

Medici - Orsini Symbolism and the Rise of Leo X

FLORENCE AND ROME UNITED

Carl Balowski | February, 2025

Lorenzo de' Medici's Ambitions and Giovanni's Early Ecclesiastical Path

Lorenzo de' Medici, known as "il Magnifico," was determined to secure his family's influence within the Church. Throughout the 1470s, he repeatedly petitioned Pope Sixtus IV to elevate his brother Giuliano de' Medici to the rank of cardinal—a request that remained unfulfilled. The situation worsened in 1478 when Giuliano was murdered during the Pazzi Conspiracy, an act carried out with the tacit approval of Sixtus IV. This betrayal was compounded by the fact that under Sixtus's influence Florence had been excommunicated, and the Pope's fervent promotion of the Immaculate Conception—epitomized by his sponsorship of the Confraternity's first chapel at San Francesco Grande—only deepened Lorenzo's resentment.

In response, Lorenzo redirected his ambitions toward his second son, Giovanni, effectively dedicating the toddler to a clerical career from infancy. At the remarkably young age of seven, Giovanni was granted significant ecclesiastical benefices; he was named abbot in commendam of the Abbey of Font-Douce. This appointment served as a public declaration of Lorenzo's intent to lift the Medici from the sphere of Florentine elites into the broader realm of Church hierarchy and, ultimately, to pave the way for a Medici papacy.

Lorenzo further underscored this ambition by ensuring that Giovanni's formal entry into Church life was marked by a ceremony imbued with symbolic vengeance. On June 1, 1483—deliberately chosen as the fifth anniversary of Florence's excommunication and the day the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception had joined San Francesco Grande—Bishop Gentile Becchi of Arezzo conferred the clerical tonsure upon the young Giovanni in the Medici palace (Magi) chapel. This carefully selected date was a pointed rebuke to Pope Sixtus IV, whose policies and actions had not only sanctioned Giuliano's murder but had also antagonized Lorenzo. Through this act, Lorenzo both dedicated Giovanni to the Church and signaled his long-term ambition for his son to one day ascend to the papacy.[1] From that day forward, the child was respectfully known as "Messer Giovanni" (Sir Giovanni), a title that underscored his newly elevated status. The

[1] Daniels, The Pazzi War and Croatians in the Service of Papal Propaganda, p. 196; Roscoe, The Life and Pontificate of Leo the Tenth, Vol 1. p. 11-16

ceremony took place in the Medici's Magi Chapel at Palazzo Medici—a setting steeped in symbolism. The chapel's decor celebrated the dual epiphanies of January 6th: first, the moment when the Star of Bethlehem revealed the newborn Jesus to the Magi at His Nativity, and second, the occasion when John the Baptist heralded Jesus to the world at His Baptism. Together, these twin revelations encapsulated the full manifestation of Christ to humanity.

At the chapel's altar, Fra Filippo Lippi's circa 1459 panel, *Adoration in the Forest*, provided a powerful focal point, Figure 1. The painting portrays the infant Jesus, adored by the Virgin Mary and proclaimed by a youthful John the Baptist—depicted as a boy about the same age as Giovanni himself. In the artwork, the young John, dressed in a humble camel-skin tunic, holds a banderole inscribed "Ecce Agnus Dei" ("Behold the Lamb of God") as he points to the Christ child. This unusual portrayal of John—as a seven-year-old rather than an adult—has been widely interpreted as a deliberate foreshadowing of Jesus' Baptism, reinforcing John's role in revealing Christ, much like the guiding star had at His birth.

For the seven-year-old Giovanni de' Medici, receiving his first tonsure before this evocative image was a profoundly powerful moment of identification. His namesake, Saint John the Baptist—portrayed as a youthful herald of Christ—served as both a peer and a prophetic figure, symbolically linking Giovanni's destiny with the sacred narrative of the Epiphany. In this carefully chosen setting, the ceremony not only initiated him into ecclesiastical life but also aligned his future with that of Florence's patron saint and the broader mission of the Church. Lorenzo il Magnifico undoubtedly intended this tableau to impress upon his son a sense of divine purpose and a robust Florentine identity within the Church—a destiny as clear as the twin Epiphany 'pointings' which revealed Christ to the world.

