



The Apocalypsis Nova and Leonardo

HOW A 16TH-CENTURY PSEUDEPIGRAPHICAL WORK DID NOT INSPIRE LEONARDO DA VINCI'S *VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS*

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Abstract

A brief analysis of historical, textual, theological, and iconographic evidence demonstrates that the writing known as the *Apocalypsis Nova* is fundamentally a pseudepigraphical forgery, deliberately composed around 1502 and therefore not a direct inspiration for Leoanrdo's Vigin of the Rocks. Rather than originating from an authentic visionary core attributed to Blessed Amadeus (d. 1482), the document is believed to be the sophisticated creation of Cardinal Bernardino López de Carvajal's intellectual circle, particularly Giorgio Benigno Salviati (Juraj Dragišić) and Cardinal Domenico Grimani. Their strategic backdating of purported revelations to Lent and Easter of 1482, coinciding with Carvajal's documented arrival in Rome and Amadeo's departure for Milan (where he died), provided a plausible historical backdrop designed to bolster Carvajal's papal ambitions.

Despite ongoing scholarly debate, the majority position now rightly supports the full pseudepigraphy of the *Apocalypsis*, rejecting the minority's assumption of an authentic "Amadean core," which lacks both internal textual support and external historical corroboration. Notably, the earliest surviving manuscript evidence from 1516, coupled with precise retrospective historical references, extensive theological erudition, and overt rhetorical sophistication, further confirms authorship within Carvajal's early 16th-century circle.

Claims suggesting Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* (ca. 1483–85) was influenced by the *Apocalypsis*—or by alleged sermons from Amadeo nearly two decades prior—are both historically and logically unsound. Such claims require acceptance of improbable assumptions about mystical encounters and deliberate encouragement of heretical iconography by the very confraternity that explicitly provided Leonardo different contractual instructions. Instead, Leonardo's intentional iconographic deviations from the confraternity's explicit directives are best understood as deliberate political and 'orthodox' theological statements aligned with Lorenzo de' Medici's anti-Sixtine stance, represented notably by Vincenzo Bandello, the Prior of San Marco during Leonardo's departure for Milan.

Leonardo's careful grouping of figures in the *Virgin of the Rocks* explicitly asserts a Dominican-sanctioned view of Mary's "sanctification" in the womb, rather than the Franciscan-endorsed doctrine of her eternal Immaculate Conception. This explains the confraternity's subsequent rejection of the painting, recognizing the theological and political subversion it entailed. Thus, rather than deriving from the *Apocalypsis Nova*, Leonardo's composition independently relied on established Florentine iconographic traditions, as exemplified by Mino da Fiesole's *Visitation* sculpture (ca. 1467) and orthodox Dominican arguments against Mary's Immaculate Conception.

Introduction

I recently became quite interested in the *Apocalypsis Nova*, a text traditionally attributed to Blessed Amadeus of Portugal (João de Menezes da Silva, 1420–1482), which has significantly influenced theological and ecclesiastical discourse. Like most scholars, I agree that the multiple post-1502 interpolations—particularly those referencing Pope Leo X and subsequent historical events—significantly complicate our understanding of the document's authenticity. However, rather than accepting the widely held view that the *Apocalypsis Nova* originated as a genuine 15th-century "Amadean core" text that was subsequently subjected to later interpolations, my working hypothesis (building on the studies of others) is that the *Apocalypsis Nova* itself is fundamentally pseudepigraphic, deliberately composed around 1502.

Anna Morisi-Guerra's detailed study is particularly illuminating in this context. She emphasizes the striking omission of any mention of the *Apocalypsis Nova*—or of the prophesied advent of the Angelic Pastor—in early Amadeite traditions. Notably, neither the Amadeites nor even Amadeo's closest biographer (who presumably would have known about such a significant visionary experience) ever refer to or acknowledge the existence of this text before the early 16th century. This crucial omission strongly indicates the later pseudepigraphical origin of the *Apocalypsis*.

The Author

An examination of the various strands of evidence—including manuscript chronology, precise historical references, explicit theological advocacy, symbolic critiques, rhetorical sophistication, and extensive editorial revisions—strongly suggests the pseudepigraphical nature of the *Apocalypsis Nova*. The text clearly appears as a sophisticated blend of historical commentary, theological propaganda, and Cardinal Bernardino López de Carvajal's personal ambition for the papal throne. This ambition, ultimately unrealized, was skillfully articulated through the literary talent of Giorgio Benigno Salviati (Juraj Dragišić). Consequently, I am persuaded that the *Apocalypsis Nova* was deliberately composed around 1502 as a politically and theologically motivated pseudepigraphical enterprise orchestrated by Carvajal and his close associates, notably Salviati and Cardinal Domenico Grimani.

