ABSTRACT

Ave Maria: Mary and Redemption in Renaissance Paintings of the Visitation

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This thesis seeks to trace changes in the interpretation of the Visitation narrative from the Gospel of Luke through the study of religious artwork. The research focuses on the Renaissance period of the West between the fourteenth and seventeenth century, specifically examining the paintings of Giotto di Bondone, Dieric Bouts, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Peter Paul Rubens, and Rembrandt van Rijn. The research also considers pertinent cultural and religious texts including devotional literature, sermons, and official decrees. The context these texts provide is then used to analyze the iconography of the paintings and present a possible "reading" each offers of the Lukan narrative. The study particularly focuses on the topics of Mariology and Redemption as understood through the artwork of the Visitation.

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AVE MARIA: MARY AND REDEMPTION IN RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS OF THE VISITATION

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In Luke 1, the following scene enriches the Gospel story:

> 39 And Mary rising up in those days, went into the hill country with haste into a city of Juda. 40 And she entered into the house of Zachary, and saluted Elizabeth. 41 And it came to pass, that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: 42 And she cried out with a loud voice, and said: Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. 43 And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord.
>
> 46 And Mary said: My soul doth magnify the Lord. 47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. 48 Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. 49 Because he that is mighty, hath done great things to me; and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear him. 51 He hath shewed might in his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. 52 He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble. 53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. 54 He hath received Israel his servant, being mindful of his mercy: 55 As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.
>
> 56 And Mary abode with her about three months; and she returned to her own house.[1]

Of the Gospel stories that find theological expression in art, this, the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, is among the least addressed both in Scripture and in contemporary thought. Despite the high degree of correspondence between the synoptic Gospels, only *Matthew* and *Luke* record the Annunciation, and only *Luke* provides the stories of

[1] Luke 1:39-56.

Elizabeth's similar miraculous pregnancy and the occasion of Mary's stay with her. There is, however, another text that describes the Visitation: the *Protoevangelium of James*. When the New Testament cannon closed in the early fifth century, this text, also known as the *Infancy Gospel of James* or just the *Gospel of James,* was not included. Yet its apocryphal status did not keep it from making a public presence; the book was translated into at least nine languages and over 100 manuscripts survive, whereas only fragments of many of the other rejected texts remain today.[2] The text had certainly attracted a sizeable amount of attention for it to have been preserved so well, and therefore it is safe to assume that the *Protoevangelium* would have at least supplemented the conceptual framework of many artists. Nevertheless, these are but two texts with short descriptions of the Visitation scene—and descriptions that disagree at that—and they consequently leave a great deal of interpretative information wanting.

Much of the current and past scholarship regarding the Visitation has dealt with the theological implications of the canonical text. Bonaventure and Calvin, notable among biblical commentators, have addressed this particular passage, as have other prominent exegetes in sermons, essays, and books. These writers pull directly from the text to trace important theological themes including the role of Mary in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Recently, David Lyle Jeffrey has noted the continuing liturgical significance of the *Magnificat* as well as Elizabeth's greeting in traditions of communal prayer; John Macquarrie has commented on the application of the same passages to the development of Mariology; and the Catholic Church has published

[2] Stevan L. Davies, ed., *The Infancy Gospels of Jesus: Apocryphal Tales from the Childhoods of Mary and Jesus*, Quality Paperback ed., SkyLight Illuminations (Woodstock, Vt: SkyLight Paths Pub, 2009).

encyclopedically on how the story demonstrates the effectiveness of the Word of God as well as the prophecy appointment of John the Baptist and the revelation of Christ's identity.[3] These, of course, constitute only a sampling of the scholarship, but they are representative of the variety if not the depth of the interpretations of the Visitation. To approach the depth, it is necessary to venture outside scholarship into a realm far more historically sensitive to religious devotion: sacred art.

Through to the iconoclasm debates of the sixteenth century leading into the enlightenment, there had been an intimate relationship between the visual arts and Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church and later the Orthodox Catholic Church has consistently used the visual language of iconography to instruct the illiterate on matters of faith and dogma. Over time, particular forms and elements of art developed strong local associations with particular religious meanings; blue and red, for example, became associated with Mary, while a grapevine came to signify the blood of Christ. Such forms essentially create a lexicon, a set of motifs and types that artists could draw upon or alter to effectively convey a particular interpretation of a biblical text. Consequently, artwork utilizing iconography can be 'read' much as a scholar's thesis can be read; they, too, provide an exegesis.

Some of the earliest known examples of this occur in the catacombs of Rome, where early Christians appropriated and "baptized" pagan funerary art so as to dignify the burial of their fellows as well as to provide a visual token of pertinent Biblical truths.[4]

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[3] David L. Jeffrey, *Luke,* Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2012); John Macquarrie, *Mary for All Christians,* 2nd ed (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001); Dictionary of Mary: *Dictionary of Mary: "Behold Your Mother,"* Rev. and expanded ed (New York: Catholic Book Pub. Co, 1997).

[4] Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven : Fort Worth: Yale University Press ; In Association with the Kimbell Art Museum, 2007), 1-14.

For several hundred years the low profile that persecution necessitated forbade many other expressions of Christian religious art, but when Christians gained first freedom to worship and then empirical favor through the Edicts of Milan (313 CE) and Thessalonica (380 CE) respectively, religious art began to flourish. The adoption and construction of public buildings for worship spurred the production of elaborate mosaics, frescos, statues, and architecture to adorn the sacred spaces. These works of art shared the dual purpose of representing Biblical stories and theological concepts for illiterate congregations as well as creating a sanctuary conducive to contemplation of God. Thus, the stories and theology informed the creation of art that in turn developed the piety of the faithful. Given the prominence of these artworks in the lives of the devout public who had no other tangible source of Scripture, it is not surprising that as time progressed and the iconography developed, the art not only took form from the theology, but the theology also developed from the art.

This latter phenomenon has often occurred with subjects that had gained great presence in popular piety but also had little foundation in a source text. Doctrine regarding Mary has perhaps most famously found expression in and been influenced by religious art, as is demonstrated not only in icons but in the recognition of feasts such as the Immaculate Conception, which is debated to have developed only after paintings representing the story and corresponding devotional practices had bee propagated.[5] Other cases of art and theology informing each other are less extreme, but their connection is no less significant in that full understanding of one requires consideration of the other.

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[5]Sarah Jane Boss, ed., *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London; New York: Continuum, 2007), 207.

In my thesis, I will examine sacred art of the Visitation as a means of understanding the religious significance that the story has held throughout western Christianity. I will focus primarily on the Renaissance for two reasons. First, very few works depicting the Visitation survive prior to the Renaissance aside from a few icons and Life of Mary cycles. Second, during the Renaissance major shifts in cultural and theological thought increased the amount of artwork produced and introduced new ways of considering the story. The rise of private spirituality, the new use of vernacular Scripture and the humanist return to the text, as well as reactions against corruption and debates over the cult of Mary and the saints all challenged the theological norms by which the Visitation had previously been interpreted. Although the Visitation was by no means central to these issues, its connection to many that are at the heart of it—Mariology, conduct and piety, salvation—brought the story significant attention in art and theology. As understanding of these issues changed and developed, so did depiction of the Visitation, indicating shifts in the understanding of its significance that were intricately connected to the overall spiritual climate at various stages of the Renaissance.

In my next three chapters I shall analyze five paintings. The first chapter I shall devote to the Giotto's *Visitation* in the Arena Chapel in Padua, painted at the dawn of the Renaissance in the early *treccento*. This painting indicates how the increase of private devotion interacted with Mariology in Giotto's art to emphasize Mary primarily as a moral exemplar, but also as an intercessor and a significant, though humble, participant in the bringing of salvation. In the second chapter I shall compare the *Visitations* of Dieric Bouts and Domenico Ghirlandaio, both painted in the mid-fifteenth century and both demonstrative of the increasingly dominant role attributed to Mary in redemption as

Mediatrix and *Co-Redemptrix*. Finally, I will consider the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens and Rembrandt van Rijn. These two artists worked almost contemporarily in the seventeenth century, when the theological debates of the sixteenth century had begun to notably effect artist creation. These *Visitations* reflect the crystallization of focus on those very themes in the *Visitation* that had caused the Church to split; the role of Mary in the Christian faith, and the emphasis on grace over cooperation in salvation.

Although these paintings vary greatly in their iconography, they all reflect the changing understanding of Mary and her significance to devotion during the Renaissance; initially, the concern for proper conduct and intercessory prayer dominate both her depiction and the discussion of her, but, gradually, increasing emphasis falls on her active role in redemption as demonstrated in the Visitation story, until both sides of the divided church attempt to place Mary back into proper relation to Christ according to the two prevailing theories of redemption.

I must now make two caveats. First, as I could not survey all the paintings from each period and place, I had to choose ones that I understood through extensive research to be particularly prominent due to the status of the painter and commission. This is alone untrue for Rembrandt's painting, where I instead chose based on religious affiliation, influences, and location, for the overarching response of the Reformation toward art severely diminished production of religious imagery, as I shall discuss in my fourth chapter. Second, I do not intend to analyze these paintings for their artistic merit; I shall remark on the elements and principles of art as well as the subject matter only in regards to the theological meaning that these components suggest—a practice well established in the discipline of art history. Although artists and those who study it have

not always distinguished between the form of art and any meaning it may possess, in modernity the community of aesthetic philosophers has long debated whether art *qua* art ought to have any definable meaning.[6] This discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis. I proceed not as an aesthetician, but as a student of art history and theology.

[6] For more information, see R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, A Galaxy Book (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958); Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, Scribner Library, SL 122 (New York: Scribner, 1953).

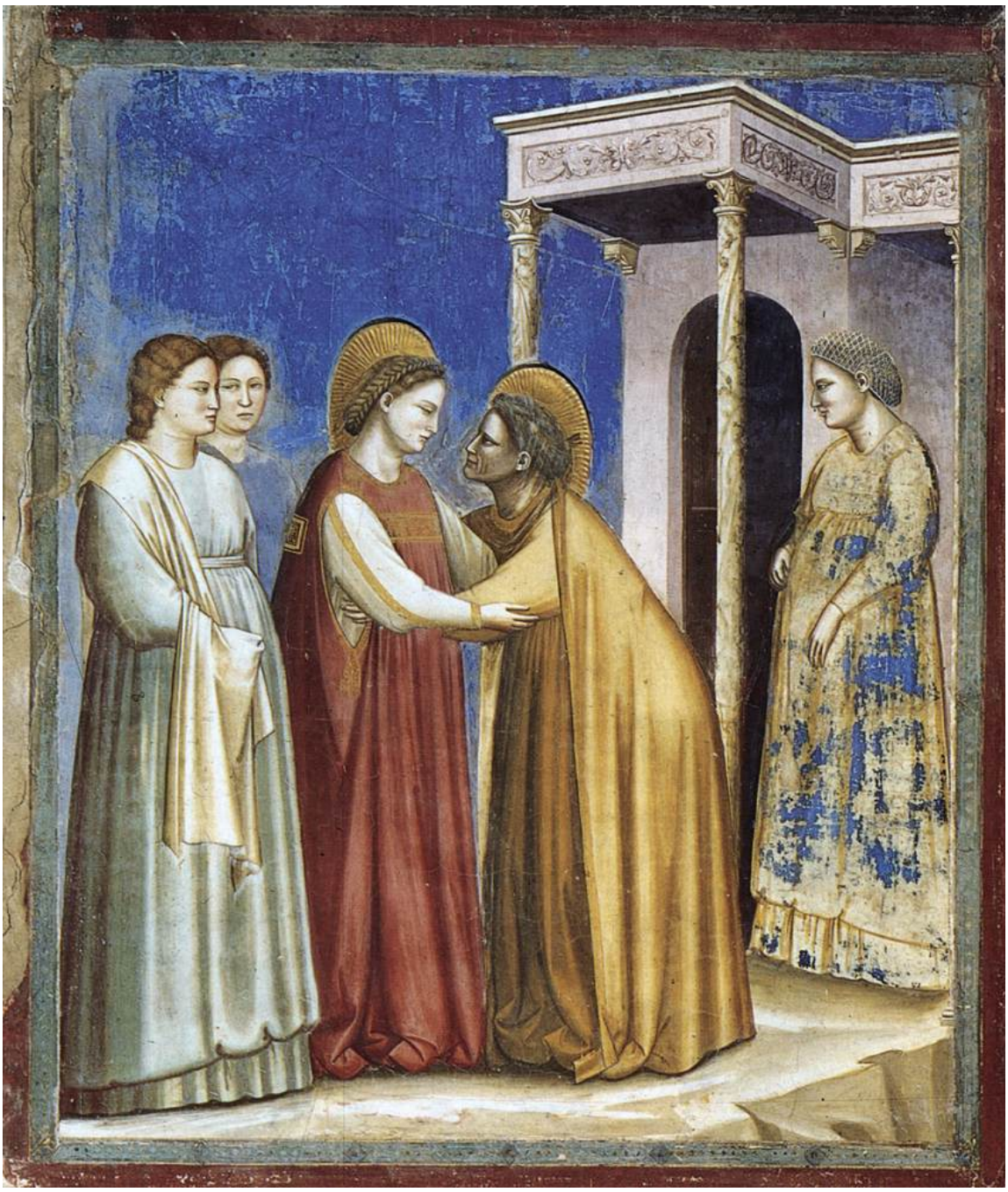

Figure 1: Giotto di Bondone, *The Visitation,* ca. 1304

CHAPTER TWO

Mediatrix: The Early Renaissance and Giotto's *Visitation*

Context

The Scrovegni Chapel stands prominently atop the ruins of a Roman arena in Padua, Italy. Annexed to the elaborate palace of Enrico Scrovegni, the fourteenth century chapel marked a new age for Christian religious practice. Although not unprecedented, private chapels were seldom built in early fourteenth century Italy. A few others dotted neighboring lands, but overall they were a rarity, a sign of a new trend rather than an established convention.[1] Construction of this and other chapels reflected a growing demand among elite classes to have a holy place for personal devotion, which in turn mirrored a broader movement toward fuller personal meditative experience of piety.

Throughout much of the Middle Ages lay devotion was limited to attending mass on Sunday and holy days or else joining a religious lay confraternity. These communities often held special masses and ritualistic practices, but membership was generally confined to men who could both read and give substantial dues.[2] In the thirteenth century, mendicant orders such as the Franciscans responded to the lack of spiritual formation available to the laity. They considered it their task to bring Gospel teaching to

[1] Georges Duby, *Art and Society in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 74.

[2] Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 28.

life out in the city streets through mystery plays and sermons given in the vernacular.[3] The tangibility and vivacity of these practices would have provided a new immediacy to the chosen Gospel stories. Before, religious experience had occurred primarily within a cathedral, which, with its incense, Latin, and gilded artistic splendor, was otherworldly, thereby emphasizing the divinity of Christ rather than his humanity. Their plays and sermons, however, brought the sacred into the mundane dirt and squabble of ordinary Italian town squares.[4] He who is enthroned in glory could now be seen in his earthly ministry, talking to tax collectors and sinners not wholly unlike some in the mendicants' audience.

At this same time, written devotional materials began to reflect a similar interest in the expressive humanity of Christ and the saints. Various guides for meditating on their lives urged those in prayer to imagine the story as though they were present, to consider just how the saint would have acted and felt.[5] The most famous of these is undoubtedly the *Meditationes Vitae Christi,* a devotional book traditionally attributed to Bonaventure but now believed to have been penned by another unknown Franciscan.[6] The reached peak influence well into the height of the Renaissance, but it is nonetheless significant to the present subject, as it is the bloom of a trend which began to bud at the close of the Gothic era. Furthermore, its immense popularity ensured its preservation;

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[3] H. W. van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300-1500* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 162.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.,* 12.

although addressed to a Poor Clare, the book was quickly reproduced and distributed to lay people, becoming one of the most popular texts of the fourteenth century.[7]

The *Meditationes* walks the reader through the stages of Christ's life, beginning with the Incarnation and closing with the Ascension. The book largely follows the Gospel accounts, yet it does not limit itself to strictly recounting the biblical storyline, instead filling in narrative gaps so as to present a fuller, more vivid representation that would presumably encourage deeper meditation. Those details that Scripture passes over, the writer adds; the reader is guided to contemplate the Father's exact instructions to Gabriel, Mary's internal thoughts, and even the reasons for Mary's behavior following the Annunciation. This effectually accomplishes for private devotion what the mendicant efforts did for public instruction; those holy figures who were previously separated from the devout were now presented in a way that allowed, even encouraged, personal identification. The reader of *Meditationes* is instructed to "be present at the same things that it is related that Christ did and said, joyfully and rightly, leaving behind all other cares and anxieties."[8] It was not enough to know the sorrow of Christ's suffering or the joy of his birth; one had to participate in it, to experience it. This was a new form of piety, one that emphasized the physical and emotional elements of the Gospel and that thereby placed the holy within the reach of the imagination.

