

**THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE *MADONNA LACTANS* IN THE
THIRTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES ITALIAN ART:
LITHURGY AND DEVOTION**

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Introduction

The iconographic type of the Virgin nursing the child is thought to have its origins in Coptic Egypt. The only Gospel with an explicit reference to the breastfeeding of the Christ Child is the Proto-Gospel of St. James, which states that:

‘A short time afterwards that light withdrew until the baby appeared, and it came and took the breast of its mother Mary.’¹

Egypt was thought to be land of the infancy of Christ, as narrated in this Apocryphal Gospel, which is thought to be a widespread text in Egypt from the third century.² The most ancient examples of this type that survived until our times are two mural paintings found in the Monastery of St. Jeremiah in Saqqara, dating from the sixth century. Further examples were found in the semi-dome of the Red Monastery, in two Fayum bas-reliefs dating from the sixth to the eight centuries. In monasteries in the Sinai, some icons have been found representing the *Galaktotrophousa* dating from the twelfth century.

The Coptic Church of Alexandria has historically devoted special attention to the figure of the Virgin Mary, defending her as *Theotokos*³ in the Councils of Ephesus and Nicaea. During the Council of Ephesus (431) Cyril of Alexandria was one of the staunchest opponents to the Nestorian heresy.⁴ In his discourse on *Mary Theotokos*, he emphasised the perfect union between the divinity and the humanity in Christ, and the essential role of Mary in this process:

‘He stretched out his hand, He took thy breast, and He drew into His mouth the milk which was sweeter than manna. The savour of thy sacrifice was sweeter unto Him than the savour of the sacrifice of Noah. Having drunk from thy spotless breasts He

¹ Protoevangelium of St. James 19:1-2

² The eldest version of this Gospel which survived until the present day is the Papyrus Bodmer V, dated in the 3rd century, found in Egypt in 1952. The text however testifies to a very advanced stage of secondary expansions and sometimes also of secondary readings, demonstrating that it was a widespread text already in the 3rd century. See E. Hennecke in *New Testament Apocrypha*, p. 384

³ That is mother of the divine and mortal nature of Christ, and not just *Christotokos*, as defended by Nestorius.

⁴ A. Hamilton, *The Copts and the West 1439-1822*, (Oxford: 2006), p.15

called thee 'my mother'. ... She worshipped Him, for when she used to give Him her breast she bowed down her head toward Him. Whilst He stood up like a tower.'⁵

The orthodox rigidity of the Coptic Church of Alexandria regarding the hypostatic union between the Word and the Person in Christ, culminated in the secession from Constantinople. Other monophysite churches, such as Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Syrian and the Ethiopian Churches, did not ratify the confession of Chalcedonian credo.

Although the existence of icons representing the *Galaktotrophousa* in Byzantium is object of controversy, they were found in non-Chalcedonian areas of influence such as Sinai and Syria.⁶ During the twelfth century the Franciscans and Dominicans travelled to those areas to proselytise, promoting the exchange of religious images.⁷ This might be one of the ways in which this image reached Central Italy, where those orders had a strong influence.

However, breastfeeding is an act inherent to motherhood. It appears since primitive cultures as a symbol of fertility, representing the archetype of the feminine as 'Great Mother'. Since the archaic representations of Gea, as nurturing earth, or the Egyptian Hathor, not to talk about figures with multiple breasts as Diana of Ephesus or the Mexican equivalent Mayauel, the breasts had always been instinctively identified as source of nourishment.⁸ In all primitive cultures examples of female divinities nursing or exhibiting their breast as their main attribute are to be found, because it is a symbol of fertility, and therefore, origin of life. The woman is the vessel through which life comes to earth, and in the case of the Virgin Mary this symbolism became even more important, because in her womb she was carrying the Saviour. Hence, she was not just origin of one single life, but the lives of all Christendom.

As a consequence, it is difficult to assert if the image of the *Madonna lactans* developed from oriental types or if it originated independently as a result of autochthonous

⁵ Discourse of Saint Cyril, 'On the virgin Mary' (Brit. Mus. MS. Oriental No. 6782) 990 AD translated by W. Budge in *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London, 1915) p. 718

⁶ For further information regarding the *Galaktotrophousa* in Byzantium see V. Lasareff 'Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 1938) pp. 28-36

⁷ A. Derbes 'Italy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Byzantine Spheres' in S. Brooks (ed.) *Byzantium: Faith and Power 1261-1557* (New York, 2006) p. 450

⁸ E. Neumann. *The great mother* (New York, 1955) pp. 126-129

circumstances. For example, it is interesting to note that the earliest example ever found of the *Madonna lactans* is the fresco in the Priscilla Catacombs in Rome, dating from the second century, which remains an isolated example in the history of the type.

In this dissertation I shall analyse the development of the iconographic type of the Virgin nursing the Child in Italy from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. This motif became extremely popular in thirteenth and fourteenth century European art, and particularly in Tuscany. The popularity of this type led to the incorporation of the *lactans* type in images which originally did not include this motif, such as the woman of the Apocalypse, and promoted the emergence of new types, such as the Madonna of the Humility.

Before investigating the visual representations, I shall outline the theological doctrines concerning the milk of the Virgin Mary and its relationship to the blood of Christ. Scholastic writers as St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas approached this topic, which in the twelfth century was object of controversy for the new Mendicant Orders. These holy substances were as well present in several mystical writings, stressing the connection with the Redemption of Humanity.

Subsequently, I shall investigate the use of this iconography in the Manuscript tradition of the thirteenth century, as images that still conveyed the complex symbolism that characterised the arts of the Middle Ages. Afterwards, I will focus on the Sienese type of the Madonna of Humility, which illustrates the new spirituality of the influential Franciscan and Dominican Orders. Consequently, I will approach the use of the *lactans* motif in public and private devotion in thirteenth and fourteenth century Central Italy. Finally, I shall examine the decline of this iconographic type due to the realism in Renaissance art, which was harshly criticised during the Counterreformation.

Blood and milk as substances of Redemption

In order to understand how the image of the Virgin nursing the Child was understood as a devotional image in the course of the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento* it is essential to understand and outline the symbolical meaning of the breastfeeding action and of the milk itself. This chapter will therefore outline the strong connection between the milk of the Virgin Mary and the blood of Christ that were recurrent themes in both the Scholastic tradition and in the theology of the Mendicant Orders.

According to the ideas of Hippocrates and Galen, widespread in the Middle Ages, breast-milk was made from uterine processed blood, which was believed to be the same substance that the foetus was created from during its stay in the womb.⁹ Nonetheless, feminine blood needed to be animated by the active principle that dwelled in the sperm in order to conceive a child.¹⁰ This statement resulted into a theological controversy regarding the Virgin Mary, since she conceived without sin – therefore without a man. However, before approaching this question, one must analyse the symbolical significance of these substances in the Bible and in the Medieval literature.

The Leviticus stated that the blood is the location of the soul or *sede animae* and consequently, the substance in which the soul resided, intended not just as principle of life but also in a moralised sense, that is, conveying the sins and virtues acquired during ones life-time.

‘For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life’.¹¹

Accordingly, is through the blood that Original Sin is transmitted, since Eve is considered as the ‘Mother of all Living’.¹² The act of disobedience to God is so grave, that no human being can make such a payment. Indeed, only God *can* resume it, but only human *ought* to make the payment.¹³ Consequently, as Anselm of Canterbury

⁹ Albertus Magnus, *De Secretis Mulierum* (New York, 1992) p. 78

¹⁰ B. Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff, 2006) p. 93

¹¹ Leviticus 17:11 [This quote was well know during the middle ages since it was reported by St. Thomas Aquinas, Robert Grossesteste and Gabriel Biel]

¹² Genesis 3:20

¹³ J. Hopkins, ‘God’s sacrifice’ as in *Human sacrifice in Jewish and Christian tradition* (Leiden, 2007) p. 242

stated, just a God-man can achieve the salvific operation, since in him are condensed the Adamic human nature and the infinite power of God.¹⁴ However, the perfect substance of God cannot operate his incarnation in an impure being, but can do so only from the purest nature in earth. Virginitly was one of the most esteemed virtues in a woman, since it kept the flesh uncorrupted and it was also interpreted as a symbol of obedience to God. Therefore, chastity was intended as a symbol of corporeal and spiritual purity, as stated by St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the staunchest defenders of the importance of virginitly. Therefore the Saviour shall come to the Earth through a Virgin, as was anticipated by Isaiah, who prophesies that a Virgin shall conceive a child called Emanuel,¹⁵ who the Christians interpreted as the Messiah.¹⁶

However the Virgin, although she demonstrated herself humble and obedient in accepting God's will, was born from mortal parents being consequently carrier of blood-guiltiness. Some apocryphal Gospels narrate the miraculous conception of Anne and Joachim, suggesting that Mary was selected by God even before her birth. However, since in the Canonical texts information regarding the infancy of the Virgin Mary was absent, the Patristic writers legitimised her role as bearer of the Lord through the 'Sanctification'. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, who founded his theories in the affirmations of Jeremiah¹⁷ and Luke,¹⁸ the Virgin Mary was sanctified when the Holy Ghost descended into her, being 'full of Grace' and therefore, cleansed of all sin.¹⁹ Indeed, the sinless nature of the Virgin is demonstrated by certain privileges as the one of giving birth without pain, as reported by St. Augustine²⁰ and by the *Meditatio Vitae Christi*.²¹ Indeed, the sufferance during birth is a legacy from Eve to all women due to Original Sin.²² In the Bible, Christ is considered as 'Second Adam',²³ that is the one who brings eternal life to resume humanity and, during the Middle Ages, the same treatment is extended to the Virgin, who is regarded as 'Second Eve'.

