renaissance Florence.

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[24] Antoninus, a staunch Thomist, served as Papal advisor during the Council of Florence. He composed his Summa while he served as Archbishop of Florence (1446 – 1459), and in his mind the scholastic Immaculists – who in Florence were undoubtedly concentrated in the Franciscan quarters of Santa Croce and San Spirito - twisted the words of Scripture and the church fathers to advance their own agenda. He writes: *"If the Scriptures and the sayings of ancient and modern Doctors who were most devoted to the glorious Virgin are well considered, it is manifestly plain from their words that she was conceived in original sin. But they who hold the contrary opinion, twist their sayings contrary to the intention of the speakers…"* See Pusey, An Eirenicon, p. 284

[25] The Summa Theologica of Antoninus was published in 1477. Bandello's book was published in Feb, 1481, and he became Prior of San Marco from 1481 – 1483. To this day an original illuminated manuscript (ca 1483) of Bandello's treatise, bound with a letter to Lorenzo, is kept at San Marco. Bandello writes: "Antonius, the Archbishop of Florence, in the first part of his Summa, entitled On Original Sin, says: "If you want to attend to Sacred Scripture and the Holy Doctors, then it is clearly evident that the Blessed Virgin was conceived in original sin. **Therefore, her conception is not to be celebrated, but her sanctification.**

[26] Kristeller. STUDIES IN RENAISSANCE THOUGHT… p. 150. Visiting Lorenzo in Florence in 1475, most likely on his way from the Dominican convent of Santa Maria Novella in Milan to his disputation in Rome, Bandello responded directly to Lorenzo and took a position contrary to Ficino, by stating the Intellect has superiority over the Will. This indicates that Bandello was already privy to the discussion between Lorenzo and Ficino, for

It is during the 15th century that the debate surrounding the nature of Mary's conception reached its highest level of intensity. The Franciscans, who were advocates for celebrating the Feast in honor of Mary's Immaculate Conception rather than her Sanctification, argued that the existing tradition of several local churches, which celebrated the Immaculate Conception and were tolerated by the Church of Rome, should at least make the observance permissible under a sort of 'grandfather clause'.[27]

In response, the Dominicans, drawing upon the teachings of Aquinas and following the precedent set by St. Bernard, contended that mere tradition could not override what they viewed as heretical beliefs. Aquinas had reasoned that if the Feast of Mary's conception were to be celebrated, it should be in honor of her sanctification in the womb, not her immaculate conception.[28] Thus, the crux of the dispute in the 15th century shifted from whether the Feast should be observed at all to how it should be observed: as a celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception or her Sanctification.

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the preface of Bandello's letter to Lorenzo implies that he recently visited Florence, ca 1475. Florence is in-route between Milan and Rome and surely Bandello would have stayed at San Marco, among his Observant brethren. It is here, using its massive Library as a resource, that he would not only have prepared for December's disputation in Rome , but also, he would have read Ficino's letter to Lorenzo and made his lengthy response. This explains why the letter is kept at San Marco. Therefore, Bandello's stay at San Marco in 1475 was most likely not days or weeks, but perhaps months. Immediately after the publication of his infamous treatise in February 1481, and less than three years after the Pazzi Conspiracy, as the animosity between Lorenzo and Sixtus and Sixtus and Bandello raged on, Bandello was appointed the Prior of San Marco, surely at Lorenzo's behest. Only 5 months after Bandello's appointment, Sixtus would issue a bull stating that anybody who read or held a copy of Bandello infamous book would be excommunicated from the Church, effectively declaring a holy war against the Dominicans generally, but the Medici's San Marco and Bandello specifically. It is in this climate, that as Lorenzo's ambassador, Leonardo left the gardens of San Marco for Milan in February 1482 and immediately received the commission for The Virgin of the Rocks, signed April 25, 1483, the feast of San Marco.

[27] As Edward Pusey ably demonstrated in his Eirenicon, as per Thomas Aquinas, the Feast of Mary's Conception was *tolerated* all throughout Europe, but, up until the 15th century, and not yet being *sanctioned* by the Holy See, it was, following the teachings of St. Bernard and Thomas, chiefly recognized as a celebration of her sanctification in the womb on the day of her conception.

[28] Aquinas, Summ 3.27; "*Although the Church of Rome does not celebrate the Conception of the Blessed Virgin, yet it tolerates the custom of certain churches that do keep that feast, therefore this custom is not to be entirely reprobated. Nevertheless, the celebration of this feast does permit us to understand that she was holy and without original sin in her conception. But since it is not known when she was sanctified,* ***the feast of her Sanctification, rather than the feast of her Conception****, is kept on the day of her conception..... and though the parents of the Blessed Virgin were* ***cleansed from original sin*** *after their birth, nevertheless she still contracted original sin, since she was conceived by way of fleshly* ***concupiscence*** *and the intercourse of man and woman"*

For the Dominicans, the matter was clear-cut. Observing the feast as a celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception was seen as an affront to Christ's dignity and tantamount to participating in a heresy worthy of excommunication. On the other hand, the Franciscan perspective was more nuanced. They believed that celebrating the feast as Mary's Sanctification fell short of giving the Mother of God, and perhaps even Jesus, their due respect. In their view, this approach relegated Mary to a state of corruption, which they considered a questionable stance, if not outright sinful.[29] This divergence in viewpoints underscored the deep theological rift between the two orders regarding the nature of Mary's conception and the appropriate way to honor her in the context of the Feast.

The War of Preservation & Sanctification

The conflict reached a boiling point with the ascension of Francesco delle Rovere, a Scotist Franciscan and former General of the Order, to the Papacy as Pope Sixtus IV in 1471. Pope Sixtus IV, an erudite and highly respected Scotist, was a fervent supporter of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. His elevation to the papacy marked a significant escalation in the controversy. Sixtus IV's support for this doctrine was not limited to ecclesiastical circles; he actively promoted it through his writings and public disputations, bringing the issue to the forefront of theological discourse.

In early 1475, sensing the urgency and the potential for the Franciscan perspective to gain Papal endorsement, Vincenzo Bandello --- a then unknown Dominican stationed at the recently founded 'sister' convent of San Marco, Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan -- took a bold step.[30] He published an anonymous treatise that fervently attacked the doctrine of

[29] Bustis in his 'Mariale' (1493) contrasts his Office written to celebrate Mary's purity, with Bandello's, written to highlight Mary's corruption.

[30] Santa Maria delle Grazie was founded in 1463 by Francesco Sforza's most trusted military advisor, Gaspare Vimercati and was later heavily patronized by Ludovico Sforza. It is Gaspare's close relative Ettore Vimercati who was involved in the failed plot to assassinate Cicco Simonetta, who, as 'regent' of young Gian Galeazzo Sforza, controlled Milan after the assassination of his father Galeazzo Sforza in December 1476 (see Simonetta, 'Conspiracy' p. 29). The implication is that the Sforza brothers were the invisible hand that motivated Ettore to kill Cicco so that he could help reinstate the Sforza as rightful 'regents' of Milan. Ettore, being the Chief of Ducal Provisions, was, like Gaspare, a senior trusted employee of the Sforza and would have had unchecked access to most rooms and people within the castle (see Register no. 8.898 at lombardiabeniculturali.it).

the Immaculate Conception.[31] This treatise, characterized by its vitriolic tone, rapidly circulated throughout Lombardy, sparking widespread debate and controversy. The authorship of this incendiary document was soon traced to Bandello, with the realization that he was an intellectually formidable Thomist.

The response to Bandello in Lombardy was by Stephano da Oleggio, a Master of Studies and Franciscan preacher, who began a vigorous campaign from the pulpit of San Francesco Grande in Milan. He preached incessantly in favor of honoring Mary's Immaculate Conception, advocating for the establishment of a Confraternity and a chapel dedicated to this devotion.[32] Oleggio's preaching, and Bandello's treatise did not go unnoticed in Rome, where both likely caught the personal attention of Pope Sixtus. The Franciscan Pope, likely perceiving Bandello as a direct challenge to his pious and scholarly integrity, took his attack personally. [33]

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[31] Bandello's first notable work was his "Libellus recollectorius auctoritatum de veritate Conceptions B.V. Mariae," published while he was at Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan in 1475. This treatise, replete with polemical fervor, vehemently attacked the immaculist doctrine, labeling it as heretical and dangerous. The controversy saw several figures making minor contributions, however, by far, the most contentious figure was undoubtedly Bandello, whose vehement opposition to the Immaculate Conception earned him the moniker "adversariorum Goliath."

[32] Glasser, Contracts, p. 308-313;

[33] Bandello, Treatise (1475): Writing to his patron Piero, Bandello contrasts the 'wise men' who leave behind popular custom to follow the Light of Truth, to the wolf like heretics who promote the Immaculate Conception in order to gain popular approval. The comparison of those who oppose the Immaculists to the Three Magi (Wise Men) who followed the Star to Christ would not be lost on the reader. *"For this reason, it will be up to the W**ise man**—who embraces and meditates on truth in his whole heart, whole mind, and whole virtue—to fight and refute with all the strength of his mind false error which is opposed to truth....Therefore we must excel and manfully fight the howling heretics who prattle impiously against divine dogma, and who try to implant the fault of diabolical error in Christian hearts. We must banish far from the Christian flock **those who are like wolves** . . . O astounding wonder! That those, whom I would call the modern-day barefoot friars, full of wind, empty of wisdom, have understood so easily what the ancient Doctors, most holy of life outstanding in talent, fervent in faith, clear in truth, did not know. Certainly, those wrapped in the shadows of ignorance, wanting to know more than they should, do not cease fabricating new inventions.... they affirm that the nourishing Mother was immune from Original Sin in her Conception, they empty the value of the redemption of the precious blood of Jesus Christ... extol with false honors the Virgin Mother of God under the pretext of piety, and most wickedly slander the dignity of Christ; they perversely recount the Holy Scriptures and spurn the writings of the Holy Fathers; and finally, they fabricate new errors, hoping for human favor and earthly advantage . . . Wherefore I will show them to be lying fabricators, those who, extolling the most Blessed Virgin with false honor, abandon Catholic truth to follow the customs of the erring crowd....Neither supported by any authority, nor persuaded by any reason, they dare to preach that she was conceived without Original Sin, to the injury of the most precious blood of Christ, against so many and such excellent doctors, for the sake of gaining popular favor. But we '**as Wise Men**', most illustrious Pietro, who **gaze** upon the **light of truth**, **leaving behind** popular custom, should **follow the truth** of the ancient Fathers."*

The theological battle reached its zenith in December 1475, in what was perceived as a dramatic "David versus Goliath" encounter. Bandello, the Dominican from Santa Maria delle Grazie, journeyed to Rome to engage in a high-stakes disputation against a formidable assembly of scholars handpicked by Pope Sixtus IV. The Pope's team was led by Francesco di Brescia, known as Sansone, a prominent Scotist and the then-General of the Franciscan Order. Sansone, a key figure in the establishment of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception at San Francesco Grande, was a towering intellectual force and a strategic choice to lead the Pope's defense of the doctrine.[34]

This disputation was far from an ordinary theological debate for Bandello. It was a carefully orchestrated event by Pope Sixtus IV, designed to be a decisive confrontation. The expectation was that Sixtus, serving as the judge, would declare Bandello the loser against the larger-than-life figure of Sansone. This setup was intended to lend an air of procedural fairness to the proceedings, allowing Sixtus to appear as a magistrate who had duly 'heard the matter' before promoting the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception with Apostolic authority.

Sixtus and Cum Praeexcelsa

In a strategically timed move after Sixtus declared Sansone the victor over Bandello, he issued the bull Cum Praeexcelsa on March 3, 1476, just days before the Dominicans' celebration of the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas and precisely 40 weeks before December 8th.[35] The timing was symbolically significant, mirroring the gestation period of a child in the womb. By doing so, Sixtus cleverly likened the publication of Cum Praeexcelsa to a miraculous 'conception' that would come to full term with its liturgical 'birth' on December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. This symbolic alignment was not only a theological statement but also a masterful use of liturgical timing to reinforce the theological underpinnings and the sanctity of the Immaculate Conception. The disputation, followed by the promulgation of the papal bull, signified a momentous

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[34] De Mambro Santos, R. (2006). LEONARDO "SINE MACULA". CONTRIBUTO PER UN'ANALISI STORICA DELLA "VERGINE DELLE ROCCE". Bruniana & Campanelliana, 12(2), 471-495. Sansone was present at the dedication of the Confraternity's chapel on June 1, 1478, the exact same day that Pope Sixtus published his excommunication of Lorenzo Medici and Priors of Florence.

[35] Soteaulx, Sacrosancti et oecumenici, (1571) p. 373-4 "Datum Romae apud S. Petrum, anno Incarnationis Dominicae 1476. 3. Kalend. Martii, Pontificatus nostri anno 6."

triumph for Pope Sixtus IV, the Franciscan order, and proponents of Scotist theology. This event marked a critical juncture in the annals of the Church, where a doctrine that had long been at the center of fervent debate and division, albeit still holding a slight minority opinion among scholastics, was now accorded formal recognition and endorsement from the apex of ecclesiastical authority.

The issuance of the papal bull Cum Praeexcelsa by Pope Sixtus IV, accompanied by an Office authored by Leonard Nogarolis, marked one of the most significant moments in theological history. This document was the first to assert with Apostolic authority that Mary was conceived without Original Sin. It further established that her Immaculate Conception should be celebrated on December 8th, equating its indulgences with those of the Feast of Corpus Christi. This alignment was a cunning move by Sixtus IV, as the Feast of Corpus Christi, celebrated on the Thursday following Pentecost, specifically commemorates the immaculate Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ, echoing the doctrine of transubstantiation. This feast, intimately tied to the words of Christ at the Last Supper, also holds a deep connection to Thomas Aquinas, who in the 13th century proposed the feast to Pope Urban IV and wrote its first Office.[36]

From the perspective of the Dominicans, Sixtus IV's actions were seen as a complete betrayal of Christ. They interpreted the Pope's decision to equate the celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception with Corpus Christi as a degradation of Christ's unique status as the sinless savior of humanity. This papal decree was perceived as placing Mary on an equal footing with Christ, suggesting her co-redemptive role and challenging the established belief in Christ's singular perfection and sinlessness.