To lend credibility to the pseudepigraphic fiction, Carvajal and Salviati strategically backdated the text, placing its purported revelations in Lent and Easter of 1482—precisely the period during which Amadeo da Silva reportedly last served as Pope Sixtus IV's confessor in Rome before leaving for Milan. Notably, this timeframe of 1482 coincides exactly with the first documented 'sermon' delivered by the young Carvajal in Rome.[1] This allowed them to plausibly suggest that Amadeo had already encountered Carvajal, the prophesied "Angelic Pastor who currently resides in Rome." Furthermore, this timing immediately precedes the canonization of Bonaventure (April 14, 1482), an event explicitly described in the *Apocalypsis Nova* as "imminent.", lending even more credibility to the prophetic claims of the *Apocalypsis*. By situating these entirely fictional revelations shortly before Amadeo departed Rome for Milan, where he died in August of the same year, Carvajal and Salviati crafted a compelling pseudepigraphical narrative intended to bolster Carvajal's claim to divine legitimacy and thus advance his ambitions for the papacy.[2]

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[1] The prophetic narrative explicitly reveals to Amadeo the future pontiff's identity, stating clearly: "He is already in Rome, very young, very poor, unknown. But the Lord knows him, and little by little He will exalt and strengthen him, and in him, when he is older, He will demonstrate the value of His power, which knows how to raise from the earth the indigent"

[2] Morisi-Guerra (1995). The Apocalypsis Nova: A Plan for Reform". In Marjorie Reeves (ed.). *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period*. Clarendon Press. p. 30-31

Further textual and historical evidence supports this pseudepigraphical origin. Domingos Lucas Dias, Arnaldo do Espírito Santo, and Sebastião Tavares de Pinho's critical edition (*Beato Amadeu: Nova Apocalipse*) identifies the earliest surviving manuscript as dating from 1516, preserved in the Biblioteca Trivulziana in Milan. Emerging thirty-four years after Amadeus's death, this manuscript evidence, along with the complete absence of earlier textual references or citations, reinforces the pseudepigraphical nature of the work.

Indirect historical evidence strongly indicates that the *Apocalypsis Nova* first emerged around 1502 within Cardinal Carvajal's influential intellectual circle. Morisi-Guerra's study explicitly associates its authorship with Carvajal and his close collaborators—particularly Giorgio Benigno Salviati, a prominent Scotist theologian, and Cardinal Domenico Grimani, known for his active promotion of prophetic literature and church reform initiatives. Carvajal's subsequent deep involvement in ecclesiastical reform movements, especially the Council of Pisa (1511), further supports this association. Morisi-Guerra further identifies a decisive argument against authentic 15th-century authorship: the earliest biography of Blessed Amadeus completely omits any reference or even subtle allusion to the existence of the *Apocalypsis Nova*, firmly positioning its composition decades after Amadeus's lifetime.[3]

The Prophecies

The internal textual evidence likewise strongly supports pseudepigraphical authorship. The *Apocalypsis Nova* contains strikingly precise prophetic references to historical events occurring between 1482 and 1502. It explicitly describes Pope Sixtus IV ambiguously as "the current shepherd… author of many good and bad actions," highlighting Sixtus's promotion of the Scotist doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as his primary virtue. Yet, it critiques Sixtus's politically turbulent and warlike tendencies. Pope Innocent VIII is accurately depicted as passive and indifferent, described as "neither warm in good nor cold in evil," in alignment with historical consensus.

[3] Ibid, p. 44

However, the text reserves its harshest critique for Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia), symbolically labeled as "the corrupt cow or bull who is neither ox nor bull." Alexander is explicitly condemned for simony and corruption, as evidenced by the vivid biblical accusation: "he will set up in the Temple of God buyers and sellers and money-changers' tables." Alexander's heraldry, prominently featuring a bull, allowed Carvajal potent symbolic imagery to directly underscore Alexander's corruption and moral illegitimacy.

Further demonstrating retrospective knowledge, Carvajal intricately describes contemporary political events, notably Ludovico Sforza's ill-fated invitation to Charles VIII ("King of Lilies") to invade Italy. The *Apocalypsis Nova* prophetically states that "the house of the new viscounts will fall and will not recover," vividly portraying Charles VIII's invasion, rapid advance, betrayal by Ludovico, and subsequent humiliating retreat from Italy. The text also accurately describes the political turmoil in Florence after the 1494 expulsion of the Medici and the subsequent rise of Savonarola, reflecting the deep familiarity of its author with recent historical developments.

The Theology

Theologically, the *Apocalypsis Nova* explicitly supports Scotist theology on the Immaculate Conception against Dominican Thomist arguments. Extensive citations from Augustine, Bernard, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, Jerome, and pseudo-Dionysius reveal scholarly fluency far exceeding the known theological capabilities of Amadeus. Morisi-Guerra further highlights the rhetorical device of humility employed throughout, portraying Amadeus as humble, ignorant, and entirely reliant upon divine illumination—a typical trope of pseudepigraphic literature to lend an aura of authenticity. She also identifies substantial editorial revisions and interpolations within the text, reinforcing its consciously pseudepigraphical nature.

Although Catteneo, Vosoli, and Morisi-Guerra strongly suggest that the *Apocalypsis Nova* is partially or wholly pseudepigraphical by the hand of Salviati, scholarly opinion remains divided.[4]

[4] Cattaneo, G. (2018). Salviati, Giorgio Benigno. In: Sgarbi, M. (eds) Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy. Springer, Cham.; Morisi-Guerra (1995). The Apocalypsis Nova: A Plan for Reform". In Marjorie Reeves (ed.). *Prophetic Rome in the High*

A minority maintains belief in an authentic 15th-century "Amadean core," based loosely on Amadeo's sermons, which they assert was later reworked and interpolated. In contrast, the growing majority supports a wholly pseudepigraphical 16th-century composition by a learned theologian deeply informed by Scotist theology. The persistence of the minority's "Amadean core" hypothesis appears unsupported by substantial internal or external evidence, resting instead upon the fading embers of longstanding "received wisdom."