Indeed, Lorenzo soon secured for Giovanni an unprecedented honor – in 1489, at only age 13, Giovanni was created a cardinal (in pectore) by Pope Innocent VIII, fulfilling what Lorenzo called *"the greatest honor his family had ever achieved"*. Giovanni's early elevation (the fanfare of which was delayed until he was a bit older to avoid scandal) confirmed that Lorenzos long nurtured ambition, one initiated by the murder of his own brother, had finally borne fruit: a

Medici prince of the Church, poised to carry forward the family's influence in both Florence and Rome.



Figure 1

The Medici-Orsini Alliance: Heraldic Symbols of Bear, Wolf, and Lion

Critical to understanding the Medici's symbolic program is the alliance between Florence (the Medici home city) and Rome's noble Orsini family. Lorenzo's wife, Clarice Orsini, was a member of one of the most powerful baronial families of Rome who claimed an ancient lineage. Through this marriage, the Medici bloodline gained a prestigious Roman dimension – something Lorenzo and his descendants did not hesitate to advertise in imagery. The Orsini name itself derives from *orso* ("bear"), and a bear figured among the family's emblems. With the ascent of Giovanni

Medici as Pope Leo X, the Medici deftly incorporated Orsini heraldry alongside their own. In art and pageantry of the period, the Orsini bear became a symbol of the Medici's Roman heritage, often paired with symbols of Rome and Florence. For example, contemporary commentators noted that the wordplay *"ursa – orsa – Orsini"* (Latin *ursa*, bear; Italian *orsa*, she-bear) was deliberately exploited during the Medici restoration to allude to Clarice's lineage. One striking instance came during the festivities of 1513 in Rome: Clarice Orsini was personified on stage as a celestial figure associated with the constellation Ursa Major, proclaiming, *"I have just now come down from the starry sky, from that more sublime region where the Bear (Orsa) upholds the Pole."*.[2] By linking Clarice to the northern starry Bear, the Medici propagandists elevated the Orsini "bear" to a cosmic guardian of the realm. Such imagery signaled that the Medici's Roman *maternal* heritage (the Orsini) was guiding their destiny under the heavens – a potent message as Giovanni ascended to the papacy.

If the Orsini bear represented the Medici tie to Rome's noble houses, the wolf was an ancient emblem of Rome itself. The Capitoline she-wolf, legendary nurturer of Romulus and Remus, had long symbolized the city of Rome and its founding. By Giovanni taking the 'yoke' as his personal emblem of Medici symbolism, the Roman wolf was effectively "yoked" with the Orsini bear to signify the union of city and family. Meanwhile, the emblem of Florence – the lion (Marzocco) – stood for the Florentine Republic and by extension the Medici paternal heritage. The Marzocco (a heraldic lion often depicted holding the Florentine red lily shield) was synonymous with Florentine pride and independence. Giovanni de' Medici's choice of papal name – Leo X ("Leo" meaning lion) – did not go unnoticed by contemporaries, Figure 2. It was widely observed that in taking this name, the new pope paid homage to his Florentine roots. Indeed, one could not help but see *Leo* X as a living embodiment of the Florentine Marzocco in the highest ecclesiastical office. Thus, three animals – bear, wolf, and lion – became key symbolic players in Medici-Orsini imagery, each representing a facet of Leo X's identity: the Orsini bear for his Roman familial ties,

[2] (**Appropriating the instruments of worship: the 1512 Medici restoration and the Florentine cathedral choirbooks *. - Free Online Library**)

the Roman wolf for the city he would rule as Pope, and the lion of Florence for the city of his birth and the name he assumed.