¹⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo* (Paris, 1963) pp. 237-244

¹⁵ Isaiah 7:14

¹⁶ Matthew 1:23

¹⁷ Jeremiah 1:5

¹⁸ Luke 1:28

¹⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas III, Q 27, art. 1

²⁰ St. Augustine of Hippo, 'Sermons on the Nativity' (no. 186-187)

²¹ [*The Son of the eternal God came out of the womb of the mother without a murmur or a lesion, in a moment*] *Meditations on the life of Christ*, (Princeton, 1961) p. 33

²² Genesis 3:16

²³ Corinthians 15:22 [For as Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive]

What did the Angel say? He said 'Ave'. Now reverse those letters, and it will say 'Eva'. What does Eva mean? It means woe and suffering. And Ave, what does it mean? *Ab a quod est sine ve*, that is without suffering and without pain. (...) It was a woman who made us fall into death; I said that you are right, but it was also a woman who raised and resurrected us. If Eve fell, Mary was firm and resolute.²⁴

Notwithstanding, there are further factors of decisive importance involved in the Redemption of humanity, such as the concept of Sacrifice. To understand the importance and effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice one has to take into account diverse constituent parts of this process. First of all, God sacrificed himself *voluntarily* as symbol of his *love* for humanity.²⁵ Second, it was an act of *charity*, because God delivered his Son just for the sake of humanity's benefit.²⁶ Thirdly, it was an act of *obedience*, because Christ could have eluded the Passion just by denying that he was the Messiah.²⁷

During the late Middle Ages, with the ever-increasing forms of Marian devotion, all these characteristics were transferred to the figure of the Virgin. She demonstrated to be an example of Christian humbleness and obedience in pronouncing the words 'Here is the servant of God' (*Ecce Ancella Domini*) during the Visitation. Although she knew the fate reserved to her son, she accepted and accompanied him towards the Cross, sharing his sorrow but without trying to persuade him to otherwise. Accordingly with what has been stated, in the Late Middle Ages the Mendicant orders established a parallel between the Passion of Christ and the Passion of the Virgin.

For now truly, the sword of that lance pierced the body of the son and the soul of the mother.²⁸

Blood was thought to be an essential element to create a new body also in a metaphorical sense. Through bloodlines the 'body' of the family is constituted, and in applying the same structure to a larger scale, it is through the 'blood of Christ' that all Christians are united in a collective body.²⁹

²⁴ Benardine of Siena, *Prediche*, vol 2, pp 410-413

²⁵ St. Augustine of Hippo *De Trinitate* IV ; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, Q 47, art. 1

²⁶ Romans 8:32 ; St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Q 47, Art. 3

²⁷ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Q 47, Art. 2

²⁸ *Meditations on the life of Christ*, (Princeton, 1961) p. 340

²⁹ [He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood dwelleth in Me, and I in him] John 6:56

The New Covenant is sealed by the shed blood of Christ during the Crucifixion, and commemorated during the celebration of the Eucharist, when Christ makes himself present through the miracle of transubstantiation. This doctrine was ratified in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, giving a renovated importance to this liturgical ceremony.³⁰ As a consequence of this, the whole of Europe developed a ‘frenzy’ for blood. The cult of the relics of the blood of Christ proliferated, as well as the devotion to related issues, as the side wound and the wounded heart.³¹

In thirteenth century Italy an unprecedented quantity of miracles and visions related to the Blood of Christ took place. One of the most relevant is the ‘Miracle of Bolsena’ of 1263, in which the bread of the communion started bleeding during the celebration of the Mass, thus confirming the miracle of the transubstantiation.³² Accounts of this miracle spread all around Italy, and one year later pope Urban IV established the celebration of the *Corpus Domini* the Thursday after Pentecost.

The miraculous nature of the blood of Christ led to a controversy between the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Some of the writers who took part in this debate were John of Capistrano (1386-1456), Giacomo della Marca (1393-1476), Pius II (1458-1464), Paul II (1464-1471) and Sixtus IV (1471-1484).³³ The blood of Christ was as well a common element in thirteenth and fourteenth century mystical visions, as in the cases of St. Bonaventura (1217-1274), Umiltà of Faenza (1226-1310), St. Margherita of Cortona (1247-1297), Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), Alda of Siena (1249-1309) and S. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380).

In the treatises, the effects derived from the blood of Christ are diverse. First of all, it is spiritual rebirth, because it became spiritual nourishment, through the communion, for those who decide to embrace and grow in the message of Christ.³⁴ Secondly, to take out the sin of the world and so that humanity can reconcile with God. Thirdly,

³⁰ [Jesus Christ, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread being changed (transubstantiation) by divine power into the body, and the wine into the blood]. Canon I, Twelfth Ecumenical Council; Lateran IV 1215

³¹ C. Bynum, *Wonderful blood* (Philadelphia, 2007) p. 3

³² F. Strazzullo, *Il sangue di Cristo* (Naples, 1999) p. 16

³³ Sixtus IV published two *Tractatus de Sanguine Christi* in 1467 and 1472 respectively.

³⁴ For further information see: Terrinca, N. *La devozione al prezioso sangue di nostro signore Gesù Cristo* (Rome, 1969) pp. 91-96

the victory over death, because through this substance God will recognise and resurrect the faithful.³⁵

Although the striking vision of Christ covered in blood during his martyrdom is a common place in devotional literature, the blood of the Redeemer also appears in mystical writings conveying a more complex theological symbolism. Sometimes it is interpreted as nourishment for the soul and source of life. Other times the blood conveys the sufferance of the Passion that is shared by the mystic in the moment of the vision. Notwithstanding, all these properties frequently appear associated to the *milk* rather than to the *blood*, which therefore act as exchangeable substances.

For example, Umiltà di Faenza expresses her aim to ‘drink from the pure blood of the Passion’ because of her ‘desire of fill my breasts with the milk of charity’.³⁶ Angela of Foligno, in her vision, drank the regenerating blood from Christ’s wound, which then insufflated her with religious wisdom.³⁷ St. Catherine of Siena reported a similar scene, but the blood that flowed from Christ’s side ‘tasted like sweet milk’.³⁸ Furthermore, Henry Suso, a German Dominican friar, had a vision of the Virgin Mary in which she ‘allowed him to drink milk flowing from her heart’.³⁹ The Cistercian abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who had a deep impact in Franciscan spirituality, had a vision in which he tasted the Virgin’s milk. While he was praying in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary in St. Vorles at Chatillon-sur-Seine, in pronouncing the verses ‘show yourself as a mother’ (*monstra te essen matrem*) the Virgin pressed milk from her breast towards his mouth, gifting him with religious wisdom.⁴⁰ Indeed, it was St. Bernard who underlined and intensified the idea of Christendom as a unique body in his works through an intensive use of maternal metaphors.⁴¹ The breastfeeding as a loving and caring act, and the milk as symbol of sweetness and tenderness are recurrent metaphors in his writings, and in all the Cistercian, Franciscan and Dominican literature influenced by him.