To further aid in contemplation, *Meditationes* and similar works were frequently accompanied by pictures. For the illiterate as well as the elite, these images served to increase piety by placing the object of that piety before the eye. These, as with icons,

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[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Pseudo-Bonaventure, *Meditations on the Life of Christ; an Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century.*ed. Isa Ragusa, and Rosalie Green (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 5.

were believed to encourage the elevation of the mind to the subject, but it was also an extension of the principle of participation common in contemporary devotional literature. An illustration of the Crucifixion or the Annunciation would have lent a further degree of reality to the story and given it greater emotional and moral impact. Christ's expression as he hangs limply on the cross is far more evocative than mere verbal description, and Mary kneeling before Gabriel demonstrates the humility that the *Meditationes* only discusses. These and other images were already present in church decoration and altarpieces, where they served a similar purpose, but their inclusion in private devotional materials such as *Books of Hours* and miniatures emphasizes the rising concern to have a personal means of practicing devotion. Some patrons even had themselves painted into the scenes as a representation of their pious meditation, as with Philip of Burgundy in his personal prayer book.[9] Just as how in the paintings the patron has full view and experience of the story in all its doctrinal and relational implications, so too in reality did the patrons, through meditation on the image, gain fuller spiritual access to life of Christ and the saints.

In conjunction with this developing use of art, the style of art itself was changing. Portrayals of Christ, Mary, and other saints as well as depictions of individual biblical scenes had been common in sacred spaces in the centuries since the legalization of Christianity during Constantine's rule. These mosaics and frescos featured formulaic and stylized figures and spaces, with specific symbolism attached to gestures of the hands or direction of the eyes. The inclusion of these iconographic details were the primary compositional indicator of the purpose or meaning of the picture; facial expressions, as

[9] *The Art of Devotion,* 14.

well as limbs and body position, were non-naturalistic, formal, turned toward the viewer in a one-dimensional directness. Furthermore, backgrounds were often solid gold with perhaps a solitary edifice, faces were elongated, and the folds of drapery simplified. This art emphasized the holiness of its subjects. Christ was portrayed in glory with golden robes and a nimbus crowning his head, while Mary had similar adornments and was frequently depicted enthroned. This was not the humble carpenter from Galilee or his domestic mother, but rather Christ Pantocrator, Lord Almighty, and Mary Queen of Heaven.[10] These were images of figures not to be identified with, but to be venerated.

With the dawn of the Renaissance, these stylized figures began to be portrayed with a more natural representation. Gradually the poses of the figures softened, the faces grew more expressive, and their environments more substantial. By the close of the thirteenth century, artists began to look back at the more idealized styles of the classical era, learning from the way ancient artists achieved regularized beauty from recognizably natural forms. Giotto di Bondone was the first of these artists to master the naturalistic effect. While maintaining the sanctity of earlier medieval art, he achieved a new degree of expressiveness that, like the Franciscan mystery plays, animated his figures with human life and emotion. Giotto quickly became recognized as a master of this new style, and his masterwork was the decoration of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.[11] Constructed for the private landowner Enrico Scrovegni between 1302 and 1305, the chapel was approved for private use, but later became open to the public on feast days.[12] Giotto was

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[10] *Art and Society,* 63

[11] Laura, Jacobus, *Giotto and the Arena Chapel: Art, Architecture & Experience* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2008).

[12] *Ibid.,* 305.

commissioned to decorate its interior, which he spent at least two years doing. By the time he had finished, the chapel was as it is today: covered in an elaborate cycle of frescoes that fill nearly every wall surface. These paintings, unlike the Byzantine icons that embellish earlier churches, emphasized the humanity of their subjects. In place of elongated, stylized faces and stiff limbs, Giotto imagined and painted naturalist representations of the familiar stories from the lives of Christ and Mary. The program begins on the South wall with images from the Mary's childhood from the *Protoevangelium* and then moves into scenes depicting the Incarnation from the Annunciation through to the Last Judgment. These paintings are strikingly evocative; the image of the *Lamentation,* with Christ laid down from the cross and held in his mother's arms while others variously throw their arms back or else clasp them tightly in grief, is loaded with emotion that has been painted into each brow and gesture. These frescos are most akin to the Life of Christ meditations that encouraged contemplative participation in the joys and sorrows found in the Gospel. Few other chapels featured cycles of this scale and import; in completing his commission Giotto accomplished something new for art, but the ideas behind his work can be traced back to mendicant outreaches and further. His paintings, like the *Meditationes* and the mystery plays, followed the medieval trend that increasingly pushed individuals to meditate on the lives of Christ and the saints so as to be brought into greater spiritual maturity; to learn moral lessons, as well as to increase piety. Thus, the artwork in the Scrovegni chapel may be understood as intended to provide a fuller demonstration of Life of Christ stories so as to prompt deep, experiential meditations for the edification of the patron, his family, and those others who would have

worshipped there. It is in this physical and spiritual background that Giotto created his *Visitation*.

Analysis

Situated beneath the *Annunciation* on the chancel arch and to the left of the *Nativity* on the north wall, the placement of the *Visitation* in the Scrovegni Chapel follows the Lukan account. At first glance, the uncomplicated composition and relatively subdued style appear to achieve little more than an illustration the narrative, but this is no more the case for the *Visitation* than it is for Giotto's highly regarded *Lamentation*. This fresco, much like any of the others, demonstrates the master's exceptional ability to embed a great depth of meaning within multiple layers of iconography. The resulting interpretations are as rich and varied as the subject's influences; when analyzed alongside its textual and religious context, Giotto's *Visitation* reveals itself to be not only considerate of the story's predominant theological interpretations, but also sensitive to the increasingly private and meditative forms of religious devotion among the lay people. Along with the theological imperative to regard both Mary's and the story's significance as intimately connected to the coming of the Savior, the painting captures the persistent concern for holy conduct that taught women to look upon Mary as a moral model, as well as the growing association of the Virgin's charity with her role as *Mediatrix*, according to which the faithful sought her intercession on behalf of their sins.

By the fourteenth century, the Visitation had not yet received a great deal of independent theological attention. The Venerable Bede had penned an influential homily on the subject in the eighth century, and Bonaventure urged his fellow Franciscans to celebrate it as a feast in the thirteenth century, but overall the story was discussed

primarily in the context of the wider analysis of Luke's Gospel. As early as the third century, Origen's own homilies on Luke established two trends for the study of the Visitation in Luke 1:39-47: interpretation of the story according to salvation history and the recognition of Mary's virtue as a model for virgins.[13] This first trend tends to emphasize Christ's ministry and purpose as the primary motivator for both the occasion of the story and the praise of Mary. Origen states that Mary visited Elizabeth so that Jesus might sanctify John, explaining that it was at the moment when John leapt for joy that Christ made him a prophet.[14] Furthermore, Origen finds the cause for both Elizabeth's prophetic utterance and Mary's song in the presence of the Holy Spirit with Christ and John; when John leapt, Elizabeth received the Holy Spirit on his account and so was able to proclaim, "Blessed art thou amongst women"; when Jesus was conceived within Mary, she received the Holy Spirit and so was able to truly magnify the Lord in song.[15] Thus the significance of the visit is in Christ's blessing of the one who would make the way for him as savior, and the joyous proclamations that follow—including Elizabeth's praise of Mary—occur as an overflow of the Holy Spirit in response to Christ's presence. Origen continues to explain that the glory of Mary's role is therefore in her relationship to Christ. He writes that just as sin began in woman, so did salvation begin in woman.[16] Mary is a new Eve, the mother of God and so may be called "blessed," for, as the movement of the Holy Spirit in John and Elizabeth attests, it was

[13] Origen, *Homilies on Luke ; and, Fragments on Luke*, The Fathers of the Church, v. 94, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 28-33.

[14] *Ibid.,* 28.

[15] *Ibid.,* 28-30.

[16] *Ibid.,* 33.

through her that Christ came into the world. Later, Ambrose of Milan revisited the subject in his commentary on Luke, again emphasizing the sanctification and appointing of John as the primary element of import, for thus was Jesus first recognized as the Lord.[17] Thomas Aquinas draws on the same themes in the third volume of his *Catena Aurea*, gathering passages from former theologians in a large compendium of orthodox thought. He discusses Origen, Ambrose, Bede, and others, attesting to their continuing influence on the interpretation of the story. He also utilizes the writings of lesser known Greek theologians, broadening and further establishing the conclusions of the others. With particular significance for the Visitation, Aquinas quotes Theophylact to have stated that the fruit of Mary's womb is that which was promised to David in Psalm 132:11.[18] The significance of the story thereby grows to be recognition not just of Christ's coming ministry, but of that ministry as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Christ is the promised king, the bringer of peace and redemption, and Mary is the queen, his mother. The Visitation is when the Holy Spirit revealed this as part of the fulfillment to John and Elizabeth.

That this understanding continued to be prominent into the Italian trecento is evidenced in the *Visitation* of the Scrovegni chapel. Whether Giotto was advised or had personally studied the doctrine, his placement of the scene and his careful attention to subtle detail demonstrates his knowledge of the theological significance of his subject. Upon immediate inspection, Mary's holiness is attested to simply by the inclusion of the nimbus (see Figure 1). Elizabeth is also painted with a nimbus, indicating her sainthood,

[17] Ambrose, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke ; With, Fragments on the Prophecy of Esaias*, ed. Theodosia Tomkinson (Etna, Calif: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2003), 51.

[18] Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman, and Aidan Nichols, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers* (London: Saint Austin Press, 1997), 39.

but she is nonetheless not represented with the same level of sanctity as Mary. On the edges of the painting are three companions, most likely handmaidens. Two stand behind Mary and are thus visually associated with her, while the one behind Elizabeth becomes connected to the home. Those two in the background have their eyes averted, as though unwilling to look upon and thereby sully the holy greeting. The foremost handmaiden, however, gazes quietly yet reverently at Mary, her hand covered so as not to profane the Virgin with her touch. As Moshe Barasch notes, hands are frequently covered for this purpose in Giotto's frescos.[19] Occasionally the gesture is portrayed with the figure covering his or hands with the outer garment, but where the gesture is ceremonial it is done with a special cloth.[20] Here, the servant's cloth resembles one which women in the middle ages would have been encouraged to carry so as not to touch the host during mass.[21] In the context of the Visitation, the allusion to the host emphasizes the presence of the Christ child in the womb as well as Mary's role as the mother of God. This recalls Elizabeth's words: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."[22] Mary and Elizabeth, both filled with the Holy Spirit, are equally dignified with nimbuses; but Mary is honored even further by her closest maidservant, who recognizes Christ within her. This directly illustrates the assertion of the theologians regarding her

[19] Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, Cambridge Studies in the History of Art (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 103.

[20] *Ibid.,* 107.

[21] *Ibid.,* 103.

[22] Luke 1:42

role: "For one reason only was she the *most blessed,* namely, that she conceived the Son of God."[23]

Figure 2: Giotto di Bondone, Padua Chapel Eastern Wall, ca. 1304

Mary's role in the coming of Christ is further developed through the positioning of the fresco. In its placement below the *Annunciation* on the chancel arch, the *Visitation* is immediately adjacent to the *Pact* (see figure 2). Given the association of the chapel's patron Enrico Scrovegni with usury and the sin of greed that motivated both it and Judas' crime, several art historians persuasively argue that this representation of the *Pact* was intended to be a reference to the evils of moneylending.[24] Furthermore, the thirteenth and

[23] Bonaventure, *St. Bonaventure's Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, ed. Robert J. Karris, Works of St. Bonaventure, v. 8, pt. 1 (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2001), 91.

[24] See Anne. Derbes and Mark Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart: Giotto, Enrico Scrovegni, and the Arena Chapel in Padua* (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 8-9; Jacobus, *Giotto and the Arena Chapel,* 22-25; Ladis, *Giotto's O,* 45-50.

fourteenth centuries frequently made connections between usury and Mary's fecundity. Remigio de' Giolami in particular stated that while usury's reproduction of money is highly unnatural and usurers are consequently "worse than Judas," other "things that are shown to come into existence against nature are nevertheless in truth good. For the Virgin Mary, remaining a virgin, against nature brought forth her son Jesus and bore fruit, which was in truth her son and the blessed fruit of her womb."[25] In light of these associations, the juxtaposition of *The Pact* with the *Visitation* invites analysis. As Jacobus explains, "Throughout the Middle Ages, Usury was condemned because interest on a loan constituted the unnatural generation of money. The chancel thus opposes unnatural reproduction and supernatural reproduction—the first leading to death, the second leading to eternal life."[26] This is seen through comparison of their formal elements. Their compositions are nearly exactly antithetical; Judas's exchange with the high priest contrasts with Mary and Elizabeth's embrace, and the maidservants, which mirror their counterparts even in the color of their garments, directly oppose the priests and devil (see figures 3 and 1). These servants, when considered along with the theme of pregnancy, may be read as present expressly to aid in the women's natal periods. The Pharisees, however, who are seen to be conspiring behind the high priest in the *Pact,* are "the appropriate midwives for a perverse, unnatural, and ultimately unprofitable conception."[27] Through this contrast, the *Visitation* is able to assume a greater depth of meaning; whereas Judas' financial exchange with Jesus' accusers gives birth to the

[25] Derbes and Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart,* 61

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Andrew Ladis, *Giotto's O: Narrative, Figuration, and Pictorial Ingenuity in the Arena Chapel* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 26.

Passion, Mary's pregnancy and visit with her cousin constitute the first recognition of the Incarnation and the beginning of Christ's ministry on earth. Death, pain, and eternal torment for Judas follow his betrayal, but life, redemption, and eternal glory follow Mary's conception and birth of Christ. Here, Mary is the second Eve that Ambrose and other theologians wrote about, the one through whom the fullness of life comes and the error of the first man and woman corrected. Thus she is indeed holy, crowned with a nimbus and met with in reverence, but her holiness is due to the savior she bears in her womb and the redemption that he brings for all creation.

Figure 3: Giotto di Bondone, *Pact of Judas,* ca. 1304

The second concern of the theologians in their analysis of the Visitation is the application of Mary's virtuous conduct as a model for virgins. Indeed, this was a concern

that occupied the thoughts of many during the Middle Ages. As a rule, the era placed a high value on chastity as the greatest female virtue. The reasons for this are complex, involving the workings of gender politics infused with religious teaching. One prominent cause, however, was the model of Mary's perpetual virginity. As a means of proclaiming Mary's holiness as set apart entirely from the world, it became important to assert that even in her marriage to Joseph there was no physical consummation of their relationship. Apocryphal texts such as the *Protovevangelium*—images from which constitute the Life of Mary cycle on the north wall of the Scrovegni Chapel—specifically included details such as Joseph's extreme age that would ensure Mary's chastity.[28] These details were then picked up and included in tradition, where they are seen to influence theology, as when Ambrose speaks of Mary's upbringing in the "innermost sanctuary"—a direct allusion to the *Protoevangelium.*[29]

As Mary's virginity became associated with her holiness and women in general were instructed to be chaste, it was natural to turn to the Virgin as a model. Some encouraged their husbands to practice chaste marriages; others took vows of chastity and entered into convents, eager to emulate the Virgin Mother.[30] For all of these women, guides were written in an effort to properly direct women in the virtue they sought to uphold. The Visitation was an obvious Scriptural source for these texts. Theologians from Origen to Bonaventure called attention to those aspects of Mary's conduct during

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[28] Stevan L. Davies, ed., *The Infancy Gospels of Jesus: Apocryphal Tales from the Childhoods of Mary and Jesus*, Quality Paperback ed., SkyLight Illuminations (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Pub., 2009).

[29] *Exposition,* 51.

[30] Joelle Mellon, *The Virgin Mary in the Perceptions of Women: Mother, Protector and Queen since the Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 87-88.

her visit that were especially fit for imitation; that she stayed for three months with Elizabeth was evidence that "it displeased her [to be] seen to frequently in public"; that she traveled with haste was proof that "she was eager, and not slothful"; and that she went to assist Elizabeth indicated her "lowliness."[31] When paired with the rise of meditative piety, this emphasis on virtue and chastity may be easily expected to appear in devotional literature and artwork, and indeed it does. These same traits recorded in homilies and commentaries were also stressed in smaller tracts and prayer books. The *Meditationes* guides the Poor Clares to pause at each of Mary's words and actions to consider her as a moral exemplar. Immediately after suggesting that Mary is troubled at the conception of Christ because she had promised her virginity to God, the author describes her as appearing "modest and humble, because without these virtues virginity is worth little."[32] Furthermore, the author echoes Ambrose in explaining that on her journey Mary "walked rapidly…to [not] be long in public view."[33]He then goes on to explain that Mary's purpose in the visit was humble service, and that while visiting she was attended only by "honest virtue"; Mary did not seek to be served, but to serve, and so upon greeting Elizabeth moved to sit at her feet and was only prevented by her cousin's own meek desire to honor Mary above herself. [34] Presumably the nuns, while meditating on these attributes and identifying with Mary, would grow in virtue as well as piety.