Leonardo and The Apocalypsis Nova

Recently, however, these embers have been fanned by followers of Marani who suggest that Amadeo's preaching—as supposedly recorded in the *Apocalypsis Nova*—directly influenced Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* (ca. 1483–85).[5] Such proposals, implicitly acknowledging the anachronistic impossibility of Leonardo having directly encountered the 16th century text, unnecessarily complicate the issue, appearing as desperate attempts to conveniently explain Leonardo's enigmatic imagery. This desperation has even led certain scholars to claim that Leonardo himself endorsed not only the highly controversial (and borderline heretical) doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, widely debated throughout Christendom, but also the unprecedented and explicitly heretical notion of an equivalent Immaculate Conception for John the Baptist.

However, careful reading reveals something quite different. Within the *Apocalypsis Nova* itself—while subtly reformulating Scotus' nuanced positions on Original Justice and Original Sin—the author repeatedly and explicitly affirms that, concerning Original Sin, Mary alone was preserved as truly 'immaculate,' eternally exempt from sin in the divine mind. A few other Christians, including John the Baptist, are depicted as fundamentally distinct: initially tainted by Original

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Renaissance Period. Clarendon Press. p. 45-47; Vasoli, C. (1992). "Giorgio Benigno Salviati (Dragišić)". In Marjorie Reeves (ed.). *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period*. Clarendon Press. pp. 121–156;

[5] Marani, P. C., L. (2000). Leonardo Da Vinci--the Complete Paintings. United States: Abrams. P. 138-9; De Mambro Santos R. Shades of Grace: The *Virgin of the Rocks* and Leonardo da Vinci's Notes on *Paragone*. *Religions*. 2021; Picta sine fabula I : a study of Leonardo's Virgin of the rocks and the Amadeite line of interpretation / De Mambro Santos, Ricardo in "Bruniana e campanelliana : ricerche filosofiche e materiali storico-testuali : XXVI, 2, 2020, Pisa : Fabrizio Serra, 2020 , 1724-0441 - Casalini id: 4843708" - 347-369 p; Picta sine fabula III : A Study of Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks and the Amadeite Line of Interpretation / De Mambro Santos, Ricardo in "Bruniana e campanelliana : ricerche filosofiche e materiali storico-testuali : XXIX, 1, 2023, Pisa : Fabrizio Serra, 2023 , 1724-0441 - Casalini id: 5612458" - 195-208

Sin, insofar as Original Justice is concerned, but subsequently cleansed on it at conception. In a somewhat innovative theological move, the author presents a layered conception of sanctification and redemption: some Christians (including John) were sanctified by God in the divine mind even before or at their carnal conception (though crucially, not from eternity like Mary), while others were sanctified after conception but before birth, and still others only after birth, through baptism. Yet, Mary occupies an entirely separate theological category. She is depicted as never being subject to Original Sin—not even conceptually—and therefore never truly needing to be cleansed or sanctified. Nevertheless, through the paradoxical logic of the Merits of Christ, she is still "redemptively preserved" from sin, leading to the seemingly oxymoronic and philosophically irrational notion of "redemptive preservation," a concept vigorously critiqued by Dominicans and their primary voice, Vincenzo Bandello, as the prime weakness of Scotist theology.

Therefore, it is apparent that the author of the *Apocalypsis Nova* borrows the formulation of John of Bassolis (d. 1347) and strategically retrogresses Mary's unique "redemptive preservation" from its previously temporal realm—concomitant with her carnal conception—into the eternal realm of God's mind, situating her immaculate soul entirely outside time and intimately linking it to the primacy of Christ's predestination. Simultaneously, and quite innovatively, the author relocates John the Baptist's traditionally womb-bound sanctification backward into the position previously occupied by Mary—making it concomitant with his carnal conception. This theological maneuver ingeniously neutralizes one of Bandello's primary objections to Mary's Immaculate Conception—namely, his frequent invocation of authoritative theological sources, particularly the ubiquitously revered 'Marian Doctor', St. Bernard. These authorities, as quoted by Bandello, often appeal to Mary's similarity to John the Baptist in her conception, and therefore subsequent sanctification in the womb.[6]

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[6] In February 1481, just before becoming Prior of San Marco in Florence, Vincenzo Bandello published his 'infamous' treatise, *Tractatus de singulari puritate et praerogativa conceptionis Salvatoris nostri Jesu Christi*, significantly intensifying the already heated dispute between Dominicans and Franciscans over the controversial doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Twenty years later, in 1501, only a year before the 'opening' of the Apocalypsis Nova by Carvjal and Salviati's, Bandello would be elected to the Dominican Order's highest office, that of Superior General. Bandello's 1481 text not only sharply challenged Pope Sixtus IV's recent approval of the new Office celebrating Mary's Immaculate Conception, but also marshaled over two hundred historical