³⁵ John 6:54 [Whoso eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the Last Day]

³⁶ Umiltà of Faenza, ‘Sermon VI’ as in *Scrittici mistiche italiane*, (Marietti 1988) p.101

³⁷ F. Strazzullo, *Il sangue di Cristo* (Naples, 1999) p. 176

³⁸ As seen in C. Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast* (Berkeley, 1987) pp.180

³⁹ As seen in C. Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast* (Berkeley, 1987) p. 103

⁴⁰ As seen in C. Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast* (Berkeley, 1987) p. 270-272

⁴¹ C. Bynum. *Jesus as mother* (Berkeley, 1982) p. 117

He [Christ] is a father in the virtue of natural creation and of the authority with which he instructs (...) He is a mother, too, in the mildness of his affection. But behold all at once the Holy Spirit was sent from heaven like milk poured out from Christ's own breasts, and Peter was filled with abundance of Milk. Not long afterwards Saul became Paul, the executioner became the nurse, the torturer became the mother, so that you might truly understand that the whole of his blood was changed into the sweetness of milk, his cruelty into loving kindness.⁴²

In addition, the milk is spiritual nourishment for the non-initiates in the mystery of Christ, for those who still need to mature in spirit in order to receive Christ in their lives and fully embrace his message. As used in a famous and popular metaphor of St. Paul:

'Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?'⁴³

St. Augustine used a similar recourse in his *Confessions* to illustrate his conversion to Christianity:

'The comforts of human milk were waiting for me, but my mother and my nurses did not fill their own breasts; rather you [God] gave me an infant's nourishment through them in accordance with your plan, from the riches deeply hidden in creation.'⁴⁴

Furthermore, in the Bible the milk has always been an element associated to fertility and prosperity, in fact, in the *Exodus* the Promised Land is described as an endless source of 'milk and honey'.⁴⁵ In several passages of the Old Testament, milk is also offered as a gesture of warm welcoming, when Hosea reports that the 'ungrateful sons of Israel' should be punished with 'breasts without milk', in this case it is a clear symbol of dearth.⁴⁶ In the literature of the late Middle Ages milk, as in the Bible, is seen as a precious substance, but with a stronger spiritual connotation. In both the mystical writings and in the preaching milk is 'spiritual nourishment', the gift of faith given by Christ. For example, Catherine of Siena refers to the blood of Christ as an

⁴² G. d'Igny, 'Second sermon for SS Peter and Paul' in *Sermons II* (Paris, 1973) pp. 381-382

⁴³ Corinthians, 3: 1-3

⁴⁴ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* Liber 1:6

⁴⁵ Exodus 3:8

⁴⁶ Hosea 9:14

‘essential milk’ that flows from his breast as milk does from the breast of a caring mother⁴⁷ and that is nourishment that ‘intoxicates the soul’.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola stated:

‘If it is not sure Lord what I have said, or if I did it because of pride, take away from me, o Lord, milk, as the mother does with her son, take away from me the milk of the Scriptures and the milk of Your grace.’⁴⁹

Mary by being ‘full of Grace’ was considered as being gifted with ‘supreme wisdom’, being therefore the only one allowed to share the throne of Salomon with Christ.⁵⁰ Thus, if as stated at the beginning of the chapter the spirit lives in the blood, and the milk is a sort of blood, the milk can transfer the properties of the soul to the breastfed. This idea was deeply rooted in the popular imaginary of the Middle Ages, as demonstrated by theories related to wet-nurses. Furthermore, the milk was thought to be able to transmit the religious identity of the nursing women, as exemplified by medieval stories of Jewish families who did not allow their Christian wet-nurses to receive the Eucharist.⁵¹ Furthermore, Alfonso the Wise and Bernardino of Siena emphasised the importance to have a ‘well mannered and healthy’⁵² wet-nurse because otherwise the ‘the child will acquire those evil customs, which remained impressed in the polluted blood, and consequently, in the suckled milk’.⁵³ Milk was a vital substance for the survival of the new-born. Consequently, when it appears in theological writings, it is intended as the spiritual nourishment for the Christian, which is vital for the survival of the soul.

The thirteenth century was a period of transition between the Scholastic theology and the affective forms of devotion of the Mendicant Orders. On the one hand, the images of the Virgin Mary still conveyed the symbolical complexity of the Middle Ages, in

⁴⁷ St. Catherine of Siena, ‘Letter LVIII to Bartolomea di Savatico’ as in *Epistolario* (Roma, 1940). P. 38

⁴⁸ C. Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast* (Berkeley, 1987) p. 270

⁴⁹ G. Savonarola. *Prediche Italiane* v.III. 2 (Florence, 1935) p. 562

⁵⁰ During the Middle Ages the concept of ‘wisdom’ was related to the one of ‘justice’ as stated by St. Augustine and Gregorius the Great. For further information concerning the Virgin as *sedes sapientiae* see Étienne Catta ‘Sedes Sapientiae’ in *Maria* v. VI (ed.) Du Manoir (Paris, 1971)

⁵¹ P. McCracken. *The Curse of Eve* (Philadelphia, 2003) p. 71

⁵² As cited in P. McCracken, *Ibidem*, p. 71

⁵³ St. Bernardine of Siena as seen in C. Atkinson *The oldest vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London, 1961) p. 60

which she typified an idea, such as the mystery of the Incarnation.⁵⁴ On the other hand, her figure started to be humanised, conveying a plurality of emotions, from the tender mother suckling her child to the pathetic *mater dolorosa* in the deposition from the Cross. In all probability, the progressive humanisation of the Virgin in the arts resulted from the highly emotional forms of devotion propagated by the Mendicant Orders in Italy. Moreover, the poetic movement of *Dolce stil novo* had a notable influence in the aesthetic of the Virgin in which she occupied a dominant position as source of inspiration.⁵⁵ The poems dedicated to the Virgin follow the same pattern as the ‘Courtly love’ compositions, in which the loved woman is praised as incarnation of all virtues, making therefore the loving poet feel undeserved of her love. This sequence has a positive influence on the poet who, inspired by all the virtues of the ‘Kind Lady’, would try to make himself worthy of her regard. Religious poetry followed similar patterns, but stressed more her role as suffering mother to enhance piety:

Son, with happy eyes / son, why do you not reply? / son why do you hide / from the bosom that nursed you? ⁵⁶

With the development of Franciscan devotion the Virgin Mary became mother of all humanity. As stated by St. Anthony of Padua, the Virgin went through a second and painful engenderment during the Passion of Christ, where she became mother of humanity.⁵⁷ Consequently, as a follower of Bonaventura resumed, ‘we have three advocates; Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. The first one fights for us, the second one speaks for us, and the third one intercedes for us’.⁵⁸

‘For nine months I carried you / in my virgin womb / with these breast I nurtured you / when you were young / I pray you, if possible / that you revoke your sentence.’⁵⁹

The Virgin, especially in the fifteenth century, is seen as a symbol of the ideal mother and woman rather than as an expression of theological doctrines as in the centuries before. This is due to the importance of the *exemplum* in the type of devotion that

⁵⁴ [She seemed to be neither woman nor mother, for she was above the sufferings and joys of life]. E. Male, *L'art religieux de la fin du moyen âge en France: étude sur l'iconographie du Moyen Âge et sur ses sources d'inspiration* (Paris, 1995) p. 137

⁵⁵ D. Mondrone ‘La Madone dans la poésie Italienne’ in *Maria* (Ed.) Du Manoir, v.II, p. 172

⁵⁶ Jacopone da Todi, *Laude* (Rome, 1974) pg. 203

⁵⁷ Anthony of Padua. *Sermoni* (Padua 1895-1903) p. 645

⁵⁸ *Manoscritti francescani della Biblioteca nazionale di Napoli* (Grottaferrata, 1971) p. 704

⁵⁹ Marian Popular Poetry (*Laude*) as reported in D. Mondrone *Ibidem* p. 171

spread thanks to the Mendicant Orders. In order to reach all the different levels in society the Mendicant Orders devised a 'simplified' devotional programme founded on following the examples of the Virgin and of Christ. Therefore, the emphasis was placed on the actions accomplished by them during their lifetime, intended as the perfect *exemplum* of Christian behaviour.

This resulted into a strong emphasis on the humanity of Mary and Christ, the aim of which was to facilitate the empathic reaction of the devotee and to arouse his piety. Therefore the images of Mary nursing the Child recalled this idea of maternity, now extended to the whole of mankind, for whom the Virgin became the *Mediatrix* between the devotee and God.

Images of the nursing Virgin in Manuscripts

This chapter will focus on the images of the *Madonna Lactans* in the manuscript tradition, particularly in psalms and books of hours.

Illuminations of the image of the Virgin nursing the Child are found in French and Anglo-Norman manuscripts dating from the second half of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Most of these manuscripts are psalters or hour books, and the image of the Virgin nursing can be found either in a narrative scene, such as the Nativity or the Flight into Egypt, or isolated. However, during the thirteenth and fourteenth century, a particular typology that unites the figures of the Virgin nursing the child and the Woman of the Apocalypse started to appear in manuscripts from the workshop of Metz.