The publication of Cum Praeexcelsa not only fueled the already raging theological dispute between the Dominicans and Franciscans but also solidified the establishment of the world's first Apostolically ordained Confraternity and chapel dedicated to Mary's Immaculate Conception. The civic charter for the Confraternity, championed by Stephano da Oleggio in Milan, was soon established, and on June 1, 1478, a significant ceremony took place. Sansone, representing Sixtus IV as his Apostolic delegate and dedicator of the

[36] The hymns Sacris Solemniis and Pange Lingua written for the Corpus Christi office make clear the connection between the feast and the Last Supper.

land, was present at the consecration of the chapel's space, officially contracting the Confraternity with San Francesco Grande.[37] [38] This Franciscan convent in Milan, a stronghold of Scotist theology, stood in stark contrast to Bandello's Dominican convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, representing the deep theological divide between the two orders.

The Dominicans of San Marco and Santa Maria delle Grazie were acutely aware of the symbolic significance of the dedication on June 1, for, on the very same day in 1478, Sixtus IV issued a bull of excommunication against Lorenzo de' Medici and the Signoria, a move that was hardly coincidental since the Pope was in open warfare against both the Dominicans and Florence.[39] This action by Sixtus IV underscored the complex interplay of ecclesiastical authority, theological stances, and political power. The simultaneous establishment of the Confraternity dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and his excommunication of key political figures highlighted the multifaceted nature of Sixtus IV's papacy, where the timing of religious events was often intertwined with broader political strategies. In the turbulent milieu of the late 15th century, Pope Sixtus IV's stance on the

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[37] See, Glasser, Contracts, p. 309-312; The contract reads *"Likewise, that the aforesaid master and brothers of the said monastery are bound to assign perpetually to the same master prior and to the scholars of the said school that place or part of the place which has been called the garden of Philippi, which was a place granted to the same lord prior and the scholars by the master Franciscus de Sansone of Brisia, the Brother Minor minister general of the order, and the lord minister and brothers of the said monastery to use, to hold, etc. and to build the scholastics and to make every kind of building to the end that in that place the lord prior and the scholastics can meet and make their congregations for the business of the said school and for the performance of devotions and for all other things that may happen to be done for the said school and chapel"*

[38] Now that they were officially joined to the Church, in 1479 the Confraternity commissioned Ambrogio de Predis to illustrate a document detailing Sixtus' explicit 'Spiritual benefit' to them. Because this document detailed the Holy See's blessing, and because Ambrogio was partnered with Leonardo in the commission for the new chapel's altarpiece, it is reasonable to conclude that the confraternity wanted the altarpiece to have some thematic continuity with the document's illustration. Ambrogio's artwork stands out for its distinctiveness, particularly because the two angels playing musical instruments in adoration closely resemble those he depicted alongside Leonardo's "Virgin of the Rocks." Moreover, the central theme of adoration in his work marks the earliest instance of adopting the iconic gesture from the renowned Florentine artist Filippo Lippi. This gesture features the Christ Child, symbolizing the Word of God, pointing to his mouth. When Leonardo was commissioned to create the altarpiece for the confraternity, he undoubtedly observed Ambrogio's substantial inspiration from Lippi. This observation likely motivated Leonardo to also draw from Lippi's style, leading him to include a youthful John the Baptist in the adoration scene. However, the idea of depicting Florence's Patron Saint and Mary together, yet apart from Christ, in an altarpiece intended for the first Sistine chapel dedicated to Mary's Immaculate Conception, was potentially too controversial for the newly established Milanese confraternity. This aspect will be further explored later

[39] The papal bull issued by Pope Sixtus IV against Lorenzo de' Medici on June 1, 1478, in the aftermath of the Pazzi Conspiracy, was titled "Excommunicamus et anathematizamus". This Latin title translates to "We excommunicate and anathematize". This title reflects the nature of the document, which was a formal declaration of excommunication and anathema against Lorenzo de' Medici and his supporters. The use of such strong language in the title underscores the severity of the Pope's condemnation and the intense political and religious conflict of the period.

Immaculate Conception, intertwined with his involvement in the politically charged Pazzi Conspiracy and the subsequent Pazzi War, cast him in a contentious light, particularly among the Medicean Dominican circles in Florence and their Milanese allies. This perception was not merely a matter of theological disagreement but was also deeply rooted in the political and ecclesiastical dynamics of the time. Sixtus, by aligning himself with the Pazzi family of the Franciscan's stronghold in Florence (Santa Croce), was seen as a villain, war monger and an illegitimate representative of St. Peter, especially in the eyes of those who held a Thomist Dominican view in Florence and Milan.

Bandello' disputation and treatise

To consolidate his position and rally support among his Franciscan base in Milan, Pope Sixtus IV, in 1480, orchestrated the publication of a second Office on the Immaculate Conception. This publication was strategically timed to coincide with his Order's prime festival on October 4th, the Feast of St. Francis, signaling a clear alignment with Franciscan interests. The author of this second Office was Bernardine de Busti, a dedicated Scotist and Milanese Franciscan, known for his scholarly acumen and deep commitment to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Busti, a member of the newly established Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, based in the prestigious Franciscan convent of San Francesco Grande in Milan, brought a scholastic rigor to the devotion of Mary's Immaculate Conception. His approach was markedly different from that of Leonard Nogarolis' earlier Office, offering a more nuanced and theologically sophisticated perspective, likely crafted with the Confraternity and its members in mind.[40]

The release of Busti's Office in 1480 was strategically timed, following a notable incident from two years prior. In March 1478, a critical period just weeks before the Pazzi Conspiracy unfolded and while Leonardo da Vinci was engaged in creating a new altarpiece for the Chapel of St. Bernard under the commission of the Florentine Signoria, a

[40] Flemming, Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum, ANNO XXI, p. 401; *"To our beloved son Bernardino de Busti, a Franciscan of the Observance. Pope Sixtus the fourth sends you Greetings and Apostolic blessings..... Dear son, so that you may freely increase your devotion, it is conceded that an Office for the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary should be compiled and ordered to allow you, and those who are with you, to willingly offer their devotion and recitations, freely and legally, and to be granted by apostolic authority indulgences..... Given at Rome from St. Peter's, under the ring of the Fisherman, on October 4th, 1480*

significant theological event took place.[41] Vincenzo Bandello, a Dominican theologian from Milan, triumphed in a public debate on the Immaculate Conception. This disputation, held during Lent in the presence of Duke Ercole d'Este in Ferrara, marked a pivotal moment in the ongoing religious discourse of the time.[42] This debate was a high-profile affair, moving the theological contention from the pulpit to the public forum, and pitting the Dominican Thomist viewpoint against the Franciscan Scotist perspective in a formal, yet openly accessible setting.[43] In the course of the debate, Bandello fiercely challenged Nogarolis' Office from 1476, denouncing it as illogical and misleading. He even ventured to propose that Pope Sixtus IV might not have thoroughly reviewed it. Bandello then suggested that even if the Pope did read it, he was in fact endorsing the idea of Mary's Sanctification instead of her Immaculate Conception. This bold reinterpretation of the Pope's theological position, and the public embarrassment it caused, represented a notable challenge to Sixtus IV's authority.[44]

The publication of Busti's new Office in 1480 can thus be seen as a direct papal counterstrike against Bandello's triumph in the Lombardy region. By choosing the Feast of St. Francis for its release, Sixtus IV was not only affirming his Franciscan allegiance but again making a bold statement in the ongoing theological and political chess game. The move was a clear indication of a Scotist Pope's unwavering support for the Franciscan

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[41] James, Painters and Their Works, p. 224; The last record concerning Leonardo's commission for St. Bernard's chapel is a generous payment of 25 florins that he received on March 16, 1478. This payment would easily sustain Leonardo for several months.

[42] Because Bandello's treatise was published in 1481, the error is often repeated that this famous disputation occurred in 1481, however not only does Bandello's treatise (published during Lent, 1481) recall that the disputation was held in a 'past Lent', but an independent journal entry (which also records the murder of Giuliano) from April, 1478 by Bernadino Zambotti of Ferrara recalls the same event, saying: "*This past Lent, the Preachers, whether of **St Francis or of St Dominic**, have disputed in the pulpit about where the Virgin Mary was conceived in original sin. For this occasion, his Excellency our Duke made many religious worthy men meet in his court, and other doctors and scholars who wanted to hear the opinions and arguments of **Scotus and St Thomas**. Thus, a great disputation was held and in the end the opinion of one party over the other was given approval. However, it was concluded that it is possible to maintain, without sin, whichever opinion one wants, because by some Papal edicts that exist, those who maintain that she was conceived without original sin have certain future indulgences."* See Diario Ferrarese, p. 47

[43] The 15th century Florentine poet Bernardo Bellincioni scolded preachers concerning the Immaculate Conception in his sonnet 'Contro Li Predicatori' wrote "This belongs to you, O preachers. Only three things in the pulpit should you speak: the gospel above, both the virtues to explain, and vices and sinners to admonish. But, instead, you clamour of the Conception or whether Christ left his blood here on earth, and interpret things in your own way, which is nothing but sowing errors….." See 'Le rime di Bernardo Bellincioni, Part 1, p. 131; Mariani, 'Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce's sermons…' p. 248-249; Howard, 'Aquinas and Antoninus', p. 12.

[44] The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance. United States: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 234-7

interpretation of the Immaculate Conception and a demonstration of his resolve to uphold this doctrine in the face of Dominican opposition, especially that of Vincenzo Bandello.

Bandello's triumph in the Ferrara debate marked a significant moment in the theological conflict of the 15th century. Duke Ercole d'Este, a supporter of the Thomist viewpoint and politically opposed to the Pope and his stance on the Immaculate Conception, commissioned the Dominican to write and publish a full transcript of this extensive disputation.[45] The task, demanding meticulous attention to detail and a deep understanding of theological nuances, took Bandello almost three years to complete. In February 1481, his magnum opus, titled "Treatise on the Singular Purity & Prerogative of the Conception of Our Savior Jesus Christ," was printed amid great fanfare by all those opposed the Immaculate Conception.

The treatise began with a strategically framed question aimed at challenging the core of Scotist theology: "*Was the Blessed Virgin conceived in original sin, or was she PRESERVED from it by the grace of some unique privilege*?" This question set the stage for a comprehensive critique of the Scotist position concerning Mary's preservation.[46]

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[45] Only three months later, because of the Pazzi Conspiracy, was the outbreak of the 'Pazzi War', a significant conflict in Italian history, marked by a complex web of alliances and political maneuvering which pitted Florence against Sixtus. During this tumultuous period, Florence found itself allied with Milan and Venice, forming a defensive front against the combined forces of Sixtus, Naples, and Siena. A key player in the alliance supporting Florence was Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, who assumed the role of captain general of the northern states' league. See Hale, J. R. (1993). War, Culture and Society in Renaissance Venice: Essays in Honour of John Hale. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 57-60.

[46] Some examples from Bandello's treatise concerning the topic of preservation: That which **preserves**, inasmuch as it **preserves**, precedes the **preserved**, inasmuch as it is **preserved**: but Christ, inasmuch as he is the Redeemer, did not precede the Virgin; therefore he did not **preserve** her…….and the Blessed Virgin, before the instant of her animation, did not exist, and thus could not be **preserved**, because then in the foetus there could not exist sin or grace any more than in spittle, as *Anselm* says. Moreover, in the instant of her animation she necessarily had or did not have original sin. If she had it, she was not **preserved** from it; if she did not have it, since it was impossible to have it any more henceforth, it follows that she was not **preserved** from it, because no one is said to be **preserved** from that which it is impossible to have. The *consequence* is clear along with the *minor* proposition. The *major* proposition is also clear: because **preservation** imports a sort of antecedent in respect to the effect of **preservation**. Therefore, in any given thing that has been **preserved**, one should recognize its existence, such that it can undertake the act of **preserver**, before its having the effect of **preservation**. Besides, whoever has been **preserved** from original sin was in conception always Holy and Just; but the Blessed Virgin was not holy or just in conception, as the Saints say, and as will be said below. Also, all who were **preserved** from all sin were also **preserved** from all punishment and guilt of punishment, as is clear regarding the holy Angels: but the Blessed Virgin was not **preserved** from all sin, nor from all guilt of sin: therefore she was not **preserved** from sin…….From which it is clear that the distinction about ***preservative*** *redemption* is vain and fatuous, and proceeds from ignorance about the meaning of the word. Therefore, just as he who has been **preserved** from all turpitude cannot be said to be *washed clean*, and one

Bandello's treatise culminated in a scathing rebuke of the impiety, depravity, and heretical nature of the Scotists' arguments. He meticulously enumerated seven key points and over 200 'authorities' to substantiate why Christ alone, and not Mary, was immaculately conceived. Bandello concluded his argument by positing that Mary was 'cleansed' from sin, a concept tying her sanctification to the sanctifying waters of baptism, traditionally believed to cleanse an infant of Original Sin at birth.[47]

In the introduction to his treatise, penned for Duke d'Este (later a commander of Florence's military alliance Sixtus), Bandello sharply criticized the Scotist faction, which included the Pope, labeling them as criminal and poisonous.[48] This vehement condemnation played a key role in Bandello's involvement in Lorenzo de' Medici's

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preserved from all sickness cannot be said to be *healed*, and one **preserved** from death cannot truly be said to be *resuscitated*, so too can one who has been **preserved** from captivity not be called *redeemed*, but he can be called *guarded* or *protected*, because *Redemption* in its own proper meaning presupposes surrender, and, if it is to be found elsewhere that *those **preserved** from any evil* are said to be *redeemed*, that will be improperly said……..From which it is clear that the *Major argument of Scotus* is false, but if the *Major argument* is granted, it necessarily follows that Christ **preserved** all men from all sin; as regarding all men he performed the perfect action of redeeming them etc. Whence, *as far as the privative effect is concerned,* he both redeemed and reconciled those whom he redeemed: because he also took away original sin, which is in everyone the same, from all those whom he redeemed; but, *as far as the positive effect is concerned,* which is the coming together of Grace and Glory, he did not redeem everyone equally. Whence, as you say, perfect Redemption presupposes the **preservation** from all sin in someone; maybe someone will say that it even presupposes **preservation** from all punishment.