Figure 2

The 1513 Capitoline Investiture: Uniting Florence and Rome in Rome's Heart

When Giovanni de' Medici was elected Pope Leo X in March 1513, the Medici wasted no time in projecting their dual heritage on the world stage. Later that year an elaborate Capitoline Investiture ceremony was staged in Rome, ostensibly to honor Leo's younger brother Giuliano de' Medici. (Pope Leo X had showered titles and honors on his family; Giuliano was made *Capitano Generale* of the Church and later ducal titles, and this Roman ceremony conferred Roman citizenship on Giuliano and Leo's nephew Lorenzo II.) The event, held on the Capitoline Hill – the civic and symbolic heart of Rome – became a pageant of Medici-Orsini propaganda. A temporary theater was constructed on the Capitoline as the backdrop for the investiture,

designed with allegorical decorations and paintings personifying the unity of Rome and Florence. Above the paintings were various allegorical figures; on one side the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus and a figure representing the Tiber, on the other the Florentine lion with a palle (Medici ball) under one of its paws and a figure representing the Amo. According to studies, the artistic and musical elements of this Capitoline festival expressed the *"topos of Florentine-Roman unity,"* making it clear that under the new Medici pope the two cities' fates were joined.

One eyewitness report notes that *"the lion figured prominently among the iconographic elements of the ephemeral Capitoline theater, while the constellation of Ursa Major was invoked in the dramatic scene portraying Clarice Orsini in a chariot."* On the chariot, toward the front, was a pelican. Around its neck it was wearing a yoke. On the right side was a she-wolf with Romulus and Remus nursing, on the left a bear, the celestial Orsa. In the middle of the chariot was planted a beautiful laurel, an obvious reference to Giovanni and Guiliano's father, Lorenzo de Medici. For, resting against the base of this laurel, was an elegant chair, in which was seated the goddess Clarice Orsini, wife of Lorenzo and mother of the magnificent Giuliano and Pope Leo, descended from heaven and dressed in gold. Father Tiber, as Rome, was lying nearby, to the right, Amo, as Florence, to the left, both with white beards and hair.[44] Standing on the chariot, all three sang several verses. Two nymphs in Clarice's service came on foot behind the carro. And when the carro came before the magnificent Giuliano, Clarice, his mother, singing, addressed many verses to him. One of the said nymphs who followed the chariot, seeing everything to be festive and joyful, invited her companions to sing verses of this sentiment together: "Come, nymphs, inhabitants of the Tiber and inhabitants of the Arno, let us sing together, O, Tiber and Arno nymphs, let us sing together." Finally the nymphs began the sweetest of music. That the Tiber and Amo nymphs joined in song captured the essential political message of the Investiture ceremony perhaps more effectively than any other of its artistic elements, their "sweetest of music" a metaphor for the similarly harmonious political relationship and yoking of Rome with Florence, through the children of Lorenzo and Clarice Medici (Orsini).

In effect, Florence's lion and the Orsini bear were prevalent on the Capitoline stage (Figure 3), symbolically uniting Rome's own she-wolf with the Orsini bear and Florentine lion. Even today we can imagine a tableau in which the Florentine lion and Orsini bear are either paired or "yoked" together – perhaps pulling a chariot of the Church or supporting the papal insignia – thereby yoking Rome to Florence under Medici rule. The personified figure of Clarice Orsini (Leo X's mother) as the She-Bear come down from the stars was a highlight, elevating the Medici-Orsini lineage to a quasi-divine plane. Meanwhile, the heraldry of the Medici was everywhere: the family's coat of arms with its iconic red palle (balls) appeared gilded and intertwined with Pope Leo's coat of arms. One contemporary poem celebrating young Lorenzo II (Leo's nephew) praised his dual inheritance, declaring: *"As the Laurel was created from Ursine stock, so he is begotten from the Medici. One derives its name from the celestial Bear (Ursa), the other from the Phoeban art of healing."*

This verse again cleverly links the *laurel* (Lorenzo's emblem and name-pun) to the Orsini bear and the Medici name to Apollo's art (Medici meaning "doctors"). In visual form, the Capitoline ceremony likewise blended Medicean and Orsini emblems to stress that Leo X's papacy married the glory of Rome with the glory of Florence. The *theme of unity* between the two realms, first symbolized at this 1513 Investiture, would soon be reprised even more spectacularly in Florence itself.