In the Scrovegni Chapel, the *Visitation* fresco attends as much to virtue as do the *Meditationes* and theologians. Through the same use of subtle iconography that captures

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[31] *Exposition,* 51; *Homilies,* 28; *Catena Aurea,* 38.

[32] *Meditations*, 18-19.

[33] *Ibid.,* 22.

[34] *Ibid.,* 21-23.

the doctrine regarding the story, Giotto draws attention to its moral undertones, quietly supporting the general profusion of conduct guides. This likely was the direct request of the patron, whose elite wife and daughters would have utilized the space for prayer.[35] They would not have commonly entered into the chapel nave directly, however; instead, they likely used the squint chamber that Enrico had installed on the north wall and connected via a gallery to the manor.[36] Out of concern for modesty, the Scrovegni women could have traveled from their home to the chapel without ever having to enter a public setting for worship. Once there, they would have had ample view of the *Visitation* and surrounding scenes, on which they would have prayerfully meditated.[37] To accommodate this purpose, Giotto drew from contemporary models of conduct. Strikingly, he did not include the precise details that any one text describes, instead combining a variety of elements to create an overall testimony to Mary's virtue. To begin with, many of the commentators moralize Mary's haste, and the author of *Meditationes* specifically notes that the Holy Mother traveled with none other than Joseph.[38] Giotto does not portray Mary's journey, instead focusing the moment of greeting. Furthermore, rather than Joseph, he includes the two maidservants. The depiction of these women may appear to contradict the humility that the Franciscan hoped to impress upon his audience, but in reality their presence supports another aspect more central to *Meditationes* and the commentaries: that Mary's modesty kept her from being too long in the public eye. Despite being unfamiliar to the artistic representation of the Visitation, the presence of

[35] *Giotto and the Arena Chapel,* 21.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Meditations*, 21-22.

the maidservants finds quick explanation in contemporary goodwifery literature.[39] Francesco Barbarini in particular specifies a requisite number of two companions for a woman traveling abroad, the precise number of Mary's companions.[40] According to the current understanding of conduct, for Mary to have been depicted without such women would have been to portray her as negligent of virtuous behavior, to have been immodest and keen for attention rather than chaste and meek. By including the figures, Giotto ensures that Mary will be seen to observe the strictest rules of modesty.

In addition to chastity, Giotto also underscores Mary's oft-mentioned humility. The most immediate and striking feature of the *Visitation* is the embrace between Mary and Elizabeth. The two women meet and reach toward each other lovingly, as is due to a female relative. Elizabeth, although the elder, seeks to kneel before her visitor, as though saying, "And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"[41] This, again, opposes the model set forth in *Meditationes,* where Mary in her meekness seeks to bow before Elizabeth. Yes, as before, the alteration does not mar the effect of the moment, but rather achieve it through a different means. By having Elizabeth seek to kneel before Mary, Giotto is able to both portray Elizabeth's recognition of Mary as the mother of the Lord and give Mary the opportunity to demonstrate her humility. She does not allow her cousin to sink fully to her knees, instead setting aside her right of superiority so as to support Elizabeth and thereby bestow upon her honor and affection. One arm reaches under Elizabeth's right, and the other stretches toward her left shoulder, propping her up. The touch is tender, gentle, graceful, free from any sense of authority.

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[39] *Giotto and the Arena Chapel,* 239.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Luke 1:43

Mary may be the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, but—as *Meditationes* urges women to consider—she is also meek and prepared to serve.

Leading up to the fourteenth century, this same meditation on Mary's gentle humility and tender affection were part of a larger trend in which the faithful perceived her as the *Mediatrix*, a mediator between pious individuals and Christ. This does not appear as strongly in patristic commentaries, but it is evident in popular devotional literature and in the common practice of faith. One scholar attributes the origins of this popular theology to the attention given Mary in deuterocanonical texts: "In the apocryphal gospels she occupies a central position between God and mankind. God chose her to be the mother of His Son, so the faithful ask her to represent them before God."[42] Almost as a function of Mary's affirmed role as *Theotokos* she is positioned between Christ and the rest of her race; the exceptional degree of her virtue only contributes to this station. As part of a devotional climate increasingly accustomed to personally identifying with figures in the Gospel narrative, it was therefore natural for people in the Middle Ages to seek her aid, for she was "the first person present at His Incarnation" and so "becomes the vehicle for all the human emotions that He awakens."[43] Although the Christ-bearer, Mary was also seen as a tender mother, whose relationship with her son was naturally more intimate, more touched with grace and affection, and therefore in some ways more accessible than that of ordinary sinners to Christ. Her strength as intercessor was further supported through interpretation of the Wedding at Cana from the Gospel of John. In the story, it is at his mother's urging that Christ performs his

[42] *The Art of Devotion,* 14.

[43] *Ibid.*

first recorded miracle and changes water to wine. She asked, and he obeyed. The faithful were therefore confident that were they to ask her, Mary in her divine charity would pray to Christ on their behalf, and so their prayer would be better received.[44]

The practice of asking Mary to intercede can in many ways be traced to the initial seventh century linking of Gabriel's greeting to Mary in Luke 1:28 with Elizabeth's greeting in Luke 1:42.[45] These phrases were combined to create an antiphon of the offertory of the mass for the 4th century of Advent.[46] Four hundred years later, this antiphon had evolved to become the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, beginning with the phrase "Ave Maria." The office was a repetitive prayer, a predecessor of the modern rosary with each prayer counted on a set of beads or a knotted rope.[47] This prayer would eventually become the primary devotion of one of the largest religious confraternities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as grow to include meditation on prescribed mysteries or Gospel stories, but even before then the *Ave* was well-known and oft-repeated. The prayer long had been repeated thrice daily as part of commemorating the Incarnation, and in 1269 Bonaventure requested his brethren to urge the faithful to also recite three *Aves* at the Vespers Angelus Bell, around 6:00 in the afternoon.[48] The bell would ring at 6:00 am and 12:00 pm as well, and so the habit of repeating the prayer multiple times a day quickly developed among laity as well as the clergy.[49] This was a

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[44] *The Virgin Mary in the Perceptions,* 10.

[45] *Stories of the Rose,* 14.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] *The Art of Devotion,* 60.

[49] *Ibid.*

simple devotion that anyone could easily partake in and that became associated the Marian Psalter, a more accessible version of the breviaries that those in formal religious orders would pray through.[50] By the fourteenth century, the *Ave* and its associated understanding of Mary as the *Mediatrix* became even more encouraged through the granting of indulgences to those who prayed it. Convinced of Mary's intercessory powers and hopeful for a reduced stay in Purgatory, the faithful regularly turned in recourse to the Virgin Mother.

In Giotto's *Visitation,* the charity of Mary that is essential to her role of *Mediatrix* is immediately evident in the relation of her form to Elizabeth's. As discussed above, her expression is tender, indicative of a grace and kindness that is revelatory of a humble love. Yet this charity is even more evident when compared with the iconography of other aspects of the chapel. Below the life of Christ and Mary cycles is a row of *grisaille* depictions of vices and their corresponding virtues. Directly opposite *Envy,* which many scholars identify with usury and the *Pact,* is *Charity* (see Figures 4 and 5).[51] The virtue is portrayed metaphorically as a woman with the left arm stretched upward, offering her heart to the hands of God, and the right stretched down, offering a bowl of fruits to the hungry. This corresponds with Bonaventure's discussion of the Virgin's charity in his commentary on Luke, and it also formally corresponds with the embrace of Mary and Elizabeth in Giotto's fresco; Mary, like *Charity,* reaches down to Elizabeth to offer loving support, while Elizabeth, also like *Charity,* reaches up to Mary in joy, offering

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[50] *Stories of the Rose*, 15.

[51] *Giotto's O,* 46.

praise to God while she does so (see figure 6).[52] This connection emphasizes the relational nature of charity; the love of one moves the other to love in return.[53] This contrasts greatly with what was previously discussed as Judas' sin of envy; whereas Judas in taking the moneybag pulls his arms protectively in toward himself, isolating him from the outstretched hands of the priest, Elizabeth, Judas' visual counterpart, receives Mary's visit with a return of affection, clasping her relative tenderly close.[54]

Figure 4: Giotto di Bondone, *Envy,* ca. 1304

[52] *Ibid.,* 43.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Usurer's Heart,* 48.

Figure 5: Giotto di Bondone, *Charity,* ca. 1304

This comparison invites a similar study between the priest and Mary. Both of these figures wear red, and both of them give; the priest gives money, which brings Judas' death, and Mary gives loving aid, which produces faithful praise. Mary's garment, like that of the priest, even appears to have a ritual meaning. Rather than the ordinary dress that matches the other featured women and even most of the other representations of the Virgin in the chapel, this particular garment features a gold rectangle on both the front and back, wide open sleeves, and a gold band bordering the hole of the sleeve. This fits the description of a dalmatic, the vestment that deacons wore

(see figure 6).[55] Such a similarity fittingly suggests that Mary's role is that of a deacon, for a deacon's responsibility was to charitably care for the flock of the church, just as Mary's primary role in this image of the *Visitation* is to care for Elizabeth.[56]

Figure 6: Giotto di Bondone, *The Visitation,* ca. 1304 detail

The connection of this charity with intercession becomes evident in the fresco of the *Last Judgment* on the West wall (see figure 7). On the bottom left of the painting, directly opposite the *Visitation,* is a depiction of Enrico and a servant offering a miniature of the chapel to Mary and two other saints. In this image, just as in the *Visitation,* Mary wears the red outer vestment. It is important to note that this portion of the fresco likely relates to the initial dedication of the chapel to the *Virgin Carita,* the Virgin of Charity,

[55] *Ibid.,* 70.

[56] *Ibid.*

on March 25, 1303, prior to its completion.[57] At the point of dedication Enrico had broken relations with the confraternity—which had likely contributed a substantial sum to the chapel's construction—and had also sought the blessing of the Church for the completion of the chapel, which he claimed was funded solely from his own resources.[58] Whether Enrico was actually involved in any financial misdealings, either of his own or of his father's, is a topic of active debate, but none deny that Enrico's choice of dedication as well as the painting of his offering indicate that he was in some degree conscious of a need for intercession. Mary, both in the corner of the *Last Judgment* fresco and in the *Visitation,* is the *Virgin Carita* whose virtuous love may represent sinners before Christ, offering them up to God like the heart of Giotto's *Charity*.

Figure 7: Giotto di Bondone, *Last Judgment,* ca. 1304, detail

[57] *Giotto's O,* 5.

[58] *Giotto and the Arena Chapel,* 23-25.

There is one last way in which the *Visitation* is indicative of contemporary views of Mary as *Mediatrix:* its connection to the *Ave*. This connection is both visual and historical. In terms of form and placement, the *Visitation* is located prominently below the *Annunciation* at the front of the chapel. This is in keeping with older depictions of the scene, where it was almost solely depicted alongside the *Annunciation,* likely because of the origins of the *Ave* in Gabriel and Elizabeth's words.[59] The appearance of the scenes adjacent to each other immediately suggests the prayer as the viewer, trained in contemplative devotion, fills in the words: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb…." Their location in the primary focal point of the chapel suggests the preeminence of the *Ave* in private and corporate prayer. Furthermore, depictions of the *Ave* itself appear twice in the chapel.[60] Finally, Pope Benedict XI is recorded to have granted indulgences to those that visited the chapel during certain feast days, just as indulgences were more broadly granted to those that recited the *Ave* a sufficient number of times.[61] Distinct, then, from simply revealing Mary as a charitable figure whom one might approach in intercessory prayer, Giotto depicts the liturgical role of the Visitation story in the *Ave,* placing the scene so as naturally to encourage viewers to seek intercessory prayer.

Conclusion

Giotto's depiction of the *Visitation* in the Scrovegni Chapel may be understood as representative of the changing contemporary perspectives of the Gospel story. Reflective

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[59] Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 1st American ed. (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971), 55.

[60] *Usurer's Heart*, 147.

[61] *Giotto's O,* 45.

of the writings of church fathers and theologians, the painting portrays Mary's great significance as the Mother of God, the role such a relationship gives her in salvation history, and the dignity owed her as such. In dialogue with devotional writings such as *Meditationes de Vitae,* Giotto also successfully relates the use of Mary's moral conduct as a guide for other virgins and young women. Finally, Giotto draws upon the liturgical application and the doctrine of Mary as *Mediatrix* in his depiction of her in the *Visitation* as the charitable Virgin Mother whom a sinner might reasonably seek for intercessory prayer. Each of these perspectives rose amid a devotional tradition that sought to bring the faithful into greater contemplative awareness of the life of Christ, a tradition that in some way shaped and blended with each understanding, eventually enabling Giotto to create a magnificently layered and evocative depiction of an otherwise simple and humble scene: the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth.

CHAPTER THREE

Co-Redemptrix: Developing Themes of the Visitation

Context

As the fourteenth century stretched into the fifteenth, the Church, following in Bonaventure's tread, renewed interest in the Visitation by mandating that it be celebrated as a feast. In 1389, Pope Boniface IX formally instated the feast for the Church in the West, following the desire of his predecessor Urban VI.[1] In his papal bull *Superni benignitas conditoris,* Boniface outlined his primary reason for this change: "to implore the aid of the Virgin in ending the Schism."[2] The Great Schism had divided church allegiance between the Roman papacy and that set up in Avignon by a group of dissenting cardinals. Boniface's selection of the Visitation for his cause suffices to demonstrate the intercessory significance that the story had developed within the Western Church, but the communication of that significance was not complete, for the feast initially failed to take grip far outside Rome.[3] In 1401, *Superni benignitas conditoris* was reissued, this time to some avail.[4] Rhythmical offices began to develop, with the most popular in Rome originating from the hand of the English Benedictine Adam Easton.[5] By

[1] Richard William Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England,* Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 40.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.,* 41

[4] *Ibid.,* 43

[5] *Ibid.,* 44

1441, the 43rd session of the Council of Basel passed the decree *Inter assiduas militantis ecclesiue turbaciones* ordering universal observance of the Feast on July 2. This met with mixed success across Bohemian lands and into northern Europe, but was not wholly ineffective; by 1441 there is record of an office of the Visitation in French service books, by 1443 Germans had adopted the office and mass of Thomas de Comreallas, and by 1475 there is a record of indulgences attached to the celebration of the Feast in England.[6] The offices written for these churches, whether rhythmical or not, all drew heavily on the same texts: the Venerable Bede's *Homily on the Visitation*, St. Ambrose's commentary on the *Gospel of Luke*, and Jerome's translation of Origen's commentary on *Luke*, among others.[7] Gradually, this regular observation and relatively standardized teaching dispersed the Marian and soteriological themes discussed in the previous chapter throughout Europe, where they intermingled with what Renaissance sensibilities had rendered one of the most ordinary means of doctrinal instruction and personal devotion: artwork.

This art adapted and deepened interpretations of the Visitation to meet the needs of its particular context. In the fifteenth century, the catalysts for what would become the Reformation were still in formation; the humanist embrace of ancient texts and traditions as well as a growing concern for the individual were as yet only spurs to deepen devotion, paradoxically coexisting with medieval scholasticism and systems of penance. Art thrived on the blend of formal tradition and private spirituality; sensitive to the textual sources and standard iconography, artists nonetheless emphasized distinct aspects

[6] *Ibid.,* 45-47

[7] *Ibid.,* 48

of the story depending on the intent of their commission and the influence of local beliefs, thereby creating a wide variety of representations as they blended tradition with innovation. Whereas Giotto and his contemporaries demonstrate a simple grace in their compositions, Jacopo Pontormo in his *Visitation* arranges a brilliantly colored, tight grouping that enervates the scene and amplifies the joy radiating from the two primary figures' expressions.[8] Raphael, meanwhile, introduces the baptism of Christ into his background to stress that the meeting between the infants Christ and John the Baptist in the wombs is as a prefiguring of that later, more auspicious event, and Rogier van der Weyden in his Leipzig *Visitation* exposes the maternity lacings on Elizabeth's garment to leave no doubt that her womb is full, in this case with John leaping for joy.[9] These artists capture fine shades of meaning in the narrative and its application to theology and devotion, utilizing their medium as a mode of further interpreting the story.

Yet each of these have lost something of the unassuming grace in Giotto's *Visitation;* rather than a Mary of humble virtue, these fifteenth century artists present a Holy Mother of regal mien and dress. Clothed in rich garments and a noble demeanor, Mary no longer seems concerned with keeping out of public view or with submitting herself to her cousin. More often than not, Elizabeth appears in fifteenth century paintings as kneeling before the Virgin, or else matching Mary with a fully upright and

[8] See Jacapo Pontormo, *Visitation,* oil on wood (Carmignano, Italy: San Michele Church, 1528-1529).