authorities opposed to Mary's supposed immaculate status, systematically rebutting numerous Scotist arguments that affirmed her singular privilege. In 1482, and then more directly in 1483, Pope Sixtus IV formally condemned the book in his bull *Grave Nimis I and II*, banning its circulation and threatening possessors with excommunication—a decisive action coinciding with Bandello's tenure as Prior of the Medici-supported Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence. Bandello prominently relied upon the widely recognized argument, first articulated by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, comparing Mary's sanctity to that of John the Baptist and Jeremiah, who, although conceived with Original Sin, were traditionally understood to have been sanctified—cleansed from original sin—in their mothers' wombs prior to their births. Following are some citations from Bandello's treatise which bring to mind that the maculist's objection to Mary's Immaculate Conception was intimately tied to her comparison with John the Baptist: p. 207: Bernard states:... "I have learned from and within the Church that the Virgin's birth unquestionably holds a festive and holy character. Therefore, holding firmly with the Church, I believe that she received sanctity in the womb, so that she would come forth holy. Indeed, I read about Jeremiah that he was sanctified before he came forth from the womb. Likewise, I similarly believe regarding John the Baptist, who even sensed and rejoiced in the Lord while in the womb. Therefore, that which was granted to only a few mortals must undoubtedly not be denied to such a great Virgin."

p. 47: Also in in his sermon of John the Baptist, Bernard states: "Since all human beings, except Christ, are conceived in iniquity, we read of no mortal being sanctified within the mother's womb except Jeremiah and John the Baptist. Although, regarding the singular Virgin, there is no ambiguity: for she herself, while enclosed within her mother's womb, was cleansed by a higher grace of sanctification, so that she was not only washed of sin and filled with the Holy Spirit, but it is also believed that she subsequently conceived her Son by the Holy Spirit. Thus, you see by what SINGULAR PREROGATIVE and exceptional privilege He [Jesus], who is 'beautiful above the sons of men,' was set apart from others in conception. For all others were conceived in sin and from sin; but He was conceived from the Holy Spirit and in the Holy Spirit."

p. 50: Blessed Honorius, in his Sermon on the Assumption, states: "The stain of Original Sin, which the soul contracts through union with flesh propagated by seminal generation, was cleansed from certain individuals by special privilege while still in their mothers' wombs, before birth—such as Jeremiah, John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin—although concerning her it is not explicitly stated." He states the same in the Sermon on John the Baptist and in the sermon for Passion Sunday."

p. 52: The same is held by Master Hugh, Bishop of Ferrara, commenting on the chapter "Firmissimè," De consecratione, distinction 4, where he says: "There are two kinds of birth: namely, birth in the womb and birth outside of the womb. To be born in the womb means the infusion of the soul into the body; to be born out of the womb means to come forth into the light. Therefore, the Blessed Mary, John the Baptist, and Jeremiah were born in the womb with original sin. Thus, the Conception of Blessed Mary should not be celebrated, since she was conceived in sin. However, subsequently, original sin was remitted from her, and she was sanctified in the womb; thus her Nativity is rightly celebrated."

p. 53: Master Guido, Archdeacon of Bologna, in his Rosary commenting upon the Chapter "Firmissimè" (De Consecratione, Distinction 4), similarly states: "There are two nativities: one in the womb, when the soul is infused; the other, from the womb, when one is born into the world. However, the Blessed Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and Jeremiah were conceived in the womb with Original Sin." And this is the meaning intended by the text at the beginning of the Chapter, saying: "Every human being is conceived with Original Sin." Thus, the Feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary should not be celebrated, but her Nativity should be well celebrated, as should John the Baptist's, because they were sanctified in the womb, and Original Sin was remitted to them."

p. 63: The same is held by Master Robert, Bishop of Milan, renowned Doctor, in the second book of his Summa, thus stating: "The Blessed Virgin Mary and John the Baptist were conceived in Original Sin, but were later sanctified by Grace. " The same is held by Master Pictanus in his Summa, thus stating: "We say as Gregory states, that all human beings derived from Adam through lustful generation contract Original Sin. But the Son of the Virgin, who was conceived without lustful generation, remained free from Original Sin. However, the Holy Spirit, coming upon the Virgin, cleansed her from the inclination toward sin (fomes peccati)." The same position is held by Master William, Bishop of the Church of San Miniato, Doctor of Law and exceptionally learned in Sacred Doctrine, who, in the Rationale Divinorum Officiorum, Part VII, Chapter "On the Purification of the Blessed Virgin," says thus: "Some celebrate the Feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin, arguing that just as the death of Saints is celebrated—not because of death itself but because they have entered into eternal marriage—similarly, the Feast of the Virgin's Conception could be celebrated: not because she was conceived (for she was conceived in sin), but because once conceived, she became the Mother of the Lord. They claim this was revealed to a certain Abbot suffering shipwreck, but this

In this way, the Scotist author of the *Apocalypsis* positions the argument so that if anybody compares Mary's conception to John the Baptist's, they will be unwittingly endorsing Mary's immaculate conception—for, as Gabriel supposedly revealed to Amadeo, John himself was immaculate in his conception. Thus, if Mary is truly "like John" in her conception, as the Dominicans insist, then Mary must similarly be immaculately conceived. The essential difference highlighted by the Scotist author is that Mary was always immaculate, eternally unstained, whereas John, as a child of Adam, was sanctified and made clean 'in' his carnal conception. Thus, if the Dominicans assert that Mary's conception resembles John's, the Amadean Scotists can reply: "Indeed, you are correct—Gabriel himself revealed to Amadeo that John, too, experienced a conception which is, technically, immaculate."