[47] Bandello, Treatise, Epilogue; "*These are the things, most illustrious Duke, which seem to me the things which must be said about the unique immaculate conception of our savior. … Using these, I have most effectively proved: 1 - that the blessed Virgin was conceived in original sin. 2 - that she was redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. 3 - that she was conceived through the lustful intercourse (concupiscence) of her parents. 4 - that she suffered the death which she deserved. 5 - that Christ suffered his own undeserved death for her. 6 - that Christ alone existed without sin. 7 - **that the virgin herself was cleansed from sin**…. With these arguments, and with the tacit authority of the saints, it is necessary to defend … against the enemies of truth who persist in their same stupidity and presumptuous novelty…. vilely depraving the sacred scriptures, and impiously defending the error of Pelagius, Celestius and Julian with their own perverse expositions. As Augustine says in his work against Julian, 'Whoever asserts that Christ did not redeem all of mankind, is the same as Pelagius or Celestius'. And again, 'In abominable perversity you attack the Christian religion when you would have us think not all, but many, have been condemned through Adam or delivered through Christ.'*

[48] The prologue reads*: "Their teaching is something nefarious, detestable and sacrilege… it should be extirpated and ejected from the Christian Religion….. it is a pernicious error and poisonous tale….preached openly with a shameless expression. What an unheard-of crime! What a detestable wickedness! What stupid minds! What blind hearts! What delusions of villainy! From where, eternal Father, did this deathly poison crawl into their minds? What could be thought up that is more appalling and so great a disgrace? They arm themselves with shouting and cries and slander us in private with clandestine conversations with the common folk. And declare boastfully to the unschooled common folk that they stand victorious. They gnaw at us with their canine fangs, and when beaten with the stick of the truth, they step back but never cease to bark: Armed with lies and falsehoods they grow stronger … their error is of human-making, pernicious, full of falsehood and contrary to the faith."*

opposition to Pope Sixtus IV, ultimately leading to his appointment in 1481 as Prior of the prestigious San Marco, the Medici's religious house.[49] Bandello's treatise is significant not just for its comprehensive recounting of the Ferrara debate and its thorough citation of scriptural and ecclesiastical sources against the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, but also for its aggressive critique of the Scotists' character and reasoning. This work offers a vivid window into the fierce theological battles waged between Dominican and Franciscan preachers during the 15th century.

Bandello's treatise robustly contested the Franciscan interpretation of Mary's Immaculate Conception, which was fundamentally based on Scotus' theory of preservation.[50] He

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[49] Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, p. 19

[50] Bandello, Treatise; Bandello focuses heavily on the Scotist concept of Mary's preservation. Following are some relevant excerpts from his treatise: "You say that the most perfect redeemer, mediator and reconciler must perform the most perfect act of mediation and reconciliation by **preserving** somebody from all sin, and in this way Christ was the perfect redeemer, for by **preserving** the Blessed Virgin from Original Sin he performed the perfect act of **redemption** and reconciliation. However, my response to this is that your rational is derived from **Scotus**, which I reject because the argument is absurd and destroys itself. For the concept of **preservation** from sin would necessitate no need for **redemption**, mediation or reconciliation, etc" and *"Any who are immune to all sin have been **preserved**. These are **preserved** from the punishment that comes from the debt and penalty of sin, like in the case of the Holy Angels. However, since the Blessed Virgin was not **preserved** from the punishment due for the guilt of all mankind, she was therefore not **preserved** from Original sin."* and *"That which **preserves**, inasmuch as it **preserves**, precedes the **preserved**, inasmuch as it is **preserved**: but Christ, inasmuch as he is the Redeemer, did not precede the Virgin; therefore he did not **preserve** her… and the Blessed Virgin, before the instant of her animation, did not exist, and thus could not be **preserved**, because then in the fetus there could not exist sin or grace any more than in spittle, as Anselm says. Moreover, in the instant of her animation she necessarily had or did not have original sin. If she had it, she was not **preserved** from it; if she did not have it, since it was impossible to have it any more henceforth, it follows that she was not **preserved** from it, because no one is said to be **preserved** from that which it is impossible to have. The consequence is clear along with the minor proposition. The major proposition is also clear: because **preservation** imports a sort of antecedent in respect to the effect of **preservation**. Therefore, in any given thing that has been **preserved**, one should recognize its existence, such that it can undertake the act of **preserver**, before its having the effect of **preservation**. Besides, whoever has been **preserved** from original sin was in conception always Holy and Just; but the Blessed Virgin was not holy or just in conception, as the Saints say, and as will be said below. Also, all who were **preserved** from all sin were also **preserved** from all punishment and guilt of punishment, as is clear regarding the holy Angels: but the Blessed Virgin was not **preserved** from all sin, nor from all guilt of sin: therefore she was not **preserved** from sin….. From which it is clear that the distinction about **preservative** redemption is vain and fatuous, and proceeds from ignorance about the meaning of the word. Therefore, just as he who has been **preserved** from all turpitude cannot be said to be washed clean, and one **preserved** from all sickness cannot be said to be healed, and one **preserved** from death cannot truly be said to be resuscitated, so too can one who has been **preserved** from captivity not be called redeemed, but he can be called guarded or protected, because Redemption in its own proper meaning presupposes surrender, and, if it is to be found elsewhere that those **preserved** from any evil are said to be redeemed, that will be improperly said…. From which it is clear that the Major argument [of Scotus] is false, but if the Major argument is granted, it necessarily follows that Christ **preserved** all men from all sin; as regarding all men he performed the perfect action of redeeming them etc. Whence, as far as the privative effect is concerned, he both redeemed and reconciled those whom he redeemed: because he also took away original sin, which is in everyone the same, from all those whom he redeemed; but, as far as the positive effect is concerned, which is the coming together of Grace and Glory, he did not redeem everyone equally. Whence, as you say, perfect Redemption presupposes the*

pointed out the paradoxical nature of 'redemptive preservation,' questioning why redemption would be necessary for someone already preserved from Original Sin. This critique directly targeted the core of Franciscan theology, as the concept of 'preservation' was a critical element in Scotist thought, initially presented in Paris and later becoming integral to Franciscan teaching. The Dominicans, fully aware of the significance of this concept in Scotus' initial disputation in Paris and its pivotal role in Franciscan ideology, vehemently opposed the notion of Mary's preservation, denouncing it as a heretical interpretation.[51] This strong opposition of Bandello forced the chair of St. Peter to intervene forcefully with Apostolic authority. To this end, in 1482, Pope Sixtus IV issued the bull Grave Nimis I, a sharp and direct response to the intensifying debate over the Immaculate Conception. This papal decree unequivocally declared that any church official in Lombardy who labeled another as a heretic for either endorsing the belief in Mary's preservation from Original Sin or celebrating her Immaculate Conception would incur the severe penalty of eternal damnation. The bull also extended this grave consequence to those who advocated that the Church's doctrine was solely about Mary's sanctification and 'spiritual conception,' rather than her Immaculate Conception.[52] This move by Sixtus IV

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preservation *from all sin in someone; maybe someone will say that it even presupposes* ***preservation*** *from all punishment."*

[51] Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum, 1902, p. 403-404 and 410-411. In 1480 Pope Sixtus IV commissioned Bernardo Bustis, a Milanese Franciscan and prominent Scotist, to write a new Office for the Immaculate Conception of Mary, presumably for the new Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in Milan. Near the beginning of this Office, Bustis relates a story about Scotus concerning the first ever public disputation over the Immaculate Conception at Paris. He writes that Scotus alone defended the Immaculate Conception so intelligently and bravely against his [Dominican] adversaries that he earned the title 'The Subtle Doctor'. Bustis cites scripture verses which imply that Scotus is a type of persecuted martyr speaking truth in the face of a multitude of God's enemies [the Dominicans]. Luke 21:13-15, 2 Chronicles 20.15. Later in the same Office Bustis then defends Scotus' formulation of Mary's preservation, writing: "*In his third book on the Sentences, the Subtle Doctor (Scotus) gives an objection to this by saying that Christ anticipated the glorious Virgin and* ***preserved*** *her from sin.... while others are saved after the* ***fall****... therefore... The redemption of the glorious Virgin is the perfection of our redemption, for it is a greater thing to* ***preserve*** *somebody from harm, than to heal them after being harmed. Therefore, if a man catches sight of two of his neighbors, one who is about to be wounded, and one who has already been wounded, is it better to* ***preserve*** *the one from being wounded or medically heal the other? Indeed, he would be Savior of them both, but surely the more perfect act is to prevent [preserve] the one from being harmed."*

[52] The concept of Mary's 'spiritual conception' representing Mary's sanctification in the womb had its origin in a very popular, pre-Dominican, letter which circulated under the name of St. Anselm of Canterbury. Although the letter seems to favor the Immaculist' s opinion, it nevertheless exhorts those, who do not wish to observe Mary's Immaculate Conception in the flesh on December 8th, to honor the Virgin on that Day by at least observing her 'spiritual conception' and sanctification. The letter says: "For just as her Nativity is honored in the Holy Church, so should her Conception be likewise, since if she had not been conceived, she would not have been born. As her Nativity was necessary for the salvation of the human race, so likewise was her conception.....for, as all the learned know, man has a twofold conception: one in which the carnal union of

was a strategic effort to quell the growing Thomist opposition in the Lombardy region, leveraging his supreme papal authority to silence dissenting voices.[53]

However, the impact of Bandello's treatise and the barking of the Dominicans against the Franciscan doctrine was more far-reaching than Sixtus IV had initially anticipated.[54] The widespread influence of Bandello's arguments necessitated a more stringent response from the Pope. Consequently, in 1483, Sixtus IV revised and intensified his earlier decree, issuing Grave Nimis II. This updated bull took an even more aggressive stance, proclaiming that anyone within Christendom found reading or in possession of Bandello's work would be subject to excommunication.[55] This revision not only targeted Bandello and his affiliated convents of San Marco and Santa Maria delle Grazie, but also extended to anyone throughout Christendom who showed any alignment or sympathy with Bandello's views. This second version of the bull underscored the Pope's determination to

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man and woman takes place, and another in which the spiritual soul, new and pure, is, by God's operation, joined to the body. Therefore, if someone is unwilling to celebrate the carnal conception of the Mother of the Lord, at least he should be willing to celebrate the spiritual creation [conception] of her soul, and its union with the body. Oh how great is that day, on which the worthy soul of our Reparatrix is **created, sanctified** and joined to her most holy body."

[53] Dominican convents were allocated by districts called congregations. Santa Maria delle Grazie was in Milan and naturally part of the Congregation of Lombardy, and even though San Marco was located in Florence, it was still administered as part of the Congregation of Lombardy. See Tavuzzi, M. (2007). Renaissance Inquisitors: Dominican Inquisitors and Inquisitorial Districts in Northern Italy, 1474-1527. Netherlands: Brill.

[54] The Dominicans were colloquially called both Jacobins and 'Hounds of the Lord'. Jacobins because their scholastic foundation was at the convent of St. James (Jacob) in Paris, and 'Hounds of the Lord' as a play on the word Domini – canes, i.e. Lord Hounds.

[55] Excerpt from Grave Nimis II; "*We then, desiring to obviate such rash daring and perverse and scandalous assertions, which may thence arise in the Church of God, as far as is permitted us from on high, of our own proper motion, not at the instance of any petition presented to us on the point, but from our own mere deliberation and certain knowledge, reprobate and condemn by apostolic authority, by the tenor of these presents, such assertions of the same preachers, and of any other persons soever, who assert that not only does the holy Roman Church celebrate the spiritual Conception and sanctification of the glorious Virgin, but also that those who believe or hold that the mother of God was, at her conception, preserved from the stain of original sin, are for this reason polluted with the stain of heresy, or have committed mortal sin; or that when celebrating such office of the conception, or listening to such discourses, that they incur the guilt of sin, as being false and erroneous, and utterly foreign from the truth; And, moreover, in this respect, the aforesaid published books containing such assertions, and by the aforesaid motion, knowledge, and authority, we determine and ordain, that the preachers of the word of God, and any other persons soever, of what state, grade, order, or condition soever they may be, who in future shall presume, by rash daring, to affirm to the people, or in any other way soever, that such assertions, so disapproved and condemned by us, are true, or to read as true the aforesaid books, to hold or to keep them, after they have obtained the knowledge of these presents, incur by the very fact sentence of excommunication, from which they cannot obtain the benefit of absolution from any other person save from the Roman Pontiff, except at the very point of death."*

suppress any support for the Thomist position and to reinforce the Franciscan interpretation of the Immaculate Conception doctrine.

The issuance of Grave Nimis II was a clear indication of the deepening rift within the Church and the lengths to which Sixtus IV was willing to go to enforce his theological stance. The bull represented an attempt to silence dissent and assert papal authority over a contentious doctrinal issue. However, the enduring influence of Bandello's treatise and the continued resistance from the Dominicans highlighted the complexity of the theological debate and the challenges faced by the Church in maintaining control in the name of doctrinal unity.

In the unfolding events following Pope Sixtus IV's decisive stance on the Immaculate Conception, it became increasingly clear to the doctrine's adversaries that the Pope was wielding his authority as the lethal sword of St. Peter. This realization brought a sobering awareness that any form of resistance could lead to grave consequences, threatening not only their positions within the Church and their professional lives but also their eternal fate. Sixtus IV, fully aware of the growing popularity of Mary's Immaculate Conception among the general populace, recognized the rapid spread of this belief.

In a strategic move, he allowed the Thomists to maintain their celebration of Mary's Sanctification, however, this allowance came with a significant caveat. The Dominicans, once the Church's staunch defenders of orthodoxy and famously dubbed the Hounds of the Lord, found themselves muzzled. They were effectively prohibited from engaging in public opposition to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception or from openly criticizing its supporters. This action by Sixtus IV effectively silenced the order vowed to protect the dignity of Christ.

For the Dominican Order, the unfolding events under Pope Sixtus' reign signaled a significant reduction in their influence and their capacity to oppose teachings they deemed heretical. This shift in the ecclesiastical landscape appeared to pave the way for complete widespread endorsement of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The Dominicans viewed this as a betrayal of the core principles of Christianity, particularly concerning the singular role of Christ in salvation.

This situation was especially poignant for the Florentine Signoria and the Dominicans, considering the historical admonitions of St. Bernard. St. Bernard had fervently urged the papacy to uphold the sanctity of the Church, advocating for her to be presented to Christ as an immaculate bride, untarnished by any heretical beliefs. [56] The irony of the current circumstances, where the Church seemed to be straying from these ideals under papal guidance, was not lost on them, highlighting a deep-seated conflict between traditional orthodoxy and evolving doctrinal interpretations.

Faced with these new restrictions, the Dominicans were confronted with a daunting challenge: how to continue their preaching and uphold their theological convictions without explicitly voicing their opposition to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This dilemma forced them to reconsider their approach to teaching and defending the faith in an environment increasingly hostile to their traditional views. The question of how to effectively preach without directly addressing the contentious issue became a central concern, requiring a delicate balance between adherence to their doctrinal beliefs and compliance with the new ecclesiastical directives.