[9] See Workshop of Raphael, *Visitation,* oil on panel transferred to canvas (Museo del Prado, c. 1519-1520); Rogier van der Weyden, *The Visitation,* oil on panel (Leipzig, Germany: Museum der Bildenden Künste, c. 1460-64).

dignified posture.[10] This does not, however, in any way diminish Mary's apparent charity; her expression and gestures are still gentle, albeit more refined.

This corresponds to an increasingly rich tradition of venerating Mary among the laity. Already encouraged by devotional literature, indulgences, and sermons to seek Mary in intercession as well as to honor the humanity of her motherhood, common people quickly come to associate her with a compassion that was, for them, far more approachable than that of Christ.[11] Tales of Mary's surpassing mercy and aid proliferated among the people, bolstering local adoration of the Holy Mother. The legend of Theophilus, mentioned in the writings of St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, and the *Golden Legend,* as well as elsewhere, gained a particularly immense degree of popularity.[12] The story follows a sixth century cleric, Theophilus, who arranged a deal with the devil so as to obtain a high ecclesiastical position. After securing his place, Theophilus repents, begging Mary for intercession. Mary hears his prayer and, observing the sincerity of his contrition, grants him absolution.[13] Stories such as these far exceed both official doctrine and previous conceptions of Mary's intercession. Whereas the Church strove to define Mary's role in redemption strictly according to her relationship with Christ, popular piety

[10] See Rogier van der Weyden, *Visitation;* Jean Fouquet, *Hours of Étienne Chevalier Visitation,* manuscript illumination (Musée Condé, c. 1445); Fra Angelico, *Cortona Annunciation,* detail of predella with Visitation, tempera and gold on panel (Museo diocesano di Cortona, c. 1430); Master of the Life of the Virgin, *Life of Mary Polyptych,* detail of predella with Visitation (Muich, Germany: Alte Pinakothek, c. 15th century).

[11] Jill Raitt, Bernard McGinn, and John Meyendorff, eds., *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, vol. II, World Spirituality, v. 17 (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 402.

[12] *Ibid.,* 403.

[13] William Granger Ryan and Eamon Duffy, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 109-110.

afforded Mary an active agency in the process.[14] Those who venerated her as *Mediatrix* also saw her as *Co-Redemptrix,* a subordinate but vital contributor the salvation of the human race.[15] The shift from conceiving Mary as the blessed yet submissive Intercessor to the venerated yet approachable Queen of Heaven, mediating between sinners and Christ, is subtle, but it is demonstrated in the portrayals of the Visitation.

In this present chapter, I will examine two paintings that just precede the height of the Renaissance: The *Visitations* of Dieric Bouts and Domenico Ghirlandaio. These works originate in two distinct contexts, both in geography and in commission. The former, created in the Netherlands, is part of a larger work, a triptych which depicts four scenes from Christ's infancy and which likely would have hung above an altar in a public setting of worship. The latter, meanwhile, is from Florence, and was commissioned for a small private funerary chapel. These two paintings present vastly different iconography as a result of the artists' efforts to present an interpretation of the story that was appropriate to their respective circumstances. Nevertheless, they reflect the same primary themes of salvation and Marian devotion; Bouts, adjusting to his formal public setting, adapts his portrayal of the Visitation to relate to its place in all of salvation history; Ghirlandaio, creating for the devotion of a single family in memorial of a departed wife, invites an interpretation of the narrative particular to the grief and hope of the patron's family; both emphasize Mary's active role in redemption.

[14] *Christian Spirituality,* 394-395.

[15] *Ibid.,* 408-410.

Bouts

Dieric Bouts, despite being recognized as one of the fifteenth century Flemish masters, has left very little documentation of his life behind him. Records indicate that he was born between 1415 and 1420 in Haarlem outside Amsterdam.[16] The similarity between Bouts' early work and that of Rogier van der Weyden has led some scholars to assume that much of his training was under that senior artist, but Lassaigne makes it clear that this is not necessarily so, given that Bouts would have had ample opportunity to study Rogier's work during his travels without any formal relationship occurring between the two.[17] He certainly developed much of his style in Haarlem and surrounding cities, but the precise nature of his studies are unknown.

Figure 8: Dieric Bouts, *Life of the Virgin,* ca. 1445

[16] Jacques Lassaigne and Robert L. Delevoy, *Flemish Painting*, Painting, Color, History (New York: A. Skira, 1957), 97.

[17] *Ibid.,* 98.

Having already worked in the Louvain ten years earlier, he was by 1448 reestablished in there, and by 1468 he was appointed painter of that city.[18] This honor affirms that not only was this Flemish master exceptional in skill, but that his religious works were acceptable to the official administration of the city.

Bouts' *Life of the Virgin* altarpiece is widely recognized as one of his earliest known works, dated to around 1445. This is not because the work is crude so much as that it shows a great degree of the influence of contemporary painters.[19] The altarpiece is constructed as a triptych with one central panel and two wings each half the width of the central piece, but it is visually divided into four scenes from the infancy of Christ: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi (see figure 8). These scenes bear the stamp of the foremost Flemish paintings of the fifteenth century. Indeed, for many years the altarpiece was attributed to Petrus Christus for the similarity which the *Nativity* panel composition bears to Christus' Washington *Nativity*.[20] Furthermore, the use of light evokes Jan van Eyck's treatment of shade and reflection, while the forms of Mary's and Joseph's faces resemble Rogier van der Weyden's *Miraflores Altarpiece* (see figure 9).[21] The arch motif also finds its source in the *Miraflores Altarpiece,* where *grisaille* archivolt groupings enhance the scenes from the life of John the Baptist with further stories from the Gospels. Rogier's influence shows once more in the arrangement of the *Visitation* scene, which has been called "nothing but

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[18] *Ibid.*, 98; James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : New York: Prentice-Hall ; Abrams, 1985), 143.

[19] *Flemish Painting,* 97.

[20] Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting, Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 315.

[21] *Ibid.,* 314.

a spatialized but literal variant of Rogier's painting in the Speck van Sternburg Collection."[22] Both paintings feature the early Renaissance standard for the depiction of the *Visitation,* with Elizabeth slightly kneeling before Mary and both women's hands extended to rest on the other's swollen abdomen (see figures 10 and 11). The landscapes are also nearly identical. A large building lies on a hill in the background, connected to the figures by a winding dirt path. An old man, perhaps Zacharias, rests near the structure, and to the left the land drops off into a valley with a pool of water and distant farmland. In many ways, Bout's *Visitation* is indeed a copy of Rogier's.

Figure 9: Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece,* ca.1442

[22] *Early Netherlandish Painting,*, 315.

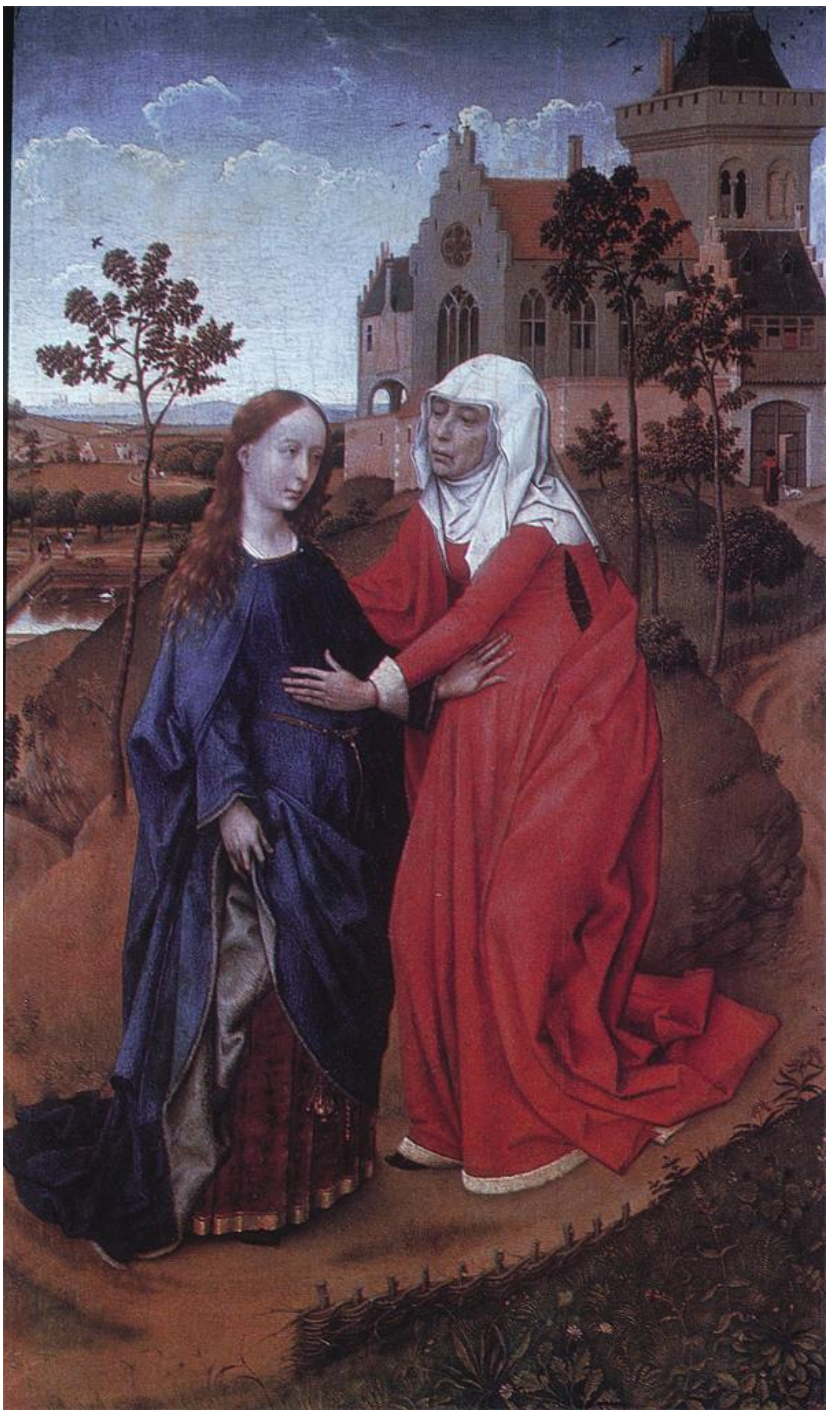

Figure 10: Rogier van der Weyden, *The Visitation,* ca.1445

Yet the similarity of the two images affords particular significance on points where they diverge. In Rogier's *Visitation,* Elizabeth's dress lacings are loosened, a typical fifteenth century sign of late pregnancy. Bout's Elizabeth also features these laces, but they are placed less obviously on the front of her garment, where Mary's outstretched hand obscures them. Mary's other hand, rather than holding up her skirt as it does in Rogier's panel, rests atop her rounded belly as though caressing her baby, the infant Christ. Mary gazes down at him, her expression tender and contented; her attention is not on her cousin, but her child. Interestingly, Elizabeth does not also gaze down at Mary's abdomen, as she does in Rogier's *Visitation*. Instead, she appears to gaze beyond Mary to the archivolt surrounding the scene. These elements subtly shift the emphasis beyond the central figures to a greater context, both formally and conceptually. Formally, because attention no longer remains with the central figures; in Rogier's painting, the viewer is concerned primarily with the exchange between the two women, where the movement between the hands and glances as well as the arrangement of the figures maintains a circular flow of the eye around the panel. The landscape further enhances this flow, as the path forms a u-shape around the figures and then meets the arching trees and clouds which close the circle. This visually keeps the audience preoccupied with the iconography of the figures themselves—the signs of pregnancy, the implication of the colors, and the subtle hint of the incense hanging below Mary's outer garment. The painting is about the two cousins, the holy children they are to bear, and little else. Bouts' depiction, however, pulls the viewer beyond the primary subject matter. The relocation of Elizabeth's laces brings more attention to her gaze, which forms a diagonal with Mary's head to direct the eye to the bottom leftmost *grisaille*

Figure 11: Dieric Bouts, *The Visitation,* ca. 1445

sculpture, inviting the viewer to explore what bearing the architectural decoration may have on the story told in the scene. The background as well brings dimension to the work. Rather than the relatively flat and disproportionate vista that Rogier portrays, Bouts demonstrates exceptional atmospheric perspective that reveals a full world beyond the scene of the *Visitation* and suggests that the implications of the story are not limited to the figures directly involved. Neither the composition nor the meaning of Bouts' *Visitation* is by any means self-contained.

This necessitates a further look at the context of the *Visitation*. It occupies the left side of the central panel of the triptych, between the *Annunciation* and the *Nativity*. A great deal of regularity and repetition establishes harmony across the four scenes: Mary wears the same garment in each panel, the landscapes are alike in color and quality, and the final two scenes occur in the same structure. Furthermore, the central action occurs in the lower bottom half of each painting, thereby encouraging the eye to move seamlessly across them, and a similar archivolt surrounds all four scenes. These connections emphasize the completeness of the triptych as a single unit which tells of how Christ came to be incarnated through Mary. This becomes especially significant when considered according to the artwork's commission. As an altarpiece, the painting would have been displayed at the forefront of a church, where the public would have seen it during mass. The climax of the Catholic mass occurs at the altar when the priest raises the Eucharist for consecration. At that moment, the ordinary elements of bread and wine are translated into the body and blood of the crucified Christ, who gave his life for the sins of humanity. By dint of its location in the church, the triptych thus becomes intimately connected with the Eucharist. The reenactment and remembrance of Christ's

sacrifice in the Eucharist recognizes the culmination of Christ's ministry on earth, a ministry that began with the infancy narrated on Bouts' altarpiece.

The *Visitation* in particular illuminates this vital connection between the infancy stories and the mass. In the traditional commentary on the Visitation, Mary is frequently compared to the tabernacle and Arc of the Covenant. Bonaventure explains that just as the Arc contained the presence of God, so too does Mary hold the presence of God. Moreover, just as the "ark of the Lord stayed in the house of Obededom for three months", so does Mary remain with Elizabeth for exactly three months: "And Mary abode with her about three months."[23] In a Catholic church, the receptacle that contains the consecrated Eucharist, which has become fully the holy body of Christ, is also called the tabernacle. Like both the original tabernacle and Mary's womb, this vessel contains the presence of God, but a presence which specifically is sought in the sacrament of the Eucharist, where Christians partake of Christ's body and blood according to his instructions at the Last Supper and thereby also take part in his sacrifice. If Mary in the *Visitation* may be compared with the tabernacle that contained the Arc of the Covenant, then the proximity of the painting to the altar at which the holy sacrament is consecrated certainly invites comparison between her and the tabernacle of the church. At the meeting between the Holy Mother and her cousin, the commentators all agree that the primary recognition in the scene is that of John the Baptist and Elizabeth hailing Christ the Lord. John, filled with the Holy Spirit, leaps in Elizabeth's womb, who also receives the Holy Spirit and is able to proclaim, "And whence is this to me, that the mother of my

[23] Bonaventure, *St. Bonaventure's Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, ed. Robert J. Karris, Works of St. Bonaventure, v. 8, pt. 1 (NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2001), 104; 2 Samuel 6:11; Luke 1:56

Lord should come to me?"[24] These two are the first apart from Mary to behold the Lord Incarnate, the first to encounter the physical, real presence of God in Christ. This meeting, and the joy it inspires through the Holy Spirit, is a prefiguring of the Sacrament that is celebrated in each mass. Mary bears the consecrated Christ, whose body and blood will redeem sinners, just as the tabernacle contains the same. It is by no accident that the composition of the *Visitation* pushes the eye and mind beyond Mary and Elizabeth, for their meeting contains significance not just for themselves, but for all who seek salvation through Christ's death and resurrection.

The extent to which the *Visitation* and the other narrative panels affect salvation history is further demonstrated in the portals surrounding each panel. The archivolts of these portals are carefully decorated with *grisaille* sculptures of other scenes and figures from Scripture. Prophets and evangelists are the largest sculptures, and they stand like pillars on either side of each arch's curve. Theirs are the voices through which Scripture found expression, the hands by which prophecy and Gospel were written. Consequently, they both structurally and literarily support the other *grisaille* statuettes, each of which is a smaller scene that enacts a significant moment in biblical history. The *Annunciation* panel features the creation of Eve, the temptation, the fall, the expulsion from the garden, the curse of Adam and Eve, and finally Cain's murder of Abel (see figure 12). Overall, these scenes relate the corruption of humanity and its descent into sin. The *Visitation* and *Nativity* panels then present the cure of that sin through Christ's suffering (see figure 13). Beginning with *The Pact of Judas* on the left of the first arch, the narrative flows thus: Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, Christ before Pontius Pilate, the

[24] Luke 1:43; Sarah Jane Boss, ed., *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London; New York: Continuum, 2007), 3: David proclaims similar words when he is entrusted with the arc of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6:9.

scourging of Christ, and the crowning with thorns. On the *Nativity* arch, the narrative continues: Christ carrying the cross, Christ crucified, the descent into hell, the deposition, Christ buried, and Christ resurrected (see figure 14). Finally, the *Adoration* panel depicts Christ's earthly appearances after the Resurrection: Christ as the gardener appearing to Mary Magdalene, the supper at Emmaus, Christ appearing to the fishermen, doubting Thomas in the upper room, the ascension, and finally Pentacost (see figure 15). Together, these statuettes represent salvation history from the fall to the commissioning of the Church, through which sinners would be brought into Christ's body and so find salvation.

