

Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*, Part 1 (Expanded):

NARRATIVE CONVERGENCE, ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND THE DOMINICAN DOCTRINE OF PRENATAL SANCTIFICATION

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Abstract

This expanded Part 1 of a two-part study introduces a new interpretive hypothesis concerning Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*, proposing that the painting functions as a sophisticated visual commentary shaped under the influence of Lorenzo de' Medici and aligned with the Dominican theology of San Marco—a major Florentine convent whose association with the Medici elevated it into a potent center of political and doctrinal expression. In this reading, the painting addresses contemporary theological controversies surrounding Mary's Immaculate Conception and reflects Florence's broader ideological resistance to Pope Sixtus IV after the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478.

Building upon an insightful but ultimately neglected observation first proposed by Mirella Levi D'Ancona in 1957—who noted the painting's surprising emphasis on John the Baptist's sanctification, but was unable to conceive why Leonardo would deliberately produce a composition opposing the very doctrine he had been commissioned to depict—I argue that Leonardo, in this first major Milanese commission awarded almost immediately after his arrival from San Marco in Florence, acted as an artistic agent aligned closely with Lorenzo de' Medici and the Dominican theologian Vincenzo Bandello. Following both Lippi and Mino da Fiesole's innovative 'converged narrative' method, Leonardo intentionally merged two pivotal biblical encounters—the prenatal sanctification of John during the Visitation and Christ's subsequent baptism by John at the Jordan—into a single narrative, subtly embedding within his altarpiece a profound subversion shaped by Florentine political and doctrinal interests against Pope Sixtus IV after the Pazzi Conspiracy.

By incorporating Northern European "type-fetus" iconography, symbolic gestures, and several geologic and botanical pointers and puns deeply rooted in Florentine literary traditions and Medici intellectual circles, Leonardo ingeniously embeds within his composition a deliberate and complex doctrinal stance. Specifically, he visually articulates the Dominican Maculist argument that both Mary and John, conceived with Original Sin, received prenatal sanctification directly from divine intervention, thus sharply contrasting them with the inherently immaculate figures of Christ and the Angel. The Angel's theatrical engagement with the viewer as Leonardo's avatar, reminiscent of narrative devices employed by Feo Belcari and Filippo Lippi, further underscores Leonardo's intentionality.

Notably, the image featured on the cover of this paper—a columbine flower personally grown from seed by the author, which serendipitously bloomed for the first time during the preparation of this study—visually echoes the botanical symbolism central to Leonardo's narrative. While this paper briefly outlines key elements of this innovative hypothesis, a subsequent, comprehensive study will provide a detailed analysis of Leonardo's symbolism, botanical allegories, and the intricate theological and historical contexts essential for fully grasping his subtle yet provocative message.

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.[1] 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.

Before the 13th century, theologians had fully embraced the notion that John's leap in Elizabeth's womb represented his sanctification, a cleansing akin to baptism. Thomas Aquinas, drawing on Church Fathers, including St. Bernard of Clairvaux, explicitly engaged with this concept, identifying John's prenatal sanctification as both miraculous and profoundly symbolic.[2] Aquinas drew a compelling theological parallel, depicting the fetal encounter between John and Jesus—marked by John's leap—as a precursor to their subsequent meeting at the Jordan River during Christ's Baptism. At that later event, John famously proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God." Aquinas thus argued that John's prenatal leap upon meeting Jesus prophetically anticipated his later declaration, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," framing both episodes as intimately connected manifestations of divine presence and prophetic recognition.[3]

The interpretation of John's prenatal sanctification as a baptism of sorts likely have roots dating well before Aquinas, for (Pseudo) Serapion, in his *Life of John the Baptist*, explicitly described this fetal event

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[1] 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."*

[2] Carl Balowski, 'Topics and Iconography related to the Immaculate Conception Controversy Prior to Leonardo' da Vinci's Virgin of the Rocks.'

[3] 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.'"*

as akin to baptism, suggesting that John's sanctification was directly administered as a form of baptism by the unborn Christ himself.[4]

> "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… [and Elizabeth] said, "I rely on the kiss I received from Mary, mother of the Lord, because as I greeted her, the baby in my womb leaped with joy and jubilation and I heard both of them kissing each other in our wombs."[5]

Even though the image of two infants kissing on the lips is quite strange, even by medieval standards, beginning with the 1490s sketch (RCIN 912564) produced in Leonardo's workshop, the motif of Jesus and John 'kissing' squarely on the lips, as infants, emerges as a significant interpretive element, particularly in relation to Leonardo, his studio practice, and specifically his *Virgin of the Rocks* (Figures 1 - 2). While most sketches on this sheet are attributed to Leonardo's students, the drawing in the lower right-hand corner, portraying the two infants, is considered by the Royal Library to be Leonardo's own work due to its distinctly superior quality and refined execution. Notably, the depiction of Jesus—with crossed legs and his left hand firmly planted on the ground—closely mirrors his pose in the *Virgin of the Rocks*, whereas John appears as though he has continued his eager forward movement depicted in that painting, now fully embracing Jesus in a kiss, as described exclusively in Serapion's narrative. How such a compelling thematic connection has remained unnoticed, to my knowledge, until now is puzzling, and I will explore this intriguing oversight and its implications in greater detail in parts 2 and 3. For now, however, it is sufficient to note that textual traditions supporting the concept of John's symbolic baptism and sanctification in the womb remained influential into the late fifteenth century. This tradition is

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[4] 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"*

[5] This reference to Psalm 85 in relation to the rather odd prenatal 'kissing' of John and Jesus appears to have some precedent in the *Pistis Sophia* (Chapter 62), and indeed Serapion later, in Chapter 5, expands upon this motif, describing their kiss explicitly as the moment when John was sanctified in the womb. According to my findings, apart from Serapion and the *Pistis Sophia*, there are no other known textual references that metaphorically describe John and Jesus as 'kissing' in utero. This is particularly intriguing since the iconographic depiction of Jesus and John kissing as infants is supposedly an artistic invention unique to Leonardo da Vinci's imagination in a lost painting. This idea is supposed to have first emerging from his studio in the late 15th century as an alternative composition based on the *Virgin of the Rocks*. Since the depiction of Jesus and John kissing as infants appears exclusively in Serapion's narrative and Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, it strongly implies that Leonardo was not only aware of Serapion's account but might have deliberately incorporated it as a central thematic motif or interpretive key in his original conception of the painting. I will further investigate this possibility in my subsequent paper.

exemplified by Vincenzo Bandello, who, referencing Pope Honorius III, emphasized the exceptional sanctification granted specifically to Mary, John, and Jeremiah—each uniquely 'cleansed' through direct divine intervention while still within their mothers' wombs.[6]

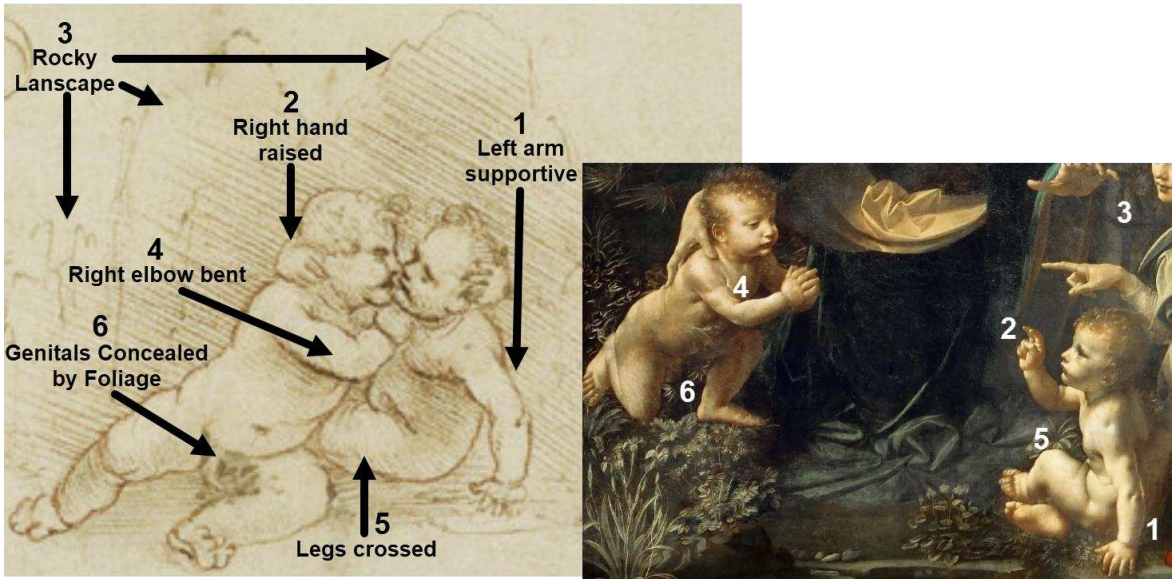


Figure 1



Figure 2

[6] 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"*

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 tradition in Northern Europe, known today as the "type-fetus".[7] 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 3). 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 3

Within this iconographic tradition, artists consistently maintained a clear hierarchical and theological distinction between the unborn Christ and John the Baptist. The unborn Christ was typically depicted as an infant either standing or seated, his hand raised in a priestly gesture of blessing reminiscent of the benediction performed during the baptismal ritual, symbolically cleansing the infant of Original Sin. In contrast, John appeared kneeling or genuflecting, embodying humility, reverence, and worshipful adoration. Such artistic portrayals reinforced Christ's divine authority and underscored John's recognition and acceptance of his own prenatal sanctification. By explicitly visualizing John's acknowledgment and humble adoration, these devotional images affirmed Christ's unique power to sanctify even within the womb, vividly emphasizing the profound mystery and spiritual significance of divine intervention.

[7] 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.

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.[8] Particularly noteworthy is the earliest example, a polychrome wooden sculpture originally from the Dominican convent of St. Katharinental, now preserved in The Met (Figure 4).



Figure 4

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.

[8] 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.

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 surely 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 5)—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.