During the Middle Ages the images of the Virgin Mary gained an ever-increasing popularity, that crystallised in the blossoming of new iconographic types. In the thirteenth century one of the most noteworthy was the Virgin as Mediatrix, hence subordinated to Christ, but still influential in the Redemption of Humanity. Through her maternal rights, she can obtain from Christ whatever she desires.⁶⁰ Therefore, due to the humble and benign nature of the Virgin, the devotee trusts in her protection.

Although the identification between the Virgin Mary and the Woman of the Apocalypse does not appear in any of the canonical or apocryphal Gospels, it is a recurring motive in some exegetical writings. As for example Saint Epiphanius (b. 315), in his work *Panarion*, who when discussing the disputed question regarding the death of the Virgin hypothesises that she may have been exempt from death and identifies her with the woman clothed with the sun found in the book of Revelations.⁶¹ Indeed, the identification between these two figures was so rooted in the popular imaginary that French Apocalypse poems composed between 1225-1300, that when narrating this passage of the Apocalypse poets referred to the new-born as '*le fiz Sainte*

⁶⁰ H. Graef, *Mary, a History of doctrine and devotion* (London, 1963) V.I p. 226

⁶¹ B.J. Le Frois, *The Woman Clothed with the Sun (Ap. 12)*, (Rome, 1954) p. 42

Marie'.⁶² Consequently, several illuminations of the Virgin of the Apocalypse are found in French manuscripts of this period.

Nonetheless, the inclusion of the breastfeeding motif in the apocalyptic iconographic type originated from the Metz workshop in the first half of the fourteenth century. Several books of hours represented the Virgin nursing the Child with the 'crown of twelve stars and the moon at her feet' characteristic attributes of the Woman of the Apocalypse. These kinds of illuminations are always placed at the beginning of the Marian-Infancy cycle, a place traditionally reserved to the representations of the Annunciation.⁶³ For example, in the MS 657 of Yale there is combined image, first representing the Virgin of the Apocalypse nursing the Child (in the 20v) followed, in the folio immediately after, by a depiction of the Annunciation (in the 21r). The combination of both images, the Virgin of the Apocalypse and the Annunciation, stress the crucial maternal relationship with Christ in her role as Co-Redemptrix. The



Book of Hours, Metz Workshop, c.1350
MS 657, fol. 20v, Beinecke Rare Book and
Manuscript Library

Benedictine abbot Guibert of Nogent profusely developed this idea, asserting that without the Incarnation of Christ the Redemption of Humanity would not have been possible, and therefore, the Virgin must be considered as a crucial figure in this process.⁶⁴ Indeed, in his writings we can find several references to the Virgin as *Salvatricem*.

In the same way, Geoffrey of Vendôme approached the role of the Virgin as intermediary in the Redemption, and concluded that she obtained the power to intercede in front of God thanks to her maternal role.⁶⁵

The breastfeeding motif served to enhance the maternal relationship of the Virgin and Christ, as exemplified by Ernardus of Chartres, who stated that:

⁶² MS fr. 9574. Paris, Bibliothèque National de France. 13th Century. F. 2119v (For further information see: B. Pitts 'Versions of the Apocalypse in Medieval French Verse' *Speculum* Vol.58, No.1 (Jan. 1983) p.48

⁶³ B. Williamson *The Madonna of Humility*. Woodbridge, 2009. P. 54

⁶⁴ H. Graef, *Mary, a History of doctrine and devotion* (London, 1963) V.I p. 225

⁶⁵ H. Graef, *Ibidem.*, p. 226

‘Mary shows Christ her heart and her breasts ... and not is possible in anyway when (Christ and Mary) come together and plead very eloquently in every tongue, for these monuments of mercy and signs of charity to be repulsed.’⁶⁶

Therefore, the breasts symbolise the maternal love and sacrifice of the Virgin that allowed her to acquire a relevant role as intercessor of humanity. This image became very popular when it was included in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, one of the most read and widespread religious texts, at the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that in illustrations of this same text, dated to the fourteenth

century, Eve is shown nursing her child while spinning and Adam is tilling. In this case since it is represented together with the labours inflicted by God, it must be understood as one of the ‘painful tasks of maternity’. The Virgin, being without sin, did not suffer during childbirth, however she did infinitely during the Passion of the Christ. Therefore, I believe, due to the conception of Mary being the second Eve, as previously discussed, the images of Mary nursing Christ also recall the idea of her sufferance during the Passion through



Speculum Humanae Salvationis
Ms 766, c.1400, The Pierpont Morgan
Library

which humanity reconciles with God. The *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* is a curious method of allegorical exegesis known as ‘typological’ since it compares facts previous to the life of Christ (antitypes) to the events of the evangelic history (types).⁶⁸ The Fall of Eve is always regarded as a prefiguration, or antitype, of the Incarnation of the Virgin, suggesting her role as Second Eve. Moreover, in this kind of manuscripts the type of the Flight to Egypt is connected to the antitype regarding the dream of Nabucodonosor on the statue of Jeremiah. In the *Speculum*, Jeremiah is interpreted as Jesus, and the statue shows the Virgin suckling the Child. As previously stated, Egypt was where it was believed that Christ spent his childhood, and therefore the image of

⁶⁶ As seen in B. Williamson. ‘The Cloisters Double Intercession: The Virgin as Co-Redemtrix’ *Apollo*, Vol. CLII, 2000. P. 49

⁶⁷ B. Williamson. *Ibidem*, p. 49

⁶⁸ P. Perdrizet, *Étude sur le Speculum humanae salvationis* (Paris, 1908), p. 111

the Virgin suckling the Child was a common motif in the arts of the Christian Coptic Church of Alexandria.



Ms Egerton 1066, c.1280
The British Library

The Virgin nursing the Child was included as well in narrative scenes. Some examples are to be found in the MS Egerton 1066 where she is placed in a historiated initial (D).⁶⁹ The initial is divided into two spaces, occupied by the nursing Virgin on top, and Job on the dungheap on the bottom.

The illumination accompanies Psalm 38, a penitential one, in which the devotee begs God to assist him in his weakness and misfortune, and asks for the forgiveness of the sins.⁷⁰ The message of the psalm is, in essence, the same as the one in the Book of Job: the importance of humbleness.⁷¹ In both passages the penitent claims his fear of God's will, while stressing his condition as a creature subjugated to God, and begging for Mercy. The presence of the Virgin in the combined image with Job symbolises the opposite attitude. She, diversely from Job, in her infinite humbleness accepted God's will of being the bearer of the Saviour. The humility of the Virgin is further enhanced by the poor stable as the scenario, and through the nursing of the Child, a widespread motif in the representations of *caritas*. The importance of humbleness is a main topic also in literature, and usually the Virgin is the quintessence of this virtue. For example, in the *Meditatio Vitae Christi* the penitent begs to be blessed by the Grace of God, and therefore be gifted with the virtues of humbleness, patience and benignity.⁷² Subsequently, the servant of God asks the Virgin, how she became so perfect in all these virtues, to which she replied, that it was through penitence and exhaustive prayer.⁷³ The same idea survives in the writings of the Dominican friar Jacopo Passavanti. As stated in his *Specchio di vera penitenza* humility is the main virtue of a Christian, but it is not an inner virtue since it must be acquired through devotion, oration and penitence.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ London, British Library. Ms Egerton 1066 (The 'Egerton Psalter') c.1270-1290

⁷⁰ Psalms 38: 17-22

⁷¹ Job, who had always behaved as the perfect Christian, began to doubt of the mercy and justice of God in losing his wealthy and family, demonstrating himself in last instance, arrogant and weak in faith.

⁷² *Meditations on the life of Christ*, (Princeton, 1961) p. 11

⁷³ *Meditations on the life of Christ* (Princeton, 1961) p. 12

⁷⁴ J. Passavanti. *Lo Specchio della vera penitenza*. Milan, 1808. P. 98 : ' No virtue is comparable to humility. She is the ruler of all virtues: she is the mother of wisdom; she is the foundation of Christian spirituality.'



Ms Harley 2930, c.1275
The British Library

Further examples are the illuminations of the MS Harley 2930⁷⁵, in which the Flight to Egypt with the Virgin breastfeeding the Child decorates again Psalm 38, and the Queen Mary psalter of Isabella of France.⁷⁶ In the latter example, a Nativity with the suckling Virgin accompanies the penitential Psalm 51. In this psalm, the devotee recognises his sins and begs for a ‘clean heart’⁷⁷ and to be delivered from

‘bloodguiltiness’.⁷⁸ Considering that this psalter was intended as an object of private devotion for a woman, concepts as chastity and purity are inevitably more strongly stressed. Hence, in this particular case, the figure of the Virgin breastfeeding can be understood as a symbol of the Immaculate Conception, as well as an example of maternal love.