John's Sanctification in the womb

Prior to the widespread acceptance of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, a prevailing theological view held that Mary, much like John the Baptist and the prophet Jeremiah, was conceived bearing Original Sin but was later sanctified and cleansed of it while still in the womb. This belief, while not explicitly stated in the Bible or by the early Church Fathers, drew upon the scriptural precedent of John's and Jeremiah's sanctification. Theologians, extrapolating from these biblical examples, posited that Mary, given her esteemed holiness comparable to that of John and Jeremiah, must have also undergone sanctification in the womb.

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[56] "*We have advanced in this matter as far as we dared. For the rest it is your part, Blessed Father, to take care that in your days no spot of heretical depravity stains the fair beauty of the Church. To you, O friend of the bridegroom, has the bride of Christ been entrusted; it is you to present her, a chaste virgin, to one husband, even to Christ"* Bernard letter to Pope Innocent. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. (1889). *Life and Works of Saint Bernard* (J. Mabillon, Ed.; S. J. Eales, Trans.; Second Edition, Vol. 2, p. 593). Burns & Oates Limited; Benziger Brothers

Bernard of Clairvaux, a notable theologian of his time, was among the first to articulate this idea of Mary's sanctification in the womb. In response to the growing popularity of the feast celebrating Mary's Immaculate Conception, Bernard composed a letter to the Bishops of Lyons to express his viewpoint.[57] Following his canonization in 1174, Bernard's letter gained significant authority as one of the earliest texts to address the nature of Mary's conception in a clear and authoritative manner. In this letter, Bernard aligned his opinion with the Church's prevailing belief that all humans, Christ being the sole exception, were conceived with Original Sin. Thus, in Bernard's view, Mary too was conceived with Original Sin. However, due to her unique role as the Mother of God, she was deemed worthy of a special grace, leading to her sanctification in the womb, akin to the prophets Jeremiah and John the Baptist. Thomas Aquinas, the progenitor of the Thomist movement and known as the Angelic Doctor, was a staunch advocate of this view of Mary's sanctification. He and his fellow Thomists after him upheld this belief to protect the unique dignity of Christ.[58] His influential work, the Summa Theologica, clearly

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[57] Bernard, Letter to the Canons of Lyons, excerpts: *" I cannot but wonder that there should have been among you at this time some who wished to sully this splendid fame of your Church by introducing a new Festival, a rite which the Church knows nothing of, and which reason does not prove, nor ancient tradition hand down to us.... I hold most firmly with the Church, that Mary received sanctification while in the womb so that she could be born holy. And indeed, I read concerning Jeremiah, that before he came forth from the womb he was sanctified, and I think no otherwise of John the Baptist, who, himself in the womb of his mother, felt the presence of his Lord in the womb ...And Jeremiah is thus addressed: 'Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee'. How beautifully the Divine oracle has distinguished between conception in the womb and birth from the womb!... Let us grant this in the case of Jeremiah. What shall be said of John the Baptist, of whom an angel announced beforehand that he should be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb... most certainly the Holy Ghost sanctified John whom He filled. But how far this sanctification availed against original sin, whether for John, or for Jeremiah, or for any other who was thus prevented by grace, I would not rashly determine. But of these holy persons whom God has sanctified, and brought forth from the womb with the same sanctification which they have received in the womb, I do not hesitate to say that the taint of original sin which they contracted in conception, could not in any manner take away or fetter by the mere act of birth, the benediction already bestowed..... The gift, therefore, which has certainly been conferred upon some, though few, mortals, cannot for a moment be supposed to have been denied to that so highly favored Virgin, through whom the whole human race came forth into life. Beyond doubt the mother of the Lord also was holy before birth;...And if it is permitted to say what the Church thinks, and the Church thinks that which is true, I say that she conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit, but not that she herself was conceived by the Holy Spirit; that she was at once Mother and Virgin, but not that she herself was born of a virgin...Wherefore, although it has been given to some, though few, of the sons of men to be born with the gift of sanctity, yet to none has it been given to be conceived with it. So that to One alone should be reserved this privilege, to Him who should make all holy, and coming into the world, He alone, without sin should make an atonement for sinners. The Lord Jesus, then, alone was conceived by the Holy Ghost, because He alone was holy before He was conceived. He being excepted, all the children of Adam are in the same case"*

[58] Aquinas, Summa: "*If the soul of the Blessed Virgin had never incurred the stain of original sin, this* ***would be derogatory to the dignity of Christ****, by reason of His being the universal Savior of all. Consequently, after Christ, who, as the universal Savior of all, needed not to be saved, the purity of the Blessed Virgin holds the*

articulated that Mary, like John, was cleansed from Original Sin in the womb. Aquinas' writings and teachings played a crucial role in shaping the Church's understanding of Mary's nature and reinforced the distinction between her sanctification and Christ's unique conception.[59]

Even in the 15th century, Dominican theologians like St. Antoninus and St. Vincent Ferrar frequently drew comparisons between Mary and John the Baptist to illustrate that she, like John, was bestowed with a special grace. The distinction made between Mary and John was that Mary's sanctification was believed to have occurred almost immediately after her physical conception.[60] This slight adjustment in timing elevated Mary's status slightly

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highest place. For Christ did not contract original sin in any way whatever, but was holy in His very Conception, according to Luke 1:35: "The Holy which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God." But the Blessed Virgin did indeed contract ***original sin but was cleansed*** *therefrom before her birth from the womb. .....and although the above appears to be part of the dignity of the Virgin Mother,* ***yet it is somewhat derogatory to the dignity of Christ****, without whose power no one had been freed from the first sentence of condemnation.*

[59] Aquinas, Summa 3.27; "*Nothing is handed down in the canonical Scriptures concerning the sanctification of the Blessed Mary as to her being sanctified in the womb; indeed, they do not even mention her birth. But as Augustine, in his tractate on the Assumption of the Virgin, argues with reason, since her body was assumed into heaven, and yet Scripture does not relate this; so it may be reasonably argued that she was sanctified in the womb..... for it is to be observed that it was granted, by way of privilege, to others, to be sanctified in the womb; for instance, to Jeremiah... and John the Baptist, of whom it is written "He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.*" ***It is therefore this reason that we believe the Blessed Virgin to have been sanctified before her birth from the womb****...for... If the soul of the Blessed Virgin had never incurred the stain of original sin, this would be derogatory to the dignity of Christ, by reason of His being the universal Savior of all. Consequently, after Christ, who, as the universal Savior of all, needed not to be saved, the purity of the Blessed Virgin holds the highest place. For Christ did not contract original sin in any way whatever, but was holy in His very Conception, according to Luke 1:35: "The Holy which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God." But the Blessed Virgin did indeed contract* ***original sin but was cleansed*** *therefrom before her birth from the womb. .....and although the above appears to be part of the dignity of the Virgin Mother, yet it is somewhat derogatory to the dignity of Christ, without whose power no one had been freed from the first sentence of condemnation."*

[60] Pusey, First Letter to the Very Rev. J. H Newman, p. 275-78. Vincent Ferrer, Sermon on Sanctification; *"Now the sanctification in the womb which is ranked least is that of* ***Jeremiah****. And greater than Jeremiah's is* ***John the Baptist's*** *sanctification, for he was sanctified three months before birth. However, the greatest of all of these is the sanctification of the* ***Virgin Mary****, because not 'at birth', nor in the last day, week or month before birth, but in the same day and hour when her body had been formed, and her soul created, she was sanctified."* Vincent Ferrer, Sermon on St. Ann*: "First in the womb, in which the body is formed, and the spirit is created by God, on the same day and hour the Virgin Mary was sanctified. Nine months she was in the womb of her holy and blessed mother."* Then Antoninus, quoting Vincent writes: "***First****, is just as the child leaves his mother's womb, like with* ***Jeremiah****, who according to the scriptures 'as thou went forth from the womb, I sanctified thee.'* ***Second****, is when the child is still wholly in the womb, like* ***John the Baptist****, who was sanctified in the sixth month when the Virgin Mary, having just conceived the Son of God, greeted Elizabeth.* ***Third****, is in the moment just after the creation and infusion of the soul. For the flesh of the* ***Virgin*** *having been formed, being conceived by Anna and Joachim, and not of the Holy Spirit -* ***for to say such a thing is heretical****, for Christ alone was conceived of the Holy Spirit – the soul of the Virgin having been created and infused by God, she was suddenly sanctified on the same day, as according to the scripture, 'the Most High sanctified His tabernacle"*

above John's, as she was sanctified on the same day as her conception. This nuanced understanding allowed Bernard and later Thomist theologians to argue that Mary and John, both similar in their experience of sanctification, were fundamentally different from Christ. Christ alone, conceived by the Holy Spirit without Original Sin, stood as the immaculate Lamb of God. This understanding of Mary's sanctification, and her association with John and Jeremiah, maintained a slim majority within the Church until the declaration by Pope Sixtus IV in 1476, after which there was a notable decline in its acceptance.

To delve deeper into the concept of sanctification in the womb, it's crucial to understand its medieval context, particularly how it relates to the sacrament of baptism. Sanctification, fundamentally meaning 'to make holy,' is achieved through a process of 'cleansing' whereby the recipient receives the Holy Spirit. In medieval theology, this concept was intricately linked to baptism, which, though an external sacrament, is believed to have an internal cleansing and sanctifying effect on the soul. Thus, for theologians of the time, the idea of sanctification occurring in the womb was seen as a special form of baptism, a divine analog to the physical sacrament, as demonstrated in the *editio princeps* of the *Missale Romanum*, printed at Milan in 1474 during the pontificate of Sixtus IV, for the Mass of the Visitation.[61]

This theological interpretation finds its roots as early as the 4th century with Serapion, who in his *Life of John the Baptist* explicitly argues that John underwent a kind of baptism administered by Christ during Mary's visitation to Elizabeth.[62] According to Serapion, John's sanctification in Elizabeth's womb was directly accomplished through divine intervention—a baptismal event mediated by the very hand of God through Christ's presence. Thus, the Visitation emerges as an early theological paradigm, connecting prenatal sanctification directly with the sacramental cleansing power of baptism.

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[61] Chupungco, A. J. (2000). Liturgical Time and Space. United States: Liturgical Press, p. 295; Van Dijk, S. "Three Manuscripts of a Liturgical Reform by John Cajetan Orsini (Nicholas III)." Scriptorium 6 (1952) 213-242.
[62] Serapion, Life of John the Baptist; *"The holy and pious virgin embraced then the true turtle-dove, and the Word baptized John while still in the womb of his mother. And David appeared in the middle and said: 'Mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and peace have kissed each other". And immediately John moved in the womb, as if wishing to come out and greet his master"*

Building upon this foundation, Thomas Aquinas later explored the nature of water baptism, traditionally performed by 'human hands'. He reasoned that while human hands cannot physically reach a child in the womb, this limitation does not restrict God's hand (action) from imparting sanctification.[63] Aquinas argued that God could bestow the grace of sanctification within the womb, mirroring the effects of water baptism. He drew an analog between the sanctification of infants through baptism, despite their lack of reasonable freewill, and the sanctification of John, Jeremiah, and by extension, Mary, in the womb. Aquinas posited that just as infants are sanctified by grace through baptism without their consent, so too were these biblical figures sanctified by the divine power of Christ's passion before their birth.[64]

Aquinas emphasized that water baptism is more than a symbolic act; it is a sacrament through which God's divine power works to cleanse and sanctify the soul. Thus, baptism with consecrated, sanctified water is essential for the reception of the Holy Spirit, and even though Christ, as part of the Trinity, had no need for baptism, His baptism in the Jordan sanctified (purified) the waters, setting a precedent for all future baptisms. Christ's baptism was marked by visible and audible signs of the Trinity, which future ministers can invoke with divine authority when administering the 'benediction' at baptism, using the formula 'in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'[65]

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[63] Aquinas, Summa, 3.68.11; *"Children, while in the mother's womb, have not yet come forth into the world to live among mankind. Consequently they cannot be subject to the action of man, so as to receive the sacrament of Baptism, at the hands of man, unto salvation. They can, however, be subject to the action of God, in Whose sight they live, so as, by a kind of privilege, to receive the grace of sanctification; as was the case with those who were sanctified in the womb [Jeremiah, Mary and John]."*

[64] Aquinas, Summa, 3.27*"Augustine seems to ponder Jeremiah's and* John's *sanctification in the womb. For he says, "that the leaping of John in the womb might signify a great truth" ….therefore, just as other miracles are done, this too was done divinely 'to' the infant; and not humanly 'by' the infant. Perhaps in this child the use of reason and will was so adult-like, that while yet in his mother's womb he was able to acknowledge, believe, and consent, whereas in other children we have to wait for these things till they grow older: this again I count as a miraculous result of the divine power." …But since it is expressly said of John that "he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb"; and of Jeremias, "Before thou came forth out of the womb, I sanctified thee"; it seems that we must assert that they were sanctified in the womb, although, while in the womb, they had not the use of reason; just as neither do infants enjoy the use of free will as soon as they are sanctified by baptism.*

[65] Aquiinas, Summa, 3.66; *"the sacrament of Baptism is completed when sanctification is completed. Now, sanctification is not completed in water, but a certain sanctifying transient virtue, passes from the water, into man who is the subject of true sanctification. Consequently, the sacrament is not completed in the very water, but in applying the water to man, i.e. in the washing. Hence the Master says that "Baptism is the outward washing of the body done together with the prescribed form of words."* and *"Although there are three personal*

This theological interpretation finds support in Aquinas's assertion that John's sanctification in the womb parallels the prenatal sanctification of Mary, each accomplished directly through divine benediction. Such a concept is vividly captured in artistic representations of the Visitation, depicting John genuflecting in Elizabeth's womb as he symbolically receives a gesture of blessing from Jesus, signifying John's sanctification (baptism) through Christ's prenatal visitation. This imagery visually conveys the precise moment of divine sanctification, underscoring the profound theological belief in Christ's sanctifying power even before His birth. Thus, the Visitation serves not merely as a historical representation of this sacred encounter but also as a symbolic visualization of the theological doctrine that these biblical figures experienced a divine cleansing via the water of the womb, mirroring the sanctifying grace imparted through baptism.

The Visitation – the first meeting of John and Jesus

In Christian theology, the Visitation is a pivotal biblical event described vividly in the Gospel of Luke, in which the Virgin Mary, having conceived Jesus by divine intervention, visits her older cousin Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant with John the Baptist.[66] Beyond simply a familial encounter, this event marks the first meeting of Jesus and John, setting the stage for their intertwined destinies. Elizabeth, upon Mary's greeting, experiences a profound and miraculous moment as John leaps joyfully in her womb, a movement understood by theologians as signifying his prenatal recognition of Christ's divine presence.