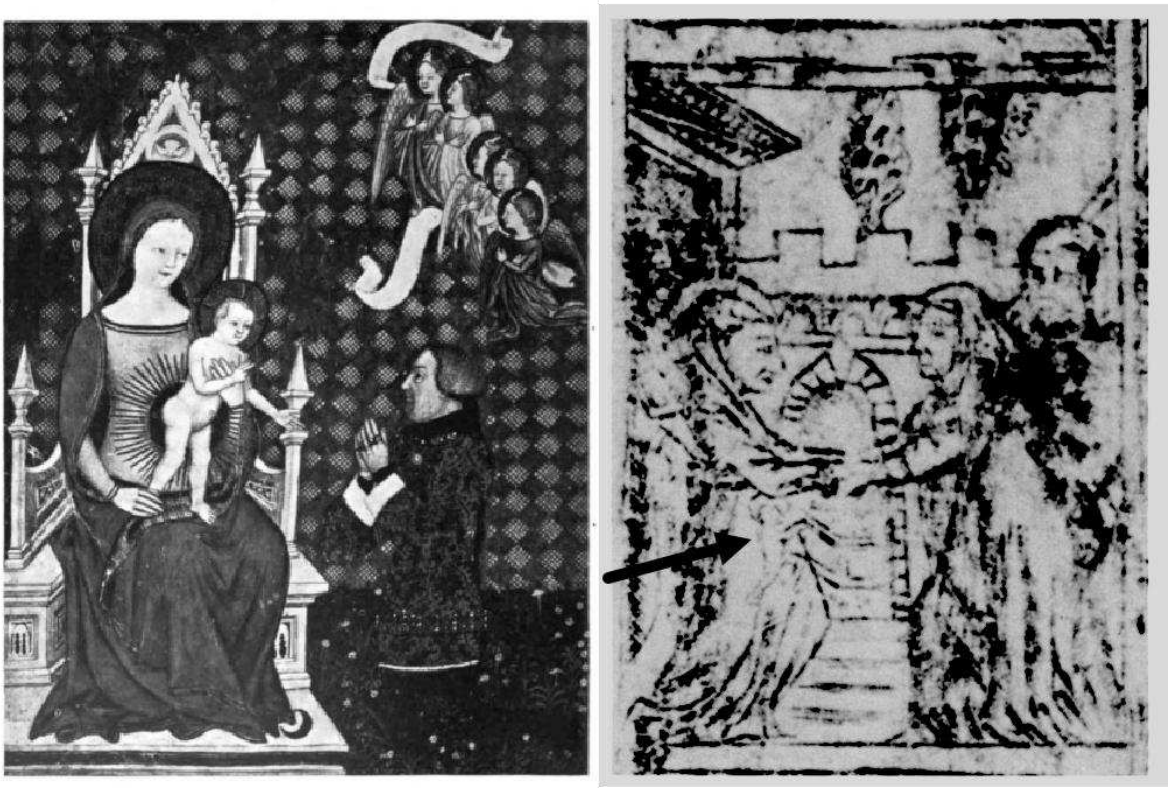


Figure 5

Nonetheless, the influence of northern mysticism and iconography indirectly permeated Italian devotional culture, especially through literary sources. As Marilyn Aronberg Lavin has demonstrated, Florentine artists were profoundly impacted by popular devotional writings, notably those by the Dominican Domenico Cavalca and the Franciscan Pseudo-Bonaventure, whose *Life of St. John* and *Life of Christ*, respectively, provided detailed narratives of the childhoods of John the Baptist and Jesus. Lavin suggests these widely circulated texts likely inspired Florentine artists—including Lippi, Mino da Fiesole, and Leonardo—to depict scenes of the young John reverently adoring the Christ Child. My own research into the broader apocryphal and hagiographical tradition builds upon and expands the range of texts analyzed by Lavin.[9]

Significantly, Verheyen further elaborates upon Lavin's argument, emphasizing that John's characteristic gesture of adoration, so common in Florentine postnatal imagery, likely originated in earlier northern European depictions of the prenatal Visitation. In these northern images, John is depicted similarly adoring Christ from within the womb. Thus, through literary mediation, the northern prenatal devotional imagery subtly and indirectly entered Italian artistic traditions, transforming into postnatal contexts that became both widespread and iconographically distinctive in Florentine Renaissance art.[10] 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 6).[11] Although not a traditional Visitation scene, the image clearly draws upon visual symbolism originally associated with the 'type-fetus' iconography depicting John's sanctification within Elizabeth's womb, here applying it instead to represent Mary's own sanctification within the womb of Anne.

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[9] Carl Balowski, 'Narrative Convergence in the Encounters of Jesus and John: Apocryphal Sources for Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks.'

[10] 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; Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg. "Giovannino Battista: A Study in Renaissance Religious Symbolism." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1955, pp. 85–101.

[11] 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.



Figure 6

Here, Mary is portrayed as an infant within the womb of St. Anne, while God the Father is depicted in the upper left corner, holding a globus cruciger and extending a gesture of benediction toward Mary, with divine rays emanating directly toward her (Figure 6). This imagery visually underscores theological positions articulated by Bernard of Clairvaux and later embraced by Thomist Dominicans, who explicitly drew parallels between Mary's prenatal sanctification and that of John the Baptist. For the Maculist Dominicans, who opposed the emerging 'heretical' doctrine of Mary's 'Immaculate' Conception, both Mary and John were understood to have been conceived with Original Sin but sanctified (cleansed) subsequently in the womb through direct divine intervention and reception of the Holy Spirit. Crucially, however, the Dominicans distinguished between the timeframe and divine agency involved in these sanctifications: Mary's cleansing in the womb occurred prior to Christ's incarnation and was therefore enacted directly by God the Father, whereas John's sanctification in the womb took place following the incarnation, and was enacted directly by God the Son. Thus, this Dominican Book of Hours visually affirms a theological stance explicitly opposed to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. It explicitly illustrates the Dominican belief that Mary was not conceived entirely without Original Sin but rather was

sanctified after her conception—cleansed directly by God the Father from the Original Sin she initially contracted—thus carefully distinguishing her sanctification from an inherently immaculate conception.

Perhaps the latest surviving example of northern "type-fetus" imagery is a sixteenth-century painting in the Cleveland Museum, formerly attributed to Altdorfer and once part of the Schloss Rohoncz collection (Figure 7). The painting explicitly portrays Elizabeth and Mary standing together in a landscape, visited by Zacharias, beneath what appears to be a star. Between the two women, tiny, radiant figures of Christ and John as infants appear clearly visible, symbolically expressing their spiritual interaction and illustrating John's sanctification. Such iconography reinforced a theological message of profound relevance, especially comforting to women who experienced miscarriages: even unborn children could be reached and sanctified through Christ's divine presence.



Figure 7

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 inverse convergence 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.[12] 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. [13]

In the ensuing scene at the edge of the Jordan, Jesus approaches John to be baptized. As Jesus emerges from the water, the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove, accompanied by a divine voice of God the Father 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 (Figure 8). 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 an epiphany of the real presence of Christ as was pointed out by John, and announced by God the Father, at

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[12] 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."*

[13] "Treatise on the Singular Purity and Prerogative of the Conception of our Savior Jesus Christ" is the title of Bandello's treatise has to do with Christ's 'unique purity and prerogative', meaning that He alone is the Lamb of God worthy to take away the sin of the world, i.e. Salvatore Mundi. He states, "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."

his baptism. This moment in the Mass reiterates the unique role of Christ as the Universal Savior of the World (Salvatore Mundi), a theme that has been perpetuated through centuries in the Eucharist celebration.[14]



Figure 8

Iconographically, depictions of Christ's baptism before the sixteenth century consistently derived from a synthesis of Gospel narratives. Typically, Christ is portrayed standing knee- or waist-deep in the Jordan River, either with hands clasped or making a sign of benediction, while John, positioned slightly above on the riverbank, pours water over Christ's head (Figure 8). Although not explicitly mentioned in the Gospels, attending angels frequently appear in artistic portrayals of this event. These angels, prefiguring those who ministered to Christ in the wilderness during his temptation, hold Christ's garments. Their inclusion enhances the symbolic depth of the scene, transforming Christ's baptism into a sacred ceremony attended and supported by celestial beings—analogous to the roles played by parents and godparents in traditional infant baptisms—thus emphasizing the familial and sacred nature of the event (Figure 9). At the apex of these scenes, a descending dove representing the Holy Spirit emanates from an image of God the Father, who often offers a gesture of benediction. This iconography visually reinforces

[14] 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 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*"

the sanctifying significance of Christ's baptism as the exemplary model for all subsequent baptisms performed in his name.



Figure 9

In the realm of fifteenth-century sacred art, masterpieces by artists such as Filippo Lippi, Mino da Fiesole, and Leonardo da Vinci transcend mere visual appeal, embodying complex theological and doctrinal narratives. These artists skillfully interweave biblical episodes and hagiographical symbolism, embedding profound theological and liturgical meanings into their artistic storytelling. As demonstrated in my earlier study, Filippo Lippi's *Epiphany* altarpiece in the Medici's Magi Chapel represents a significant innovation, advancing beyond the earlier tradition of the 'continuous narrative.[15]' By creating a converged narrative—merging biblical episodes such as the Epiphany and Christ's Baptism (both traditionally celebrated on January 6th)—Lippi intentionally streamlined these events into a single, unified, and more realistically composed scene. This deliberate narrative convergence was a bold departure from the gaudy and often unrealistic visual clutter of continuous narrative depictions, producing instead a natural and harmonious composition. Commissioned by the influential Medici family, the altarpiece highlights the intricate interplay between scripture and the liturgical calendar, emphasizing that fifteenth-century sacred art was not merely decorative but actively facilitated theological discourse and political reflection.

Thus, Lippi's altarpiece functions as a visual homily, communicating esoteric meanings fully accessible primarily to those connected to its commission, while illuminating the meaningful intersection of key Christian doctrinal events with broader Medici political and religious ambitions. Similarly, Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* employs Lippi's innovative technique of narrative convergence, synthesizing the 'type-fetus' Visitation imagery of Jesus and John with baptismal themes. Leonardo's strategic adoption and refinement of this narrative method actively engages the theological controversies of his time,

[15] Carl Balowski, 'Narrative Convergence in Lippi's Adoration in the Forest: The Fusion of Baptism and Adoration into a Liturgical Epiphany and its Anticipation of Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks.'

particularly debates surrounding Mary's Immaculate Conception. Richly symbolic, Leonardo's painting extends far beyond mere aesthetic considerations, functioning instead as a sophisticated theological commentary. By employing narrative convergence to fuse the two biblical encounters between Jesus and John—their prenatal meeting at the Visitation and their later encounter at Christ's baptism—Leonardo underscores John's sanctification in the womb as a typological baptism. This innovative merging enables Leonardo to directly address the theological controversy surrounding Mary's own sanctification, thus profoundly influencing contemporary interpretations and actively participating in fifteenth-century religious and doctrinal discourse.

Therefore, Leonardo's artistry did not emerge in isolation. His approach was informed by contemporary theologians deeply versed in both hagiographical and apocryphal traditions, as well as established iconographic conventions.[16] However, the innovative narrative convergence pioneered by Filippo Lippi and adopted by Mino da Fiesole remained relatively obscure. This lack of widespread familiarity likely provided Leonardo with an opportunity to present something fresh and less overtly recognizable—enabling him to craft a nuanced theological narrative readily accessible to viewers familiar with Lippi's approach, yet subtle enough to remain unnoticed by those unaware of such innovations. Equipped with Bandello's Dominican theological guidance and Medici sponsorship, Leonardo arrived in Milan shortly after departing from San Marco—the Florentine Dominican stronghold closely aligned with the Medici—and soon thereafter received his commission. This timely sequence uniquely positioned Leonardo, providing him with the political backing and doctrinal insights necessary to subtly challenge prevailing theological views, particularly the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, championed by Pope Sixtus IV, the shared archnemesis of both Bandello and the Medici. Consequently, Leonardo's sophisticated and novel use of religious iconography—fully comprehensible primarily to this Medici inner circle—transcended mere artistic representation, becoming instead a deliberate and powerful instrument of theological subversion during an era defined by intense doctrinal and political conflict.

To fully appreciate the evolution of religious iconography, particularly regarding Mary's Immaculate Conception, it is crucial to recognize that explicitly identifiable artistic representations of this doctrine emerged only in the first decade of the sixteenth century—more than two decades after Pope Sixtus IV's controversial proclamation in 1476. Today, with unprecedented access to extensive datasets of fifteenth-century religious art and texts, contemporary scholars can identify subtle artistic intentions that

[16] Carl Balowski, 'Narrative Convergence in the Encounters of Jesus and John: Apocryphal Sources for Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks.'

remained opaque to earlier twentieth-century art historians. Nevertheless, the modern art historian remains fundamentally a product of the twenty-first century rather than the fifteenth, inevitably lacking the organic context gained by living within the original historical moment of the artwork's creation.