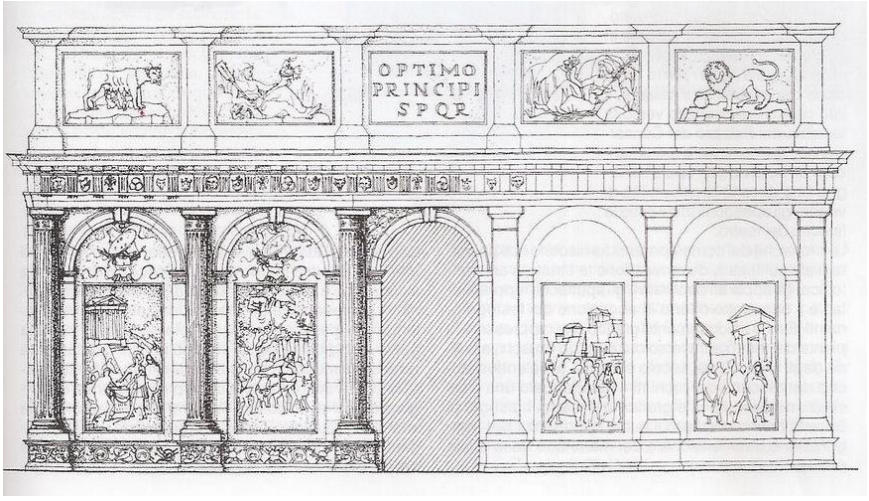


Figure 3

The Florentine Entrata of 1515: Triumph of "Two Lions and Two Johns"

In November 1515, Pope Leo X returned in triumph to his native city. Florence prepared an extravagant *Entrata* (triumphal entry) to celebrate and welcome the Medici Pope. This was not merely a civic pageant; it was a declaration of Medici hegemony restored after two decades of exile and republican rule. A contemporary chronicler, Marcello Virgilio Adriani, described how on 30 November 1515 the city was transformed by a coordinated program of arches, statues, and allegorical displays as Leo X processed from the city's gates to the cathedral. The route itself, through the center of the city, was symbolically charged, crossing over the Arno "from south-west to north-east" – a path planned to evoke a meaningful itinerary through the city. In the words of a modern historian, *"It was an encomiastic journey – centered on the exaltation of the Pope and his family, as well as on emphasizing the bond between Florence and Rome – punctuated by elaborate temporary structures… the imaginative seal of the regained Medicean hegemony over the city."*

Indeed, twelve triumphal arches and five symbolic monuments were erected along Florence's streets and piazzas, each laden with political and religious allegories celebrating Leo X and the Medici. A "schiera folta" – a teeming host – of artists and artisans (including some of the finest in Florence, such as Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Sansovino) collaborated to produce this ephemeral urban decor. The result was a festival that brilliantly fused theater, architecture, and art, temporarily remaking Florence into a stage for Medici glory

One of the most resonant inscriptions of the 1515 *Entrata* encapsulated the event's symbolism. At Piazza Santa Trinita, an elaborate stage set resembling Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome was built, complete with a faux fortress façade. On its frieze, gilded letters proclaimed that *"this city rests most felicitously under the protection of two Lions two Giovannis." According to Florentine chronicler Bartolomeo Cerretani, who recorded the Latin motto, the meaning was clear: "by the two Lions, understand the two Leos; by the two Giovannis, the heavenly Baptist and the earthly Medici".* In other words, Florence was doubly guarded by its secular lion and its spiritual John. The "two lions" referred, first, to the Marzocco – the emblematic Florentine lion that personified

the city's strength – and second, to Leo X himself, the Medicean lion on Peter's Throne. The "two Giovannis" meant St. John the Baptist, Florence's patron saint (San Giovanni, often called the "heavenly John"), and Giovanni de' Medici (Pope Leo's given name, the "earthly John")