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names of the three Persons, there is but one essential name. Now the Divine power which works in Baptism, pertains to the Essence; and therefore we say, "in the name," and not, "in the names."... Now Christ commanded the sacrament of Baptism to be given with the invocation of the Trinity.... For this reason at Christ's Baptism, wherein was the source of sanctification for our Baptism, the Trinity was present in sensible signs: viz. the Father in the voice, the Son in the human nature, the Holy Ghost in the dove. .... In like manner, too, the power of the Holy Ghost acts in the Baptism of Water through a certain hidden power."

[66] Luke chapter 1. *"And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren... so... Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."*

By the 13th century, theologians had fully embraced the idea that John's leap in Elizabeth's womb signified his sanctification—a cleansing analogous to baptism. This idea was explicitly discussed by Thomas Aquinas, who recognized the prenatal sanctification of John as both miraculous and symbolic. Aquinas drew a powerful theological connection, presenting this first prenatal meeting between John and Jesus as a foreshadowing of their later encounter at the Jordan River, when John baptized Christ. In this sense, Aquinas argued, John's leap mirrored his later prophetic proclamation at the Jordan: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." [67]

Theological interpretations of this prenatal sanctification have roots dating back as early as the fourth century. Serapion, in his *Life of John the Baptist*, explicitly described this prenatal event as akin to a form of baptism, suggesting that John's sanctification was directly administered by the unborn Christ himself.[68] Further supporting this view, Bandello cited Pope Honorius III, emphasizing the special sanctification granted to Mary, John, and Jeremiah—each uniquely cleansed and sanctified directly by divine intervention while still within the womb.[69]

Medieval mysticism deepened this theological interpretation, elevating the Visitation into a profoundly devotional moment. Mystics and theologians of the Dominican and Cistercian traditions in particular explored its symbolic richness, focusing especially on the invisible mystery of sanctification made visible through devotional art. Beginning in the fourteenth century, this mystical contemplation gave rise to an innovative artistic

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[67] Aquinas, Commentary on John; *"after the conception of Christ, when his mother, the Virgin, went in haste to the mountainous country to visit John's mother, Elizabeth, that John, still in his mother's womb and unable to speak, leaped in her womb as though performing a religious dance out of 'reverence' for Christ. And as then, so even now; for when Christ comes to John out of humility, John offers his testimony and 'reverence' and breaks out saying,* ***Behold! the Lamb of God (Ecce Agnus Dei).*** *"* John, Chapter 1; *"The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! .....for this purpose, I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'"*

[68] Serapion, Life of John the Baptist; *"The holy and pious virgin embraced then the true turtle-dove, and the Word baptized John while still in the womb of his mother. And David appeared in the middle and said: 'Mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and peace have kissed each other". And immediately John moved in the womb, as if wishing to come out and greet his master"*

[69] Bandello, Treatise, p. 50; *"Also, in his sermon on the Assumption, Pope Honorius III says "the soul contracts the spot of original sin through its union with the flesh which is propagated by seed, but some certain ones, by special privilege, are cleansed before birth, as in the case of Jeremiah, John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin"*

tradition in Northern Europe, known today as the "type foetus." [70] In these devotional images, tiny, illuminated figures or statuaries of the unborn Jesus and John were visually depicted either floating transparently before their mothers' wombs or placed symbolically within transparent wombs (Figure 1). Such symbolism visually represented spiritual pregnancy, suggesting that the sanctifying presence of Christ entered the heart of the faithful, not merely a physical womb. These images were explicitly intended to make the invisible sanctification visible, a sacred visio revealing the hidden mystical interaction between Christ and John.



Figure 1

Within this iconography, a clear hierarchy and theological distinction was consistently maintained: the unborn Christ was shown either standing or seated, offering a gesture of blessing, while John appeared kneeling or genuflecting in humble adoration. Such artistic depictions reinforced Christ's divine authority and John's reverential acceptance of sanctification. By visualizing John's prenatal recognition and humility, these devotional images served as tangible, theological affirmations of Christ's power to sanctify even before birth, underscoring the profound mystery of divine intervention.

The spread of this distinctive iconography was largely concentrated in Southern Germany, especially within Dominican and Cistercian convents along the Upper Rhine. Over forty surviving examples created between roughly 1300 and 1500 attest to its popularity.[71]

[70] Verheyen, Egon. "An Iconographic Note on Altdorfer's Visitation in the Cleveland Museum of Art." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 46, no. 4, 1964, pp. 536–39.
[71] Westergård, I. (2007). Approaching Sacred Pregnancy: The Cult of the Visitation and Narrative Altarpieces in Late Fifteenth-century Florence. Finland: Finnish Literature Society, Finland, p. 52-54.

Particularly noteworthy is the earliest example, a polychrome wooden sculpture originally from the Dominican convent of St. Katharinental, now preserved in The Met (Figure 2).



Figure 2

Though the original figures of Christ and John within transparent wombs were later replaced by crystals, this sculpture testifies to devotional practices that may have included annual commemorations of the Visitation. These communities, characterized by an intense devotion to both John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, emphasized their spiritual relationship. Dominican mystics such as Margaretha Ebner at Maria Medingen articulated visions in which Christ himself explained the unique bond between himself and John, grounded precisely in John's prenatal recognition and sanctification.

The artistic significance of the Visitation extended beyond devotional sculptures into illuminated manuscripts and altarpieces. Manuscripts such as the lavishly illustrated gradual from Wonnental or the famous gradual from St. Katharinental explicitly depicted Christ and John visible within the wombs of Mary and Elizabeth, thereby visually embedding prenatal sanctification within the liturgical context of John's nativity.

Interestingly, despite its widespread northern popularity, explicit depictions of Christ and John within transparent wombs were rarely adopted by fifteenth-century Italian artists. Although the imagery was known to Italian theologians and artists—as demonstrated by rare examples such as a late-fourteenth-century Lombard manuscript or a Florentine engraving portraying Elizabeth with a transparent womb (Figure 3)—Italian artists typically rejected the explicit northern prenatal imagery. Instead, Italians favored more realistic portrayals, relying upon narrative context rather than overt symbolic depictions of pregnancy, placing the Visitation between the Annunciation and Christ's Nativity in life-of-Christ cycles, or between the Annunciation to Zechariah and John's Nativity in Johannine cycles.

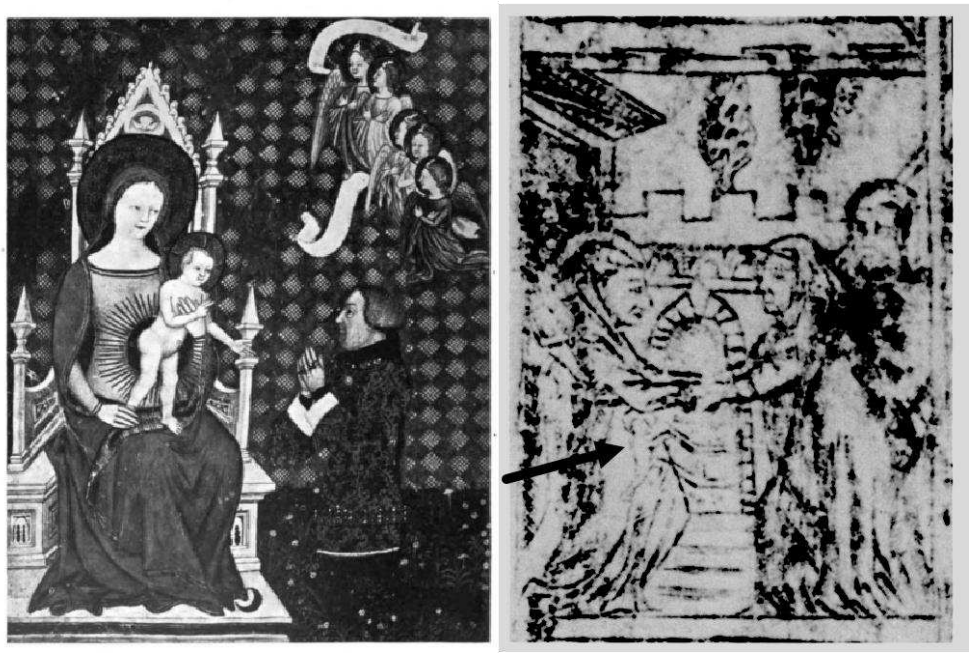


Figure 3

Nonetheless, the influence of northern mysticism and iconography indirectly permeated Italian devotional culture, particularly through literary channels. As demonstrated by Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Florentine artists were especially influenced by the writings of the Dominican Domenico Cavalca, whose *Life of St. John* introduced detailed narratives regarding John's childhood. Lavin explains that Cavalca's popular text likely inspired Florentine artists, including Lippi, Mino and Leonardo, to depict scenes of the young John

reverently adoring the Christ Child. Importantly, she points out that John's characteristic gesture of adoration in Florentine postnatal images likely originated from earlier northern prenatal Visitation iconography, where John similarly adored Christ while still in the womb. Thus, northern prenatal devotional imagery subtly entered the Italian artistic tradition, transformed into postnatal contexts that became widespread and characteristic in Florentine Renaissance art.[72]

Moreover, a mid-fifteenth-century illustration portraying Mary's sanctification in the womb, found in a Dominican Book of Hours for the Feast of Mary's Conception (sanctification), further reflects northern iconographical influence, though adapted differently (Figure 4).[73] Although not a traditional Visitation scene, the image clearly borrows visual symbolism associated with the 'type foetus' of John's sanctification.



Figure 4

[72] Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg. "Giovannino Battista: A Study in Renaissance Religious Symbolism." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1955, pp. 85–101. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3050701. Accessed 6 Mar. 2025.

[73] O'Connor, The dogma of the Immaculate Conception: history and significance, p. 465 and Plate V. The Plate is entitled 'Mary sanctified in her mother's womb' and O'Connor indicates that the 'maculists' used images such as these to represent Mary's sanctification in the womb.

Here, Mary is depicted as an infant in the womb of St. Anne, while God the Father appears in the upper left corner, holding a globus cruciger and bestowing a gesture of benediction towards Mary, with rays emanating from Him directly toward her (Figure ?). The imagery visually echoes the theological teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux and later Thomist Dominicans, who explicitly paralleled Mary's prenatal sanctification with that of John. Both Mary and John were considered sanctified in the womb through divine intervention and reception of the Holy Spirit. The primary theological distinction here was the timing and agency: Mary's sanctification occurred prior to the incarnation of Jesus and was therefore performed directly by God the Father, whereas John's sanctification followed Christ's incarnation and was performed directly by God the Son.

However, it is essential to recognize that while these Dominicans affirmed Mary's sanctification in utero, they consistently opposed the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception, which claimed she was conceived without original sin altogether. Instead, Dominicans maintained that Mary was sanctified—cleansed of original sin—within the womb of St. Anne after her conception, aligning her closely, though uniquely, with John's own prenatal cleansing. Thus, this Dominican Book of Hours visually asserts a theological position contrary to the Immaculate Conception doctrine, clearly reflecting the Dominican belief in Mary's post-conception sanctification rather than her immaculate conception.

Perhaps the latest surviving example of the northern "type foetus" imagery is an early 16th century painting in the Cleveland Museum, formerly attributed to Altdorfer, once belonging to the Schloss Rohoncz collection (Figure 5). It explicitly portrays Elizabeth and Mary in a landscape, visited by Zacharias, beneath what appear to be a 'star'. Between the women appear tiny radiant figures of Christ and John, clearly visible and symbolically expressing their spiritual interaction and sanctification. Such iconography reinforced the theological message that even unborn children could be reached and sanctified by Christ's divine presence.



Figure 5

Ultimately, these images and theological interpretations of the Visitation served not merely as devotional objects but as profound meditations upon sanctification and baptism. The visual parallel between Christ's prenatal blessing of John and John's subsequent baptism of Christ at the Jordan vividly symbolized the interconnectedness of their prophetic destinies. The Visitation was artistically and theologically recognized as both a literal and symbolic foreshadowing of baptism: first, Christ came to John in Elizabeth's womb, sanctifying him spiritually; later, Christ would come again to John at the Jordan, publicly inaugurating his ministry through baptismal waters.

Christ's Baptism – The second meeting of John and Jesus

The Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, their second encounter, is a momentous event in the Christian narrative, richly detailed in the Gospels. This event, following their initial meeting during the Visitation, unfolds as John preaches and performs baptisms in the

Jordan River. Like his prenatal leap in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, John, upon recognizing Jesus, directly proclaims, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world…" These profound words have been pivotal in Christian theology, particularly emphasized by those opposing the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception.[74] They underscore Christ's unique status as the only perfect, immaculate sacrificial lamb. The Dominicans, notably opposed to the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, have placed substantial emphasis on this detail. This is exemplified in the title of Bandello's treatise, which resonates with this sentiment, and his frequent references to Church fathers in support of his viewpoint. [75]

In the ensuing scene, Jesus approaches John to be baptized. As Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove, accompanied by a divine voice affirming, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." This moment marks not only a divine endorsement of Jesus' mission but also symbolizes the inauguration of his public ministry. The Catholic liturgy mirrors the significance of the Baptism during the Eucharist. The priest, elevating the consecrated Host, recites John the Baptist's words, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." This liturgical act invites the congregation to gaze upon the Host as the real presence of Christ, symbolizing his self-sacrifice. This moment in the Mass reiterates the unique role of Christ as the savior, a theme that has been perpetuated through centuries in the Eucharist celebration.[76]

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[74] Even the medieval scholastic Franciscan, St. Bonaventure wrote concerning the Immaculate Conception: *"…no one has been set free from the guilt of original sin except the Son of the Virgin alone. For as the Apostle says in Romans 3 – "All have sinned and need the glory of God"….. St. Augustine says this same thing when treating words of St. John, '**Behold the Lamb of God**', commenting 'He alone could take away the sins of the world, he who came without sin, because he is free from every sin. And this opinion is more common, more reasonable and safer."*

[75] The title of his treatise it to do with Christ's 'singular prerogative'. Bandello, Treatise; "Where there is redemption, there is a price. And what is this price, if not the precious blood of the immaculate Lamb, Jesus Christ?" and "For the Octave of the Epiphany and feast of Christ's baptism: 'Behold, the Lamb of God, as if to say, Behold, the Lamb, a man innocent of all carnal sin; meaning that of those born of this sinful generation; he alone derived no stain of sin'." and "Christ is truly an innocent Lamb, in **whom alone** even the devil can find no fault." and "Christ is truly the immaculate Lamb, because **only in him** is no sin found."