For example, when encountering a fifteenth-century painting depicting a watery scene with Jesus blessing a kneeling John, it is generally clear that the artist intends to evoke the memory of Christ's baptism, recalling John's proclamation: "Behold the Lamb of God." However, deeper contextual understanding becomes necessary when artists, such as Filippo Lippi or Leonardo in his *Virgin of the Rocks*, choose instead to portray John as a youth, or Jesus and John as infants. Why would an artist adopt this unconventional portrayal?

Leonardo's depiction was not a casual artistic decision; instead, it represents a deliberate narrative convergence, consciously recalling Filippo Lippi's *Epiphany* altarpiece in the Medici Chapel and Mino da Fiesole's sculptural program in the Salutati Chapel. As with these earlier works, Leonardo's painting purposefully merges two theologically interconnected biblical events involving John the Baptist and Jesus. The first event—the Visitation—depicts the prenatal meeting of John and Jesus within their mothers' wombs, represented iconographically as the "type-fetus," where Jesus, still an infant, symbolically blesses (or "baptizes") John. This prenatal interaction anticipates and achieves its theological fulfillment (the "antitype-fetus") in their second biblical encounter, the adult baptism of Christ in the wilderness, where John baptizes Jesus. Leonardo's innovative merging of these two encounters into a single, cohesive scene underscores their shared theological meaning, enabling a nuanced commentary on doctrinal issues such as Mary's sanctification in the womb.

Thus, through a remarkable reversal of roles and setting, Leonardo's sophisticated composition accentuates the profound theological symmetry linking these two pivotal biblical meetings, merging them seamlessly into a single, converged narrative. Leonardo situates the infants John and Jesus within a landscape ingeniously designed to evoke simultaneously the nurturing, protective, womb-like environment of their prenatal encounter at the Visitation, and the harsh, rocky wilderness reminiscent of John's sojourn near the Jordan River, the site of their second encounter at Christ's baptism. Upon close observation, viewers immediately sense the paradoxical fusion inherent in the setting: the overall landscape appears rugged, cavernous, and forbidding, yet at the same time lush, aqueous, and abundant with flourishing plant life. Leonardo's masterful environment thus visually embodies an oxymoron, encapsulating the theological inversion and symbolic interconnectedness intrinsic to the type / antitype relationship of these sacred events.

In this sophisticated visual synthesis, the initial event—the "type-fetus," in which the infant Jesus symbolically blesses or baptizes John within the safety and nourishment of the womb—is ingeniously fused with its inverse fulfillment, the "antitype-fetus," where the adult John baptizes Jesus in the stark wilderness. Leonardo achieves this remarkable convergence by rendering the wilderness environment distinctly womb-like, juxtaposing safety with danger, and fertility with desolation. Reminiscent of Lippi's altarpiece in the Magi Chapel, Leonardo's depiction of the figures sheltered within this fertile yet rocky cave-like womb evokes the impression of a sacred space intentionally cleared by divine providence—rocks seemingly moved aside to create a place of refuge, accessible by foot only through a narrow passage on the right emulating a vagina like opening into the womb. This is reinforced by the phallic like stone just outside of the narrow opening giving the impression that this womb-like refuge is where conception takes place, and the scene before us is what is happening 'in the womb' after conception.[17] This divinely prepared shelter conveys a tangible sense of protection and sanctuary from the harsh, foreboding landscape beyond, simultaneously underscoring their comfort and vulnerability.

By merging these two contrasting landscapes and theological moments, Leonardo provides viewers with essential scenic and iconographic cues, creating a profound visual meditation on the symbolic depth and theological complexity inherent in the narrative. Observers, especially within the devotional and intellectual context of Leonardo's environment, would have immediately experienced a compelling cognitive dissonance, simultaneously sensing refuge and threat on visual, emotional, and theological levels. Leonardo's deliberate depiction of a shelter cleared within the rock would also naturally evoke the abundant Old Testament imagery—particularly prominent in the Psalms—of God as both the steadfast "Rock of Refuge" and the "Rock of Salvation," further deepening viewers' contemplation of the work.

God is the Rock

Leonardo visually articulates a distinctly Dominican interpretation of prenatal sanctification within his Virgin of the Rocks, a carefully constructed environment where a group of vulnerable figures takes shelter in a rocky clearing—visually evoking the biblical metaphor of God (and Jesus) as a "Rock of Refuge" and Savior. Here the infant John approaches Jesus, who, depicted in profile as God the Son--emulating the gesture of His Father above--sits beside a pool of water and raises his right hand in a priestly gesture of

[17] The meaning of these geologic formations will be studied extensively in Part 2.

benediction.[18] This gesture deliberately recalls the Visitation's *type-fetus* sanctification encounter between Jesus and John, symbolically evoking John's prenatal cleansing (Figure 10). Simultaneously, within the same composition, God the Father depicted above in the rock's illuminated profile, extends an identical right-handed gesture of benediction above Mary's head, visually reinforcing the parallel Dominican understanding of both their sanctifications by clearly echoing the Father's action through that of the infant Son (Figure 11).

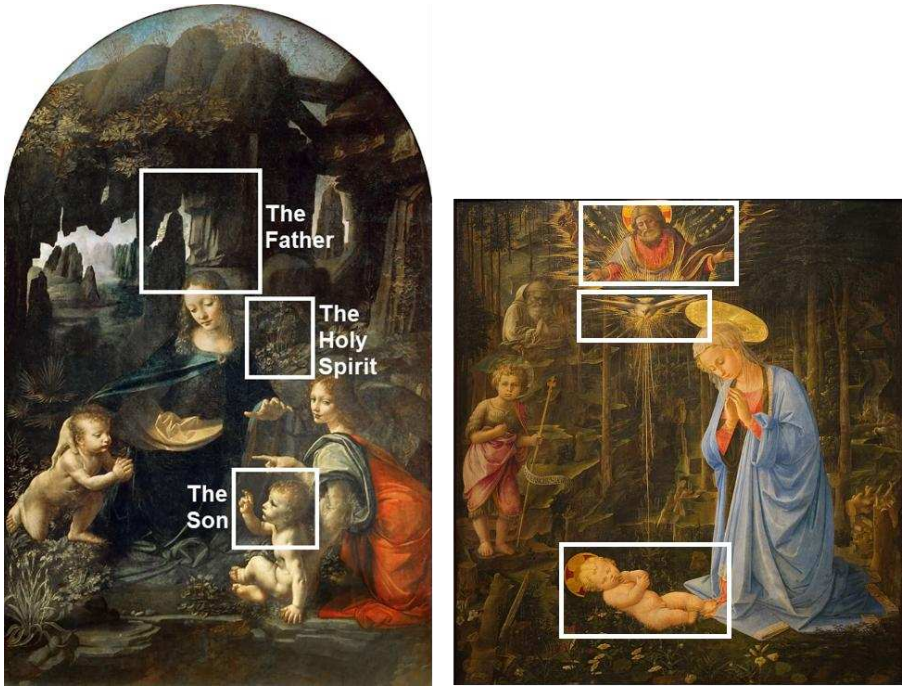


Figure 10

[18] John 10:29 "My Father, who has given the sheep to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand**. I and the Father are one**."; 1 Cor 10:3 "They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, **and that rock was Christ**.; Psalm 18:2 (and Sam 22:32): "The **LORD is my rock** and my fortress and my deliverer, **my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge**, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.... For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God?" Det 32: 4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. Psalm 31: 2 Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me. Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me. Psalm 62: 6 Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Psalm 71:3 Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Psalm 89:26 He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior. Isaiah 26:4 Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.



Figure 11

Emerging from the rock behind Mary, yet aligned vertically just above her descending left hand as it reaches toward the foreground, grows a columbine flower—a plant whose name derives from the Latin *columba*, meaning "dove," explicitly symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit directly from God the Father (Figure 12). Here Leonardo inventively demonstrates a literary approach reminiscent of Isidore's *Etymologies*, for he selects the columbine not primarily for its symbolic virtue or traditional meaning, as one might do with lilies for 'grace' or carnations for 'love', but precisely for the plant's actual name, 'dove.' This deliberate practice of selecting plants specifically for their actual 'common names'—an approach deeply rooted in Leonardo's Florentine background and his association with the Medici circle, known for their fondness of wordplay, allegory, puns and pictographs, as evidenced extensively throughout his notebooks[19]—will be further explored and illustrated in my subsequent study, revealing how Leonardo ingeniously used botanical names to construct deeper narrative layers within this painting.

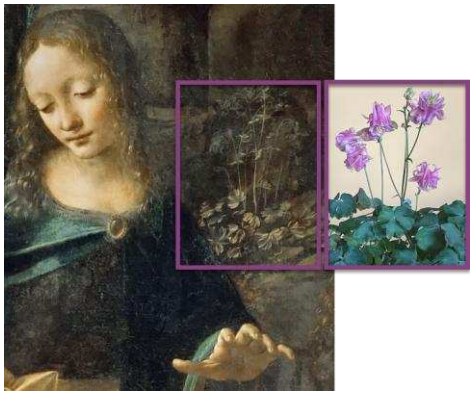


Figure 12

[19] M. Versiero, *Leonardo Allegorico, Al Principio Delle Guerre D'Italia.*

Indeed, Mary's open, descending hand appears dovelike and seems poised to land upon the Son's head; however, the Angel—positioned closer to the viewer, already in contact with Christ, and carefully grouped separately from Mary and John—appears momentarily distracted, glancing outward toward the viewer as if suddenly aware that this sacred meeting has been stumbled upon (Figure 13). Thus, inadvertently and perhaps instinctively responding to the viewer's silent question, "What is this about?", the Angel's explanatory extended finger above the Son's head interrupts Mary's reach, placing itself precisely in the space between Mary's hand and Christ. Thus, Mary's descending dovelike hand, visually linked with the columbine-dove behind her, if continued along its current trajectory, would inevitably encounter the Angel's finger, blocking Mary's access to Christ. It is no mere coincidence that Leonardo placed the blooms of the columbine at Mary's eye level and used the outstretched span of her hand to represent the descending dove (columbine). In traditional commentaries on the Canticles, especially in the context of the later controversy surrounding the Immaculate Conception, theologians compared Mary to the dove-like bride of Canticles hiding within the rocks, whose eyes were likened to those of a dove.[20]



Figure 13

[20] Canticles 1 -2: "Ecce tu pulchra es, amica mea! ecce tu pulchra es! Oculi tui **columbarum**….. **columba** mea, in foraminibus petræ, in **caverna** maceriæ, ostende mihi faciem tuam, sonet vox tua in auribus meis: vox enim tua dulcis, et facies tua decora." *"Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves…. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely"*

Even from a virtual top-down view, as if observing the scene from above (Figure 14), this seeming obstruction to Mary's hand (the descending dove) compels the viewer to ponder the consequences of the angel's accidental and interruptive gesture. Leonardo, therefore, undoubtedly arranged this visual tension deliberately, for such a precise compositional obstacle could hardly emerge without careful forethought. Indeed, the angel's prominent pointing gesture, accompanied by its inviting gaze toward the viewer, deliberately calls attention to this subtle yet meaningful interruption, and, remarkably, this interruption and all the botany are precisely the two primary elements that Leonardo changed in the second version of the painting, after the initial composition was rejected. The reasons for the alteration of these elements have not been adequately explained by art historians until now.