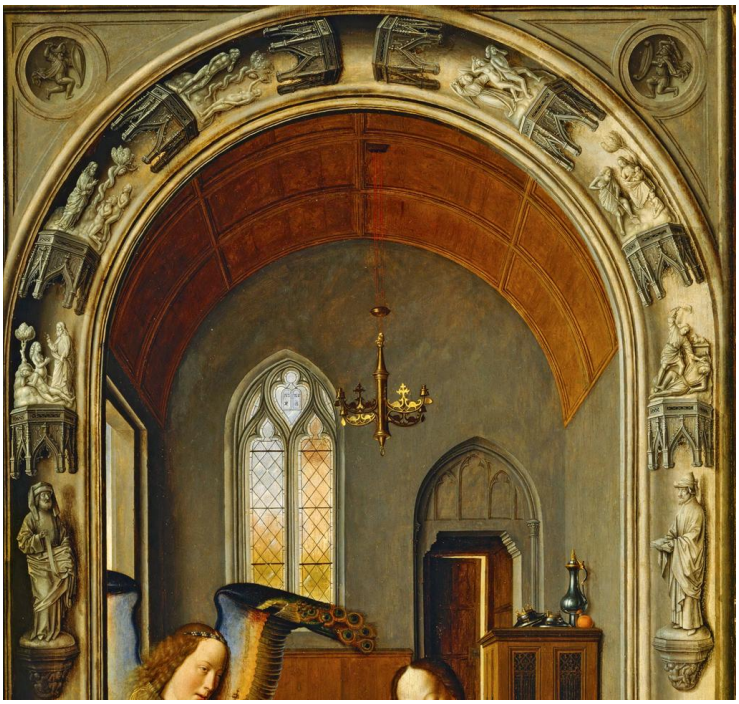

Figure 12: Dieric Bouts, *The Annunciation,* ca. 1445, detail

Figure 13: Dieric Bouts, *The Visitation,* ca. 1445, detail

Figure 14: Dieric Bouts, *The Nativity,* ca. 1445, detail

Figure 15: Dieric Bouts, *The Adoration of the Magi,* ca. 1445, detail

The arrangement of this vital narrative around the infancy stories affirms their great relation to the narrative. The Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, and Adoration, although not representative of every story related to Christ's infancy, successfully encapsulate the beginning of Christ's Incarnation and the role of Mary within it. The *grisaille* statuettes, when considered alongside this role, place the infancy narrative firmly in realm of biblical prophecy and fulfillment. Each panel gains depth of meaning through its juxtaposition with the *grisaille* narrative: In the *Annunciation* panel, the babe that Mary comes to carry in fulfillment of Scripture shall be the new Adam, the healing of the first man's sin. Mary's obedience casts her as the new Eve—a role that has been ascribed to her since Bede's homily on the Visitation, if not before—and through bearing

Christ with her virtue intact she becomes a figure of redemption for women.[25] Her child, then, is shown in the last three panels to grow to be the man that, having been betrayed, tortured, and crucified, has risen again, bringing with him life and hope. In the *Visitation,* the Spirit stirring in John the Baptist and Elizabeth signals the ministry that Christ shall step into and which shall reach its culmination in suffering, beginning with Judas' pact with the Pharisees; just as this initial encounter with John marks the beginning of Christ's life and teaching, the statuettes above mark the end. The *Nativity* similarly relates to its surrounding *grisaille;* whereas the primary subject represents the birth of Christ, the scenes above depict his death—but also his resurrection, which is the new life that all Christians are reborn into. Finally, the *Adoration* displays the first recognition and celebration of Christ's lordship after his birth; the *grisaille* statuettes present the first recognitions of Christ as the resurrected king, lord even of death. The interaction of each of these panels with the *grisaille* therefore relates the infancy narrative intimately to key aspects of the greater biblical narrative, ultimately revealing the infancy scenes to be both a fulfilment of and answer to Old Testament events as well as a foreshadowing of the ultimate hope that is to come through Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. Bout's depiction of the *Visitation,* and indeed the rest of Christ's infancy, is thus far from narrow; instead it incorporates the whole of salvation history, demonstrating the bearing that the events of Christ's early life have both on the Fall and on the life and hope of the Church.

As much as the panels relate the infancy of Christ to the salvation of all Christians through his death and resurrection, there is also a strong suggestion in the painting that Mary is indispensable to that salvation. In a general survey of the painting, the Holy

[25] The Venerable Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels,* 1.4 (Cistercian Publications, 1991), 33.

Mother appears as not just *a* central figure in the altarpiece, but in some ways *the* central figure. No one observing the panels can deny the primacy of her presence; hers is the only constant figure in all four panels, and in each the intense blue of her outer garment contrasts vividly with the greens, reds, and browns of the backgrounds. This reflects in the name this altarpiece has been given. Although the scenes it portrays are representative of those traditionally classified as the infancy of Christ, the work has been overwhelmingly discussed as the *Life of the Virgin.*[26] Why is this? I have already discussed Mary's role as *theotokos* in relation to the incarnation and the Eucharist, examining how she relates to soteriology insofar as her son is the redeemer. Yet the connection runs deeper still, as may be understood from a further examination of the arch motif.

This formal feature does not originate with Bouts. He borrows it from Van der Weyden, who in turn adapts it from a teaching that affirms Mary's role in the lives of Christians as a symbol of the Church.[27] This tradition describes Mary as a door or gate to Heaven, and is deeply tied to her motherhood.[28] St. Anselm of Canterbury illuminates the logic of this concept, explaining that the "Mother of the Justifier was also the mother of the justified."[29] She who is the physical mother of God is also the spiritual mother of the Church; she is the spotless virgin whom the Lord sought as his bride, thereby establishing her as both a model and maternal figure. Christ's words on the cross further

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[26] *Christian Spirituality,* 92.

[27] Caroline H. Ebertshäuser and Peter Heinegg, eds., *Mary: Art, Culture, and Religion through the Ages* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 1998), 232.

[28] Timothy Verdon and Filippo Rossi, *Mary in Western Art* (Washington, D.C.: Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, 2005), 44-47.

[29] *Christian Spirituality,* 401.

support this relationship, for when he says to his disciple, "Here is your mother," the statement is traditionally assumed to apply to all Christ's followers.[30] By the twelfth century, at least among the Cistercians, this motherhood became a place of refuge for the faithful who sought grace and forgiveness. Bernard of Clairvaux outlines his brethren's reasons as thus: Christ is savior, but he is also judge, and therefore strikes fear in sinners.[31] Mary, however, may be regarded for her tender maternity and mercy toward her children in the church.[32] Those who seek her in humble prayer are thereby not only sure of her intercession, but that her intercession shall be heard, for "the Son hears the Mother as the Father hears the Son."[33] In short, insofar as Mary bore Christ into the world she also bears the plight of sinners to her Son; she is the mother of the Church, reconciling her children with God and providing a pathway, a portal, for them to Heaven. This is the active role that in the public mind becomes ground for venerating Mary as *Mediatrix* and *Co-Redemptrix*.

As this tradition gained adherence, it began to find display in religious iconography. The thirteenth century Reims Cathedral in France is perhaps the best known early example of this. Three portals provide entry to the sacred space, each with elaborately carved archivolts. Jamb statues from the life of the Virgin constitute a part of this decoration around the central portal. On the left is the *Presentation in the Temple,* while the right features earlier moments: the *Annunciation* and the *Visitation* (see figure 16). Here, just as in Anselm's and Bernard's teachings, Mary's motherhood is

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[30] John 19:27.

[31] Christian Spirituality, 402.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] *Ibid.*

considered a gateway to the divine. The placement of stories involving her role in the Incarnation—especially the Annunciation and the Visitation—at the central portal emphasize her association with both the coming of Christ and the mediation between sinners and Christ. Just as Christ come through her into the world, so do the faithful go through her to receive him in the Eucharist.

Figure 16 Jamb statues in Central Portal of Reims Cathedral, 13th century

Rogier van der Weyden, whether he had knowledge of the Reims or not, utilizes a similar association with the portals of a church in his *Miraflores Altarpiece*. The painting features three scenes from the Life of Christ, each surrounded by a portal and *grisaille* archivolt like those common in most Gothic cathedrals. That Bouts, who studied Rogier's work, borrowed this motif is undeniable, but his efficacy in doing so is questioned. One scholar claims that Bouts weakens the connection between his arches and church portals by including four portals rather than the three typical to most

cathedrals.[34] Furthermore, he argues that his *grisaille* figures do little to enhance the scenes themselves.[35] To the second claim I have already provided ample refutation, but the first requires some qualification. It is true that Bouts takes a liberty in painting and additional portal. By doing so he certainly diminishes the strength of the Trinitarian imagery of a church façade, and he may demonstrate a degree of thoughtlessness, but it is thoughtlessness in relation to the verisimilitude of the church, not to the symbolism of the church. The pointed shape of the portals and the carefully arranged *grisaille* statuettes each evoke a traditional church archivolt as well as interact meaningfully with the scene it surrounds. That they do not resemble any particular church entry is unimportant; their significance lies in the fact that they do indeed suggest façades, and that within them are depictions of the Holy Mother.

As with Rogier's altarpiece, the Reims portal, and Church tradition, Bout's composition declares that Christ may be found through Mary's motherhood. Yet the message is even more emphatic than the examples of either Rogier or the Reims. Although Rogier depicts the *Nativity,* the *Deposition,* and the *Appearance of the Resurrected Christ to Mary,* he accompanies each only with *grisaille* directly related to its particular scene. Thus the *Nativity* is paired with the life of Mary through to the infancy narrative, the *Deposition* is accompanied by the passion, and the *Appearance* displays other instances of the resurrected Christ revealing himself to his disciples. There is no sense of exegetical connectedness between Mary and biblical history, just of the single narrative arch of the Gospel, with the relationship between Mary and her Son at

[34] Karl M. Birkmeyer, "The Arch Motif in Netherlandish Painting of the Fifteenth Century: A Study in Changing Religious Imagery," *The Art Bulletin* ,Vol. 43, no. 2 (1961), 107.

[35] Ibid.

each major stage. The Reims faces a similar limitation; there is no distinct relation between the jamb statues and the greater narrative. Bout's altarpiece, however, intertwines the iconography of Mary as portal with that of all salvation history, from the fall to the resurrection. It affirms her motherhood and deeply establishes her role in the Incarnation as well as the salvation that the Incarnation brings about. She is the bearer of the Savior, and the mediator between sinners and their Lord. This is seen literally in the Visitation, where it is through encounter with Mary that Elizabeth and John are first stirred by the Holy Spirit to rejoice at the presence of the Lord. Thus insofar as the altarpiece, and especially the Visitation, encourages meditation on the infancy of Christ in relation to salvation history, it also encourages meditation on Mary as portal to that salvation. Her role as Mother of God Incarnate is exulted, and the faithful are encouraged to look to her in seeking Christ.

Bouts' painting is deep and broad. He responds to the demands of his context and the influences of tradition by connecting the infancy narrative to the fundamental devotional issues it bears upon. In his consideration of the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist, between the infancy and biblical history, and between Mary and a church portal, Bouts creates an altarpiece that extends the significance of the Visitation and its surrounding narrative to all of salvation history, upholding the cooperation of Mary in achieving that salvation.

Ghirlandaio

The next painting I shall examine is far less expansive in its interpretive sweep, but is equally attuned to Mary's role as *Mediatrix* and *Co-Redemptrix*. Rather than capture the

significance of the Visitation narrative for all of humanity, Ghirlandaio brings it to bear on a family of a specific patron in fifteenth century Italy.

Born in 1449 Florence as Domenico di Tommaso di Currado Bigordi, legend has it that Ghirlandaio become associated with the family name due to his father's success as a goldsmith.[36] There is no definite evidence to confirm this, but it is, however, certain that from an early age Domenico was immersed in the arts. Like Bouts, his early training is not thoroughly documented. He might have learned the basics of his trade from the workshop of Andrea del Verochio, as much of his work shows that master's influence, but he may just as well have trained under Alesso Baldovinetti or another, so great is the degree that Ghirlandaio's *oeuvre* displays the stamp of his contemporaries.[37] More than anything, this attests to the breadth of Ghirlandaio's education as well as his success at his endeavors. By 1472, at age 23, he had completed his training and was welcomed as a master in the local painter's guild, the Florentine brotherhood of St. Luke.[38] Florence in the fifteenth century was a popular trade center between Provence and the North. Consequently, a steady exchange of ideas and art familiarized tradesmen and artists such as Ghirlandaio with techniques and motifs popular in the Netherlands. Domenico particularly demonstrates a mastering of the Flemish use of lighting and landscapes utilized by Jan van Eyck and his disciples, and he comes to make use of these methods in many of his religious paintings. Furthermore, he adopted the Flemish sensitivity to private devotion that often placed the patrons in the paintings they commissioned, as may

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[36] Andreas Quermann, *Domenico di Tommaso di Currado Bigordi Ghirlandaio: 1449-1494*, Masters of Italian Art (Köln, Germany: Könemann, 1998), 6 ; Gerald S. Davies, *Ghirlandaio* (London: Methuen and Co, 1908), 34-14.

[37] *Ghirlandaio,* 4-14.

[38] *Domenico di Tommaso,* 6.

be seen in much of the work that he did for the Tournaboni family. His success is overwhelmingly evident; his workshop flourished, and he took on a great number of pupils as well as many public and private commissions around Florence. Such is his popularity that he is rumored to have trained Michelangelo, although there is no verification of this claim. What remains certain is that he was an artist of vast training and knowledge, familiar with a variety of traditions and methods and capable of attending to the desires of his patrons.

In 1491 Lorenzo Tornabuoni and his cousin Lorenzo de' Medici commissioned him to create a small altarpiece of the *Visitation* for a private chapel that they had constructed alongside the Church of Castello in Florence, now the Santa Maria Maddalena di Pazzi (see figure 17).[39] This was a Cistercian church, a sect particularly oriented toward the veneration of Mary. The structure originally served as a convent but later was transferred to the monks of Badia a Settimo.[40] In 1448, the monks established a trend for the creation of private chapels adjoined to the church when they encouraged patrons "to construct chapels and embellish the church."[41] That Tornabuoni and his cousin adhered to this advice forty years later is unsurprising as both were known for commissioning large public works, especially Tornabuoni, whose father a decade prior had commissioned a chapel in the memory of his own deceased wife.[42] The Tornabuonis

[39] Jeanne K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 262.

[40] *Ibid,,* 263.

[41] *Ibid,*

[42] Maria de Prano, "Per La Anima Della Donna: Pregnancy and Death in Domenico Ghirlandaio's Visitation for the Tornabuoni Chapel, Cestello," *Viator - Medieval and Renaissance Studies,* Vol. 42, no. 2 (2011), 321.

had also commissioned a *Visitation* from Ghirlandaio before as part of a larger Life of Mary fresco cycle at Santa Maria Novella. In this former painting Ghirlandaio showcases his delicate lighting and mastery of landscapes, but the primary point of interest is the young woman standing to the right of Elizabeth with two other maids behind her. This has been identified as Giovanna degli Albizzi, the young wife of Lorenao Tornabuoni.[43] She had likely died only months prior to the completion of this work in 1488, having had complications in childbirth.[44] Lorenzo was overcome with grief at her death, and commissioned this as well as other portraits of her, one of which he continued to hang in his home even after he remarried.[45] It was in her memorial that he commissioned the private chapel and Ghirlandaio's altarpiece. In all effect, it is a funerary chapel, dedicated to prayer for Giovanna's soul.[46] Giovanni provided all necessities to ensure that this prayer occurred; in addition to establishing the space, he also paid for a predella, backed benches, four candelabras, and vestments, as well masses to be said each week for 100 years.[47] These masses would have been understood to lessen Giovanna's stay in Purgatory and afford her safe passage to Heaven. Such concern for his wife's well-being in the afterlife also provides one explanation for the choice of the *Visitation* as an altarpiece. Any devotion to the Virgin of the Visitation on her feast day on May 2 would have earned indulgences, thereby further aiding Giovanna's soul. The *Visitation* was a

[43] Ibid., 329.

[44] Ibid., 322.

[45] *Domenico Ghirlandaio,* 262.

[46] "Per la Anima," 326. De Prano cites the original contract with the Church stating that the masses were *"per la anima della donna."*

[47] *Domenico Ghirlandaio,* 263.

practical choice for a man whose primary concern was the eternal fate of his deceased wife.