[76] Aquinas: "*Water flowed from Christ's side to wash us; blood, to redeem us. Wherefore blood belongs to the sacrament of the Eucharist, while water belongs to the sacrament of Baptism. Yet Baptism derives its*



Figure 6

Iconographically, the baptism of Christ, consistent in representation before the 16th century, is derived from a synthesis of the Gospel narratives. Commonly, Jesus is depicted standing in the Jordan River, either with his hands clasped or bestowing a sign of benediction, while John, positioned slightly elevated on the riverbank, pours water over Christ's head (Figure 6). In artistic representations of this event, although not specifically mentioned in the Gospel narratives, attending angels are often depicted. These angels, prefiguring those who minister to Christ in the wilderness during his temptation, are shown holding Christ's garments. This inclusion adds symbolic depth, equating Christ's baptism to a holy ceremony observed and supported by celestial beings. This mirrors the role of parents and godparents in traditional infant baptism rituals, emphasizing the familial and sacred nature of the event (Figure 7).

At the apex of these scenes, a descending dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, is often shown emanating from an image of God the Father, who is also bestowing a benediction. This visual representation reinforces the sanctifying nature of Christ's baptism and serves as a model for all future baptisms performed in his name.

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cleansing virtue from the power of Christ's blood.... Baptism operates by the power of Christ's Passion, which is the universal remedy for all sins; and so by Baptism all sins are loosed"



Figure 7

In the world of 15th-century sacred art, the creations of luminaries transcend simple visual appeal, serving as rich representations of theological and doctrinal stories. These artists, exemplified by Leonardo's "Virgin of the Rocks" and Lippi's "Epiphany" altarpieces, crafted for the Confraternity and the Medici family respectively, masterfully weave together key biblical incidents and symbols. They embed profound theological and liturgical motifs into the very essence of their artistic storytelling. Filippo Lippi's "Epiphany" altarpiece is a testament to this intricate weaving of biblical stories. In this masterpiece, Lippi merges the narratives of the Epiphany and Christ's Baptism, both traditionally celebrated on January 6th. This artistic integration is intentional, crafted to express a deeper liturgical and theological meaning. Lippi's creation, commissioned by the prominent Medici family, showcases the intricate interplay between biblical stories and the liturgical calendar. It illustrates that 15th-century art was more than mere aesthetic display; it was a conduit for theological discussion and political contemplation. The altarpiece acts as a visual homily, conveying meanings that are esoteric, understood primarily by those associated with the commission. It reveals the connection between key Christian doctrinal events and their relevance in the wider scope of the Medici's political and religious ambitions.

Leonardo da Vinci's "Virgin of the Rocks" represents a significant departure from conventional biblical art, merging the Visitation of Jesus and John with themes of baptism in a way that actively engages with the theological debates of his era, especially those concerning Mary's Immaculate Conception. This synthesis of narratives is not just an artistic endeavor but a nuanced commentary on the theological discussions of the time, making the painting a vessel for deep theological interpretation. It's rich in symbolism and implications that extend beyond its visual elements, with Leonardo using the Visitation to

underscore its baptismal connections, thus influencing and contributing to the contemporary understanding of these doctrines.

The portrayal of Jesus and John as infants in the painting is layered with a deeper narrative that resonates with the teachings of baptism and sanctification, a choice that gains significance against the backdrop of the 15th-century doctrinal debates. This approach positions Leonardo's work as more than just a visual masterpiece; it's an active participant in the religious dialogues of his time.

Leonardo's innovative blending of these biblical events, however, didn't arise in a vacuum. It draws on the theology of the Church Fathers, providing a historical and theological context for artists like Leonardo. Under the patronage and guidance of influential figures such as Lorenzo de' Medici and Bandello, Leonardo and his contemporaries were equipped with iconographic tools that allowed them to subtly question and challenge the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Thus, Leonardo's employment of religious iconography transcends simple artistic representation, becoming a powerful tool in theological discourse during an era marked by intense doctrinal and political turmoil.

To fully appreciate the evolution of religious iconography, especially concerning Mary's Immaculate Conception, one must recognize that explicit representations of this doctrine only began to emerge in the 16th century, following Sixtus IV's controversial proclamation. Before this period, a rich tapestry of treatises, commentaries, and sermons intricately wove a complex theological narrative. These texts, replete with metaphors and similes, articulated the doctrine in a way that, although not visually represented, laid the groundwork for future artistic interpretations. These interpretations would later encapsulate the roles of key figures like Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Jesus, and John the Baptist in the unfolding controversy.

In the modern era, with the benefit of a contemporary perspective but examining through the lens of 15th-century religious art, we can discern specific artistic intentions that may have been opaque to earlier audiences. For instance, when encountering a painting that depicts an unusual scene of Jesus blessing a kneeling John, set in a watery landscape, it becomes apparent that the artist is evoking the memory of Christ's baptism, where John

famously exclaims, ‘Behold the Lamb of God’. Yet, a more nuanced understanding is required when artists, like Leonardo in his "Virgin of the Rocks," choose to portray Jesus and John as infants. Leonardo’s depiction is far from a casual artistic choice; it is a calculated attempt, akin to Lippi’s "Epiphany" altarpiece in the Medici Chapel, to blend and reinterpret two biblically and theologically interconnected events. Chronologically, the first event, the Visitation, aligns with the infantile first meeting of John and Jesus, while the second event corresponds with their meeting at Christ’s baptism. During the Visitation, as the narrative describes, John is sanctified and leaps in Elizabeth's womb, an event that not only serves as a theological analogue to baptism but also, in the context of Leonardo’s commission, is imbued with significant meaning pertaining to the argument against Mary’s immaculate conception. Thus, the fusion of Christ’s Visitation with His Baptism, already established in the theology of the Church Fathers, allowed Leonardo, under the auspices of Lorenzo and Bandello, to covertly employ its iconography as a subtle yet powerful weapon against the proclamations of Sixtus IV.

In summary, the religious iconography of the 15th century was far more than a display of piety; it was a critical didactic tool, especially during times of theological controversy. Serving as a visual language, it communicated religious teachings, narratives, and beliefs, drawing inspiration from the rich similes and metaphors found in sacred scriptures and theological commentaries. This period marked a pivotal point in the history of religious art, where the visual depiction of theological concepts played a crucial role in shaping the Church's teachings and the understanding of its most pivotal figures.

Mary as Mother Church and Bride

The theological insights of Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysologus, Bede, Ambrose of Milan, and Gregory of Nazianus enrich our understanding of Mary's purity, obedience, and maternal role. These insights not only highlight Mary's significance in the salvation narrative but also her symbolic representation of the Church's identity and mission.

Through this section, we aim to assess this Marian symbolism, examining how the Church Fathers and medieval theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux understood and articulated Mary's dual role. This exploration is not just an academic exercise; it invites us to reflect

on the spiritual and mystical dimensions of the historical Christian faith and the role of the Church.

> *We have advanced in this matter as far as we dared. For the rest it is your part, Blessed Father, to take care that in your days no spot of heretical depravity stains the fair beauty of the Church. To you, O friend of the bridegroom, has the bride of Christ been entrusted; it is you to present her, a chaste virgin, to one husband, even to Christ.*[77]

In the realm of medieval theological discourse, the symbolic interplay between Mary, the Mother of God, and the Mother Church stands as a profound subject that has long intrigued and inspired scholars. The Church Fathers, with their deep insights into scripture and tradition, have provided a rich framework for understanding this connection, demonstrating that Mary and her womb are symbols and types of both the Mother Church and the Bride of Christ.

Augustine, in his treatise "De Sancta Virginitate" (On Holy Virginity), illuminates this connection, particularly focusing on the virgin birth of Christ as a signifier of the Church's spiritual birth.[78] This statement by Augustine underscores the necessity of Christ's birth from a virgin to symbolize the spiritual rebirth of believers in the virgin Church, further enriching the typological understanding of Mary and the Church. Augustine then draws a compelling direct parallel between the Church and the Virgin Mary. He captures the dual nature of the Church, likening it to Mary who is both virgin and mother.[79] This parallel not only highlights the Church's role in spiritual nurturance and guidance but also its perpetual purity and faithfulness, akin to Mary's own qualities.

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[77] Bernard letter to Pope Innocent. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. (1889). *Life and Works of Saint Bernard* (J. Mabillon, Ed.; S. J. Eales, Trans.; Second Edition, Vol. 2, p. 593). Burns & Oates Limited; Benziger Brothers.
[78] Augustine: "To a virgin, for Christ could only be born from virginity, seeing He could not have an equal in His birth. It was necessary for our Head by this mighty miracle to be born according to the flesh of a virgin, that He might signify that his [church] members were to be born in the spirit of a virgin Church."
[79] In his sermons, Augustine articulates, "As Mary gave birth to Him who is your head, so the Church gives birth to you. For the Church also is both mother and virgin: mother in the womb of our love, virgin in her inviolate faith. She is the mother of many nations who yet are one body and are thus likened to that one Virgin Mary, the mother of many but yet of the one."

Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysologus and Bede further Augustine's typological connection. Cyril's depiction of Mary as ever virgin and simultaneously the holy Church emphasizes her symbolic role in representing the Church's perpetual purity and its intimate union with Christ,[80] while Chrysologus views Mary's announcement of Christ's birth as reflective of the Church's mission to proclaim the good news.[81] This perspective places Mary as a figure through whom the Church's role as a messenger of the divine word is revealed. Bede, delving into pastoral imagery, likens the Church to Mary. His allegorical interpretation positions Mary as the embodiment of the Church's purity and beauty, a guiding symbol for the 'shepherds' of the Church.[82]

Even before these patristic sources, the synergy of Mary as the Church, and both Christ's mother and His bride, is echoed in both Ambrose of Milan and the popular Hymns of Saint Ephrem the Syrian.[83] Ephrem's words not only reaffirm the prophetic fulfillment found in Mary but also extend this mystery to her as the mother, sister and, in the voice of Mary, bridegroom.[84] Ambrose of Milan contributes to this rich tapestry of Marian symbolism. In his "Exposition of the Christian Faith," Ambrose reflects on the uniqueness of Jesus' birth from Mary's womb, drawing a parallel with the Church.[85] Ambrose's insight here parallels that of Gregory of Nazianus, in that Mary's role in the Incarnation prefigures the Church's mission in spiritually birthing and sanctifying the faithful. In his "Orations," Gregory captures the mystical union of Christ with the Church, using the imagery of a

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[80] In his "Commentary on the Gospel of John," Cyril asserts, "Mary ever virgin, who herself is clearly the holy Church, together with her Son, a most chaste spouse."
[81] Crysologus: "Mary brings the news, not now as a woman, but in the person of the Church, so that, as the above woman was silent, here as the Church she might bring tidings and speak."
[82] Bede: "Again, the shepherds of the Lord's flock by contemplating the life of the fathers who went before them, enter as it were the gates of Bethlehem, and find therein none other than the virgin beauty of the Church, that is, Mary."
[83] Ephrem, Hymns 8-11: "Blessed art thou, O Church, for of thee Isaiah speaks in his prophetic song of joy: 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.' O hidden mystery of the Church!" and "Bridegrooms shouted joyfully with their brides, "Blessed is the Babe whose mother was bride of the Holy One" and "For she is Your mother, she alone, and is Your sister with all. She was to You a mother; she was to You a sister. Moreover, she is Your betrothed with the chaste women. In everything, behold, You adorned her"
[84] Ephrem, Hymn 13: "Shall I call you Son? Shall I call You Brother? Shall I call You Bridegroom? Shall I call You Lord?"
[85] Ambrose: "For if we follow the letter, how can every male be holy, since it is undoubted that many have been most wicked? But He is holy whom in the figure of a future mystery the pious ordinances of the divine law prefigured, because He alone was to open the hidden womb of the holy virgin Church for the begetting of nations."

marriage feast within the womb of Mary at Christ's conception.[86] Gregory's metaphor of the marriage feast and the bride-chamber eloquently symbolizes the intimate and sacred union between Christ and the Church, a mystical communion that Mary's womb foreshadows.

Bernard of Clairvaux

The writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, particularly his sermons on the mysteries of the Virgin Mary, are a fascinating study in the dual roles Mary plays in Christian theology: as both the Mother of God and the Bride of God. Bernard's sermons offer a profound insight into these roles, especially in the context of key events like the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Presentation in the Temple, and Pentecost.

Bernard's sermon on the mystery of the Annunciation is particularly striking.[87] He describes the incarnation of Jesus as a divine marriage, with Mary as the Bride of God. This imagery is powerful: "the marriage of heaven and earth," as Bernard puts it, begins with Mary's humble acceptance, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to Thy word." Here, Mary's role as the Bride of God is not passive; it is an active consent that sets the stage for the Incarnation. This moment signifies the inseparable union of Godhead and manhood, a mystical marriage where Mary's human nature intertwines with divine action.

In his sermon on the mystery of the Visitation, Bernard highlights Mary's elation as the Bride of God.[88] This joy is not just personal; it's cosmic, affecting all of creation. Yet, it's

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[86] Gregory: "God the Father made a marriage feast for God the Son, when He joined Him to human nature in the womb of the Virgin.... it is safe to say, that the marriage feast was made by the King the Father for the King the Son when He joined to Him the Holy Church in the mystery of His incarnation. The womb of the Virgin Mother was the bride-chamber of this Bridegroom."

[87] "But who shall intermeddle with her joy! joy that the hour was come for which all creation groaned; joy that now, for the glory and delight of God and man, the inseparable union of Godhead and manhood should be accomplished; and joy that the marvel, the marriage of heaven and earth, should begin in her". "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to Thy word," was Mary's answer; and the divine marriage between God and man were accomplished in her person. O love of God, preparing for Thyself a human heart, vouchsafe to hear our prayer.... Mary, the woman of all prophecy, the Bride of God, pray for us"

[88] "Mary arose in haste, and, as she went across the hills, the humble, happy bride of God, that hymn was "singing in her heart," which her lips poured forth when Elizabeth saluted her, "Mother of my Lord."

coupled with profound humility. When Elizabeth calls her the "Mother of my Lord," we see the duality of Mary's roles. She is at once the Bride of God, rejoicing in her union with God, and the Mother of God, carrying God the Savior within her.

The Presentation in the Temple further illustrates this duality.[89] Bernard notes that Mary, "the immaculate Bride of the Father, and Mother of God the Son," consents to hide her blessedness. This act of humility, presenting Jesus in the Temple, underscores her role as the Mother of God, while her internal struggle reflects her status as the Bride of God. She grapples with the paradox of her immaculate nature and the typical rites of redemption, questioning whether her actions might dishonor her divine Son. This tension between her exalted status and her humble obedience is a recurring theme in Bernard's sermons, highlighting the multifaceted nature of Mary's roles.