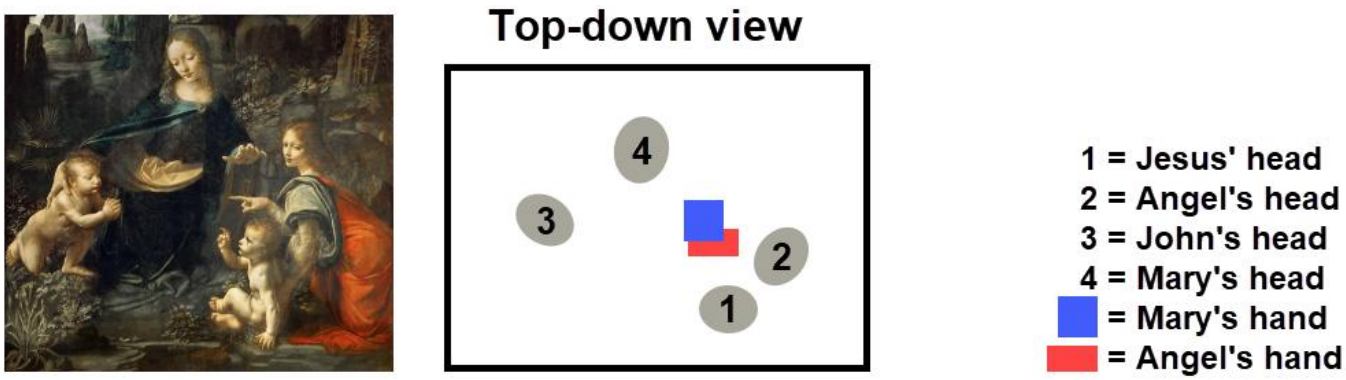


Figure 14

So, briefly, what precisely is communicated through the columbine and the angel's interruption? Since the angel's pointing hand occupies the forecasted landing spot of Mary's descending hand— both of which are immediately beneath the columbine, but precisely on its vertical axis—and considering that the angel finger explicitly directs our attention toward John while simultaneously reinforcing Christ's benediction, Leonardo's intention becomes unmistakably clear. This carefully orchestrated visual interruption, intentionally embedded within the painting to provoke contemplative engagement from the viewer, reveals that Christ's blessing gesture toward John represents a reframing of John's reception of the Holy Spirit—that is, his sanctification, or, according to Serapion, his 'type-fetus' baptism in the womb. Moreover, as the Angel redirects the Holy Spirit toward John, it simultaneously gazes outward, directly addressing the viewer who has inadvertently stumbled upon this sacred moment. Thus, the Angel—functioning explicitly as Leonardo's visual avatar, akin to Lippi's figure of John the Baptist in the Magi Chapel or Feo Belcari's theatrical device of the Annunciation Angel Gabriel, who regularly delivered

prologues, epilogues, and occasionally stepped into scenes to clarify unfolding events—visually engages the audience, explicitly signaling Leonardo's deeper narrative intent.

Within this paradoxical setting—simultaneously wild and womb-like—Leonardo, clearly not working in a vacuum, masterfully borrows, blends, and reworks thematic elements derived from Lippi's innovative approach and tempered by Mino da Fiesole's 'Coronation' structured formality, orchestrating a narrative convergence that ingeniously employs a profound theological role reversal, merging Christ's baptism with John's prenatal sanctification during the Visitation (Figure 15).



Figure 15

Once the fifteenth-century viewer recognized that Leonardo's scene cleverly portrays not only John's sanctification but also explicitly pairs Mary with John—depicted through Mary's direct touch—and distinctly separates them from Jesus and the Angel, similarly, connected through the Angel's protective hand on Jesus, they would intuitively grasp the painting's deeper theological implication (Figure 16). Leonardo visually articulates the Maculist argument against Mary's Immaculate Conception: Mary, like John, was conceived with Original Sin and subsequently sanctified within the womb, clearly distinguished from Jesus and the Angel, who never contracted Original Sin and thus required no purification. Leonardo reinforces this theological reading explicitly by depicting Mary, eager to touch

Jesus, but being prevented by the Angel's hand—underscoring the theological separation. This interpretation aligns precisely with Dominican theology, which holds that John was sanctified in the womb by God the Son (Jesus), whereas Mary was sanctified directly by God the Father.

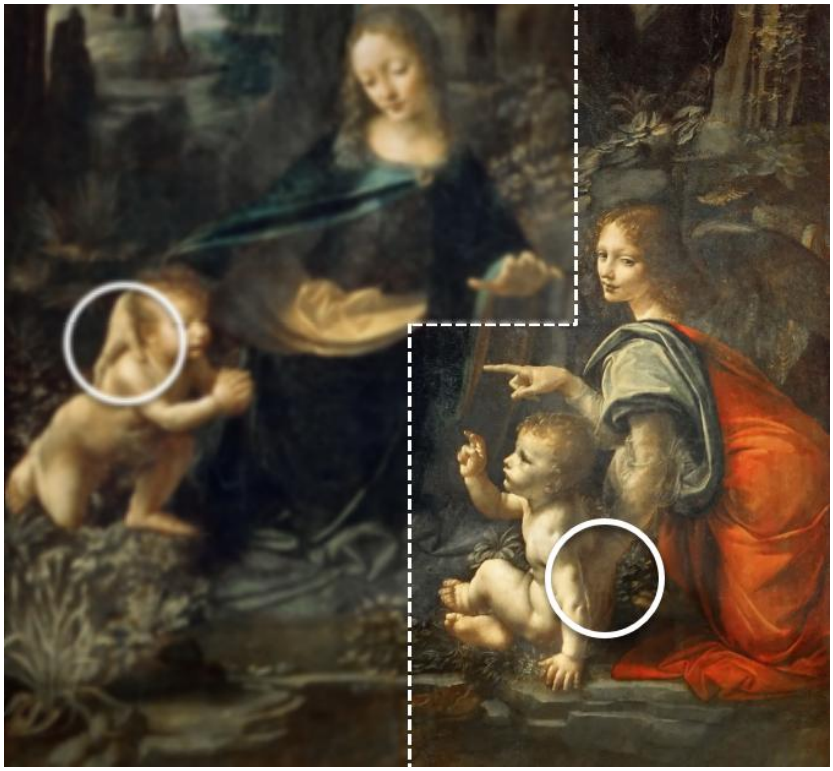


Figure 16

Indeed, to see how this plays out even further, Leonardo carefully visualizes this dual sanctification of Mary and John through other symbolic gestures and iconographic details: Jesus, poised to baptize, rests his left hand beside the foreground pool of symbolic 'baptismal' water—an act fulfilled unmistakably by God the Father's rocky left hand (or palm), prominently depicted as an outcrop emerging from the water in the midground (Figure 17). This rocky formation, shaped explicitly as God's 'left hand,' distinctly evokes the gesture of a priest scooping water in the palm of his hand during baptism—symbolically washing away Mary's Original Sin. To ensure the viewer would not miss this clever visual cue, Leonardo playfully positions a palm shrub immediately beneath the rocky palm of God's left hand, reinforcing, through pun, the intended symbolism. Leonardo further reinforces this symbolism by deliberately blending the aquamarine hues of the background water through a connecting channel toward Mary's similarly colored cloak in the foreground. This wisely arranged visual continuity provides careful

observers with the subtle impression that the baptismal water flowing from the left hand of God the Father is washing directly over Mary, sanctifying her in parallel to Christ's simultaneous benediction and sanctification of John.

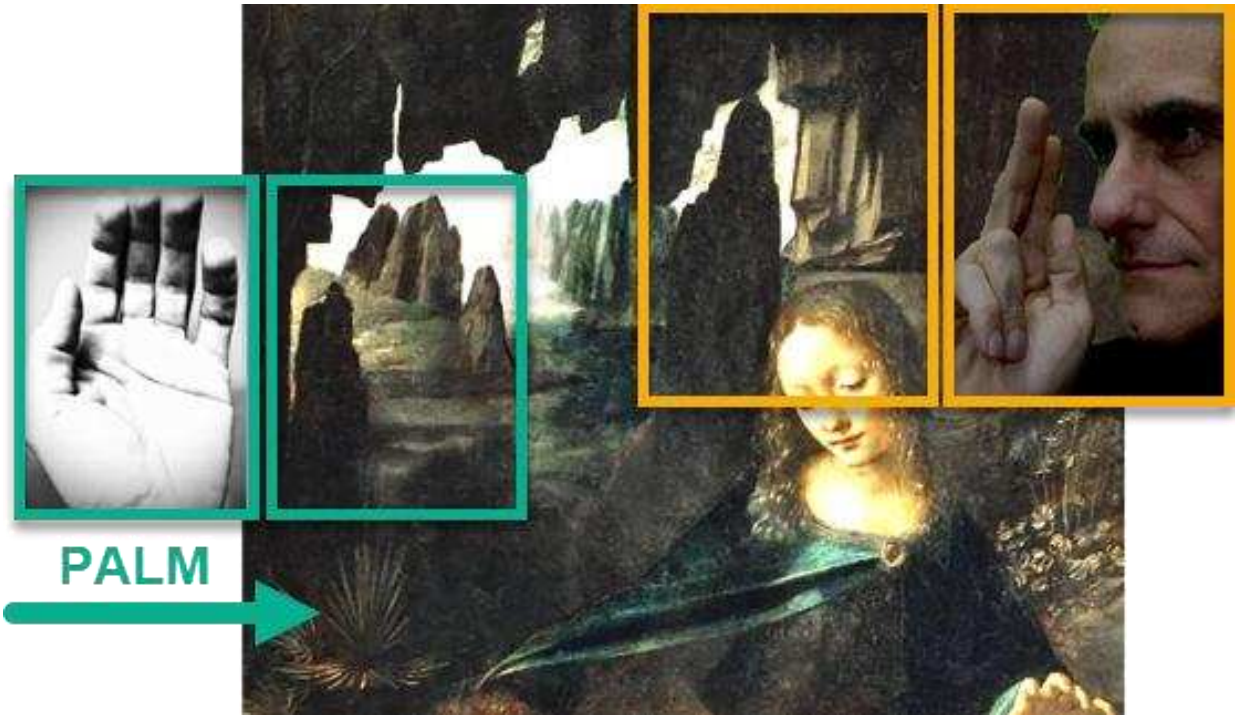


Figure 17

Moreover, this priestly action of God's rocky left-hand complements and is further clarified by His rocky right hand, which simultaneously extends a gesture of benediction. Here, Leonardo intentionally evokes the ritual practice of a priest, popular in iconography throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, who, at infant baptism, pours water over the child's head with one hand while offering the sign of benediction and pronouncing the words, "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," with the other. By ingeniously combining these dual gestures within the single rocky figure of God the Father, Leonardo not only visually underscores the Dominican belief that Mary was sanctified after conception rather than immaculately conceived, but he also explicitly clarifies the precise nature of this sanctification. Leonardo emphasizes that Mary's sanctification by God the Father in the womb was essentially identical to John's sanctification by God the Son in the womb—both sanctifications being baptismal in effect.