This clever phrase simultaneously honored Florence's traditional protectors and the living Medici pope. It also harkened back to the fact that Leo X's very name (Leo = lion, and his birth name Giovanni = John) embodied Florence's symbols. Little wonder the chronicler notes that the city was "most fortunate" to repose under such guardianship. Leo X's Florentine contemporaries thus saw his ascension as a kind of dual benediction for the city: a lion pope for the *City of the Lion*, and a Pope John (by birth) for the *City of St. John*. The conscious pairing of Leo with the Florentine Marzocco and Giovanni with the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence, in the Entrata imagery, likely highlighted an association which followed Giovanni since even before receiving of his tonsure in 1483. This intimated by the other inscription above an arch with an image of his father Lorenzo, which reads "this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased" a direct reference to the words of God to Jesus during His baptism by John.

Throughout the triumphal route, Florence and Rome's union under the Medici was a recurring motif. Many tableaux featured the personified rivers Arno and Tiber, the lifeblood of Florence and Rome, as if greeting or converging with one another – a common allegory to signify the meeting of two powers. (One arch, located at the bridge over the Arno, even sported a large wooden obelisk, explicitly evoking Rome's Vatican obelisk, to announce that the Pope had crossed into the city and that "Rome" was now present in Florence.) We hear of Roman gods and Florentine personifications entwined: for example, one triumphal arch staged at the Porta San Gallo reportedly showed an image of Florence as a matron and Rome as a matron joining hands under Leo's benevolent gaze. On other arches, the Medici palle (balls) were painted alongside the Roman imperial eagle, and inscriptions in Latin hailed Leo X as *"Felix both Romanus and Florentinus"*. The decorative program was so comprehensive that even the façade of the unfinished Florence Cathedral was covered with an elaborate temporary facade for the occasion, adorned with tapestries and devices comparable to those used on St. John's Day festivities. The Medici-Orsini heraldry was likewise integrated in the displays. In one notable illuminated

choirbook (Figure 4) made to commemorate Leo's visit, an image for the Day of Epiphany shows *"two lions, a lioness, and a bear… with five golden balls"* (the Medici balls) all enclosed together.



Figure 4

From left to right

- Lioness = Alfonsina Orsini (1472-1520)--widow of Piero de' Medici (1472-1503), Leo's sister-in-law
- Lion (resting) = Lorenzo II "il Giovane" de' Medici (1492-1519)--Leo's nephew
- Lion (standing) = Lorenzo "il Magnifico" de' Medici (1449-92)--Leo's father
- Bear = Glance Orsini (1450-88)--wife of Lorenzo il Magnifico, Leo's mother

The further reference to the two Giovannis, embodied in Pope Leo X, is also carried out visually by the iconography on this same choirbook page. The illuminated initial H marking the beginning of the Epiphany chant text encloses a scene of the Baptism of Christ. On the left is a small gathering of spectators among which, standing behind some angels, is Giovanni de' Medici portrayed as Leo X. The presence of both Giovanni de' Medici and John the Baptist within the confines of this initial probably would have resonated with special meaning in the eyes of contemporary viewers. Like Leo's entrata itself, aimed at underscoring the unity between Rome and Florence, this chant book page, too, is rich with signifiers of the special relationship between the two cities: the Roman Orsini and the Florentine Medici, the Roman lion (Leo X) and the Florentine lion (the marzocco)