Bernard's sermon on Pentecost draws a parallel between the Church's reception of the Holy Spirit and Mary's conception of Jesus.[90] He describes Mary as being "overshadowed by the power of the Most High" once more, this time with the infant Church. The imagery of Mary as the Bride of God is vivid here, as she, along with the Church, receives the Holy Spirit. This event mirrors the Annunciation, where Mary as the Bride conceives Jesus. At Pentecost, she is part of the Church, the collective Bride of Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit. This moment encapsulates the transition from Mary's individual role as the Mother and Bride of God to the Church's corporate identity as the Bride of Christ.

Bernard's sermons offered a rich tapestry of Marian theology to subsequent generations of scholastics. The dual imagery of Mary as both Mother and Bride of God is not just a poetic or mystical expression; it has profound theological implications. As the Mother of God,

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[89] "He "emptied Himself" for our salvation, and through Mary He became "obedient unto death." Though she was the immaculate Bride of the Father, and Mother of God the Son, she consented to hide her blessedness, and carried her divine Babe to the temple with the typical price of redemption … "Might not the blessed Virgin have asked: "**Being the Bride and Mother of God**, shall I not dishonour Him by acting as if Joseph were His real father? Being a spotless Virgin, Mother only by the overshadowing power of the Highest, will it not be a false (and even perhaps blasphemous) humility to act as if unclean? Is not my Jesus the Sanctifier of the sanctuary? Am I not, by God's grace, purer than the new-fallen snow?"

[90] "Once more is Mary overshadowed by the power of the Highest. She, with the infant Church, waited for the promise of the Father; and, in fire, the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, came down…. O Mary, Bride of God, the fire of love was the very life of all your life."

and crowned queen of heaven at her assumption, Mary is intimately connected with the Incarnation of Jesus within her womb, playing a crucial role in God's plan of salvation. As the spotless (immaculate), cleansed Bride of God, the Church, personified as the Virgin Mary, exemplifies the ideal erotic relationship between the divine and the human, a model of receptivity, obedience, and nuptial union with God, serving not only as the perfect parallel to the Bride of Christ found in Ephesians but also the perfect antitype to Solomon's bride found in Canticles.

Canticles, a remarkable poetic composition in the Bible traditionally attributed to King Solomon, serves as an opulent backdrop for the exquisite and sometimes erotic portrayal of love between a bride and a bridegroom.[91] Yet, beneath the surface of these verses lies a profound wellspring of interpretations that transcend their romantic origins. Among these interpretations, allegorical representations of the profound union between Christ and the Church emerge as a prominent theme. Within the rich tapestry of Canticles' vivid imagery, theologians found inspiration when viewed through the prism of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:25–28 introduces a poignant metaphor, comparing a husband's love for his wife to Christ's boundless love for the Church. Christ's love for the Church is portrayed as a love so profound that He willingly gave Himself for her. This sacrificial love is depicted as the transformative agent by which Christ cleanses and sanctifies the Church. Using baptismal imagery, Paul claims that Christ purifies his bride "by the washing of water with the word," presenting her "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing," akin to the immaculate virgin bride described in Canticles. Ephesians underscores the themes of

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[91] Canticles 4: *"Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are **doves** behind your veil..... You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no **spot** (macula) in you. Come with me from Lebanon, my **bride**; come with me from Lebanon, thou shall crowned from the top of Amana...How beautiful is your love, my **sister**, my **bride**...My sister, my spouse, **is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed**, a fountain sealed up."*

Canticles 5: *I sleep, and my heart watcheth: the voice of my beloved knocking: Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled (immaculata): for my head is full of dew, and my locks of the drops of the nights.*

Canticles 6: *"My **dove**, my **perfect** one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, **pure** to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her **blessed**; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her, saying "Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the **moon**, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?"*

sanctification and purity within the Church, mirroring the profound symbolism found in Canticles.

Aquinas and the Dominicans

In his interpretation of Ephesians, Thomas Aquinas from the Dominican tradition provides a profound understanding of the relationship between the Church and Christ, particularly focusing on the symbolism of water in the Church's sanctification. Aquinas emphasizes the sacrament of baptism as the essential means through which the Church is purified and unified, drawing a parallel to the spiritual union between Christ and the Church. He elucidates that the Church's ultimate goal is to present itself before Christ as a glorious and immaculate bride, echoing the sentiments of Ephesians 5:25-27.[92]

Aquinas further explores the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ in the form of a dove during His baptism, interpreting this as a symbol of the unity and community Christ seeks within His Church. The dove, representing love and community, mirrors the nature of the Church and aligns with the dove-like Bride of Canticles. This imagery is significant as it

[92] Aquinas, Commentary on Ephesians: "Thus he says: as Christ also loved the church; "Be ye therefore followers of God, as most dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us and hath delivered himself for us" (Eph. 5:1-2). The sign of Christ's love for the church is that he delivered himself up for it. "The Son of God who loved me and delivered himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). "He hath delivered his soul unto death" (Is. 53:12). And for what? That he might sanctify it: Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people by his own blood, suffered without the gate" (Heb. 13:12). "Sanctify them in truth" (Jn. 17:17); that is the effect of Christ's death. As a result of this sanctification he cleanses it from the stains of sin. Hence he adds cleansing it by the laver of water. This washing has a power from the passion of Christ. "All we who are baptized in Christ Jesus are baptized in his death; for we are buried together with him by baptism into deatY' (Rom. 6:3-4). "And I will pour upon you clean water and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness" (Ez. 36:25). "There shall be a fountain open to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem; for the washing of the sinner and of the unclean woman" (Zach. 13:1). This occurs in the word of life which, coming upon the water, gives it the power to cleanse: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19). The goal of this sanctifying action is the Church's purity. Thus he states that he might present it to himself, a glorious church; as if the Apostle said: It would be highly improper for the immaculate bridegroom to wed a soiled bride. This is why he presents her to himself in an immaculate state, now through grace and in the future through glory. Regarding the latter, he says glorious by the clarity of both body and soul. For "he will reform the body of our lowness, made like to the body of his glory" (Phil. 3:21). Hence he adds not having spot: "the man that walked in the perfect way, he served me" (Ps. 100:6); "blessed are the undeffled in the way: who walk in the law of the Lor&' (Ps. 118: 1). Or wrinkle refers to the lack of suffering since, as the Apocalypse 7 (16) remarks: "they shall no more hunger nor thirst," or any such thing, but that it should be holy through its confirmation in grace, and without the blemish of any defilement. Thus all of these characteristics can be understood of the appearance of the Church in the future through glory."

reflects the Church's aspiration to be a pure and loving community under Christ's guidance.

By the 13th century, both the Bride of Canticles and the Virgin Mary were seen as representations of the Church. This perspective allowed for the equating of Mary or the Bride of Canticles with the Church, and even the association of Mary with the Bride of Canticles. Aquinas uses this framework to connect the imagery of the dove at Christ's baptism with the loving, communal dove-like Bride found in Canticles. He specifically references Canticles 6:8, a verse that would later be used in theological debates about Mary's immaculate conception. [93] [94]

Aquinas's purpose is to show that the bride in Canticles symbolizes the Church, the Bride of Christ as described in Ephesians. He argues that the Church achieves her state of immaculacy and heavenly purity through the sacrament of Baptism. This interpretation not only provides a theological basis for understanding the Church's relationship with Christ but also integrates Marian doctrines, particularly the concept of Mary's immaculate conception, into the broader narrative of the Church's sanctification and unity with Christ.

Later, in 1481, when writing his Thomist attack against the teaching of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Vincenzo Bandello, parroting Church Father Nicholas of Lyra, introduced the symbols of the moon and the sun found in Canticles 6:10.[95] According to Bandello, Mary is likened to the moon at her birth because she, only reflecting the Light of Christ, was

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[93] Aquinas, Summa 3.39.6 "*the Holy Ghost appeared over our Lord at His baptism in the form of a dove, in order to designate the common effect of baptism---namely, the building up of the unity of the Church. Hence it is written (Eph. 5:25-27): "Christ delivered Himself up that He might present to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing cleansing it by the laver of water in the word of life." Therefore, it was fitting that the Holy Ghost should appear at the baptism under the form of a dove, which is a creature both loving and gregarious.* ***Wherefore also it is said of the Church (Canticles 6:8): "One is my dove****."*

[94] In 1476 Sixtus approved the first Office for the Feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception written by Leonard Nagorolis. The Office closes with a recitation of Canticles 6:8, except that Nogarolis changed the very last phrase of the verse from 'beatissimam predicaverunt' (called her happy) to 'immaculatam predicaverunt' (called her immaculate), which would have caused quite a stir among the Thomists. It reads: "*One is my dove, my perfect one, who alone is His chosen mother, the Holy souls saw her and called her immaculate."*

[95] Canticles 6:10 "Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array?"

sanctified in the womb before birth. However, at the Annunciation, when Mary conceived Jesus (the Light of the World) in her womb by the Holy Spirit, she is equated with the sun, because carrying the Light of the World in her womb has made her perfectly immaculate, not only washing away all her sin, but even washing away her ability to sin. This transformation signifies her transition from being sanctified to becoming immaculate, radiating with the divine light of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. Therefore, using Canticles against his rivals, Bandello's interpretation beautifully weaves together Mary's journey from sanctification to immaculacy, offering a nuanced perspective within the broader Immaculate Conception debate.[96]

Bandello was a Medici partisan, so it's no wonder then that another Medici partisan Gentile Becci, the creator of the Flornetina Synodus, leveraged Aquinas' comparison between the bride of Canticles and the Church to sarcastically attack the prime supporter of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Pope Sixtus, for his ecclesiastical corruption and complicity in the murder of Giuliano Medici.[97]

It is evident that theologians from the 5th to 15th century perceived Mary not merely as a historical figure but as a profound symbol encapsulating the essence of her dual role as both mother and bride. Her purity, obedience, and maternal role resonate deeply with the Church's identity as both the mother of believers and the sanctified Bride of Christ. This dual symbolism, richly articulated by the Patristic sources, found scriptural resonance in the writings of Paul, particularly in Ephesians 5:25-27. Here, the heaven-bound Church is depicted as the immaculate Bride of Christ, sanctified, and cleansed by Christ's sacrificial love, paralleling the theology of Mary's sanctification in her mother's womb and

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[96] Bandello, Treatise: "*According to Nicholas of Lyra, this passage [Canticles 6] is to be interpreted 'spiritually' as referring to the Blessed Virgin, in that, being sanctified in the womb by the Light of Grace, she was born as beautiful as the moon, but still with the inclination to sin. However, in her conception of the Son, she was granted to become bright as the Sun, for all impurity and incentive to sin was destroyed by the fullness of Light which she carried.... The Blessed Virgin had the stain of original sin in her mother's womb but was cleansed and sanctified. In this way, she was 'beautiful as the moon' in her birth. At the Conception of the Son she was liberated from the fomes. In this way she was 'bright as the Sun' at the Annunciation.*"

[97] Florentina Synodus: "*This minister of adulteries (Sixtus) made that woman (the Church) -- whom the **celestial bridegroom** (Christ) had called his own **unique beauty and immaculate dove** -- into a misshapen prostitute and a crow stained with filth: for he bought her in the temple and sold her to the impious, and from his earnings he fed pigs with nuggets of gold. Then this successor of Peter murdered his son, and as the devil's Vicar he assaulted whoever was most Christian.*"

subsequent complete immaculacy at the incarnation of Christ in her own womb. The baptismal imagery of washing and cleansing in Ephesians not only symbolizes the Church's purification in the rite of its members' baptism, but also its continual spiritual renewal and growth, a process mirrored in Mary's own sanctity and submission to God's will. The Church, as a symbol of Mary and the Bride of Christ, anticipates the ultimate consummation of its heavenly union with Christ, a theme that is vividly portrayed in the Book of Revelation where the Church is depicted as the Bride adorned for her Bridegroom.[98]

Mother Church or Mary as the Moon?

As we have seen, Augustine viewed Mary as a precursor to the Church, a type or symbol of the Church's sanctification and purity. He eloquently describes the Church as both virgin and mother, drawing a parallel to Mary who gave birth to Christ while maintaining her virginity.[99] This analogy extends to all believers, as the Church, like Mary, gives birth to its members through the sanctifying waters of baptism.

St. Augustine then further enriches this symbolism by comparing the Church to the moon.[100] In his sermon on Psalm 10, he describes the moon as an allegorical figure of the Church, which, like the moon, has no light of its own but derives its light from Christ, the Sun.[101] This allegory beautifully captures the essence of the Church's relationship with Christ. The moon, ever-changing and cyclical, mirrors the Church's journey through times of brightness and shadow, symbolizing the faith in resurrection and eternal renewal.

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98 Revelation 19:-8, "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints."

99 Gambero, Mary and the Fathers of the Church, p. 222-227

100 For Mary as symbol of the Church see my paper 'Mary as Mother Church & Bride in Medieval Texts'.

101 In his sermon on Psalm 10, when talking about the Church's early fight against heresy, Augustine compared the Church, who receives its light from Christ, to the moon and its stages. *"...consider in this Pslam how **the moon is an appropriate symbol of the Church**.... as it turns...**it appears at first crescent shaped**...then the whole appears completely white...then diminishes until it becomes crescent shaped once more and finally disappears. ...the **moon is an allegorical figure of the Church**. When she shines forth on her spiritual side, her human side is in darkness... The moon symbolizes the Church, which possesses no light of her own but derives her light from the only-begotten Son of God, who in many places in Holy Scripture is allegorically termed the sun. .... The figure of the moon perfectly symbolizes the Church. ... insofar as she wanes only to rise again she becomes, even for the unlettered multitude, a figure of the Church with its faith in the resurrection of the dead."*

Augustine's metaphor not only deepens our understanding of the Church's nature but also subtly reinforces Mary's role within this celestial imagery often highlighted through a correlation with the Book of Revelation (12:1), which describes a woman "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head." The woman in this passage was often interpreted as a symbol of either the Church or the Virgin Mary, or a combination of both, again conflating the Church with Mary.

However, returning to Bandello's treatise, his turning of Canticles 6 against the immaculists is particularly noteworthy. By employing traditional interpretations, he demonstrates that Mary, though conceived with original sin, was sanctified in the womb, paralleling the moon's reflection of the sun's light. This interpretation solidifies Mary as a symbol of the sanctified Church, the Bride of Christ, and the Queen of Heaven.