To complete this synopsis of Part 1, we can briefly consider how Mary's sanctification in the womb is intimately connected to her Assumption and Coronation. In medieval and Renaissance theology, Mary's

crowning as Queen of Heaven was deeply intertwined with the Church's understanding of her immaculate purity. Dominican (Thomist) theologians emphasized that Mary's purity did not mean she was conceived entirely free from Original Sin—as the Scotist Franciscans argued—but rather that she was immediately sanctified in the womb after conception. This prenatal sanctification, achieved directly through the anticipated merits of Christ's Passion, not only removed Original Sin but also eradicated the *fomes peccati*, the very inclination or desire toward sin, preparing her as the perfect vessel to conceive Christ in absolute purity.

Scriptural support for this view was strongly derived from the Canticles (Song of Songs), interpreted typologically through Gabriel's Annunciation greeting, "Hail Mary, full of grace…". Particularly central was the verse "*Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te*" ("You are all beautiful, my beloved, and there is no blemish in you," Canticles 4:7). Scotist Franciscans read this as evidence that Mary was inherently immaculate (conceived entirely without Original Sin, i.e., inherently "full of grace"). Dominicans, however, maintained the more traditional interpretation: Mary, like the Church she typifies, was not inherently immaculate at conception but was instead cleansed or sanctified immediately afterward by Christ's grace, becoming "full of grace" progressively—first through her prenatal sanctification, and then finally perfected through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation.

This Dominican interpretation specifically aligned Mary's sanctification as the antitype of the bridal and royal imagery found in Canticles. The spotless bride, poetically depicted as dove-like in beauty and praised for having the eyes of a dove—symbols of spiritual purity and perfection—aptly represented Mary's sanctified condition. Her sanctification in the womb was thus understood as the initial act in a process of becoming immaculate, a process ultimately fulfilled by the Incarnation of Christ in her womb at the Annunciation. Mary's union with Christ at the Incarnation perfected her purity, fully enabling her to assume the role of Bride and Queen at her Assumption. Just as Solomon's bride in Canticles was crowned upon union with the King, Mary's divine union with Christ allowed her to embody completely the purified, dove-like Bride who, upon her death and assumption, would be crowned as Queen of Heaven.

The Coronation

Mary's heavenly coronation, long celebrated in Christian liturgy and visual culture, especially flourished in theological and artistic expression during the early to mid-15th century. While devotion to her queenship predates the Renaissance, it is precisely her prenatal sanctification that provides the theological foundation for her crowning in glory. Within the broader context of Mariology, the key interpretive distinction between Franciscan and Dominican theologians centered on how this sanctity was attained. The Franciscans ardently defended the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, asserting that Mary was conceived entirely without Original Sin—immaculate from the first instant of her existence. The Dominicans, however, while affirming her exceptional purity, maintained a more traditional position: that Mary was conceived in Original Sin like all humanity, but was immediately cleansed of it through an act of divine grace while still in the womb of her mother, Anne.

This subtle but crucial theological nuance allowed Dominican thinkers to frame Mary not merely as a singular exception, but as the supreme type of the Church itself—the Bride of Christ, who is sanctified not inherently but through the active redemption of Christ's sacrifice. In this interpretation, Mary's purity is not self-generated, but conferred by the Savior, prefiguring the way all members of the Church are cleansed from Original Sin through baptism and Christ's redemptive death. This view harmonizes directly with the language of Ephesians 5:25–27, which speaks of Christ loving the Church as His Bride and sanctifying her by "the washing of water with the word," so that she might be presented "without spot or wrinkle… holy and without blemish."

Thus, Mary's Coronation as Queen of Heaven—frequently depicted in 15th-century art (Figure 18)—serves not only as a celebration of her unique role, but as an iconographic and theological symbol of the Church itself: glorified, sanctified, and united to Christ. In these depictions, Christ, and/or God the Father, is often shown placing a crown upon Mary's head in a posture of both royal honor and bridal union. Crucially, in many of these coronation scenes, Christ holds the orb or globus cruciger—a globe surmounted by a cross—visually affirming His identity as the universal Savior and King of the world. The orb in Christ's hand thus carries layered meaning: it signals His sovereignty over the cosmos through His unique role as the one who redeems and sanctifies, even Mary, as we'll see later.



Figure 18

In this way, the coronation of Mary is more than a Marian honor—it becomes a visual theology of redemption. As Mary is crowned and blessed by Christ, she embodies the Church perfected; as Christ holds the orb, He affirms that His kingship extends to all creation and that sanctification—from Mary's womb to the baptismal font—is the fruit of His universal salvific mission. Therefore, these richly symbolic coronation images not only exalt Mary's status but affirm that she is the mirror and model of the Church, radiant with the splendor of grace, made immaculate not by her nature but by the boundless mercy of the world's Savior, i.e. Salvatore Mundi.

Accordingly, Mary, as the Bride of Christ, stands not only as Queen of Heaven but as the archetypal embodiment of the "Mother Church"— 'made' spiritually immaculate, sanctified and crowned in celestial glory, and tenderly protective of her own. Like a hen gathering her chicks beneath her wings, Mary shelters the faithful not merely in maternal compassion, but because they are, like her, of like kind: sanctified by grace, purified through Christ, and joined to Him in spiritual kinship. This image, long echoed in Misericordia iconography (Figure 19), becomes all the more potent within the Dominican theological framework, which affirms that Mary's sanctification—granted not at conception, as the

Franciscans claimed, but immediately afterward by divine intervention—makes her not an exception to human nature but its glorified exemplar.



Figure 19

In this light, Mary does not stand apart from the Church but above it as its crowned prototype, drawing the sanctified faithful under her mantle because they share in the same grace that first made her immaculate in the womb. Her purity is not self-contained, but representative—bestowed by Christ, her divine Bridegroom, in the same way the Church is made spotless through His redemptive sacrifice. Thus, the image of Mary as Queen and protective mother is not merely devotional but deeply ecclesiological: she is the Church glorified, the redeemed Bride, and the gracious shelter of all who are made holy through the one Savior of the world.

This theological vision finds subtle visual expression in Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*, where the young John the Baptist is placed under Mary's protective care and outstretched mantle (Figure 19). There, too, John is shown as one sanctified and guarded—not merely as a child, but as one spiritually akin to

Mary, made holy by the same grace, and gathered beneath her as one of the sanctified faithful, or the church, she tenderly shelters.

This theological lens of the Bride-Church advances the already profound meaning of Leonardo da Vinci's visual symbolism, for a subtle cluster of jasmine leaves is arranged in the form of a delicate bridal garland, hovering above a kneeling Mary's head—visually evoking a crown, yet formed entirely from nature (Figures 20 - 21). This botanical coronet cleverly intimates the Dominican theology of grace-bestowed sanctification, aligning Mary's crowning not with innate purity, but with divine favor. It is a symbolic coronation that parallels the right hand of God's benediction above, and finds fulfillment below in the gesture of Christ, whose raised right hand blesses the genuflecting John the Baptist. Together, these acts form a vertical liturgy of sanctification—heaven and earth—consecrating both Mary and John through the redemptive authority of Christ.

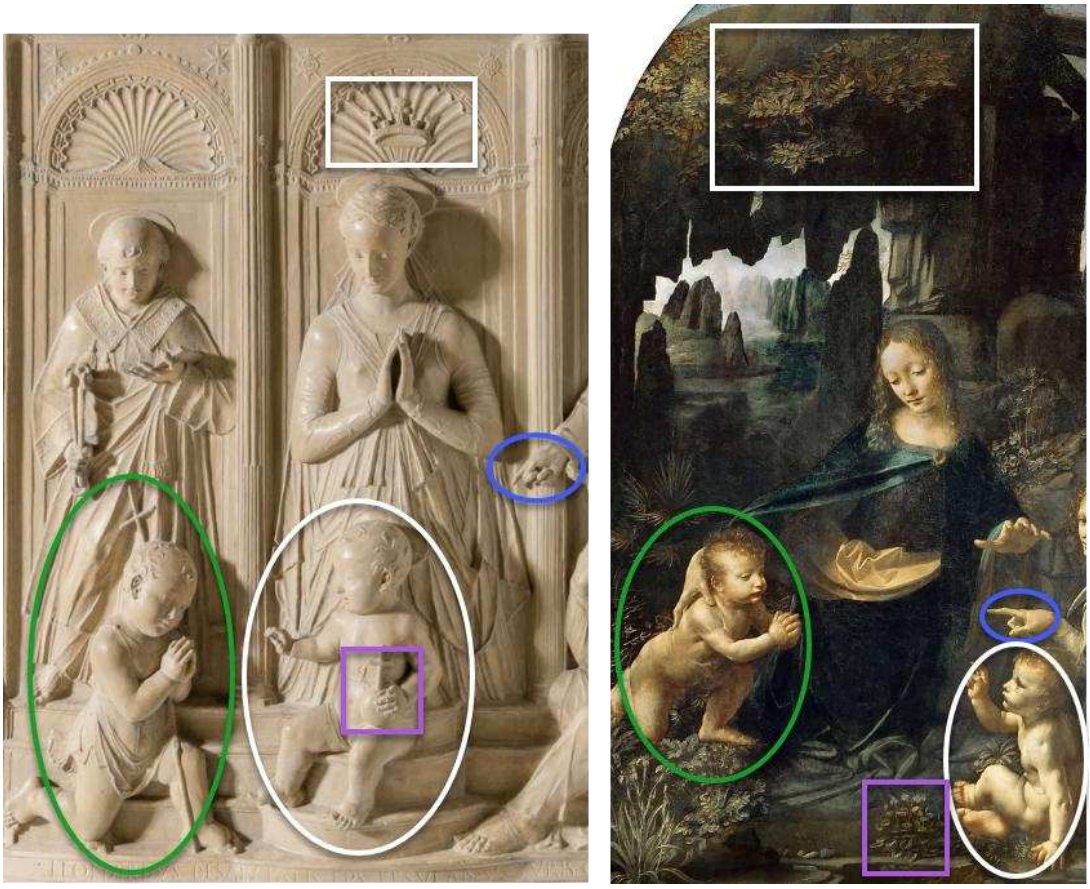


Figure 20



Figure 21

Importantly, in Dominican thought, both Mary and John were sanctified in the womb, but after conception—a shared status that carries profound visual and theological implications. As Mary is shown kneeling and in the process of being crowned, her sanctification is affirmed through her royal elevation; simultaneously, John, shown genuflecting and in the process of receiving Christ's blessing, becomes the earthly counterpart to her heavenly glorification. This dual sanctification—of Mary above and John below—is precisely the theme Mino da Fiesole masterfully displayed in his *Salutati Chapel* relief. There, as Mary kneels in adoration during her coronation, Christ, holding the globus crucifer, blesses the genuflecting infant John, intimating the Visitation with Elizabeth scene, thus visually reinforcing the notion that Christ alone is the universal sanctifier of all, including Mary and John.

Through this visual logic, the sanctified Bride of Christ is represented doubly: Mary, crowned in heaven as the glorified Church, and John, sanctified on earth, representing the faithful Church militant—particularly the communal church at Florence, who were baptized under the patronage of John the Baptist. In this context, as we will see, John becomes a political and theological stand-in for Dominican and Medicean sympathies in Florence, positioned in contrast to Pope Sixtus IV's promotion of the Immaculate Conception (post Pazzi Conspiracy), which the vociferous Dominicans of San Marco viewed as a theological heresy. Thus, Leonardo's subtle yet powerful symbolism reinforces this carefully calibrated Dominican reading of Mary's purity—not as preemptive exemption, but as bestowed sanctity.