In short, the whole Medici clan – past and present – along with the two Giovanni's was heraldically present in the Entrata's art and music: Florence, Rome, Medici, and Orsini joined under Leo X's aegis. One particularly poignant element of the Entrata was the homage paid to Lorenzo il Magnifico, Leo X's late father and orchestrator of Giovanni's ascension to the papal chair. At San Felice in Florence, along the procession route, the organizers erected a 'likeness' (either a painting or statue of Lorenzo with an accompanying inscription drawn from the Gospels. It read: *"Hic est filius meus dilectus, in quo mihi bene com" is Latin for "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." According to contemporary accounts, when Pope Leo came upon this image of his father and read the inscription he was moved to tears. The allusion was powerful: these words are those of God the Father at the Baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:17), now applied to Lorenzo addressing Giovanni. The implication was that Lorenzo, looking down from heaven, rejoiced in his son the Pope, just as the Eternal Father did in His Son at the Jordan. This clever biblical appropriation simultaneously canonized Lorenzo's memory and divinized Leo's authority. It suggested that Leo X's rise was part of a providential plan – that he truly was the *"beloved son"* not only of Lorenzo, but by extension of God's favor. The *Entrata* arch's inscription thus tied directly into the Medici's Epiphany/Baptism imagery (which we will discuss next), making Leo X's homecoming a kind of *epiphany* of Medici destiny. Such theatrical and religious symbolism hammered home the message that *Medici rule was blessed by both human lineage and divine sanction*. As historian Ilaria Tacconi notes, Florence in 1515 was believed to

stand under the protective gaze of "two lions and two Johns," and the entire city was adorned to emphasize that happy guardianship. The triumphal entry was, in essence, a grand public relations display presenting Leo X's papacy as the triumphant fulfillment and unification of both Florence's civic spirit and Rome's sacred mission.

Epiphany Imagery: The Magi Procession and the Medici's Magi Chapel

The Medici did not invent the use of sacred symbolism to legitimize power – they perfected it. From the 1430s onward, the Medici were closely associated with Florence's popular Epiphany celebrations (the feast of the Magi and Baptism of Christ, each January 6th). This feast commemorated the manifestation (*epiphaneia*) of Christ to the gentiles – traditionally through the visit of the Three Magi (Wise Men) to the infant Jesus, and in a broader spiritual sense through events like Christ's Baptism. In Florence, a lay confraternity known as the Compagnia de' Magi (Company of the Magi) had for decades staged a lavish procession through the city on Epiphany. Historical records tell us that this Epiphany pageant would often begin at the Baptistery of San Giovanni and conclude at the Church of San Marco, which by the late 1430s became an Observant Dominican monastery associated almost exclusively with the Medici. During the journey, participants dressed as the Magi and their retinues – sometimes numbering in the hundreds – traveled from site to site, with stops for prayers and theatrical tableaux. The procession typically culminated in a reenactment of the Adoration of the Christ Child, often with a Nativity crèche or tableau vivant awaiting the Magi at San Marco. Notably, the observance on January 6th also highlighted the Baptism of Christ, since in religious terms both the Adoration of the Magi and the Baptism in the Jordan are "epiphanies" of Jesus's divine identity to the world. The Dominican friars of San Marco, and later Savonarola in the 1490s, preached often about these dual revelations. For the Medici, who had made San Marco a center of their piety (Cosimo de' Medici funded the complete rebuilding and decorations of the convent and maintained a personal cell there for meditation), the Epiphany procession became an opportunity to fuse civic, religious, and personal family symbolism.

It is in this context that Cosimo (Lorenzo's grandfather) built the first of its kind, private, *Chapel of the Magi* inside Palazzo Medici, around 1459. This small luxuriant chapel was nothing less than the Medici's *own miniature Epiphany pageant, frozen in art*. The walls were covered in Benozzo Gozzoli's sumptuous frescos of the Procession of the Magi, depicting the Three Wise Men and their lavish train of Medici retinue winding through a Tuscan landscape teeming with courtiers, animals, and exotic detail. Gozzoli famously included portraits of the Medici themselves (Cosimo, his son Piero, and his idealized grandson Lorenzo as a boy) and their allies among the retinue of the Magi. In this visual pageant, the youngest Medici appears as a *wise king* leading the faithful on their journey to witness the Christ child being pointed out by the youthful John the Baptist painted by Lippi at the altar (Figure 1). As scholar Dale Kent observes, the cult of the Magi provided the Medici with "a perfect metaphor for the spiritual journey of the wealthy and powerful toward true devotion – the submission of the kings of the earth to the supreme authority of the Word of God, incarnate in His Son." In other words, the Magi theme allowed the Medici to cast themselves as pious rulers who, despite their earthly power, humbled themselves in worship of Christ. This was a highly useful narrative for a family often criticized for their political dominance – it suggested that the legitimacy of their 'reign' was justified by faith and reverence, not merely ambition. The Medici's divine right to rule was thus implied: like the biblical Magi who were guided by a star to kneel before the true King, the Medici claimed to be guided by the Baptist, i.e. Florentine principles, to bear witness of and to Christ's glory.