However, because these illuminations are accompanying penitential psalms, the breastfeeding motif can be intended also in connection with the milk as salvific substance. The identity between the blood of Christ and the milk of the Madonna did not just have a physical dimension, but a sacrificial one too. Although the Incarnation of Christ is the keystone in the role of Mary as intercessor, with the development of thirteenth century ‘affective devotion’ the grief of Mary during the Passion of Christ had an enormous relevance. Her sufferance progresses simultaneously to that of her Son, making in last instance her milk identical to the blood poured during the Crucifixion, hence, fluid of Salvation. This idea is also represented visually in the *Speculum* in an illustration showing the Virgin carrying the Cross and surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, thus underlining and emphasising the shared sufferance with Christ.



Speculum Sancte Marie V'ginis
c.1471, The British Library

⁷⁵ London British Library. Ms Harley 2930. c.1250 – 1300.

⁷⁶ London, British Library. Royal 2 B VII (The ‘Queen Mary Psalter’) c.1310 – 1320

⁷⁷ Psalms 51: 10

⁷⁸ Psalms 51: 14

A later example that perfectly illustrates the relationship between nursing and sacrifice is the Royal Psalter and Rosary of the Virgin dating 1480-1490. This psalter contains three different typologies of illuminations; three depicting narrative scenes of the Passion of Christ, one representing the instruments of the martyrdom of Christ and one *Madonna Lactans*. Moreover, the Psalter includes eight folios completely covered by drops representing the blood of Christ, with marks of wear out, occasioned by the devotional practise of kissing these folios during the prayer. The illumination of the *Madonna Lactans* is the first one to be found in the manuscript (f.2v) and comes with the devotional indication ‘keep before your eyes the sweet image of the blessed Virgin Mary’⁷⁹ that precedes the reading of the codex. Blood was considered as a life-giving fluid and,



Ms Egerton 1821 c.1480
The British Library



Ms Egerton 1821 c.1480
The British Library

after the New Covenant, a substance that guaranteed eternal life to those who had participated of the Blood of the Redeemer through the Holy Communion. At the same time, milk was a fluid related to the concept of life since it flows after giving birth and is vital nourishment for the new born. Moreover, in the devotion of the Holy Blood, Christ is often represented pouring from his wounds milk instead of blood, as well as in theological

scripts. Forasmuch Christ’s bloody sacrifice, though death was implicit, was a life-giving act for humanity.⁸⁰

‘On your altar let it be enough for you to have the representation of our Saviour hanging on the cross; that will bring before your mind his Passion for you to imitate, his outspread arms will invite you to embrace him, his naked breasts will feed you with the milk of sweetness to console you.’⁸¹

⁷⁹ N. Thebaut, ‘Bleeding Pages, Bleeding Bodies: A Gendered Reading of British Library MS Egerton 1821’ *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, no. 2 (2009). P. 182

⁸⁰ N. Thebaut, *Ibidem*. P. 194

⁸¹ Aelrex of Rivaulx as reported by C. Bynum in *Jesus as mother*, 1982. P. 123



Book of Hours Joanna I of Castile, c.1485
The British Library

initial with a man and a woman, probably Adam and Eve among Acanthus leaves (319r), the successive image is a tromp-oil Rosary, framing a strawberry, two lions and vines. The lion has been associated to Christ in the *Physiologus* in which certain characteristics of the lion are



Book of Hours Joanna I of Castile, c.1485
The British Library

The connection between images of the *Madonna Lactans* and the Passion of Christ is emphasised along the fifteenth century. In the Book of Hours of Joanne of Castile, there is a representative example. In the f287v there is a full-page illumination with the *Madonna Lactans* while in the f288r there is a representation of Joanne of Castile kneeling beside her patron, St. John the Baptist, who is presenting her to the Virgin. The sequence of illuminations after this scene are an illuminated



Book of Hours Joanna I of Castile, c.1485
The British Library

compared to events of the life of Christ.⁸² Furthermore, Philip

of Thaon also wrote in his *Bestiary* that the lion represented Christ beyond any doubt.⁸³ Moreover, the lions also appear on the throne of Salomon, which is reserved to the Christ and the Virgin Mary. The strawberry was instead the symbol of the fruitful virginity of Mary. The vines symbolised the Passion of Christ, and the Rosary the Marian devotion. The sequence closes with an image of the

Child seated over a red cushion on the altar, symbol of his martyrdom, holding the *Globo Cruciger*, his symbol as *Salvator Mundi*. Accordingly, the virginal milk that is feeding the Saviour in the first illustration will be transmuted into blood to free the world from sin, as symbolised by the altar where Christ is seated in the last illustration. Only a substance like the milk of Mary, uncontaminated and free from Original Sin, could clean the origin of evil. In addition, most of the pages in between contain representation of the milk thistle or *cardus marianus*, a plant, the

⁸² *Physiologus* (Texas, 1979) pp. 3-4

⁸³ L. Charbonneau-Lassay, *Le bestiaire du Christ*. (Bruges, 1940), p. 98

precious extract of which was used to heal snakebites, being this animal associated to the devil since *Genesis*.⁸⁴



Book of Hours Joanna I of Castile,
c.1485
The British Library

To summarize, all the mentioned examples show that the Virgin is represented suckling the Child as an allusion to her role as *Madonna Mediatrix* between Christendom and Christ. The fact that these kinds of illuminations were used to illustrate penitential psalms reinforces the idea of the Madonna as an intercessor for the Salvation of the faithful. The books of hours were ideated for individual oration, as well as the apocalyptic poems and the books of psalms were used for private devotion. The *Madonna Mediatrix* and the Apocalypse are a *memento* of the judgment that will occur at the end of time. That is why Christians have to go through a phase of remorse, penance and contrition, and beg the Mother of God for commiseration.

⁸⁴ M. Levi-D'Ancona. *The garden of the Renaissance*. (Florence, 1977), pp. 375-376

A Sienese new type: The Madonna of Humility

The aim of this chapter is to understand and outline the origin and evolution of the Madonna of Humility, which often appears with the nursing motive in Sienese painting. This motif rapidly spread around Europe and it is intimately connected to the spirituality of the Mendicant Orders.

In the city of Siena the Virgin Mary occupied an important position in both the religious and political spheres. Although the devotion of the Mother of God was widespread in all Gothic Europe, Siena's Mariolatry was more extended.⁸⁵ Since the twelfth century the main altar of the Cathedral of Siena was dedicated to the Virgin, who was considered the patron of the city during the conflict between the Guelphs (Florence) and the Ghibellines (Siena). After the Sienese victory in the battle of Montaperti (1260) the devotion of the Virgin flourished and she was considered the defender of the city and of the *contado*. In 1310 the *palio*, a special horse race to commemorate the Assumption of the Virgin, was established and regulated by the government. In these years the images of the Mother of God were used to decorate the main public buildings, as the Spedale della Santa Scala (1335) and the Palazzo Pubblico (1311). Siena adopted the Virgin Mary as both their particular Queen and Patron,⁸⁶ as also demonstrated by the fresco representing the *Mestà* by Simone Martini in the Palazzo Pubblico. In this fresco the Virgin is exalted as the heavenly ruler of the city by being positioned over the civic emblems of Siena (the black and white *balzana* and the Lion of the Popolo) and the *fleurs de lis* of the Angevin kings of Naples and France, which expressed Siena's Guelf affiliation.⁸⁷

The importance of the subject of the Virgin in central Italian painting occasioned the blossoming of new typologies, the most popular of which was the type known as Madonna of the Humility, which originated in Siena. This type was ideated in the first half of the fourteenth century, and rapidly spread around Europe, becoming particularly popular in Italy, Catalonia, Belgium, Bohemia and France.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ J. Steinhoff, *Sieneese Painting after the Black Death*, (New York, 2007) p. 119

⁸⁶ D. Norman, *Siena and the Virgin*, (New Haven-London, 1999) p. 214

⁸⁷ J. Steinhoff, *Ibidem*, p. 129

⁸⁸ M. Warner, *Alone of all her sex*. (Oxford, 2013) p. 203

The main characteristic that defines this type is that the Virgin is represented divest of any attribute of her status as *Regina Coeli*, such as the throne or the crown. Instead, she is represented sitting in the floor or on a cushion, sometimes with bare feet, symbol of poorness, and nursing the Child. The representations of the Madonna of the Humility stand out for their austerity, which underline the humble nature of the Virgin Mary. However, it is not just through the lack of attributes that the modest disposition of the Virgin is suggested. As argued by Marina Warner, the act of breastfeeding during the Middle Ages was regarded as indicative of a low social status, thus, the inclusion of this motif enhanced her humbleness and therefore it was a suitable iconographic addition to the Madonna of Humility type.⁸⁹