Hence, according to the *Apocalypsis Nova's* author, Mary's purity is eternally timeless, predestined, and qualitatively distinct, as she was never stained by Original Sin in any way and thus required no cleansing or sanctification whatsoever. Meanwhile, John's sanctification—although elevated dramatically—is strictly temporal, positioning him still fundamentally as a child of Adam, a sinner requiring cleansing, and thus theologically subordinate to Mary in absolute purity, despite their apparent similarity in terms of immaculate conception. Moreover, it is critical to note that although the *Apocalypsis Nova* explicitly presents John as having been cleansed of Original Sin at the exact moment of his carnal conception, thereby rendering his

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revelation is not authentic. Thus, the aforementioned feast should not be approved, for she was conceived in Original Sin. However, though she was conceived in Original Sin, this sin was remitted when she was sanctified in the womb; similarly Jeremiah and John the Baptist were sanctified, and thus the Church rightly celebrates both her Nativity and that of John the Baptist."

p. 135: Therefore, if anyone were to say that John the Baptist or the Apostles did not have Original Sin, he would be a heretic: for he would be contradicting these councils, which exempt no one from Original Sin except Christ. Likewise, those who claim that the Blessed Virgin had no Original Sin contradict these Councils.

p. 149: Even if Mary is considered a prophetess, it does not follow logically that she must surpass John the Baptist in every type of dignity, particularly prophetic dignity narrowly defined. Or even if she were indeed considered superior to John, it does not necessarily follow that she was conceived without Original Sin—merely that she surpassed him in some specific respect of dignity."

p. 184: It is held that the Blessed Virgin was conceived in Original Sin: yet she was still prepared in a singular manner, because her sanctification surpassed all other sanctifications. First, in terms of speed, because it occurred very quickly after animation (ensoulment): whereas the sanctification of John the Baptist happened in the sixth month, and of Jeremiah shortly before he exited the womb.

conception technically "immaculate," it deliberately avoids using that term for him. Indeed, the text unequivocally states that all children of Adam, including John, were at one point "enemies" of God, reserving the unique distinction of complete and perpetual sinlessness exclusively for Mary.[7]

Thus, arguments suggesting that Leonardo's painting was influenced by this novel (and heretical) theological proposition—one lacking any demonstrable existence prior to 1502—appear forced and unpersuasive. As I will demonstrate thoroughly in my forthcoming paper, it seems far more plausible that Leonardo's painting, which by 1502 was already widely known, controversial, frequently copied, and undoubtedly familiar to participants in contemporary Thomist-Scotist debates on the Immaculate Conception, independently drew upon established iconographic traditions involving the *type foetus* motif associated with John the Baptist's sanctification in the womb—traditions similarly informing the Visitation scene in the *Apocalypsis Nova*. Indeed, it appears even more likely that the author of the *Apocalypsis Nova* was directly inspired by Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, rather than vice versa, particularly since Leonardo's composition represents a hybrid Visitation-Adoration scene. Given the pseudepigraphical author's evident erudition and deep familiarity with hagiographic literature, philosophy, theology, and particularly the Church of San Francesco Grande, it seems entirely plausible that he explicitly envisioned Leonardo's celebrated painting while composing his Visitation narrative—especially considering that Leonardo clearly adapted the well-established *type foetus* Visitation motif previously depicted by Mino da Fiesole in his sculptural program for Salutati's Chapel (ca. 1467) in Fiesole Cathedral, which notably includes a prominently pointing figure (Figure 1).

[7] See Appendix I and list of quotes from the Apocalypsis Nova.



Figure 1

The subtle yet significant detail—that John the Baptist is depicted in the *Apocalypsis Nova* kneeling on two knees, rather than genuflecting on one as portrayed by Leonardo in his *Virgin of the Rocks* and earlier by Mino da Fiesole in his sculpture—casts considerable doubt on claims suggesting Leonardo's thematic inspiration originated from directives provided by the confraternity, which were supposedly based on fragmentary sermons or visionary accounts attributed to Amadeo da Silva. Though seemingly minor at first glance, this discrepancy takes on meaningful importance when viewed within the broader theological and political contexts of the 1470s and 80s.

Indeed, if Leonardo da Vinci's thematic inspiration for the *Virgin of the Rocks* truly originated from a visionary sermon or mystical directive purportedly given to Amadeo da Silva in 1482—approximately twenty years before the documented appearance of the *Apocalypsis Nova*—we are faced with a series of deeply problematic and historically improbable assumptions. Foremost among these is the extraordinary claim, supposedly advanced by hermit-like Amadeo himself, that he had genuinely received a personal visitation from none other than the Archangel Gabriel. According to this assertion, Gabriel did not merely offer general spiritual or devotional guidance

but instead provided Amadeo with exceptionally sophisticated theological revelations, explicitly instructing him in detailed and highly technical Scotist arguments tailored specifically to refute Dominican theological positions. These advanced theological arguments were articulated prominently in Visions (Raptus) numbers 4 and 5, involving nuanced doctrines concerning Original Sin and immaculate sanctification.