Bandello's view, deeply rooted in Dominican theology, presents Mary as a celestial metaphor evolving from the moon to the sun, encapsulating her spiritual journey through sanctification. Citing Nicholas of Lyra, he aligns Mary with the moon at her birth.[102] This analogy is not just poetic but deeply theological. He posits that Mary, sanctified in the womb by the Light of Grace, was conceived with the stain of original sin but was cleansed of it and sanctified in the womb, much like the moon which gradually waxes in brightness. This view resonates with the Dominican emphasis on Mary's sanctification over her immaculate conception. Bandello, interpreting Canticles 6, argues that Mary, although sanctified and cleansed in the womb was nevertheless born with an inclination to sin. In this way, as a reflection of God's light, she was 'beautiful as the moon', but not yet 'bright as the sun' with no inclination to sin.

The transformation in Mary's symbolism from moon to sun is pivotal in Bandello's narrative. At the Annunciation, when she conceived the Son, she was granted to become as bright as the sun. This moment marked the eradication of all impurity and inclination

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[102] Bandello, Treatise: *"According to Nicholas of Lyra, this passage [Canticles 6] is to be interpreted 'spiritually' as referring to the Blessed Virgin, in that, being sanctified in the womb by the Light of Grace, she was born as beautiful as the moon, but still with the inclination to sin. However, in her conception of the Son, she was granted to become bright as the Sun, for all impurity and incentive to sin was destroyed by the fullness of Light which she carried.... The Blessed Virgin had the stain of original sin in her mother's womb but was cleansed and sanctified. In this way, she was 'beautiful as the moon' in her birth. At the Conception of the Son she was liberated from the fomes. In this way she was 'bright as the Sun' at the Annunciation."*

to sin, illuminated by the fullness of Light she carried in her own person. Bandello's interpretation underscores a significant theological transition: Mary, initially sanctified and akin to the moon, becomes immaculate like the sun at the Annunciation. In this way she is like the sanctified Bride of Christ that Paul used as a symbol of for the Church found in Ephesians.

The **Mother of Mercy and the Confraternities**

The Madonna della Misericordia, or Mother of Mercy, is an evocative symbol in medieval religious art, established in the traditions and visions of the Cistercian Order. In this evocative iconography, the Virgin Mary is portrayed as a majestic figure, like the Mother Church, exuding serenity and compassion. She is mostly depicted standing -- though in early instances she is typically seated, enthroned as the queen of heaven -- with one or both arms extended, gracefully holding open her voluminous cloak or mantle (Figure 8). When only one arm is outstretched, her other arm is often cradling the Christ child, who gives a sign of benediction towards its patrons. This maternal and protective gesture forms a sanctuary within her mantle, beneath her arm, where a diverse array of small figures find refuge. These figures, representing the faithful patrons, frequently include men, women, children, members of the clergy, and occasionally recognizable figures of the era such as popes, bishops, or local leaders, all seeking solace and protection under her mantle.

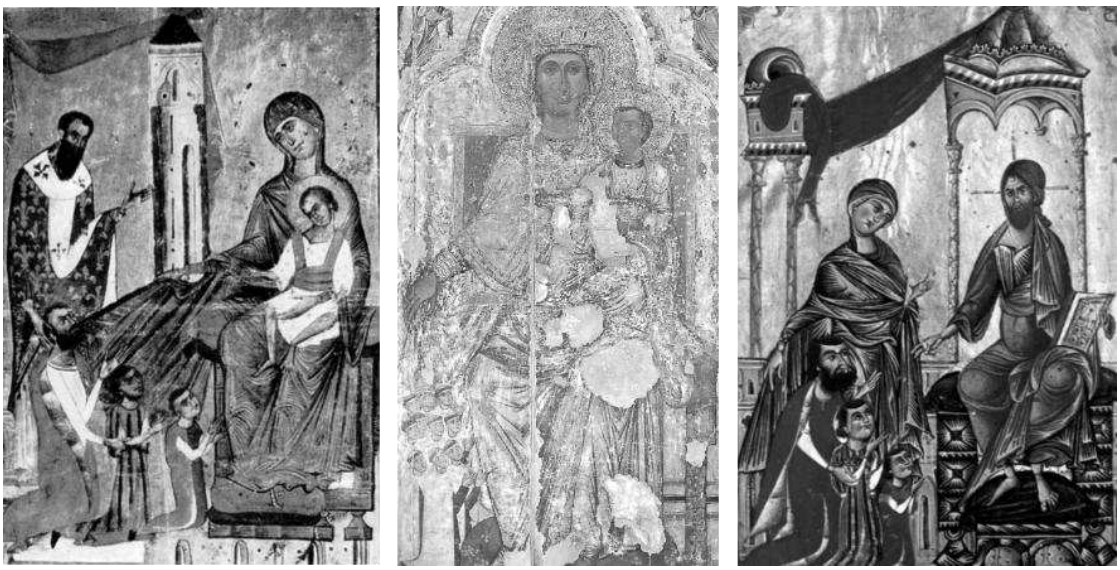


Figure 8

Left (Miniature, Cilicia, 1275), Middle (Fresco, Nicosia, 1290), Right (Miniature, Cilicia, 1272)

The origins of this motif can be traced back to a vision experienced by a Cistercian monk, as vividly described in the immensely popular Dialogus Miraculorum by Caesarius Heisterbacensis, also a Cistercian from the diocese of Cologne. In this vision, the monk, deeply devoted to the Virgin Mary, witnesses the various orders of the triumphant Church in Heaven but is distressed at the absence of his own Cistercian Order. Upon questioning the Virgin, she reveals an innumerable multitude of monks, lay brothers, and nuns sheltered under her expansive, marvelous mantle, affirming their cherished place with her.

Dialogus Miraculorum, written around 1220, is believed to have provided the inspiration for the later Mother of Mercy iconography. However, the concept of the 'mantle' as a symbol of protection and adoption predates this vision, finding its roots in pagan legends, rites, and folklore. The Cistercian Order, dedicated to the worship of the Virgin, found this imagery particularly resonant, for Madonna of Mercy motif is evident in official Cistercian seals from the fourteenth century.[103] One of the earliest examples, dated 1335 from the Cistercian nunnery of Beaupré, shows the Virgin with the Child in her arms and several nuns beneath her mantle. Another seal from the convent of Notre-Dame de Cercamp-lès-Frévent, attached to a document from 1352, similarly depicts the Virgin as the Mother of Mercy. These seals underscore the significance of Dialogus Miraculorum within the Cistercian tradition, but perhaps its earliest influence on art is Duccio's Madonna dei Francescani (ca 1285), which will be discussed later.[104]

The Madonna della Misericordia's protective nature, symbolized by her cloak, resonated with the belief in the Virgin's mercy or Misericordia, a Classical virtue adapted for Christianity. The cloak became a talisman of the Virgin's power as a protectress from life's maladies, especially plague, and as an intercessor for human salvation. In this way, the depiction of the Madonna della Misericordia in art, particularly under the patronage of confraternities, evolved to include a significant element of portraiture. By the middle of

[103] **Dominique** Donadieu-Rigaut, « Les ordres religieux et le manteau de Marie », *Cahiers de recherches médiévales* , 8 | 2001, 107-134-xiv.
[104] Michele Bacci, < La Madonna della Misercordia individuale>, *Acta Ad Archaeolgiam Et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, V. 21, 171-173

the 15th century, the artistic trend of incorporating recognizable likenesses of notable figures, such as popes and political leaders, into depictions of the Madonna della Misericordia became increasingly prevalent in Italian art. This artistic inclination is vividly demonstrated in Domenico di Bartolo's fresco at the Sarestia Vecchia in Siena and in Antonio Rossellino's relief sculpture at the headquarters of the Fraternita dei Laici in Arezzo, both of which prominently feature Pope Eugenius IV. Later, Gugliemo de Marcillat's stained glass work at the Santa Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaio in Cortona is another notable example, showcasing depictions of Pope Leo X, Emperor Maximilian, and Bishop Soderini of Cortona, all sheltered under the Virgin Mary's expansive cloak.[105]



Figure 9

Left (Seal of Cistercian abbey of Beaupre, 1335), Right (Duccio, Madonna of the Franciscans, 1285)

Alongside identifiable figures, some confraternity members were depicted hooded, maintaining anonymity to underscore the selflessness of their charitable acts. This duality

[105] Brown, K. (2017). Mary of Mercy in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art: Devotional Image and Civic Emblem. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

in representation – both the recognition of patrons and the anonymity of certain members – underlines the complex social dynamics within these religious brotherhoods. The Madonna della Misericordia imagery, thus, becomes a canvas reflecting both individual identities and collective consciousness, symbolizing a community united under the protective mantle of Mary. The confraternities often met in designated buildings or chapels within parish churches, and by the 15th century, many had acquired significant wealth, enabling them to commission artworks. These brotherhoods, while engaging in religious practices, also participated actively in civic life. Their motivations varied from genuine charity to social networking and business interests.

Public processions, especially on feast days of patron saints or during Lent, were primary means for these brotherhoods to assert their presence and unity within their communities. These processions, often featuring art and banners, highlighted the confraternities' identity and their commitment to the so-called common good. This concept was exemplified as early as the 13th century by artworks like Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Allegory of Good Government.

The patron-artist relationship in the context of confraternal commissions was unique, often reflecting the collective taste and decisions of the group rather than individual preferences. This corporate nature of patronage democratized the commissioning of art, allowing broader participation across social classes. The artworks commissioned by these brotherhoods, particularly those featuring the Madonna della Misericordia, were not just religious symbols but also markers of group identity, social status, and civic engagement. Mary's cloak in these depictions served as a visual metaphor for inclusion and protection, subtly indicating the selective nature of confraternal membership and the fortified boundaries of communal care in the Mother Church (Figure 11).

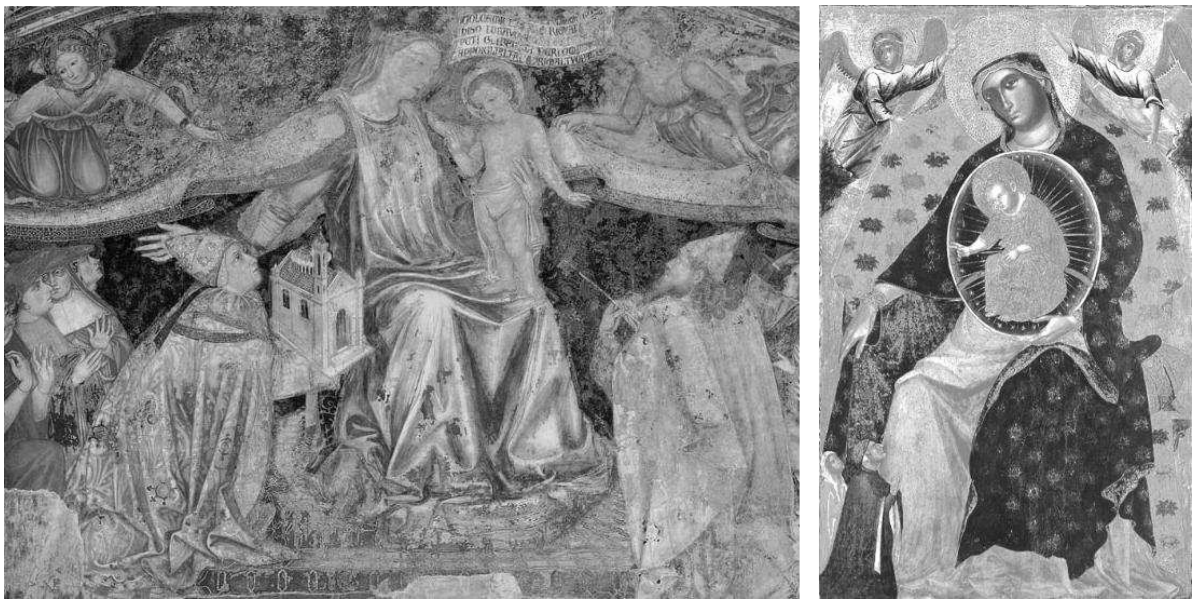


Figure 10

Left (Bartolo, Madonna della Misericordia, 1444), Right (Veneziano, Madonna and Child w/donors, 1325).

Mother Church and Sheela-Na-Gig

In a final note about the symbols of the Mother Church we have the hundreds of Sheela-na-gigs. These ancient stone carvings dating from the 12th to the 16th centuries, are found all throughout Northern Europe, particularly in the UK and Ireland. These figures, often positioned on churches, city walls, and other structures, depict mostly bald, naked women, characterized by their open legs in a V shaped displaying their vulva (Figure 11). Believed to be rooted in pagan traditions and possibly linked to crone goddesses, Sheela-na-gigs symbolize a range of concepts from protection and warning to fertility and eroticism. Despite their possible pagan origins, these figures were integrated into Christian architecture, suggesting a deeper symbolic meaning within a religious context.



Figure 11

The explicit display of the vulva has led to various interpretations of their symbolism and purpose. Many Medieval Catholic authorities initially viewed them as warnings against the sexuality of women, leading to actions such as hiding or destroying these figures, reflecting a complex relationship between the church and these carvings. Scholars typically view Sheela-na-gigs as symbols of both death and fertility, while others see them unequivocally as fertility figures. The Sheelas' explicit vulvar display has been linked to ancient and cross-cultural rituals of skirt-raising as once seen on Porta Tossa in Milan (Figure 12). Dating back to around 1185, this relief, which once adorned the city's eastern gate, depicts a woman revealing her vulva in a bold and explicit manner.

A nearly ubiquitous aspect of Sheela-na-gigs is their location over portals, doors, and gates and is believed to imbue these portals with apotropaic powers, serving as symbols of life and protection. The Sheela-na-gig's portrayal of the vulva is seen as a representation of the portal of life, in and out of the womb.

Erling Rump, a medical professional specializing in obstetrics, presents a unique perspective on the Sheela-na-gig, interpreting it as a symbol representing the Mother Church in the act of giving birth. He highlights the fertility and life-giving aspects of the Sheela's genitalia, suggesting that these carvings were used by medieval churches to convey an affirmative message to the uneducated populace. Drawing on his obstetric knowledge, Rump analyzes the Sheelas' distinctive squatting posture, their openly displayed vulva, and their facial expressions, viewing them as authentic depictions of childbirth. Furthermore, the Sheela-na-gig can be perceived as an emblem of both

conception and birth, symbolizing the Church's role in conceiving and nurturing members.



Figure 12

Stone carving was once located over Porta Tossa, Milan.

In summary, Sheela-na-gigs, with their explicit open legged display and strategic placement over portals and entrances, emerge as complex symbols that have evolved from pagan roots to become integral parts of Christian architecture. Their varied interpretations, from fertility and protection to a representation of Mater Ecclesia, reflect the multifaceted nature of these figures.

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