According to Meiss this type was developed by Simone Martini in Siena, and it widespread around central and southern Italy, as well as in Avignon, since most Martini's patrons were located in these areas, where the progressive style of the Sienese master had an enormous influence.⁹⁰ Meiss believed that the development of this devotional image derived from a narrative scene, such as the Nativity, in recalling the concept of *Andachtsbild* of Panofsky. Consequently, the Madonna of Humility functioned as a counterpart of the *Vesperbild* images, where the maternal joy and tenderness complement the pathetic agony of the entombment.⁹¹ Moreover, Meiss denied the influence of the Metz manuscripts in the development of the



Roberto d'Oderisio, c.1345
Naples, Museo Nazionale di
Capodimonte

Italian Madonna of Humility, and suggested that the type reached France through a group of Parisian painters who were the first to assimilate the Sienese style and iconography.⁹² Williamson stands against this theory, suggesting that the Metz manuscripts had a strong influence on the Italian type as a middle step in its development. Hence, the influence of these manuscripts will explain the presence of the lilies⁹³ in the Naples panel and the motives of the woman of the Apocalypse in

⁸⁹ M. Warner. *Alone of all her sex*. Oxford, 2013, p. 205

⁹⁰ M. Meiss. 'The Madonna of Humility'. *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 18 (Dec., 1936) P. 451

⁹¹ M. Meiss. *Ibidem*, p. 453

⁹² M. Meiss. *Ibidem*, p. 449

⁹³ The lilies were used as *bas-de-page* illustration of the Annunciation, together with the miniature of the *Madonna Lactans* in Metz manuscripts. As seen in B. Williamson *The Madonna of Humility* (Woodbridge, 2009) p. 58



Bartolomeo da Camogli,
c.1346
Palermo, Galleria
Nazionale

Palermo's one and in some exceptional and rare examples in Tuscany.⁹⁴ Van Os instead, defends that the presence of the lilies is due to the development of the Madonna of the Humility from Annunciations representing the Virgin lying on the ground, and not from Nativity scenes, as suggested by Meiss.⁹⁵

Williamson has also remarked that the iconographic complexity of this type roots in the fact that there are several examples of this same image in different areas, which shows substantial variations in the iconography. For example, the inclusion of motives from the Apocalypse in Sicilian examples, or the presence of iconographic elements characteristic of the Annunciation in some representations in Campania cannot be explained as derived from the Nativity or the Flight to Egypt.⁹⁶ Therefore, it is not possible to argue a unanimous function of this type, since every patron and artist would have adapted it to his own personal preferences.

In fourteenth century Tuscany the Mendicant Orders, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans, dominated the religious panorama. Through the simplification in the forms of devotion, based on the imitation of exemplar figures of the Catholic Church and constant preaching, their message broadly extended between all the social classes. The ideas of humility and penitence were at the basis of their moral programme as demonstrated by their texts. Two of the most important are the *Meditatio Vitae Christi* written by an anonymous Franciscan friar and the *Specchio di vera penitenza* by the Dominican preacher Jacopo Passavanti. In the first one the devotee requested to the almighty God to be instilled with 'love for everything he loved and humility, patience and benignity'.⁹⁷ This servant of God referred to the Virgin as the one who 'is full of Grace and all this virtues'.⁹⁸ Thus, she replied to him that she considered herself 'unworthy of the grace of God' and that she just reached the grace of God through

⁹⁴ B. Williamson, *Ibidem*, p. 59

⁹⁵ H. van Os, *Marias Demut*, (The Hague, 1969), pp. 108-109

⁹⁶ B. Williamson, *Ibidem*, p. 20

⁹⁷ *Meditations on the life of Christ*, (Princeton, 1961). p. 11

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.11

‘constant prayer, ardent desire, profound devotion and corporal affliction’,⁹⁹ demonstrating her eternal humbleness in not considering herself different to any other human being, despite being the mother of Christ.

Indeed, as stated by Passavanti, real humility is considering one-self always inferior than the other, despite one’s status or circumstances.¹⁰⁰ Humility is crucial in religious devotion, because just in recognising corruption and evilness as inherent conditions of humanity, the devotee shows that he is aware of his condition and therefore, can avoid living blinded by arrogance and pride. Passavanti’s *Specchio di vera penitenza*, which is a compendium of his preachers and sermons, is articulated in a scale of twelve degrees of humility and twelve degrees of pride. Hence, the devotee can use it as a guide to know if he is acting righteously and use it as a moral manual to improve his religious virtues. Consequently, the more humble the devotee becomes, the more suitable he is to receive the grace of the Lord. As illustrated by the exemplum of the Virgin, since ‘the more Mary sat humble, the more grace she received’.¹⁰¹

Indeed, the fact that the Virgin of Humility is represented sitting in the ground is not casual. According to Isidore of Seville, *humilis* is etymologically derived from *humus*, which means ground, and therefore, it can be understood as ‘bent to the ground’.¹⁰² This definition was quoted with Aquinas, who interpreted it as ‘inclined to the lowest place’ and therefore humility is defined as ‘when a man, considering his own failings, assumes the lowest place’¹⁰³. In his analysis of the humility as a Christian virtue, Aquinas recalls the affirmation of St. Agustin who states that ‘almost the whole of Christian teaching is humility’.¹⁰⁴ In his work St. Agustin defines virginity, not just as a corporal condition, but as a spiritual one since it demonstrate continence and piety, and equates it to humility since it demonstrated the good will to obey and to control the appetites that lead man to sin.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the connection between the Virgin Mary and the concept of humility, even if became popular since the twelfth century, dates from centuries back.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p.12

¹⁰⁰ J. Passavanti. *Lo Specchio della vera penitenza*. (Milan,1808). P. 90

¹⁰¹ J. Passavanti. *Ibidem*, p. 100

¹⁰² St. Isidore of Seville, *Etimologias*. (Madrid, 1982) Liber X 1-2

¹⁰³ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* II-II Q 161

¹⁰⁴ St. Agustin of Hippo *De Virginitate* XXXI and St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* II-II Q 161

¹⁰⁵ St. Augustine of Hippo *De Virginitate* LVII

The suckling motif, which appears in most of the representations of the Madonna of Humility, can be understood as symbol of charity and distinctive of the *contado* of Siena. The breastfeeding is a subject traditionally related with charity and piety, as stated by Valerius Maximus in his *Memorable deeds and sayings*, a recurrent source of inspiration for the artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.¹⁰⁶ The association between breastfeeding and charity was popular in Tuscany, as demonstrated by the sculpture representing *Charity* by Tino di Camaino originally from the baptistery of Florence, in which two children are suckling from a woman. Both concepts are really close to each other, as stated by Saint Bernard, ‘humility is the origin of charity’.¹⁰⁷ Charity was a moral imperative in fourteenth century Italy, since it was regarded as an expiatory act. Practical and visible charity was also a widespread habit, because the pecuniary donation was understood as a penitential and restorative force, and it also exalted the exemplary faith of the donor.¹⁰⁸ Charity’s importance was also consequence of popularity of Purgatory, strengthened especially after the publication of the *Divina Commedia* of Dante and the *Pelègrinage de l’âme* by Guillaume de Deguileville. Thus, in 1343 was registered the first official indulgence for the dead, a process that culminated in 1476 when the Pope Sixtus IV officially extended this benefit to the souls of Purgatory.¹⁰⁹

As explained previously the blood tie between Mary and Christ consents to take out the Original Sin of the world, thus redeeming Eve, ‘the mother of All Living’.¹¹⁰ The concept of the Virgin Mary as new Eve can be traced back to the second century in Iraneus’s writings,¹¹¹ and it reappeared, and later on in St. Agustin, with renovated force in the thirteenth century as testimonies the preaching of St. Bernardino of Siena:

¹⁰⁶ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* (Cambridge, 2000) Liber V

¹⁰⁷ J. Leclercq. *Bernard of Clairvaux*. (Paris, 1989) p.327

¹⁰⁸ R. Swanson. *Religion and devotion in Europe*. (Cambridge, 1995) pp. 206-210

¹⁰⁹ R. Swanson. *Ibidem*, p. 224

¹¹⁰ Genesis 3:20

¹¹¹ [And Eve had necessarily to be restored in Mary, that a Virgin, by becoming the advocate of a virgin should undo and destroy virginal disobedience by virginal obedience]. Iraneus as in J. Pelikan *Mary through the centuries*, p. 43

‘Thus, it is quite evident that every bodily perfection granted the human race in Adam by the Lord was principally given so as to descend through many generations to the Virgin, and through the Virgin Mother to terminate in Christ.’¹¹²



Carlo da Camerino,
The Madonna of Humility with
the Temptation of Eve, c. 1405,
The Cleveland Museum of Art

Due to this privilege, and her humble and benevolent character, the Virgin Mary was considered as the perfect intercessor for humanity. The connection between Incarnation and Redemption is a keystone in Christian theology, because without the presence of Sin the Passion of the Lord would have been worthless.¹¹³ This complex theological articulation is condensed in a Panel of Carlo da Camerino, dated to 1405. The reconciliation of God with the fallen-humanity happens through sharing his divine substance with its creation through the immaculate materiality of the Virgin Mary.¹¹⁴ Therefore the presence in this work of the Virgin nursing, and therefore nourishing

the divinity with her own substance, and the presence of Eve at her feet states her importance in the Redemption of Humanity.