To accept this narrative at face value requires one to suspend reasoning and either believe the literal historical occurrence of this visionary experience—including remarkably precise theological and iconographic instructions—or to assume an almost equally improbable scenario: that Amadeo suddenly experienced an unprecedented and miraculous infusion of advanced theological knowledge at the very end of his life, accompanied by the exceedingly bold claim that this infusion was communicated directly through an angelic visitation. Both scenarios strain credulity and significantly undermine historical plausibility.

Moreover, accepting such a scenario would further necessitate believing that Leonardo consciously and deliberately disregarded the explicit thematic instructions clearly outlined by the confraternity of San Francesco Grande in their original and carefully stipulated contract. Instead of adhering to these official guidelines, Leonardo would have had to heard and then chosen to follow an alternative mystical theme—a theme which, even by the comparatively flexible and open-minded Franciscan theological standards of the late fifteenth century, would still have been considered heretical. Ricardo De Mambro Santos provides a well-researched but non-persuasive assumption that this specific heretical teaching likely existed in oral form at the time of Leonardo's commission.[8]

This assumption becomes yet more improbable when we briefly examine the inherent logical contradictions and historical inconsistencies involved. Specifically, it would require believing that the very same confraternity that explicitly outlined clear contractual instructions to Leonardo secretly or implicitly encouraged him—behind closed doors—to pursue an alternate,

[8] Picta sine fabula III : A Study of Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks and the Amadeite Line of Interpretation / De Mambro Santos, Ricardo in "Bruniana e campanelliana : ricerche filosofiche e materiali storico-testuali : XXIX, 1, 2023, Pisa : Fabrizio Serra, 2023 , 1724-0441 - Casalini id: 5612458" - 195-208

theologically problematic and potentially heretical iconography. Furthermore, this hypothesis would then necessitate the belief that this very same confraternity, only a few years later, rejected Leonardo's completed painting precisely because it was either heretical or because it deviated from their originally explicit instructions, both of which they suggested. This convoluted sequence of hypothetical contradictory actions and motivations is not merely historically unlikely—it's a non sequitur.

In contrast to this admittedly contextual yet contrived hypothetical scenario, an equally contextual, but significantly more coherent, explanation emerges. Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* is best understood as a sophisticated and deliberate hybridization—a syncretism—of the iconographic and theological themes traditionally associated with both the Adoration and the Visitation narratives. Such an interpretation aligns well with the insights offered by both Ayala and Santos, who observed that Leonardo indeed drew inspiration from a Visitation motif.[9] However, it is crucial to emphasize that the Visitation, long before the advent of the *Apocalypsis Nova*, was already a well-established biblical narrative. It depicted not only the significant encounter between Mary and Elizabeth but also theologically underscored the pivotal moment when John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb, thereby receiving sanctification—being cleansed from Original Sin.

In Leonardo's carefully structured composition, the arrangement and pairing of figures carry deep symbolic meaning. By 'physically attaching' the Angel to Christ in one group positioned in the immediate foreground, and then attaching Mary with John in a separate group in the mid-foreground, Leonardo deliberately emphasizes two distinct relationships within the scene (Figure 2).

The first category comprises those who, though conceived with Original Sin, were subsequently sanctified or cleansed within the womb—this includes John the Baptist and, notably, Mary herself (according to Leonardo's deliberate compositional choice). The second category consists of those who were eternally and absolutely free from Original Sin, thereby never requiring any

[9] See Ramon Moreno Lopez de Ayala (2023), 'The Visitation by Leonardo da Vinci: According to the Apocalypsis Nova.'

sanctification whatsoever, clearly represented by Christ and the angel. The distinction between these two groups is significant, for, in the controversy around the Immaculate Conception and Original Sin, not only is Mary 'paired' with John, but Christ is paired with the angels.[10]