The altarpiece, like most works of its nature, is painted with tempera and oil on a wooden panel. It measures approximately 172 by 165 centimeters. Completed in 1491, it is considered to be one of the last in Ghirlandaio's *oeuvre,* and many scholars contest whether it was actually completed by his hand or by his brother's.[48] The remains of sketches, however, affirm that it is certainly of the master's design, despite any differences that are apparent between it and his former treatment of the theme.[49] Indeed, more than a few reviewers of this painting remark on the abnormality of its composition.[50] Ghirlandaio includes the embrace between Mary and Elizabeth that is typical of the Renaissance, with Elizabeth kneeling even deeper than she does in Bout's earlier work; Mary's colors are also common, as are the tender expressions passing between the two cousins. Yet the remainder of the painting is highly innovative. Whereas the *Visitation* most frequently appears in the North within a landscape and across Europe before Elizabeth's home, here the two meet before an archway that opens unto an expansive city, identified as Rome by the triumphal arch appearing between the women.

[48] *Ghirlandaio,* 127.

[49] *Domenico di Tommaso.,* 129.

[50] *Domenico di Tommaso*, 129; "Per la Anima," 333.

Figure 17: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Visitation,* 1491

Furthermore, although it is typical for Mary and Elizabeth at this point in history to be depicted with companions, they are generally handmaidens or servants. These women are neither. Inscribed above their heads are their names: on the left, Mary Iachobi, and on the right, Mary Salome. There is no other recorded instance of these two women in a *Visitation* panel, and their presence proves at first difficult to explain. According to the tradition found in the *Golden Legend*, they are Mary's stepsisters, born of St. Anne's two previous marriages to Cleophas and Salome.[51] With each husband she had one daughter, all of whom she named Mary, and all of whom figure as mothers of important New Testament figures. De Prado notes that some scholars have consequently proposed two different reasons for their appearance, both of them problematic.[52] First, some suggest that presence of the two Marys in addition to Elizabeth and the Holy Virgin constitutes a variation of an example of the holy kinship theme. This theme was popular in the north throughout the early Renaissance and generally features the maternal ancestry of Christ stemming from his grandmother St. Anne, with each present woman often holding their infant cousin of the Christ child. In no other circumstance, however, is the theme combined with that of the *Visitation,* and none other depicts the women as pregnant rather than with their babes. The second suggestion proffered compares the three Marys of Ghirlandaio's *Visitation* with the theme of the Three Marys at Christ's tomb. This is also not directly evident in the painting, however, as the Holy Mother is nowhere in either canonical or apocryphal texts described as present in that scene. From the paint and construction alone, the iconography of the altarpiece, innovative as it is, proves

[51] *The Golden Legend.*

[52] "Per la Anima," 333.

ambiguous. As with Bout's altarpiece, it is necessary to consider its context to fully understand the interpretation that Ghirlandaio offers of the Visitation.

As the piece was created for Tornabuoni's private chapel, it is first necessary, albeit obvious, to note that those who would have used the artwork were limited to those related to that patron. Whereas Bouts composed his triptych with consideration for the formality of the mass and the theme's application to an almost universal audience, Ghirlandaio sought to relate his piece only to a very specific family. No instruction was necessary in Ghirlandaio's altarpiece, no impartation of specific doctrines for use in public devotion; instead, its aim is private devotion, which in fifteenth century Florence was heavily inclined toward the Virgin and her intercessory mercy. This general trend from within the greater Church flourished in local imagination, where veneration of Mary became the natural recourse of men and women seeking intercession for a variety of reasons, ranging from proximity to death to forgiveness for a particularly grievous sin. Freed from the boundaries of formal church practice, private devotions were flexible enough to account for each of these needs.

In commissioning the altarpiece for the chapel dedicated to his deceased wife, Tornabuoni was sensitive to the Virgin's reputation for mercy, especially her mercy toward pregnant women. His wife had died on October 7, 1488 after complications with her pregnancy.[53] Her death was not uncommon for women in her age: in the mid-fifteenth century, approximately one-fifth of married female deaths were pregnancy related.[54] In the face of such uncertain odds, the Holy Virgin was a regular source of

[53] *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, 263.

[54] "Per la Anima," 322.

hope and comfort for women. Hers was an example of a pregnancy blessed by God; she bore her child without sin or stain, and when she passed into labor, she did so without suffering.[55] As DePrado puts it, the joy and painlessness of her pregnancy and labor "expressed a reassuring and desired ideal."[56] Having experienced a healthy delivery, the Holy Mother offered hope to ordinary expectant mothers. Women commonly invoked Mary when their term was full, keeping tokens of the Virgin close at hand as they endured their pains.[57] Attending women would say special prayers over the laboring women, calling upon Mary's fruitfulness.[58] In life, and in death, Giovanna and her family would have thus naturally sought aid from the Holy Mother of mercy.

Such an understanding of the Tornabuoni purpose in commissioning Ghirlandaio's work illuminates the theme and its unusual iconography. At its most basic level, the *Visitation* is a celebration of pregnancy. Throughout the Renaissance, however, this essence is generally overshadowed by heavy iconography of emphasizing the presence of Christ or John the Baptist, especially in the German lowlands.[59] The Tornabuoni altarpiece counters this trend; the piece stresses *that* the women are pregnant on equal terms with *whom* they are pregnant; the condition of being with child is as an important a subject to the painting as is the fulfillment of prophecy or the promise of salvation through Mary's child.

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[55] "Per la Anima," 331; *The Golden Legend*

[56] "Per la Anima," 331.

[57] Ibid., 332-333.

[58] Ibid.

[59] See Workshop of Raphael, *Visitation,* oil on panel transferred to canvas (Museo del Prado, c. 1519-1520); Master of the Stories of the Baptist, tempera on panel, (Vatican Museums, c. 1450-1475).

The primary indicators of this interpretation are the two Marys. The stance of the Holy Mother and Elizabeth curiously shields their swollen abdomens; viewers only know that they are pregnant from familiarity with the story. Mary Iachobi and Mary Salome, however, are both notably with child. Not only is the former unmistakably round with pregnancy, but both wear the special cloaks proscribed in fifteenth century for expectant mothers.[60] Furthermore, Mary Salome's headdress resembles that of a midwife, thereby inviting a connection between herself and the doubting midwife of the *Golden Legend,* also called Salome, although it is possible that this relation was not intended.[61] According to tradition, both Marys bear sons that become Jesus' disciples: to Mary Iachobi is born James the Less, Simon, Jude, and Joseph the Just, and to Mary Salome, John the Evangelist and James the Less.[62] These are two further examples of healthy, spiritually fruitful births that would have been well known to Giovanna and other women in her generation. Throughout fifteenth century Italy they were prominent saints, almost as familiar to pregnant woman as the Holy Mother.[63] If the Holy Kinship theme may be thought of to apply here, then it is to a slightly different affect than generally sought in such paintings; rather than validate the home and family through displaying the maternal line of Christ's ancestry with all of his playful infant cousins, the Tornabuoni *Visitation* presents several of the same women, but all still in the prenatal stages. The arrangement of the two Marys around Mary and Elizabeth greeting gives affirms and gives blessing to each of their pregnancies. Elizabeth's words, "blessed is the fruit of thy womb,"

[60] "Per la Anima Della Donn," 335.

[61] Ibid., 337.

[62] Ibid., 333.

[63] Ibid., 334.

although most true for the Holy Virgin, are valid for all four of them, for each is pregnant with a son that is destined to experience a healthy childhood and to figure prominently in God's redemption of the world. The nature of their pregnancies further contributes to the significance of this blessedness; the Holy Mother and Elizabeth are both pregnant by miraculous means, for the former is a virgin and the latter was past child-bearing age. Consequently, although their pregnancies represent the ideal, their condition is above that of the ordinary woman. Mary Iachobi and Mary Salome, however, are not recorded to have become pregnant in any way other than the usual course of marriage. Thus their inclusion in the Visitation grouping affirms their natural pregnancies. Overall, the scene provides validity to motherhood, as well as the hope of safety in childbirth, and thus is an obvious devotional subject for expectant mothers such as Giovanna.

Giovanna, however, did not survive childbirth, instead passing away shortly after due to complications. The wholehearted affirmation of pregnancy apparent in the Tornabuoni altarpiece may have provided hope in her life, but what does it indicate in her death? To answer this, one must look again at the context of scene, both physically and compositionally.

As discussed, the painting stood upon an altar in a funerary chapel. This simple fact, when considered alongside the presence of the two Marys, gives greater credence to the comparison of the painting with the Three Marys at the Tomb motif. Here, the Marys are present at the tomb of Giovanna. If their usual appearance is at the resurrection of Christ, then it is possible that their inclusion in the Tornabuoni altarpiece signals a similar hope for the deceased mother. This is further supported in more minor iconography of the altarpiece. In the background a triumphal arch appears between the Virgin and

Elizabeth. This is not a mere historical detail, but a subtle indication of the triumph of Christ over death. Furthermore, the precious stone in the Holy Mother's brooch symbolizes both her royalty and the blood of Christ, spilled for the redemption of sinners.[64] Although the unborn Christ child stirs in her womb, Mary and the rest of the painting leans toward that final fulfillment of Jesus' ministry on earth, when, having been crucified, he rises again from the tomb with joy and glory.

As in Bouts' painting, however, this resurrection hope is mediated through the motherhood of Mary. Positioned as she is within the portico before the triumphal arch, the eye must visually pass her to perceive the symbol of redemption beyond, just as devotionally the faithful pass through her intercession to seek the mercy of Christ. Hers is the pregnancy that shall bring the Messiah into the world, the one who shall eventually conquer death. Through her healthy pregnancy comes eternal hope for all those whose pregnancies prove unhealthy. The arch, just as in Bouts' altarpiece, suggests Mary as portal, or gate: through her this hope comes, and through her motherhood of all the church, through her love and mercy, ordinary women such as Giovanna may have eternal life in Christ.

All of these elements converge in the Tornabuoni *Visitation:* the compassion of Mary, the affirmation and blessing of pregnancy, and the hope of final triumph over death through Mary's son. These are not interpretations unknown to the story, but they are combined uniquely through original use of traditional iconography in Ghirlandaio's altarpiece. The themes of mediation and co-redemption, which are expanded to relate to all Christians in Bouts' triptych, here are applied to the plight of a single woman. The

[64] *Ghirlandaio,* 4*:* Davies identifies the stone as a carbuncle, which is used to designate precious stones especially of the color red in many English translations of the Vulgate.

pregnancies of the Holy Mother, her sisters, and Elizabeth justify the celebration of the pregnancy that ultimately cost Giovanna her life; Mary's intercessory mercy, coupled with the hope of resurrection brought forth through her son, affords Giovanna's family with the faith that the death of their loved one is not final.

Conclusion

The *Visitations* of Dieric Bouts and Domenico Ghirlandaio, although not representative of all portrayals of the theme in fifteenth century art, do demonstrate the breadth to which an understanding of Mary as mediator and cooperator in redemption had influenced popular understanding of the Lukan narrative. These paintings, created for vastly different contexts in geographically separate regions, indicate that the veneration of Mary as *Mediatrix* and *Co-Redemptrix* was not an isolated occurrence. Instead, the practice had spread to such a degree that the iconography of the Visitation shifted to emphasize an active role of Mary in redemption. The Mary of these depictions, although gentle, is no longer the humble servant of the Lord found in Giotto's depiction. Instead she is Our Lady, the Gate of Heaven, the Holy Mother whose mercy and aid any sinner might reasonably seek.

CHAPTER FOUR

Grace and Cooperation: The Visitation and Post-Reformation Soteriology

Context

Fifteenth century Marian devotion continued to develop and expand in local congregations as legends, visions, and the promise of indulgences further encouraged her veneration. The events of the sixteenth century, however, shifted the focus of church practice and teaching from simply the attainment of salvation to the means by which that salvation is achieved. The *Visitations* of Domenico Ghirlandaio, Dieric Bouts, and Giotto existed within a doctrinal framework that assumed human participation to be not only possible, but necessary for full redemption; sinners ought to do penance, seek intercession, and partake in the Sacraments. In following this Christian pursuit of grace, the Virgin Mary was a model and an intercessor, even a co-redeemer, worthy of veneration and extraordinarily significant in the history of salvation. These beliefs found support in the Visitation narrative, and are recorded in the paintings of that scene previously studied here.[1]

Less than one hundred years after Ghirlandaio, however, there was no longer a consensus that ordinary sinful people, let alone the Virgin Mary, could further the attainment of God's saving grace. Martin Luther's challenge to the system of indulgences through the almost mythologized posting of the 95 Theses flowed from a greater undercurrent of thought that eventually found expression in his assertion of *sola*

[1] Luke 1:46-55.

gratia, sola fide: salvation may be found through grace and faith alone, not through any individual's good works.[2] This theme echoed in the voices of many other reformers to greater and lesser degrees. Some, such as Johann von Staupitz, questioned abuses such as the sale of indulgences from within the Church but maintained the validity of the Sacraments as the chief means by which God grants saving transformational grace to the faithful.[3] Others, such as John Calvin, pushed Luther's theology to the extreme implications of double predestination, in which people have no active role whatsoever in the salvific process.[4] Catholic leaders continued to affirm Sacramental theology, but they were unable to reverse the schisms that had occurred; no longer did the Church adhere to a single doctrine of salvation.

Out of this debate were born peripheral disputes that radically altered representations of the Visitation. Luther considered the use of visual church art to be detrimental to faithful worship, as it was popularly abused for the purposes of seeking idolatrous intercession or else for attaining indulgences.[5] Unlike Luther, those in a more extremist camp saw such works to be not just dangerous, but downright idolatrous.[6] These reformers began a movement of iconoclasm that obliterated countless western European religious artworks as well discouraged or even prohibited the creation of

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[2] For an in-depth study of the connection between Luther's 95 Thesis and his primary doctrines, see John Dillenberger, "Setting the Stage for the Image Question," *Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[3] *Images and Relics,* 65.

[4] Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe*, 1st English ed, Christianity and Society in the Modern World (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 60.

[5] *Ibid.,* 5-9.

[6] For more discussion on the reasoning of these iconoclasts, see "Setting the Stage for the Image Question."

religious art in the Alps and German lowlands for centuries to come. This prohibition did not, however, include the circulation of prints and other artworks of mass production. Nevertheless, these etchings were generally produced with crude and literal forms intended to serve explicit didactic purposes, whether as illustrations accompanying Scripture or as propaganda against the Roman Catholic Church leaders.[7] Consequently, there are no Protestant altarpieces of the Visitation to compare with those of Ghirlandaio or Bouts, and of the etchings, only Albrecht Dürer's survived, although his religious stance never fully conformed to that of his hero Martin Luther.[8]

Yet this aversion to religious artwork is not solely responsible for the lack of Protestant depictions of the Visitation. The cult of Mary and the saints found as much criticism in Protestant circles as did the artwork it inspired. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church, explicitly to a certain degree and implicitly to an even greater degree, had traditionally sanctioned and encouraged the veneration of Mary as the Holy Mother of both God and the Church as well as a figure of mercy and mediation, Luther found this reverence to diminish the mediating role that only Christ may claim in salvation.[9] To afford attention to Mary was to deny proper attention to the true Savior, whose grace alone brings redemption. More extreme Protestants almost excluded Mary from teaching; consequently, those few non-Catholic artists who continued to make religious artwork were highly unlikely to paint the images of the Virgin unless for clear instructive Gospel purposes. Thus, aside from Dürer's Visitation woodcut from his Life of the

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[7] *Images and Relics*, 16.

[8] *Ibid.,* 57; Whereas Martin Luther intentionally underemphasized the role of the Virgin, his contemporary Albrecht Durer openly venerated her and continued to create depictions of her until his death; *Ibid.,* 68.

[9] *The Reformation and the Visual Arts,* 36.

Virgin series, no notable Protestant depictions of the theme occurred for the next century, and even his does not reflect any distinctly Protestant sensibilities.

The Roman Catholic Church was not insensitive to the abuses that Luther and other Protestant leaders noted within it. From 1545-1563 Catholic leaders met in a series of ecumenical meetings known as the Council of Trent to address challenges from protestant leaders as well as other internal issues. These topics were discussed with an aim to end abuses while simultaneously affirming integral practices and doctrines. In upholding the role of sacraments in redemption during the 7th session, the Council explicitly declared that "If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary unto salvation, but superfluous; and that, without them, or without the desire thereof, men obtain of God, through faith alone, the grace of justification;-though all (the sacraments) are not indeed necessary for every individual; let him be anathema."[10] Furthermore, in Session 25 on December 4th, 1563, the council reaffirmed the proper granting of indulgences to lessen "temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven," but specifically denounced any abuse of such power for "evil gains."[11] On the same day the council defended the cult of Mary and the saints as well as the use of artwork as an acceptable means of performing devotion; Mary and the saints indeed may act as intercessors, and depictions of them aided their veneration as well as

[10] Council of Trent, Session 7, March 3, 1547, Canons on the Sacraments in general, in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent: Original Text with English Translation* , ed. Henry Joseph Schroeder (St. Louis, Mo.; London: B. Herder Book Co, 1941), 51-53.