In doing so, Leonardo—true to his Medicean milieu—reinterprets established iconographic tradition with characteristic invention, using the language of nature and gesture to quietly yet forcefully align his imagery with Florentine Dominican theology and Medici politics against the Franciscans, but specifically Pope Sixtus IV. For his elite audience steeped in these debates, the message would have been unmistakable: the true Queen of Heaven is she who has been sanctified and cleansed of Original Sin by

the Savior of the World, the 'Salvatore Mundi', just as the Church, in her truest form, is cleansed by the baptismal waters of Christ's sacrificial love.

Salvatore Mundi

In the late antique and medieval worlds, power and authority found visual expression in tangible symbols—few more evocative or enduring than the held orb. This spherical emblem of universal dominion, originally known as the *orbis terrarum* ("sphere of the lands"), adorned the coins, regalia, and imagery of Roman emperors who claimed universal power (Figure 22).



Figure 22

With the rise of Christianity, this worldly emblem underwent a subtle yet profound transformation. Crowned by a cross, it became the *globus cruciger*—a globe surmounted by Christianity's highest symbol—signifying Christ as the ultimate divine authority from whom imperial power (and salvation) flowed. By the early medieval period, what had once represented solely imperial supremacy was now reinterpreted as a sacred emblem of divine sovereignty, proclaiming Christ's salvific dominion over the entire cosmos, exercised on earth through the stewardship of the emperor (Figure 23).



Figure 23

By the late the medieval period, the orb transcended its terrestrial origins, embodying a far broader and deeper cosmic symbolism. The concept of "world"—*mundus*—in medieval imagination was expansive,

signifying not simply the earth (*terra*) but the circular entirety of creation, structured into seven celestial spheres—those of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—culminating in the divine empyrean heaven. Christ's creative and salvific dominion thus stretched infinitely beyond earthly bounds to embrace the entire cosmic order. When medieval worshippers invoked "Salvator mundi" they addressed not merely an earthly king, but the Redeemer and Lord of the entire universe.

Perhaps nowhere in medieval Italy is the cosmic dimension of Christ's kingship more impressively expressed than in the monumental golden mosaic dome of Florence's Baptistery (ca. 1280). Here, high above marble pavements and gilded altars, Christ sits enthroned upon seven concentric circles symbolizing the celestial spheres, extending His downward left hand in judgment and upward right hand in mercy (Figure 24 – left). Angels and demons below separate the saved from the damned, visually reinforcing the profound belief that Christ's sovereignty encompasses the cosmos, from the highest heavens to earthly humanity. This compelling depiction eloquently conveyed to every Florentine entering the baptismal waters that Christ's salvific reign and judgment was infinite, spanning both space and spirit. Similarly, Giovanni di Paolo's *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (ca. 1445) vividly reflects how this common medieval motif was still prominent in the early renaissance, portraying the created world (*mundi*) as a circle composed of concentric rings, reinforcing the symbolic tradition of depicting the universe as a cosmic orb in God's hands (Figure 24 – right).



Figure 24

What had once been the emblem of earthly rule—clutched in the hands of emperors on Late Antique coinage as the *orbis terrarum*—was, by the 14th century, being placed into the hands of Christ Himself. Just as artists had long rendered the world as a circle of concentric rings—visualizing the cosmos in two

dimensions—so too did the three-dimensional orb, when placed in Christ's grasp, become a symbol not of imperial might but of divine dominion. Initially, depictions of Christ physically holding an orb or *globus cruciger* were rare, confined largely to illuminated manuscripts, ivory carvings, and minor relief sculptures through the early and high medieval periods.

By the early 14th century, however, this motif gained new visibility, particularly in France. Gothic artists began transferring the symbol from secular to sacred hands, most strikingly in monumental stained glass and sculptural programs such as those at Chartres Cathedral, where Christ is depicted with the orb as a mark of cosmic kingship (Figure 25 – left). One particularly vivid example of this shifting iconography appears in a *Reliquary Statuette of Saint Christopher* (c. 1390), in which the Christ Child—carried on the saint's shoulders—is shown, in a gesture of benediction, holding a tiny orb, a compelling visual metaphor for the world borne by its Redeemer (Figure 25 – right). Such imagery captured the theological imagination of the time, signaling that the globe of dominion now rested not with kings and emperors but with the incarnate, salvific Word.



Figure 25

This iconographic transformation deepened in the 15th century across Europe, particularly in the works of the great Flemish masters. Around 1440, Rogier van der Weyden was among the first to establish a hyper focused visual model for the *Salvator Mundi*, depicting Christ in quiet majesty, again raising His right hand in benediction while holding a massive translucent orb in His left—a gesture that signified not

only His authority over the world but also His act of blessing and redeeming it (Figure 26 – left). Hans Memling, working a generation later, followed van der Weyden's example, producing compositions that closely echoed this structure with only subtle refinements. In Memling's celebrated version from around 1480, Christ gazes directly outward, His right hand raised in serene blessing as if to sanctify the very orb He cradles in His left—a translucent sphere crowned with a cross, symbolizing the redeemed world (Figure 26 – right). Together, these images helped centralize the motif of Christ as universal savior and king, reinforcing the theological idea that His blessing (benediction) equates to the sacrificial means by which the world is saved. This visual formula soon permeated devotional art across Northern Europe and laid the groundwork for its flourishing in Renaissance Italy.



Figure 26

One of the earliest known Italian depictions of Christ as *Salvator Mundi*—and perhaps the first to include the orb—is found in Simone Martini's *Salvator Mundi Surrounded by Angels*, painted in Siena around 1320. In this striking and refined panel, Christ appears frontally, serene and regal, offering a blessing with His right hand while holding a luminous orb in His left—an unmistakable symbol of universal dominion. Though the composition remains rooted in Gothic stylization, the presence of the orb firmly anticipates later Renaissance treatments of the motif. Surrounded by a celestial court of adoring angels, Martini's Christ is already invested with the dual aspects of salvation and cosmic kingship that would come to define the *Salvator Mundi* image in full.



Figure 27

Despite this early precedent, the motif remained relatively rare in Italy throughout the 14th century. It was only after the diffusion of the image in French Gothic art, and just before its formal codification in the Flemish tradition, that the *globus cruciger* began to reappear in Italian art with increasing regularity. In the early 15th century, Italian painters gradually resumed and reimagined this iconography, incorporating the orb more directly into depictions of Christ's salvific identity.

A key moment in this resurgence occurs with Gherardo Starnina's *Christ as Salvator Mundi* (ca 1405), in which Christ again blesses with His right hand while firmly holding the orb in His left. The image, produced in Florence, marks one of the earliest Renaissance-era revivals of the theme and suggests growing local interest in visualizing Christ's salvific kingship through the symbolic weight of the orb (Figure 28 – left).

This trajectory continued with increasing clarity. Masaccio, in his *Pisa Altarpiece* of 1426, innovatively positioned the orb above the cross in a reserved yet clear gesture that linked Christ's universal dominion with His redemptive death (Figure 28 – right). Though modest in scale, the placement signaled the theological fusion of universal sacrifice and sovereignty—cosmic rulership grounded in incarnate love.

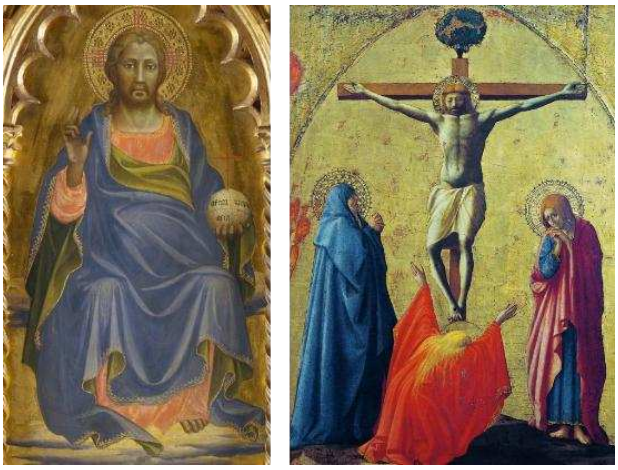


Figure 28

Together, these developments—beginning with Simone Martini's early vision, reignited by Starnina, and refined by Masaccio—paved the way for the fuller integration of the orb into painted Italian religious art, as realized through the mid-15th century altarpieces of Fra Angelico, both at San Marco and for the Linaioli Guild featuring San Marco (Figure 29 – left).[21] However, it was not until the 1460s, through the innovative work of Florentine sculptor Mino da Fiesole, that the powerful visual motif of Christ's benediction—combined with the globus cruciger—became decisively integrated into Florentine sculpture. Just as Leonardo was entering Verrocchio's workshop as an apprentice, Mino first introduced this imagery around 1465 in a prominent marble relief for the Badia of Florence, where Christ is shown holding the orb in a gesture of calm authority (Figure 29 - right).



Figure 29

[21] See Carl Balowski, *Civic Power and Sacred Identity in Quattrocento Florence: The Evolution from Fra Angelico's Linaioli Tabernacle to Filippo Lippi's Altarpiece in the Medici Magi Chapel in Florence as a Precursor to Leonardo Da Vinci's Virgin of the Rocks*

It was shortly after this relief for the Badia that Mino da Fiesole reached the full flowering of his iconographic vision in his masterpiece for the *Salutati Chapel* in Fiesole Cathedral, completed around 1467 (Figure 30). In this virtuoso work, Mino brought together theological symbolism, civic devotion, and artistic innovation with remarkable unity. At the heart of the composition is the kneeling Virgin Mary, portrayed in serene humility yet unmistakably exalted as the Queen of Heaven. A delicately sculpted crown descends from above her head—a visual affirmation of her celestial sovereignty as the Bride of Christ and honored intercessory role in the divine order.



Figure 30

Before her, in a scene of quiet intimacy, the infant Christ and the infant John the Baptist—Florence's patron saint—meet in a visionary encounter that transcends historical chronology. Though their biblical meeting at the Jordan River lies decades ahead, Mino imaginatively re-envisions their bond in the infancy of the Visitation, investing their exchange with profound prophetic resonance. Christ, seated with composure and authority, gently holds the salvific *globus cruciger upon his lap*. With His right hand, He reaches in a natural gesture of blessing toward young John—a gesture that affirms not only Christ's divine mission as Redeemer, but also His role as the source of spiritual grace.

John, shown genuflecting with reverent humility, holds a slender processional cross—his traditional emblem—symbolizing the path of baptism and preaching of Christ's sacrifice. By portraying both Christ and John as toddlers, separated by six months in age, Mino subtly recalls the earlier, mystical moment of

the Visitation, when John, still in Elizabeth's womb, leapt at the presence of the unborn Christ in Mary—a moment long interpreted as the instant of his sanctification.

In traditional Visitation scenes, the mystical encounter between the unborn Christ and John the Baptist is often depicted with the two children shown in utero—John kneeling in reverence, Christ raising His hand in blessing. In Mino's relief, this hidden moment of grace is translated into visible form: John kneels once more, now embodied in tender humility, and Christ extends His hand in solemn benediction.