Even more telling is the chapel's altarpiece, Filippo Lippi's *Adoration in the Forest* (also called *Mystical Nativity*). Unlike a standard Adoration of the Magi, Lippi's scene is set in a tiny clearing in a wild forest and does not show the Magi at all. Instead, the composition centers on the Virgin adoring the newborn Jesus on the ground, who is being anointed with the dove of the holy Spirit being sent down through the split open heavens to reveal the starry realm of God's light, a clear allusion not only to the Star of Bethlehem, but also the Baptism of Jesus, for to one side stands the young John the Baptist pointing the 'Magi' (observer) toward the infant Christ in place of the Star of Bethlehem. This young John, donned in his traditional camel-skin and red garment, carries a small cross staff and unfurls a scroll reading "Ecce Agnus Dei," or Behold the Lamb of God, the words recited by the priest as his reveals the Eucharistic Body of Christ at Mass, while a

stream of running water, emulating the Jordan, mirrors him on the other side of the painting. Above, the heavenly Father sends forth the illuminated Dove of the Holy Spirit, completing the Trinitarian presence. This imagery brilliantly fuses the two Epiphany themes: it is at once a Nativity (the moment of Adoration of the Child by the Magi) *and* a prefiguration of the Baptism (John the Baptist bearing witness to Christ, as he would about thirty years later on the banks of the Jordan). The painting, in effect, collapses time to present John the Baptist as a child prophet attending the Nativity, prompting the observer to immediately consider that the painting is not to be read 'literally'. Given that St. John was only about six months older than Jesus, the scene is entirely ahistorical – it's a kind of "what if"….

For the Medici, the resonance was profound. Their palace chapel offered an intimate Epiphany: *worshippers entering the chapel became figurative Magi along with the Medici*, joining the painted procession on the walls, and then approaching the altar they beheld the miracle of Christ's appearance with John the Baptist testifying to Him. This was a private mirroring of the public Epiphany pageant that began at the Baptistery, then down the street in front of the Medici's palace, to arrive at San Marco (site of the Nativity display). In the palace chapel, one could mentally visualize what was taking place in the streets – the entire journey of revelation was encapsulated in one space, sanctified for the Medici family's use.

The Medici's appropriation of Epiphany imagery thus reinforced several messages at once. First, by identifying themselves with the Magi, the Medici emphasized their role as worldly rulers who recognize a higher, divine authority – implying their rule was in harmony with Christian values. (Contemporaries sometimes likened the Medici to the "Three Kings" bringing gifts to Florence's Savior; lavish gifts were actually distributed to the populace during the Magi festivals, courtesy of Medici patronage.) Second, by highlighting a 7 years old John the Baptist, the Medici associated their legacy (progeny) in Florence with its patron saint which has just reached the 'age of accountability'. Certainly by the 1480s, the presence of John in Lippi's altarpiece would be read as a symbol of the young Giovanni de' Medici (the future Leo X) himself – a child of Florence destined to serve Christ. It is intriguing to think that the seven-year-old Giovanni, standing in that chapel in 1483 with his head freshly shorn for the tonsure, saw in the altarpiece