‘That the whole world, after the fall of our first parents, was kept in being by God out of love of the Blessed Virgin.’¹¹⁵

Regarding the suckling motif, it might have conveyed political implications, as well as religious, since it was one of the main symbols of the city of Siena. The city was thought to have been founded by Senus, one of the sons of Remus. That is why Siena adopted the Roman she-wolf-suckling motif, as it’s own civic emblem.¹¹⁶ The same motif survived in the allegory of the *Buon Governo* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico. Williamson suggests that the visual similarities between the

¹¹² St. Bernardine of Siena, ‘On the nobility of the Blessed Virgin Mary’ in *Opera Omnia* (Florence: 1950-1965) v.IX, p. 300

¹¹³ [If there were no sinner / God would not have sent / his only Son to earth / to there be crucified / and Christ would not have resided / in your most blessed womb] *Le opere volgari di Bovesin de la Riva* (Roma, 1941) pp. 51- 52

¹¹⁴ L. Steinberg. *The Sexuality of Christ* (New York, 1983) p. 130

¹¹⁵ St. Bernardine of Siena, ‘On the nobility of the Blessed Virgin Mary’ in *Opera Omnia* (Florence: 1950-1965) v.IX, p. 300

¹¹⁶ B. Williamson *The Madonna of Humility* (Woodbridge, 2009) p. 113

traditional motif of the she-wolf and the *Madonna Lactans* may be the origin of the emotional connection in which the citizens of Siena saw themselves as sustained by the Virgin. Thus taking the place of the Child, as expressed in a traditional Sienese song:

‘You in order to give milk to Siena, deprived the heavenly child of his share’¹¹⁷

Regarding the development of the type in Central Italy, there are several hypotheses. Georgina Goddard King argues that the first example is a panel conserved in Palermo, dated 1346, by Camogli and inscribed ‘Our Mother of Humility’.¹¹⁸ Goddard King argues that this image was developed from illuminations in the Spanish commentaries on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liebana. Nonetheless, this thesis was refuted by Meiss, who argued that in manuscripts the Woman of the Apocalypse was usually represented standing and that the composition is essentially Simonesque in style.¹¹⁹ Indeed, representations of the Madonna of the Humility found in Avignon, Venice, Naples and Tuscany are very similar in style, suggesting the existence of a common prototype. Simone Martini has been generally accepted as the author of that prototype, although no example has survived until today. The only exception is the badly damaged fresco in Notre-Dame des Doms in Avignon, where Martini was working at the end of his life, and would therefore be dated around 1344.¹²⁰ Two other early examples of this type are a panel in Naples attributed to Roberto d’Oderesio, which was conceived as part of the tomb of Giovanna d’Aquino in St. Domenico Maggiore, and therefore dated in 1345, the year of Giovanna’s death. In this panel the Virgin is represented nursing the Child with the inscription ‘Mother of All’ and with the lilies characteristic of Annunciation scenes. In Central Italy the oldest example that survived until the



Lippo Memmi, *Virgin of Humility*,
c.1345, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

¹¹⁷ J. Hook, *Siena*. (London, 1979) p.130

¹¹⁸ G. Goddard King. ‘The Virgin of Humility’ *The Art Bulletin*, n. 17, 1935

¹¹⁹ M. Meiss. ‘The Madonna of Humility’. *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 18 (Dec., 1936) P. 437

¹²⁰ B. Williamson *The Madonna of Humility*. (Woodbridge, 2009) p. 21

present day is the panel currently conserved in the Gemäldegalerie of Berlin. This panel, dated around 1355, was probably made by Lippo Memmi, or some other artist very close to Simone Martini. Consequently, in a period of ten years, examples of the Madonna of Humility in a very similar style are found from Avignon to southern Italy. The hypothesis of a lost work by Simone Martini as the common prototype still stands as the best option for two substantial reasons. First of all, the fact that the earliest examples are found in areas where the Sienese artist was active, as Naples, and where his work had a particular influence. Secondly, because the style, especially in the features of the Virgin, is essentially Simonesque. Simone Martini was an innovative artist, able to combine the rich orientalism of his Master Duccio with the emotional realism of Giotto. Even Vasari agrees with the originality of this painter in saying that he was ‘not very excellent in draftsmanship but gifted with great invention’¹²¹ and he was particularly admired by Ghiberti, who said that he was considered as ‘the best of the Sienese painters because of the great diligence of his delicate images’¹²². Indeed in all the examples the Virgin wears a blue tunic with golden embroideries, and the Child is wrapped in an ochre-orange cloth. In the composition there is a common pattern as well: the Virgin always holds the new-born in her lap with both hands, while bending the head in a tender gesture, while the child grasps her breast with one hand while staring at the beholder with a surprised expression. Regarding the features of the face of the Virgin, the similarities with the *Annunciation* of Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, are evident. The golden lock of hair, the almond-shaped eyes, as well as the well defined oval of the face, and the tight and thin lips are all representative of Simone’s *Madonnas*.

Before the Black Death of 1348 Siena experimented a Golden Age in painting. The generous sponsorship of the Govern of the Nine and the Mendicant Orders promoted the experimentation of innovative artists such as Simone Martini or the Lorenzetti brothers. That crystallised in the development of new forms and the establishment of an artistic language distinctive of Siena and that was imitated all around Italy. However, after the Black Death, most of the first generation Sienese artists had passed away, and the atmosphere in the city after the plague was not artistically encouraging. Therefore, the successive generations of painters just repeated the forms ideated by

¹²¹ G. Vasari. *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori* (Florence, 1987) v.1 , p. 175

¹²² L. Ghiberti, *Commentari* (Napoli, 1947) p. 38

their predecessors, with a special emphasis in those in which the Virgin is represented as a tender mother, ready to intercede on humanity's behalf.¹²³ The new generation of painters was scarcely innovative, but they contributed to the widespread of Sienese painting around Europe. One of the most notable examples of this fact took place when Andrea di Bartolo, son of Bartolo di Fredi, was commissioned in 1394 a large number of Madonna of Humility, all of the same Simonesque type, to decorate each nun's cell in a recently built Dominican convent in Venice.¹²⁴



Andrea di Bartolo, c. 1400
Washington D.C., National Gallery

¹²³ D. Norman, *Painting in late medieval and Renaissance Siena* (New Haven –London, 2003) p. 122

¹²⁴ T. Hyman, *Sienese painting* (London, 2003) p. 124

Images of the nursing Virgin in Sienese and Florentine Altarpieces

One of the most common usages of the *Madonna Lactans* during the Italian *Quattrocento* was in altarpieces, especially in Tuscany. The motif of the lactation is found either in narrative scenes, in the type of the Madonna of Humility, or in a *Maestà*, or enthroned Virgin.