But this gesture carries far more than biblical resonance. As Florence's patron saint, John the Baptist stands here as a symbol of the Florentine faithful, and in this specific context, of Leonardo Salutati, whose tomb directly faces the scene. This connection is made unmistakable by the inscription of the name "Leonardo" beneath the figure of the infant John—subtly inviting the viewer to recognize that the kneeling child represents not only the Baptist, but also Salutati himself, christened (baptized and named) as a newborn at the Baptistery of San Giovanni, as every Florentine was.

For the citizens of Florence—deeply attuned to visual symbolism and civic theology—such an association would have been immediately apparent. The gesture of Christ blessing John would be read as Christ's blessing upon Florence, and particularly upon one of its own. Yet perhaps no viewer would have perceived this with greater depth than Leonardo da Vinci, who shared not only the city of Florence but also the name "Leonardo" with the man honored in this sculpture. Raised in the same civic-religious world, Leonardo would have instinctively grasped the theological and artistic significance of this composition, recognizing in it a meditation on sanctification, identity, and belonging.

Thus, Mino's sculpture unfolds across multiple dimensions—honoring the grace of baptismal sanctification, commemorating Florentine identity, and inviting meditation on the soul's passage from earthly baptism and civic devotion to eternal rest in Christ. The blessing Christ bestows upon the kneeling John is no mere symbolic gesture; it is directed unmistakably toward Leonardo Salutati, and by extension, to all who share in his faith, name, and Florentine heritage. In weaving together themes of cosmic kingship, prophetic fulfillment, maternal intercession, redemptive sacrifice, and communal belonging, Mino da Fiesole created one of the most theologically rich and civically resonant depictions of this sacred trio. The result is a sculptural work of profound intimacy and layered meaning—uniting doctrine with identity, and shaping the devotional imagination of early Renaissance Florence with lasting influence.

After Mino's masterpiece of the late 1460s, depictions of Christ holding an orb or *globus cruciger* began to rise dramatically, appearing with growing frequency in manuscripts, altarpieces, devotional panels, and sculptural programs across Italy and Northern Europe (Figure 31). What had once been a reserved emblem of cosmic authority became a defining attribute of the *Salvator Mundi* type, reflecting a theological and artistic shift that increasingly emphasized Christ's role as universal savior and sovereign. This iconographic momentum continued to build throughout the final decades of the 15th century, reaching a point of visual and symbolic culmination in the early 16th century—exquisitely realized in **Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*** of 1501 (Figure 32).



Figure 31

In this ethereal and contemplative image, Leonardo synthesized centuries of symbolic tradition into a single, quietly powerful vision. Christ is depicted in serene frontal stillness, His gaze calm and penetrating. With His right hand, He offers his salvific benediction; with His left, He supports a crystal-clear orb rendered with striking optical precision. Unlike most earlier depictions of opaque of semi-translucent globes topped with crosses, Leonardo's orb is completely translucent and unadorned, suggesting not merely the physical world but the entire created order—the layered, rarified celestial spheres, the boundless heavens, and the radiant harmony of the cosmos as imagined in medieval and Renaissance cosmology.

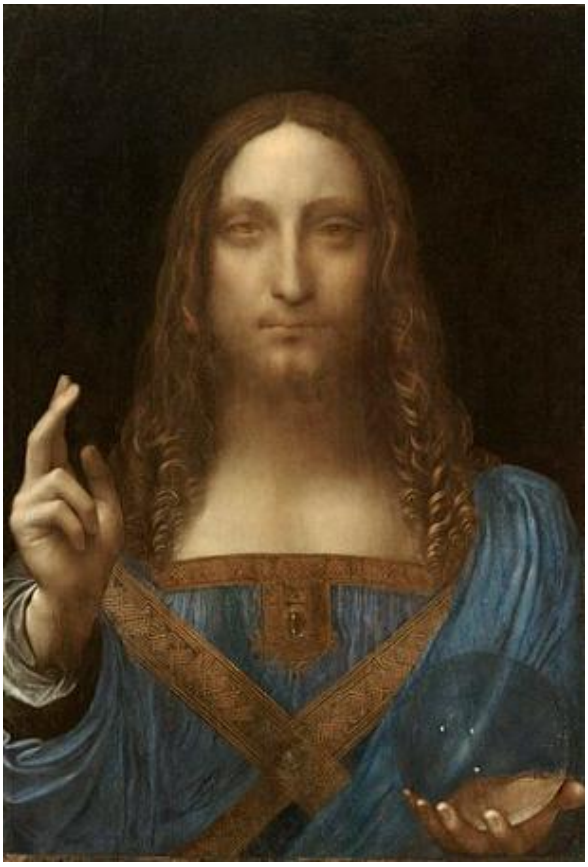


Figure 32

By uniting divine sovereignty with human mercy, and metaphysical symbolism with optical realism, Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi* marks the culmination of a visual tradition that had steadily grown for centuries. The orb, once the mark of imperial dominion, now rests definitively in the hand of Christ—not as a relic of earthly power, but as a luminous emblem of redemptive kingship over all creation.

The globus cruciger undertook a remarkable evolution—from its origins as the *orbis terrarum* in ancient Roman imperial iconography, to its theological reinterpretation in medieval France and Northern Europe, and finally to its mature artistic integration in Renaissance Italy. A turning point came with Mino da Fiesole's influential sculpture in the Salutati Chapel, where the orb-and-cross imagery assumed a central place in Italian devotional art. From this moment forward, the symbol would recur with increasing prominence, culminating in Leonardo da Vinci's ethereal *Salvator Mundi*, where Christ's calm benediction and translucent globe evoke dominion not merely over earth, but over the totality of creation.

Cyclamen as the World

In this arc—from imperial emblem to cosmic symbol—the orb came to embody evolving human understandings of power, kingship, and divinity. Yet throughout this transformation, Christ remained at the center, the true *Salvator Mundi*—proclaimed by John the Baptist, venerated in liturgical prayer, enthroned in Florence's Baptistery mosaics, and rendered in marble by Mino with both majesty and tenderness. In each depiction, the message endures: Christ is not merely ruler of nations or savior of an earthly domain, but the redemptive Lord of the cosmos—eternally sovereign, infinitely merciful.

Yet, for the Renaissance mind—shaped by a revival of hermetic and humanist ideals—true understanding lay in the harmonic synthesis of the heavens, nature, humanity and divinity. The humanist imagination sought a theory of everything, weaving together botany, geology, optics, rhetoric, theology, and etymology into a cohesive vision of the cosmos. In such a worldview, symbols were not arbitrary, but meaningful correspondences, and the natural world was read as a text infused with divine order.

Within this symbolic framework, one plant emerged as a particularly apt emblem of the macrocosm rendered in miniature. The cyclamen—known in Italian as both *ciclomino* and *orbiculare*—embodied the world in both form and name. Its rounded tuber and elegantly spiraling stems physically mirrored the celestial order, while its nomenclature directly invoked the Latin *orbis*, meaning "sphere" or "world." Modest in appearance yet profound in implication, the cyclamen did more than suggest the cosmos—it *embodied* it. For a Renaissance polymath like Leonardo attuned to the unity of nature, language and science, this humble plant stood as a living metaphor for the perfectly ordered universe—a microcosmic testament to the divine architecture of creation.

Indeed, the name "cyclamen" itself derives directly from the ancient Greek *kykláminos* (κυκλάμινος), rooted firmly in the Greek *kýklos* (κύκλος), meaning "circle." The cyclamen thus inherently suggests cosmic symbolism through the distinctively rounded shape of its tuber and its gracefully spiraling stems. This connection was clearly recognized in medieval and Renaissance botanical literature. Early medieval Latin herbals including the immensely popular *Herbarium Apuleii Platonici* explicitly identified the cyclamen as *orbicularis herba* ("orb-like herb"), explicitly highlighting its spherical bulb. This evocative designation endured prominently into the Renaissance lingo, clearly reflected in the influential botanical text of Leonhart Fuchs (1545) and dictionary of John Florio (1598), both of whom continued to explicitly employ the term *orbiculare* when referring to cyclamen (Figure 33).

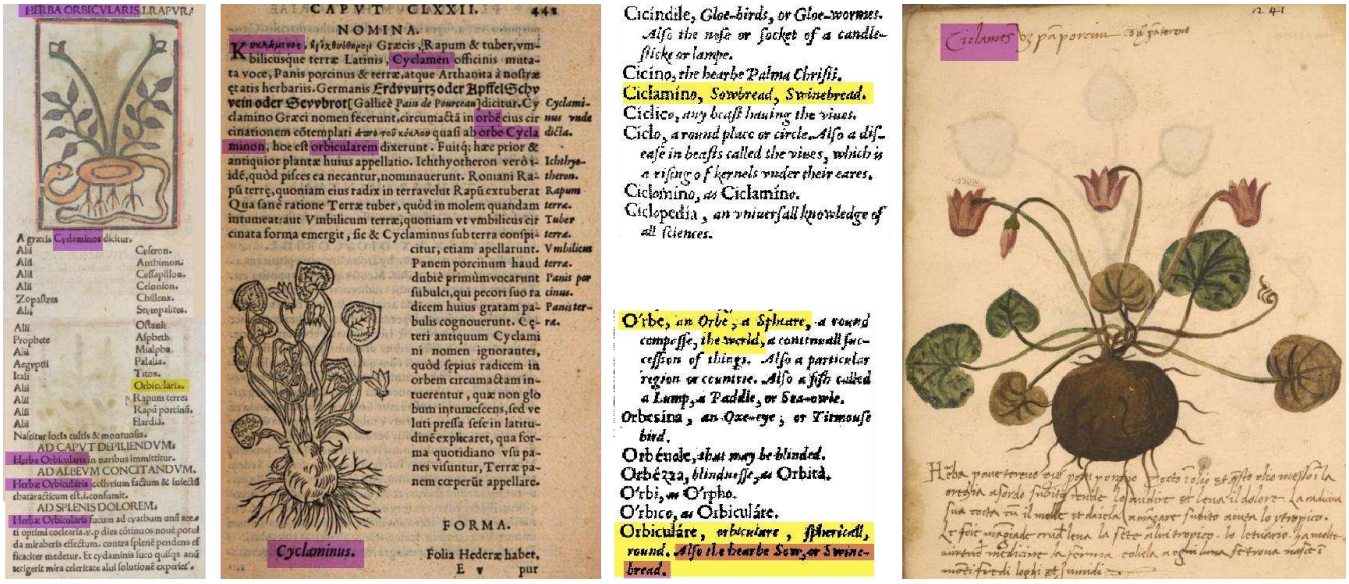


Figure 33

Additionally, cyclamen bore other popular vernacular names—such as "earth-apple," "earth-navel," and "swinebread"—all of which drew attention to the distinctly earth-like, rounded nature of its nutritious subterranean tuber.

Linguistic evidence from Florio's celebrated Italian-English dictionary of 1598 further underscores the symbolic resonance embedded within the cyclamen's dual identities. Florio explicitly equates the Italian terms *Orbiculare* and *Ciclomino* with the English "Swinebread," while crucially noting that "orbiculare" specifically signifies "spherical." Intriguingly, just five entries prior, Florio translates both "world" and "sphere" with the Italian term *orbe*, linguistically reinforcing the association between the cyclamen's spherical shape and the broader cosmological conception of an orb-like world. This linguistic interplay reveals profound symbolic resonances, clarifying that to medieval and Renaissance minds, the natural descriptor for the world was certainly neither square nor angular, but unmistakably *orbiculare*—that is, "orb-like."