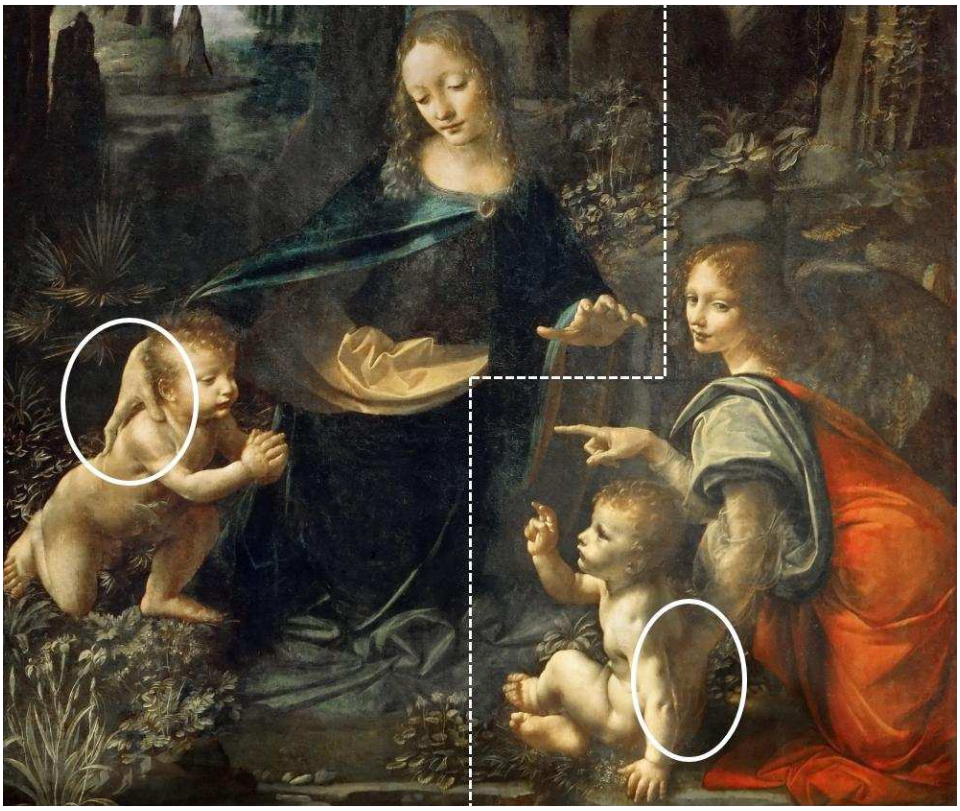


Figure 2

This implicit yet unmistakable theological assertion embedded in Leonardo's painting—that Mary underwent sanctification in her mother's womb rather than being immaculately preserved from Original Sin from all eternity—stood in direct contradiction to the increasingly favored doctrinal position championed by the Franciscan confraternity. Such a bold theological deviation would, therefore, have provided more than sufficient cause for the confraternity's rejection of Leonardo's artwork.

[10] See Carl Balowski, '**Topics and Iconography related to the Immaculate Conception Controversy Prior to Leonardo' da Vinci's Virgin of the Rocks**', **p. 11-12; Also** Bandello, Tract p. 99, 193, 164, 173. *"Any immune to all sin have been preserved. These are preserved from the punishment that comes from the debt and penalty of sin, like in the case of the holy angels. However, since the Blessed Virgin was not preserved from the punishment due for the guilt of all mankind, she was therefore not preserved from Original Sin."*

Leonardo and Lorenzo

Furthermore, this scenario gains additional historical credibility and logical coherence when we examine Leonardo's own background and connections. Leonardo, acting at this time as an ambassador and representative of Lorenzo de' Medici, was clearly and profoundly influenced by established Florentine artistic traditions, notably those exemplified by his compatriot and fellow sculptor Mino da Fiesole's renowned sculptural program for Salutati's Chapel (ca. 1467) in Fiesole Cathedral. Mino's influential work explicitly employed the well-established 'type foetus' Visitation motif, prominently featuring a distinctively pointing figure alongside a reverently genuflecting John the Baptist—the patron saint of Florence itself.

Moreover, it must be recalled that already by 1440, the Signoria of Florence, under the strong influence of the Council of Florence and their future Archbishop, the influential Dominican theologian Antoninus (former Prior of San Marco), had officially declared that the feast of Mary's Conception was to be celebrated explicitly as the feast of her 'Sanctification' rather than as the feast of her immaculate conception.[11] The theological implications of this Florentine stance were well-known, widely debated, and politically charged.

Given that Lorenzo de' Medici was, at the very time Leonardo began his Milanese commission, bitterly opposed to Pope Sixtus IV—who had recently taken explicit steps toward endorsing the Franciscans' preferred doctrine of Mary's eternal immaculate status—Leonardo's strategic deviation from the confraternity's instructions emerges as clearly deliberate and provocative. Indeed, the political and theological tensions surrounding Mary's Immaculate Conception were not merely incidental but were deeply embedded in the context in which Leonardo produced his work. Significantly, when Leonardo departed Florence for Milan in February 1482 (and stopping at Fiesole along the way), Vincenzo Bandello was serving as Prior of the Dominican convent of San Marco—the very monastery at which Leonardo, according to biographers, had been employed directly under Lorenzo de' Medici's patronage. Consequently, Leonardo was almost

[11] See Carl Balowski, '**Topics and Iconography related to the Immaculate Conception Controversy Prior to Leonardo' da Vinci's Virgin of the Rocks**' **p. 17-18.**

certainly in close contact with Bandello precisely at the peak of Bandello's and Lorenzo's heated theological and political controversy with Pope Sixtus IV.

Given these circumstances, it is entirely conceivable—and historically plausible—that Leonardo, at least partially influenced or encouraged by Lorenzo and Bandello, deliberately programmed the *Virgin of the Rocks* with subtle yet unmistakable iconographic references favoring the Dominican theological perspective of Mary's sanctification and the political agenda of the Medici regime.[12] Far from being a mystical or visionary aberration, this represents a carefully orchestrated strategy, rooted deeply within Florentine Dominican theology, aimed at undermining the Franciscan position officially endorsed by Pope Sixtus IV.

Furthermore, since Leonardo's painting was expressly commissioned for the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, the thematic implications become even more striking. By grouping Mary together with John the Baptist—both traditionally understood, especially by Dominicans, as having been sanctified or cleansed from Original Sin in the womb rather than immaculately conceived—Leonardo delivered a painting whose primary theme indeed revolved around the Immaculate Conception, but sharply and provocatively articulated from an explicitly anti-Immaculist stance. Rather than affirming the perceived heretical Scotist doctrine of Mary's eternal freedom from Original Sin, Leonardo's sophisticated visual narrative served as a biting orthodox counterstatement that rejected, or at the very least critically challenged, this doctrine.