a reflection of his own calling: like the child John in the painting, he too was a *"precursor"* of Christ in the world, charged not only with pointing others toward God, but God's Florence. Giovanni's lifelong devotion to St. John the Baptist (whose name he bore) and to the Church was likely nurtured by such symbolic moments orchestrated by his family. Finally, the combination of Magi and Baptist imagery strengthened the Medici's association with Christ's life and revelation. It insinuated that the Medici were present at, and participants in, the foundational events of Christian revelation – metaphorically, of course, but in the eyes of Renaissance spectators, metaphors in art and ritual carried great weight in legitimizing power. Just as the voice of God at the Jordan announced, *"This is my beloved son"* (an utterance the Entrata pointedly applied to Lorenzo and Leo), so the *Epiphany* celebrations, both public and private, cast the Medici in the roles of those whom God chooses to reveal His will. The Medici Magi Chapel was in essence a shrine to the idea that the Medici family had a divinely sanctioned mission, paralleling the journey of the Magi to honor Christ and the mission of John the Baptist to prepare His way.

Conclusion: Medici Destiny Fulfilled—Florence and Rome United

The rise of Leo X as the first Medici pope was not merely a political triumph; it was the culmination of a meticulously cultivated narrative that fused religious, civic, and dynastic symbolism. Lorenzo de' Medici's long-held vision—initiated in response to the Pazzi Conspiracy and nurtured through Giovanni's ecclesiastical ascent—was ultimately realized in 1513, when the Medici secured both the papacy and the unity of Florence and Rome under their rule.

The Medici-Orsini alliance provided a powerful framework for this unity, as seen in the heraldic fusion of the Florentine lion, the Roman wolf, and the Orsini bear—symbols that were woven into the pageantry of Leo X's papal celebrations. From the 1513 Capitoline Investiture to the extravagant Entrata of 1515, every artistic and theatrical display reinforced the idea that the Medici's dominion was divinely sanctioned. The imagery of rivers—Arno and Tiber—flowing together, the celestial Ursa Major guiding the Medici-Orsini legacy, and the lion of Leo X

embodying both Florentine and Roman strength all spoke to a carefully orchestrated vision of Medici supremacy.

At the heart of this symbolic program lay a deeply ingrained association with Epiphany imagery, particularly through the Medici's long-standing patronage of the Magi and John the Baptist. The Magi Chapel at Palazzo Medici, decorated with Gozzoli's Procession of the Magi and Lippi's Adoration in the Forest, served as both a private shrine to the Medici's divine mission and a reflection of Florence's public Epiphany pageants. The placement of a youthful John the Baptist—pointing toward Christ—mirrored Giovanni de' Medici's own path, linking his destiny to Florence's patron saint and foreshadowing his role as Leo X.

By the time Pope Leo X triumphantly returned to Florence in 1515, the city had been transformed into a stage celebrating the fusion of Medici and papal authority. The inscription "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased," placed before an image of Lorenzo de' Medici, moved the Pope to tears—a poignant moment that encapsulated the Medici's self-mythology. Just as John the Baptist revealed Christ to the world, the Medici positioned themselves as the heralds of divine will, shaping both Florence's civic identity and Rome's spiritual destiny.

Thus, Leo X's papacy was more than the realization of Lorenzo's dream; it was the fulfillment of a grander Medici vision—one that united Florence and Rome under a single, sacred lineage, legitimized by heraldry, spectacle, and deeply entrenched religious symbolism. The Medici had not only ascended to the highest echelons of power but had enshrined their legacy within the very fabric of the Church, ensuring that their name would forever be intertwined with both the sacred and the eternal.

Sources

Contemporary chronicles and festival descriptions as analyzed by Tacconi, Shearman, Cummings, and others (e.g. Cerretani and Nerli in Ciseri's documents) provide detailed evidence of these symbolic programs. Tacconi's study of the 1515 choirbook imagery decodes the Medici-Orsini heraldry in the Entrata, while Dale Kent and Rab Hatfield elucidate the Medici's longstanding involvement in Epiphany rituals.

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