Consequently, cyclamen emerges convincingly as a botanical emblem of the cosmic orb itself—not merely through the physical spherical shape of its tuber but intrinsically and poetically through its evocative naming as "orbiculare," literally meaning "orb-like." By virtue of these traditional and linguistic associations, the cyclamen came to embody the enduring Renaissance fascination with the orb, a symbol simultaneously natural and cosmic, earthly and celestial, profoundly echoing humanity's ongoing quest to understand and visually represent the world and its Creator.

Indeed, given Leonardo da Vinci's well-known penchant for allegory, metaphor, and the embedding of layered symbolism—often hidden in plain view—it is entirely fitting that a plant like the *cyclamen* might carry profound meaning in his work. Far from a mere botanical detail, the *cyclamen* in Leonardo's hands could become a microcosmic emblem of the world itself, its rounded form and etymological ties to *orbis* ("sphere" or "world") making it a natural visual metaphor for the cosmic orb.

As previously observed, Leonardo da Vinci consistently employed elements of nature to express complex theological truths, transforming flora, stones, and light into subtle carriers of spiritual meaning. In this light, it is especially revealing that in *The Virgin of the Rocks*, a spherical cyclamen appears prominently in the foreground—positioned beneath the infant Christ's outstretched hand as He blesses the kneeling John the Baptist (Figure 34).[22] Far from a decorative flourish, the cyclamen occupies a deliberate and symbolic space. Its orb-like form, nestled at this moment of benediction, functions as a vegetal counterpart to the *globus cruciger*, visually declaring Christ as *Salvator Mundi*—the Savior of the World.



Figure 34

Leonardo's compositional logic in *The Virgin of the Rocks* closely mirrors that of Mino da Fiesole's marble relief in the Salutati Chapel, where the infant Christ, as *Salvator Mundi*, blesses the kneeling infant John. In Mino's sculpture, John represents not only the forerunner of Christ but also serves as a stand-in for the Florentine faithful—especially Leonardo Salutati, whose name is inscribed directly beneath the figure of

[22] Emboden, W. A. (1987). *Leonardo da Vinci on plants and gardens.* United States: Dioscorides Press, p. 125-26; . Emboden unmistakably identifies this plant as a cyclamen.

the Baptist. Leonardo draws from this same visual-theological tradition, portraying John not merely as a prophetic figure, but as a Florentine proxy, receiving Christ's blessing under the maternal protection of Mary. At the center of this exchange, Leonardo places a spherical cyclamen—deliberately nestled between Christ's blessing hand and John's posture of reverence—serving as a naturalized echo of the *globus cruciger* and Christ's cosmic sovereignty.

This Florentine identification is reinforced by another compelling detail: in the lower left corner—echoing not only the inscribed axe adjacent to the giglio in Lippi's *Adoration* in the Medici Chapel but also Salutati's inscribed name in Mino da Fiesole's sculpture—Leonardo paints a *giglio*, the unmistakable emblem of Florence (Figures 35 - 36), placed directly beneath the genuflecting knee of the Baptist.[23] Through this symbolic pairing—the cyclamen beneath Christ's blessing hand toward John and the *giglio* beneath John's knee—Leonardo constructs a richly layered narrative that intertwines theological meaning with civic identity. Nature becomes his medium for affirming Medicean sacred (political) vocation and doctrinal alignment with the San Marco Dominican's (Jacobin's) vision of Florence, standing in clear contrast to the newly approved, 'heretical', Sixtine doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

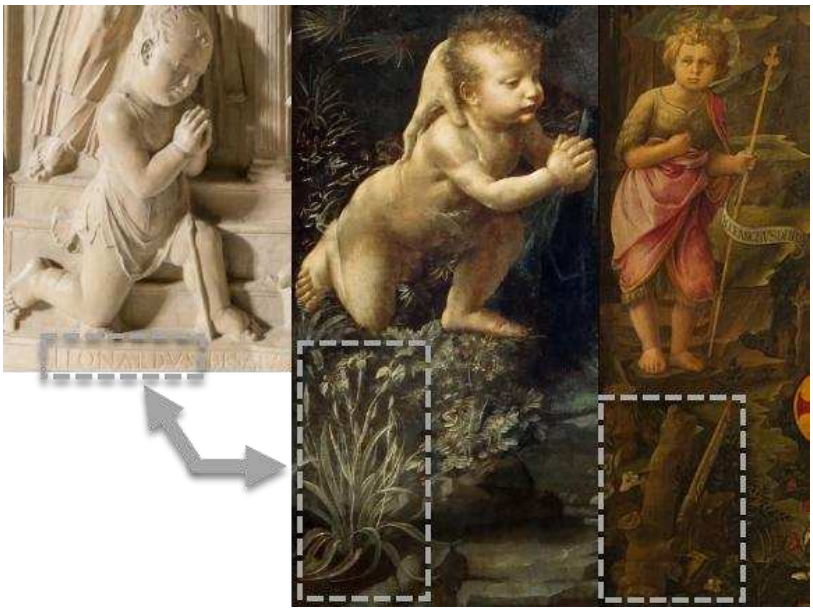


Figure 35

[23] Emboden, W. A. (1987). *Leonardo da Vinci on plants and gardens.* United States: Dioscorides Press, p. 125-26; . Emboden identifies this giglio as an Iris Pseudacorus, also commonly known as "Jacob's Sword". The Giglio and other symbols of Florence, including the Marzocco, will be studied in light of Leonardo's use of allegory and the Pazzi Conspiracy extensively in Part 2.



Figure 36

By depicting both John and Mary as sanctified through Christ's grace after conception—a core tenet of Dominican theology—Leonardo subtly challenges Pope Sixtus IV's aggressive efforts to enforce the Immaculate Conception as dogma. His pairing of Mary with John, and Christ's blessing of the latter, becomes a visual rebuttal to Sixtus' theological innovation and political hostility toward Florence and the Medici. The scene thus becomes more than devotional art; it is a quiet but deliberate act of resistance.

In this way, Leonardo not only honors Mino da Fiesole's Florentine precedent but transforms it. Nature is no longer a passive backdrop but an active bearer of divine meaning. Through two infants, a flower, and a gesture, he elevates local identity to cosmic significance. The cyclamen becomes the orb of a world redeemed, the *giglio* the banner of a city blessed, and the Church—symbolized in Mary and John—not sanctified by papal decree, but by the singular prerogative of Christ, the true *Salvator Mundi*.

With all of this subtly inventive iconographical detail thus far, the question of why Leonardo would choose to depict a distinctly symbolic Maculist theme in an altarpiece intended for a chapel explicitly dedicated to the opposite doctrine—that of the Immaculate Conception—needs to be answered. What was his modus operandi? Well, once we carefully examine the broader historical, theological, and political contexts surrounding Leonardo's commission, especially considering the Florentine and Dominican war with the chief promoter of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Pope Sixtus IV, his motivation becomes perfectly understandable. These deeper motivations, contexts and iconographic symbols including even more botany will be explored fully in my forthcoming Part 2.

Conclusion

In this Part 1 survey we see that Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* emerges as a profoundly sophisticated theological statement, carefully articulated through an intricate visual language rich in symbolism, wordplay, and doctrinal nuance. By strategically blending northern European devotional iconography of the "type-fetus" tradition with Florentine innovations in narrative convergence—techniques pioneered by Filippo Lippi and further refined by Mino da Fiesole—Leonardo ingeniously unifies two pivotal biblical encounters: the prenatal sanctification of John at the Visitation and Christ's subsequent baptism by John at the Jordan River. Within this paradoxically womb-like yet rugged wilderness setting, Leonardo deliberately employs visual puns and botanical allegories drawn from his Florentine heritage and Medici associations, creatively emphasizing theological subtleties through the actual common names of depicted plants rather than their traditional symbolic virtues.

More significantly, Leonardo's composition articulates an unmistakably Dominican theological stance of Christ as Salvator Mundi, subtly yet decisively opposing the increasingly popular doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception championed by Pope Sixtus IV. Leonardo visually argues—consistent with Dominican Maculist theology—that Mary, like John the Baptist, was conceived with Original Sin and subsequently sanctified within the womb through divine intervention, distinct from the inherently immaculate natures of Christ and the Angel. By visually paralleling God the Father's baptismal sanctification of Mary with Christ's simultaneous prenatal benediction of John, Leonardo reinforces the doctrinal stance held by prominent theologians opposed to Mary's immaculate conception, including St. Bernard, Thomas Aquinas and Vincenzo Bandello.

The strategic placement of some symbolic elements—such as the columbine "dove," the palm and crown-like jasmine, the cyclamen, the rocky priestly gestures of God's left and right hands, and the Angel's deliberate interruption of Mary's dovelike gesture—reflects Leonardo's meticulous intellectual planning and intentional engagement with complex doctrinal debates. Moreover, the Angel, directly addressing the viewer like a theatrical narrator from Feo Belcari's devotional plays, explicitly signals Leonardo's deeper narrative intent, prompting viewers to consider the theological implications embedded within the painting's carefully orchestrated symbolism.

Ultimately, Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* transcends mere aesthetic beauty or conventional devotional imagery. It serves instead as a profound meditation upon baptismal sanctification, theological doctrine,

and devotional practice, intricately woven into a visual narrative accessible primarily to those intimately connected with the theological debates, literary traditions, and political currents of Leonardo's contemporary Florentine milieu. In my next study, I will continue along this previously unexplored interpretive path first recognized but not pursued by D'Ancona, advancing toward a comprehensive solution.[24] By delving deeper into Leonardo's intricate botanical allegories, his Florentine intellectual heritage, and the complex political-religious dynamics informing his commission, I aim to illuminate even greater depths of meaning embedded within this extraordinary painting. Had D'Ancona fully trusted her insightful instincts regarding Leonardo's apparent emphasis on the doctrine of sanctification, my current work might not have been necessary. Fortunately, she ultimately hesitated, writing instead:

> "In this painting the emphasis is centered on the infant St. John. All action converges upon him: the Angel points to him, the Christ Child blesses him, and the Virgin gathers him protectively under her mantle. Even assuming that Leonardo's painting was only a secondary part in the altarpiece—which it was not, the painting is repeatedly mentioned as its central part—such prominence given to St. John would certainly not have been acceptable to the Brotherhood. The figure of the infant St. John, though common in the [late] fifteenth century in a picture of the Adoration of the Child or of the Holy Family, could not be easily associated with the Immaculate Conception. St. John was sanctified in the womb of his mother, and his association with the Virgin Mary would seem to point to the 'doctrine of Sanctification.' His prominent position in the Louvre panel would have made such an interpretation even more probable. In view of the fact that the altarpiece was commissioned to oppose the doctrine of Sanctification and that the Pope had condemned this doctrine only the year before, Leonardo's Louvre *Virgin of the Rocks* is a surprising solution for an Immaculist theme."

It is precisely this "surprising solution" that I hope to fully articulate in my forthcoming Part 2.

[24] Levi D'Ancona, M. (1957). The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. United States: College Art Association of America in conjunction wth the Art bulletin.

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