The confraternity, upon recognizing the attempted covert theological and political messaging—entirely distinct from and contrary to their explicitly pro-Immaculate Conception orientation—would understandably have rejected the painting outright and withheld payment. Leonardo's deviation from their explicit instructions thus can be comprehensively understood not as some mysterious heretical digression, but as a calculated, politically motivated assertion of an

[12] Remarkably, Mirella Levi D'Ancona was the first to observe clearly that the Dominican doctrine of Mary's sanctification in the womb was central to theological controversies at the precise moment Leonardo received his commission. D'Ancona astutely noted that Leonardo's deliberate pairing of Mary with John the Baptist represented a clear theological faux pas within this context—yet strikingly, she (or those after her) never entertained the possibility that Leonardo's controversial iconographic choice might have been wholly intentional. See Mirella Levi D'Ancona, M. (1957). The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, p. 77.

orthodox, yet specifically Florentine Dominican theological position, heavily informed by Mino da Fiesole's formal precedent. Consequently, the confraternity's rejection of Leonardo's painting appears fully justified as a reaction to the uncomfortable political and theological challenge posed by Leonardo's intentional and provocative anti-Immaculist iconography.

The comprehensive details and supporting evidence for this conclusion, including a more extensive analysis of the political and theological implications of Leonardo's iconographic decisions, will be further explored and demonstrated clearly in my forthcoming paper.

Appendix I (supportive quotes from the Apocalypsis Nova)

"And as they [Mary and Elizabeth] embraced, a wonderful thing is to be said. Mary saw Jesus looking at John and John looking at Jesus. For as soon as Mary, upon entering, said: "May the peace of Christ be with this house (and to Elizabeth, who was coming to meet her: 'May peace be with you. most worthy mother of the great prophet, voice crying in the wilderness). John immediately turned, face and body, towards Christ, and they looked at each other with the vision of the spirit as blessed souls look at themselves and at God. John first bowed his 'knees' before Jesus, as we angels watched, and worshiped Christ the King. Then, in the language that angels and souls speak to each other, he uttered these words, saying in a chant: "Blessed be Christ, true God, my Lord and savior..." But Jesus, as it were, sat down, and with his right hand raised and extended toward John, with these words and in the same language, blessed him in a manner from a song: "Blessed are you, John, my chosen servant... herald...in the desert... you will proclaim the Lamb who takes away the sin, you will proclaim the Savior of men"

"Know, then, that just as in His first intention He wished to give all men blessedness without condition, so after seeing man's first transgression He wished to give it to no one except on condition, that is, if they had the appropriate remedies. But He never diverted His mind or spirit from the Virgin, He absolutely determined that she should enjoy these means, that is, the merits of the Son who would be born of her. Receive and keep what I say to you: there is no son of Adam with whom God has not at some time been angry, that is, whom He has not willed to be blessed, at least on condition.... And there is no one who God, in His eternity, has not considered for some time an outcast and an enemy, with the exception of this Lady of whom we speak, the Lady of us all.... All others, in the foresight of Adam's sin, were presented to him for a time as hateful enemies."

"There is a great variety of men. Some have never been pleasing to God except under conditions, like those (non-Christians) who have never accepted the remedy for original sin. Others, sometimes, sometimes not, like those who, having taken the medicine (come to faith), have sinned again, some rarely, others often. Some, having taken the medicine once, have remained constant. Some have returned after having fallen once, some after seven times, some again after having

sinned seventy times seven times. Others were cured of the disease of that sin [in the womb] before they were born. Others, before they were conceived, by the merits not only of Christ, but also of their pious parents or other righteous people whose tears, that is their pious desires foreseen by God, meritoriously justify (thus God accepting their offspring, and this insofar as they were in the knowledge of God), were freed from that sin in the same way that the master can free the son of the slave from slavery before he is born or even conceived. And God can do much more, for He knows and calls into existence what did not exist. Those whom He foretold as having been sent by Him into the world and as having come as great men and as His friends, He immediately absolved from the sin of their father (Adam), in view of the merits of the true God and perfect Man (Christ). However, He never absolved the Virgin, neither before she was born, nor at her conception, nor before her conception. For He never considered her an enemy or underserving of grace. But He absolutely wanted, by reason the merits of His Son, to purify her not only from non-existent sin, but also to never have to absolved her from the sin apprehended in her by the divine mind, as if God himself had ever seen her in that sin as he saw all the others children descended from Adam."

Therefore, when Adam had eaten of the forbidden fruit, God, from that eternal time, regarded him and all his children begotten of the flesh as children of wrath and curse, and looked upon them as his enemies, whom, from the eternal time when Adam was created he regarded as friends, on condition. And before the creation of Adam, because he had nothing against them, he saw them neither as friends nor as enemies. But the Mother, He never looked at her with bad eyes nor had an aversion to her, never despised her nor rejected her. Finally, God did not want, from all eternity, that John the Baptist – from the moment I appeared to his father [Zechariah], who was offering incense in the Temple and said to him: "A son will be born to you by a special privilege" – be subject to original sin, but freed him from it before he was conceived, in the same way that he freed many others. All, however, consider themselves to have been conceived in original sin because all, when Adam sinned, were condemned, deprived of grace, considered enemies, subject to the curse, with the exception of our Lady and Queen."

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