[11] Cardinal William Wakefield Baum,"The Gift of the Indulgence", *Apostolic Penitentiary*, 29 January 2000; Council of Trent, Session 25, December 4, 1563, Decree concerning Purgatory: Schroeder, *Canons,* 214.

helped instruct the faithful in correct doctrine.[12] Yet the Council also recognized the dangers of this practice. The Church placed limits on depiction of the nude figure, and subjects contrary to official teaching were condemned. By the seventeenth century, ecclesiastical authors had interpreted these decrees and from them delineated artistic standards that came to define baroque Catholic art.[13] This is debated to be one of the few times that Catholic theology directly influenced both the style and content of artwork in a uniform manner.[14] Baroque painting, elaborate and dramatic in style, nonetheless adhered closely and almost polemically to issues of dogma questioned in the reformation.[15] Mary and the saints were painted with increased vigor, as were themes touching on sacraments and salvation. Those very topics that reformers especially discouraged, including the *Visitation* and its accompanying Marian and salvific doctrines, proliferated throughout Catholic lands.

In this chapter I will examine two paintings representative of the divergent Christian traditions of the seventeenth century: Peter Paul Rubens' *Descent from the Cross* altarpiece, focusing especially on his *Visitation* panel, and Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn's *Visitation*. Both Dutch in origin and nearly contemporary in life, these two painters were raised in opposing faiths that colored their otherwise similar artistic creations. The study of their treatments of the Visitation therefore reveals not only how its iconography had altered since the time of Ghirlandaio and Bouts, but also

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[12] Council of Trent, Session 25, December 4, 1563, On the invocation, veneration, and relics of saints, and on sacred images: Schroeder, *Canons,* 215-17.

[13] Richard Viladesau, "Counter-Reformation Theology and Art: The Example of Rubens's Paintings of the Passion," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 28, no. 1 (March 2012): 29–42, 30.

[14] Ibid., 29. For the opposing side of the debate, see G. G. Coulton, *Art and the Reformation*, Harper Torchbooks, TB 25-26 (New York: Harper, 1958).

[15] "Counter-Reformation Theology and Art," 31.

how interpretation of the story changed in response to the theological debates on salvation and Marian doctrines. Rubens, functioning within the Catholic baroque movement, delivers a *Visitation* that appropriately avoids the *Co-Redemptrix* theme of the fifteenth century while simultaneously proclaiming Tridentine salvation theology; his Virgin, like Giotto's, is a model, this time for the cooperation that the faithful are meant to have in God's salvific plan. Rembrandt, meanwhile, demonstrates a Protestant perspective more akin to Luther's ideas; his Virgin also is model, not of behavior, but of the depth of God's grace for his chosen people.

Rubens

From birth through to his early career, Peter Paul Rubens was well groomed to become a prominent Counter-Reformation painter. Born in German lands and relocated shortly thereafter to Cologne, Rubens and his family were continually seeking refuge from religious turmoil. His family originated in Antwerp, but left before his birth in response to the Eighty Years' War brewing between the Spanish Crown, who won authority over the Netherlands in 1585, and a majority reformed Dutch population that sought independence from Catholic and foreign rule.[16] Following the death of his father, Jan Rubens, his mother took Rubens back to Antwerp where she saw to his Catholic upbringing.[17]

When Rubens came of the appropriate age, he left his classical education and began to apprentice with local painting masters. By 1598 at age 21 he had joined the

[16] Jaap van der Veen, "Politics, Religiou, Economy, and Culture: the Dutch Republic in the Golden Age,"Lene Bøgh Rønberg et al., *Rembrandt? The Master and His Workshop* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2006), 17.

[17] For a more expansive biography, see Susan Lawson's *Rubens* (London: Chaucer Press, 2006).

Guild of St. Luke, a requirement for anyone wishing to sell one's paintings locally. Rubens had internalized his catechism and translated it into his profession. One historian records him as having said, "My passion comes from the heavens, not from earthly musings."[18] In 1600, he left for Italy to study the Italian masterpieces for eight years. This travel brought him into closer connection with the splendidly decorated cathedrals and the work of contemporary baroque painters such as Michelangelo Merisi da Carravaggio as well as the earlier mannerist painters, such as Jacopo da Pontormo. The stylistic influence of such examples may be clearly seen in Rubens' later work.[19]

At the end of his eight years of travel Rubens returned to Antwerp. He did not give any initial indication of an intention to remain there, but the circumstances of the city had drastically changed during his absence.[20] After nearly 53 years of fighting, much of the Protestant population of Antwerp, unwilling to confess the Catholic faith, had fled north to the more tolerant Amsterdam. Others, less concerned with religious freedom, also left; these were primarily those of a political or economic bent that found the structure of the burgeoning Dutch Republic more suitable to their success.[21] This exodus left the population of Antwerp depleted, with tens of thousands fewer residents left to maintain the society and economy.[22] Nonetheless, 1608 saw the hope of Antwerp returning to some of its former splendor; the war was on the verge of entering into the

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[18] Kristin Lohse Belkin, *Rubens*, Art & Ideas (London: Phaidon, 1998), 11-18.

[19] For a greater discussion of these influences, see Lawson, *Rubens*. Suffice for present purposes that Rubens drew inspiration from Baroque painters.

[20] John Rupert Martin, *Rubens: The Antwerp Altarpieces*, 1st ed., Norton Critical Studies in Art History (New York: Norton, 1969), 38.

[21] "The Dutch Republic in the Golden Age," 18.

[22] Ibid., 17.

twelve years' truce of 1609 to 1621.[23] Although this was destined to dissolve into further battle coinciding with the Thirty Years' War, the truce provided a stable environment for the renewal of the arts and trade which Rubens undoubtedly sought.[24] Furthermore, the truce coincided with an offer from the Archduke Albert and Infanta Isabella, the reigning sovereigns of the Spanish Netherlands, for Rubens to become court painter.[25] He accepted the post in 1608, and settled down to a fruitful career.

Despite holding the position of official court painter, Rubens did not receive a great number of commissions from the sovereigns. In keeping with the trend that had been gaining ground since the fifteenth century, Rubens instead created in response to the private commissions from members of the bourgeois: guilds, wealthy merchants, and church dignitaries.[26] The first project offered Rubens after his return to Antwerp was a large altarpiece to hang in the choir of the Church of St. Walburga. He completed the project in just two years; now hanging in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, it features an impressive middle panel depicting the *Raising of the Cross,* which narrative stretches into the left and right panels to show the grief of the women and an apostle, likely John, as well as the preparations for the crucifixions of the two thieves. The painting stands, then and now, as a testament both to Rubens' command of his medium and of the New Testament narrative, and it soon earned Rubens another commission.[27]

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[23] *Rubens: the Antwerp Altarpieces,* 38.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] For discussion on the doctrinal accuracy of the *Raising of the Cross,* see *Rubens: the Antwerp Altarpieces,* 38-42.

According to a history first penned by J. C. Weyerman in 1729, Rubens was approached by Antwerp's *Kloveriersgilde,* the Guild of Harquebusiers only a short time after completing his *Raising of the Cross*.[28] These men asked Rubens to make another altarpiece for the Church of St. Walburga, this time featuring their patron, Saint Christopher. Records indicate that Rubens, in a fit of inspiration, replied, "Very well, sir, then I shall bring together in the painting and in the wings everything that relates to the carrying of the Savior."[29] Rubens did not explain his statement, but proceeded to paint the *Descent from the Cross* and its surrounding panels.

Rubens' precise words cannot be verified, but tangible records prove that the Harquebusiers were indeed responsible for the commission of this altarpiece. Like Ruben's former triptych, the piece features a central panel, two side panels, and, in conformance with the legend, a painting of St. Christopher on the exterior of the panels that shows when the altarpiece is closed. It would seem that spurious as any the legend of the commission may be, the essence of it is correct; a thorough look at the iconography of the altarpiece, beginning with St. Christopher and culminating with the scenes inside, reveals an expansion on the theme of St. Christopher, who in name and action bears the Savior.

With the panel doors shut, the altarpiece depicts the primary action of the legend of St. Christopher, taken from the *Golden Legend* (see figure 18). In the tale, St. Christopher, a giant, frequently bears people across a treacherous river. One night, a small child requests his aid. He picks the child up on his shoulders and, like he had done so many times before, begins to wade across the river. With each step, however, the child grows heavier, until he is too difficult for Christopher to bear. At this point it

[28] *Rubens: the Antwerp Altarpieces,* 63.

[29] *Ibid.*

becomes clear that the child is Christ, and that in bearing Christ, Christopher felt the weight of all humanity.[30] Here, on Rubens' panels, he has shown St. Christopher struggling under the weight of the Christ child, his muscles obviously straining and his brow furrowed with concentration. On the right, the hermit from the legend holds up a lamp by which Christopher and Christ are illuminated. In pain and toil, Christopher carries his burden.

Figure 18: Peter Paul Rubens, *St. Christopher,* 1612-1614

[30] *The Golden Legend.*

Figure 19: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Descent from the Cross,* 1612-1614

On the inside of the altarpiece, the *Descent* occupies the central panel, but does not expand beyond it as the primary subject does in the *Raising* (see figure 19). Here, with masterful treatment of form and color, Rubens portrays the efforts of St. John, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus among others to remove Christ's pale, lifeless body from the cross. The right panel features the *Presentation at the Temple*. Joseph knees before the prophet Simeon, while Mary stands, arms still outstretched, having just passed her child into the arms of the prophet. Simeon's eyes are raised upwards to the heavens, from which an unidentified light falls on the four main figures. Around this grouping several bystanders gather around, but none of their expressions reveal any sort of understanding about the significance of the moment.

Figure 20: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Visitation,* 1612-1614

The left panel, which is of most interest here, displays the *Visitation* (see figure 20). Rubens follows the most common tradition for this scene by placing it in front of Elizabeth and Zachariah's house. Yet there is no embrace, no kneeling, between Mary and Elizabeth; Mary grasps the rail and leans back slightly to manage the weight of her child, and Elizabeth leans forward to just as slight a degree, her right index finger alone extended to brush Mary's abdomen and indicate her knowledge of the babe's identity. They are still, restrained, and grouped in an ordinary setting that could occur anywhere on the streets of Antwerp. Furthermore, no halo crowns either the Virgin's or Elizabeth's heads, no sign of holiness or prophecy marks the figures, although Mary does wear her customary colors of red and blue. Behind the primary women, Joseph and Zachariah engage in conversation, and directly behind Mary a maid carries what are presumably the Holy Virgin's belongings. Her gaze extends outside the painting, meeting that of the viewer's, and, as one critic suggests, challenging the viewer to respond.[31] An initial response is not easy, however; not only is the painting unlike its predecessors, but it does not at first appear to correspond with the other panels.

Examined individually, each of these panels appears incongruent with the rest. Some critics have even noted a distinct difference in style between the central panel and the two wings, using this difference to challenge whether there is truly any uniformity of intent in the altarpiece. Certainly the history of the piece's completion is striking: the *Descent* panel was delivered to the Church of Walburga in 1612, but the wings were not added until February and March of 1614.[32] Some hypothesize that, given the rapidity

[31] "Counter-Reformation Theology and Art," 39.

[32] *Rubens: The Antwerp Altarpieces,* 43-44.

with which the *Descent* was delivered after the completion of the *Raising* in 1611, the former painting must have been made alongside the former; they certainly complement each other in narrative and theme.[33] The other panels then would have been conceived and added later, explaining the difference in compositional format and treatment. There is no way to verify whether this is true, but either way it would not discredit any real unity of thought in the final presentation. Indeed, the wings correspond to each other formally in their use of architectural motifs such as the arch, and across all three panels a similarity and repetition of color palettes binds them together. The greatest unity, of course, is not in composition, or even in narrative, but in theme.

Rubens, a faithful Catholic following in the Baroque tradition of the Counter-Reformation, would almost certainly have been aware of the theological truths that the Roman Catholic Church had been striving to preserve against Protestant movements for the past century. The cries of *sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura* would not have been unfamiliar to the painter, and, as an educated man, he also may have encountered a great deal of the literature, polemical and otherwise, passing on either side of the debates. In adherence to Tridentine instruction, however, Rubens did not shy from presentation of the saints and Virgin, nor did he depict only those Gospel motifs that were without controversy. Instead, at least in this early work, he chose a theme to instruct viewers on precisely what the Protestant reformers deny: the cooperation of human kind in salvation.

This sense of cooperation with the work of Christ in salvation undergirds the entirety of Rubens' altarpiece. Interestingly, Christopher is one of the few saints that

[33] *Rubens: the Antwerp Altarpieces,* 45.

Martin Luther accepted in regular discussion.[34] In *Table Talk,* he writes that the purpose of his story "is to show what the life of a Christian should be, and how it fares with him."[35] Luther notes that Christopher finds the Christ child too difficult to bear, but leans upon his staff, which is God's word, and is guided by the light of the hermit's lantern, which are "the writings of the prophets."[36] Rubens' painting does not directly contradict Luther's interpretation of the saint in and of itself; Christopher, acting as an example to all the faithful, bears Christ on his shoulders, struggling, but managing with aid of the lantern and the staff. In the context of the whole altarpiece, however, the St. Christopher painting cannot be read merely as the burden and comfort of the ordinary Christian. Each panel of the work portrays a saint who bears Christ, culminating in the deposition of Christ from the cross. This association of these panels with the central theme, Christ's death and sacrifice, connects each of their stories with the work of the Savior, challenging viewers to find their thematic relation. In the *Descent* itself one does not find the radiant, victorious death featured in some crucifixions where Christ half appears in glory already. Instead, it is the raw truth of the fullness with which Christ entered into death so as to conquer it. As one critic writes, "We are reminded that this is the 'price' of salvation; it is precisely the real, horrid death of Christ that redeems humanity from eternal death, hence that death is also the sign of the hope for eternity and implies the imperative for viewers to 'bear' Christ in themselves."[37] The purpose of the panel is thus not to show the triumph of Christ's death, but instead the role of the disciples and the three Marys in

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[34] *The Reformation and the Visual Arts,* 34-35.

[35] *The Table Talk of Martin Luther,* 4th Centenary ed., (London: The Gresham Press, 1883), 94.

[36] *Table Talk*, 95.

[37] "Counter-Reformation Theology and Art", 38.

supporting the physical weight of Christ's limp form as well as the spiritual weight of participating in the work of his redemption, both in his death and after it. Ultimately, the stories of the surrounding panels are seen to also cooperate with the work of Christ. Christopher bears Christ on his shoulders just as Christ bears Christopher and all others on himself when he takes sin upon him on the cross; Mary in the *Presentation* offers Christ for sacrifice, just as all Catholics offer him up in the Eucharist with the hope receiving his grace by partaking in his suffering; in the *Visitation,* Mary quite literally bears Christ and furthers God's design for salvation as the direct result of having exerted her will in cooperation with His in her *fiat*. These panels are therefore not dissimilar, but rather joined in a resounding exhortation to the viewer to also participate in Christ's redemptive work.

This, then, is the depth of Rubens' theologically distinct representation of the Visitation. Arranged adjacent to the *Descent,* there is no room for interpreting this depiction along the same lines of those of Bouts and Ghirlandaio. Rubens' Virgin does not beckon the faithful to herself as the *Co-Redemptrix*, but rather directs attention to Christ and her cooperation in his coming. Her downward gaze and left hand, resting gently on her abdomen, quietly direct the viewer's gaze to her pregnancy. The soft glow of light further emphasizes her form, whereas the shadow encapsulates Elizabeth, suggesting that she has already given her greeting, and now Mary speaks the verses of the *Magnificat*: "My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."[38] These words recall Mary's earlier

[38] Luke 1:46-48.

response to the Archangel Gabriel following his annunciation: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word."[39] This is the fiat of Mary, her humble assent to participate in the Lord's Will. This is significant in and of itself, for it perfectly demonstrates the Roman Catholic Church's insistence that the faithful are able to cooperate with God to perform good works that merit salvation. The themes of the altarpiece in its entirety, however, carry the implications of Mary's fiat even further. Her pregnancy is not just a small part of God's overarching design, but rather a primary element in the bringing about of redemption through the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. The surrounding panels of the altarpiece aside, the *Visitation* itself directs the viewer to make this association. Beneath the stairs on which the grouping stands there are two birds, a rooster and a peacock. The rooster signals the Passion with its connection to Peter's denial, while the peacock symbolized immortality in northern renaissance iconography.[40] Furthermore, the grapevine climbing up the wall signifies the blood of Christ's death as well as the wine taken in remembrance of Him during the celebration of the Eucharist.[41] The connection is clear; by participating in God's will to bring Christ into the world, Mary also participates in God's will for redemption through the Passion of Christ.

Rubens thereby upholds Tridentine theology in his representation of the Visitation. He affirms Mary's role in redemption, not as *Co-Redemptrix,* but as an exemplar. Her spiritual assent to bear Christ, proven and recognized in the *Visitation*, demonstrates an active participation in the redemptive work of Christ. Furthermore, it as

[39] Luke 1:38.

[40] "Counter-Reformation Theology and Art," 39.

[41] Ibid.

a model of participation that others may also partake in, as exhibited in the other panels of Rubens' altarpiece. Though none may have her role, all Christians may follow Mary's example and actively conform their will to that of the Lord for the furtherance of their salvation through good works and the sacraments. Such is the answer due the maid who looks inquisitively out from behind Mary. "Will you do as Mary has done?" she seems to ask, to which the faithful may reply, "Behold the servants of the Lord."

Rembrandt

Ruben's depiction of the Visitation is not unique among Counter-Reformation painters, although not all Catholic artists exemplify the Tridentine attitude toward Mariology and Soteriology as well as he does. Among Reformation painters, however, Rembrandt van Rijn and his *Visitation* are unusual, though no less faithful to Protestant theology than Rubens is to Catholic tradition.

Rembrandt was born July 15th, 1606 to a large family in Leiden.[42] Unlike many contemporary artists, he did not have a history of craftsman in his family and so was not raised particularly for the trade.[43] From approximately 1612-1616 he attended a basic grammar school, and then from c. 1616-1620 he was enrolled in a Latin school, where he would have undergone training in Biblical studies and classics. These studies would undoubtedly have had Calvinist flair, as the Dutch Reformed Church was unofficially the state church.[44] Nowhere in law were citizens required to adhere to the Reformed faith, but

[42] Ernst van de Watering, "Rembrandt: a Biography," *Rembrandt? The Master and his Workshop,* 30.

[43] Ibid., 31.

[44] Ibid.

those who did nonetheless held more power as only they were eligible for public office.[45] Later records debate which tradition Rembrandt belonged during his adulthood, but he was almost certainly raised in the Reformed tradition and the Protestant habit of close adherence to Scripture.[46]

In 1620, Rembrandt began his training as an artist. He studied initially under the Leiden painter Jacob van Swanesburgh, and then with Pieter Lastman when he moved to Amsterdam, the most influential city in the arts of the Dutch Republic.[47] Rembrandt excelled in his art, creating portraits and history paintings that earned him a stable living. But these fields did not satisfy him; Rembrandt's most favored subject by far was that of Scripture, and he created countless drawings, etchings, and studies according to his reading of both the Old and New Testaments.

Although Rembrandt's pursuit of religious art was unusual in a Protestant nation, it was not condemned. Seventeenth century Amsterdam was far more tolerant than during the sixteenth century, when iconoclasm was at its peak in the Netherlands.[48] This is partially due to religious freedom supported in the Dutch Republic where there was relative separation of church and state, but it is also due to the diversity in population. By no means was the Dutch Reformed Church the sole option for Dutch citizens; twenty percent belonged to the Lower German Reformed Church, five to ten percent were

[45] "The Dutch Republic in the Golden Age," 19.

[46] For a thorough treatment of the debate regarding Rembrandt's religious affiliation, see Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958).

[47] "Rembrandt: a Biography," 31.

[48] "The Dutch Republic in the Golden Age," 24.

Mennonites, and still others were Lutheran or Catholic.[49] Furthermore, when citizens began to flee Antwerp in the 1560s to avoid the Catholic faith, many others fled for economic purposes.[50] Artisans as well as those with enough resources to commission art left Antwerp, which had previously been a cultural hub, to find new opportunity in Amsterdam. Thus the city was rich with religious and artistic variety, and Rembrandt met little to no opposition in creating his biblical paintings.

In part because of his artwork and the people it brought him in contact with, many doubted that Rembrandt remained in the Dutch Reformed Church after leaving home. Rembrandt frequently mingled with Jewish neighbors and painted subjects favored by other traditions, including the Roman Catholic Church. Despite Protestant concerns of "Mary worship," Rembrandt did not shy from painting the Holy Virgin and her family.[51] Furthermore, he owned a great many prints from Albrecht Dürer, who, as already noted, created depictions of Mary until he died.[52] The greater, and more urgently pressed, objection to his faith is in response to what he did not do rather than what he did do. Following the death of his first wife, Rembrandt entered into an affair with Hendrickje Stoffels as well as fell into bankruptcy. Both of these actions would have been considered sinful in the Reformed Church. These behaviors, however, are not given as evidence of Rembrandt's lack of faith; instead, he is accused for having not been

[49] Ibid., 19.

[50] Ibid., 18.

[51] For a more thorough discussion of Rembrandt's Marian art, see *Rembrandt and the Gospel.*

[52] Christian Tümpel and Astrid Tümpel, *Rembrandt: Images and Metaphors* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006), 133.

summoned to the Church for discipline, as was the practice.[53] No record exists of Rembrandt having undergone censure for either offence, leading many biographers to support their claims that Rembrandt was Mennonite or Anabaptist, but certainly not Reformed. History disproves these arguments, however, as Rembrandt was present as a witness at the baptism of both his illegitimate child and his granddaughter in the Dutch Reformed Church, and his witness would not have been taken into account were he not at least a *liefhobber,* or adherent, of the Reformed Church.[54]

Regardless of Rembrandt's official standing with the Dutch Reformed Church, the true evidence of his faith is not in his records, but in his artwork. Although he embraces religious subjects, including those of Mary and the saints, his paintings display a closeness of attention to Scripture that aligns with Protestant sensibilities, even where it leads him against some Reformed teachings. Furthermore, his later paintings, including the *Visitation,* display a sense of grace far more akin to Luther's teaching of *sola fide, sola gratia* than to Catholic sacramental theology such as that demonstrated in Rubens' work by the same name.

Unlike many similar paintings, Rembrandt's *Visitation* has no record of commission, and may have even been made of the artist's own volition, leaving little context by which to help interpret it (see figure 21).[55] He likely created it during approximately 1640, and certainly after seeing a print made from Ruben's *Descent from the Cross* altarpiece. This and other works from Rubens significantly influenced

[53] For a discussion of Rembrandt's his lack of summons to disciplinary action, see *Rembrandt and the Gospel.*

[54] "Rembrandt: a Biography," 19-20.

[55] *Rembrandt: Images and Metaphors*, 196-197.

Figure 21: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Visitation,* ca. 1640

Rembrandt both in style and in subject, rendering the differences between the two particularly significant.[56] The most immediate departure from Rubens' painting is that Rembrandt created his to stand alone; no other paintings immediately inform the meaning of this *Visitation*. Beyond this, the composition also greatly diverges from most prior depictions of the scene. The format has reversed, so that Elizabeth is on Mary's left, and the home of Zachariah and Elizabeth looms impressively large while the background reveals a sprawling metropolis. Mary appears to have just arrived; a servant girl helps divest her of her traveling cloak, and Elizabeth joyfully embraces her with both arms, seeming to have forgotten about her cane. Beyond them, Joseph leads the animal they traveled with to stable, and to the left Zachariah descends the stairs with the helpful support of a servant boy, his right arm raised as though he is in a hurry to greet his guest. A small dog, common to many of Rembrandt's paintings, sniffs at Mary's dress, and peafowl with their chicks crowd the bottom left corner in front of a vine, symbols again of eternity and sacrifice. The scene is humble, even more ordinary than Rubens' stately depiction. This is not only a greeting that could occur anywhere, but it is gentle, rich with the tender emotion of beloved relatives meeting after a great deal of time apart.

This could suffice for interpretation of the painting but for the ambiguity of the lighting. Darkness enshrouds the setting, with only a subtle golden light cast from the clouds above present to illuminate the quiet scene (see figure 22). Most of the light falls on Mary, who positively glows from behind, while some falls on Elizabeth and highlights

[56] "Rembrandt: a Biography," 38.

Figure 22: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Visitation,* ca. 1640, detail,

her eyes raised toward heaven, as though addressing God, crying, "And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"[57] The rest of the figures, as in Rubens' painting, are in shadow. This light, however, is very different in effect from Rubens'. Though it falls primarily on Mary, it does not reach her face, nor does it illuminate her abdomen. Elizabeth's expression is far more legible than Mary's, which can simply be described as meek. This, clearly, is a departure from tradition, and merits a closer look at Rembrandt's reading of the Visitation story.

Although Rembrandt demonstrates a deep personal attention to the substance of Scripture, his later paintings, including the *Visitation,* suggest some degree of sympathy

[57] Luke 1:43.

with the perspective of the Reformers.[58] Of the most prominent Protestant leaders, Martin Luther by far wrote the most about the *Visitation* specifically. John Calvin glosses Luke 1 in his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, but does not expound greatly on the passage.[59] This corresponds to Calvin's overarching perspective on Mary; he does not deny that she has significance, but he does not give her enough attention to explore that significance.[60] Luther, however, and others following in his lead, held a more defined stance on Marian doctrine. Working within his fundamental understanding that sinful men and women could achieve nothing good apart from the undeserved grace of God, Luther recoiled against any suggestion that Mary could offer aid in the place of Christ; in one sermon, he wrote that if one calls on her, "God does everything and the power is not Mary's."[61] Along these same lines, Luther purposefully underemphasized the greatness of character traditionally assigned to Mary. In another sermon, he wrote, "The saints are given to us as an example not for their deeds but for their faith."[62] Thus Luther speaks of the model of Mary's faith, not the venerability of her motherhood. Commenting specifically on the Visitation, Luther concedes that Mary is indeed first among women for the honor bestowed upon her in bearing Christ, but that the honor ought not lead anyone to specially praise her.[63] Instead, faithful individuals

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[58] *Rembrandt and the Gospel,* 44-47.

[59] Jean Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol. 1, Calvin's Commentaries (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1972), 47-57.

[60] Sarah Jane Boss, ed., *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London; New York: Continuum, 2007), 441.

[61] Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

[62] *The Reformation and the Visual Arts*, 35.

[63] *Reforming Mary,* 5.

ought to praise God for having granted her the grace to bear his Son, for she did not by any means earn that right.[64] Catholic tradition, leaning on apocryphal tales, provides the virtue of Mary's early life as evidence that she alone was worthy of the honor of being the Mother of God. The Virgin's words in the *Magnificat* appear to support this claim: "he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid."[65] It is precisely this verse, however, that Luther uses to support his contrary claim that there was nothing in Mary that commended her for sacred motherhood. He argues that the translation of Mary's words into 'humility' is misleading; humility implies attitude or disposition, which a person might reasonably control. For God to choose Mary in response to her humility would be for her to have deserved grace. A more appropriate translation would be 'lowliness.'[66] Mary did not simply have a modest disposition, but she, like all people, was truly lowly, infinitely small in comparison with the Lord's infinite greatness. When God chose her, he did not do so because she was appropriately holy, but because she was inappropriately ordinary; God granted her the grace to bear the Son of God and Man. Luther concludes that in the Visitation the faithful ought to look to Mary as an example of feminine virtue, yes, but even more so as an example of the extent of God's grace for his chosen servant and the faithful response of praise she offers up to Him.

This distinction between humility and lowliness, so pivotal to Luther's teaching on Mary, helps explain the difference in emphasis between Rembrandt's *Visitation* and that of Rubens. The latter painter, functioning in the Catholic tradition, did not pause over Mary's worthiness for her role, instead accepting the fullness of her virtue; however

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[64] *Reforming Mary,* 7.

[65] Luke 1:48

[66] *Rembrandt and the Gospel,* 46.

lowly Mary might be, her agency is nonetheless admirable, for it is exerted to cooperate humbly with the grace of God. Thus the light falls on her face and form, indicating her speech and will, but her eyes are downcast and meek so as not to draw attention to herself. For Rembrandt, the second approach is true; his Mary is not simply humble, but lowly. Any virtue, any obedience, is not to her credit, but rather to God's, for He gave her the grace to accept her role. This is why in Rembrandt's *Visitation* the heavenly light falls on Mary's back rather than her face; the Lord granted her the honor of bearing Christ; she did not earn it. Furthermore, the light illuminates Elizabeth's upturned expression, just as the Holy Spirit illuminates her understanding in the Lukan narrative. Her words of praise and exclamation are a gift of the Spirit, not a leap of her own intuition. The model that the scene and especially Mary provide is therefore one of God's goodness rather than of the saints'. While Mary and Elizabeth demonstrate Christian charity and humility, the greatest example that they set is faith in response to God's mercy and grace. The faithful may learn from them that all people, like Mary, are lowly, and that it is only through God that any good may occur in and through them.

Conclusion

Rubens and Rembrandt together demonstrate through their *Visitations* how reformation debates on soteriology and Marian doctrines had affected interpretations of the Lukan narrative in art. Representative of Catholic and Protestant perspectives respectively, Rubens and Rembrandt both depict scenes that aim to correct the excessive agency accorded to Mary as *Co-Redemptrix* in previous representations. The two arrive at different solutions, however, according to their traditions' teaching on grace and salvation; Rubens depicts a Holy Virgin that serves as an exemplar of active cooperation

in God's salvific plan, whereas Rembrandt portrays an ordinary Mary whose honor and virtue finds its source solely in the undeserved grace of God. These divergent interpretations of the Visitation signal a schism in Christian understanding of Mary's role in salvation history that mirrors the schism in the Church as a whole. Scripture proclaims that Mary is the mother of the savior, but from the sixteenth century on there is no universal consensus regarding the implications of that role for broader questions concerning Mary and the redemptive process; for as many traditions arise, there are as many doctrines promising an answer.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Over the course of the Renaissance, the rich layers of the Visitation developed and found expression as theologians and painters continually turned toward the story to further understand the Holy Mother and her role in the Christian faith. Giotto demonstrates the early, and still prevalent, tendency to look to Mary as an exemplar in the pursuit of virtue, but he also hints at the place of the Visitation in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and strongly demonstrates the devotional turn toward the Virgin for intercession and mediation. Bouts and Ghirlandaio, painting at a time of rapid growth in the cult of Mary, reveal how this last theme flourished in Christian spirituality, expanding Mary's intercession and role in redemption to a point of near equality with Christ; for the entirety of the church as well as for individuals, Mary became the *Co-Redemptrix,* the active and merciful Holy Mother of not just Christ, but all those who abide in him. In the sixteenth century all of these ideas were challenged as the Protestant reformers as well as the Catholic Church responded to abuses in church practice and teaching. Rubens depicts the Counter-Reformation response: the need to uphold Orthodox instruction on the veneration of Mary as well as cooperation in redemption, but also the need to emphasize the subjugation of Mary to Christ. Rembrandt's *Visitation* responds to these issues through a Protestant perspective; his Mary does not by her own strength participate in redemption, but rather by the grace of God that alone is responsible for her goodness.

These paintings do not exhaust the myriad interpretations of Mary, nor do they represent the entirety of artwork of the Visitation. Furthermore, the theme of redemption in the Visitation does not end with the sixteenth and seventeenth century schisms. Although the celebration of the Visitation has been largely lost from Protestant practice of faith, the feast remains in the Roman Catholic Church and continues to inspire artwork. Arcabas especially, a French painter noted for his transcendental portrayal of goodness, chose the Visitation to relate the delight and celebration of Mary and Elizabeth's relationship in his *La Visitation* and his *La Rencontre de Marie et d'Élizabeth*; here, the joy is a mark of the redemption.[1] These paintings, along with others like it, strike the viewer afresh with the beauty and grace depicted in the works of each of the painters discussed here. Through all the shifts in religion, politics, and culture of the Middle Ages along with the subsequent changes in the perceived significance of the Visitation, the story did not and has not lost its ability, through quiet meditation, to evoke a pious sense of the love, grace, and mystery of the moment of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting, thereby raising the mind in prayer just as Mary is recorded to have prayed, "My soul doth magnify the Lord."

[1] Kirsten Appleyard, "Moi je vis un peu avec les anges": *The Search for Transcendence in the Contemporary Art of Arcabas* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009) 65.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Luke 1:39-56, Douay Rheims 1899 American Edition

39 And Mary rising up in those days, went into the hill country with haste into a city of Juda.

40 And she entered into the house of Zachary, and saluted Elizabeth.

41 And it came to pass, that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

42 And she cried out with a loud voice, and said: Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

43 And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

44 For behold as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.

45 And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord.

46 And Mary said: My soul doth magnify the Lord.

47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

48 Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

49 Because he that is mighty, hath done great things to me; and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear him.

51 He hath shewed might in his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.

52 He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

54 He hath received Israel his servant, being mindful of his mercy:

55 As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.

56 And Mary abode with her about three months; and she returned to her own house.

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