Between the *Trecento* and the *Quattrocento* the altarpiece completely changed its typology. In the *Trecento* the prevailing types were the triptychs and polyptychs, representing one image from the Christological or Maryological cycle, flanked by the representation of Saints in the aisles. However, with the rise of the new architectural theories of Brunelleschi and Alberti, the *pala* or single panel type widespread. The *pala* created a window effect, which respected the order and proportion of the architecture, without breaking the rhythm of the construction in an axial perspective.¹²⁵ Therefore, the *pala* was the most popular typology of altarpiece in new constructions, since it represented the modern style or *maniera moderna*. Consequently, the changes in the typology were made to better embrace this new ideal order, rather than being linked to liturgical issues.¹²⁶

The weaker connection between the altarpiece and the liturgy can be extended as well to the subject of the painting. Although the liturgical ceremony was regulated by Canon Law, there is no explicit reference to the decorations of the altar, apart from the presence of the Crucifix.¹²⁷ The altarpiece was not an essential element for the celebration of the Mass, but merely a convention.¹²⁸

According to the statements of the Synod of Trier (1310) the name of the patron had to be inscribed on the altar or indicated by an image. Nonetheless, the legislation does not seem to have been widely followed in Italy. As Charles Hope has indicated, 'clear indications about the names of the titular saints of altars are often hard to come by,

¹²⁵ L. B. Alberti, *Della pittura*, ed. L. Mallé, (Florence: 1950), p. 70

¹²⁶ C. Gardner von Teuffel, 'From polyptych to pala: some structural considerations' in Os, H. (ed.), *La pittura nel XIV e XV secolo: il contributo dell'analisi tecnica alla storia dell'arte*. (Bologna, 1983), p. 377

¹²⁷ Minor modifications concerning the Eucharistic ceremony can be found in the First and Second Councils of Lyon (1245 and 1272), The Lateran Councils (1240-1245 and 1274) and the Council of Vienne (1311-1312)

¹²⁸ C. Hope 'Altarpieces and patrons' in Verdon, T. (ed.) *Christianity and the Renaissance* (Syracuse, 1990) p. 537

since inscriptions are by no means always present, while the altarpieces themselves frequently depict several saints, without necessarily giving special prominence to – or even including – the one in whose honour the altar was dedicated.¹²⁹ With the increasing preference among patrons for private masses, commonly celebrated in their own private chapel, the altars multiplied.¹³⁰ The fashion of owning an altarpiece spread between the aristocrats and wealthy families of Italy during the fifteenth century. Consequently, the subject of the altarpiece was decided by the owner of the chapel, who sometimes gave very detailed specifications regarding the iconographic program of the altarpiece, as reported in the contracts with the painters.¹³¹ Those altars were rarely used for liturgical ceremonies, thus making their placement behind the altar mainly a convention. Frequently, the altarpieces for private chapels were commissioned at the end of the life of the donor, who probably expected to be buried in that chapel. Therefore, the altarpiece had mainly a funerary function, commonly expressed in the chosen iconography of the altarpiece.¹³² This usage was particularly relevant in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the funerary rituals acquired an unprecedented importance in Catholicism. The Christian would dedicate considerable attention to the preparation for the moment of his death, which surpassed the spiritual dimension, and demonstrated the wish of being remembered after death. Christians would employ abundant time and money in their burial choices. Particularly those belonging to the higher social ranks would request for particular preferences, as being buried close to a particular saint or pay for a sepulchre in a private chapel inside the church, since the proximity to holy spaces was perceived as a sort of divine protection.¹³³ Therefore, the *Madonna Lactans* was a favourite motif in funerary altarpieces, due to her power as Mediatrix. Indeed, the naked breast is a powerful allegory of the sufferance of motherhood, that can be found even in the *Iliad*, where Hecuba shows to Hector the bare breasts with which she nursed him, as a plea to avoid his fatal fate.¹³⁴ In the *Cloisters panel* in the Metropolitan the same idea is

¹²⁹ C. Hope, *Ibidem* p. 537

¹³⁰ J. Gardner 'Legislation and usage' in Verdon T. (ed.) *Christianity and the Renaissance*, Syracuse, 1990, p. 13

¹³¹ C. Hope, *Ibidem*, p. 538

¹³² H. van OS 'Writing a history of Sieneese altarpieces' in *The Altarpiece in Renaissance*, (Cambridge, 1990) p. 25

¹³³ P. Rouillard. *Histoire des liturgies chrétiennes de la mort et des funérailles* (Paris, 1999) p. 42

¹³⁴ The breasts are interpreted as a wound that represents the sacrifice of a mother for her children, starting from the risks and pain in giving birth. In the case of the Virgin the maternal sufferance took place during the Passion of Christ.

present. The Virgin is represented showing her naked breast to Christ, with a group of penitents in front of her. On the other side of the composition, Christ points his side wound in looking at the father, constructing a sort of salvific hierarchy. The work has a double inscription saying ‘My dearest son, for the life I gave you, have mercy on them’ and ‘My Father, save those for whom you wanted me to suffer’. Consequently, the milk of the Virgin is considered as analogous to the bloodshed of Christ, fact that granted her power as intercessor.¹³⁵ In Campania this idea crystallised in the type known as ‘Madonna of the Purgatory’, which derived from the composition of the ‘Madonna of the Mercy’ but with the peculiarity that the Virgin is pouring her milk on the souls of the Purgatory.¹³⁶ The milk of the Virgin was considered as a powerful

symbol of Mercy, and relics containing the precious substance were venerated across Europe.¹³⁷



Lorenzo Monaco, The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin, c. 1370-1425
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

From what has been stated previously, we can deduce that the style and subject of the altarpieces mainly depended from the local conditions and traditions, or the devotional preferences of the commitments, therefore creating a heterogenic panorama. An added problematic to determine the function of the altarpiece is the fact that most of the polyptychs were disassembled, making it really difficult to establish with certainty which was the original composition. Furthermore, frequently the altarpiece would be replaced by a new one, and therefore, changing the original placement.

Nonetheless, the altarpiece was a painting intrinsically related to the celebration of the Mass, and particularly, with the Eucharistic ritual, that took place on the altar. Van der Os suggested in his essay about Sieneese altarpieces, that the altarpiece was understood as a ‘physical framework’ for the ritual.¹³⁸ He defended that this role as ‘scenario for the transubstantiation’ determined the imagery of the altarpieces. As

¹³⁵ S. Ryan ‘The persuasive power of a mother’s breast: The most desperate act of the virgin Mary’s advocacy’ *Studia Hibernica*, no. 32 (2002-2003) p. 70

¹³⁶ For further information see P. Scaramella, *Le Madonne del Purgatorio* (Genova, 1991)

¹³⁷ S. Ryan, *Ibidem*, p. 61

¹³⁸ H. van Os, *Ibidem*, p. 13

stated before, several other factors influenced the motif of the representation, which were not always connected to the Eucharist ritual. Nevertheless, being this the more immediate and instinctive connection between the altarpiece and its function, it is expected and reasonable to find iconographic elements associated to the mystery of the transubstantiation. For example, Filippo Lippi's altarpiece shows the *Madonna lactans* in a landscape, which is a scenario typical of narrative scenes. However, the presence of the saints St. Jerome and St. Dominic contradicts the possibility of defining the scene as a *storia*. Therefore, the image of the Virgin suckling the Child underlines the Virgin's crucial role in the Incarnation of Christ, who was formed from her blood in the womb, and then nourished with her milk during his childhood. The importance of the physicality of Christ is emphasised by the decoration in the *predella*, where Christ is represented in the sepulchre, surrounded by the attributes of his Passion. As Williamson states, in this particular case the Virgin is shown as 'bringing forth and nurturing the Eucharistic body of Christ'.¹³⁹

As demonstrated by the contracts between patrons and artists, there are two main categories in the representations of the altarpieces. They represent either *storie*, as a nativity or other narrative passage, or figures (a single one or a group). The latter traditionally occupied the main panels along the Middle Ages, and the *storie* were mainly used to decorate the *predella*. However, with the developments in perspective during the Renaissance, the *storia* became the main genre in painting, as well as the highest considered one, since the illusion of a fictional third dimension included the spectator as a part of the action. Alberti praised the affective appeal of this genre by saying that 'it holds the eye of the learned and the unlearned alike, delighting the eye of the beholder as it moves his soul'.¹⁴⁰ These theories had a deep inflection in altarpiece painting, since it was considered that *stories* visually engaged the painter, and therefore, invited to interpretation.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ B. Williamson, 'Altarpieces, liturgy and devotion' in *Speculum* v.79, No. 2 (Apr. 2004) p. 385

¹⁴⁰ L.B. Alberti, *De Pictura* (Florence, 2011) II 17

¹⁴¹ D. Rosand, 'Pictorial structure and legibility' in Humfrey, P. (ed.), *The Altarpiece in Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1990) p. 150

Some Tuscan triptychs and polyptychs from the *Trecento* represent the *Madonna Lactans* in the central panel. The large size of the panels suggests their use as an altarpiece in the celebration of the mass. We have stated before the link between the blood of Christ and the milk of the Virgin Mary, which explains the association of this topic with the Eucharistic ritual. Moreover, the importance of the Incarnation of Christ¹⁴² in his role as Redeemer of the humanity during his passion was one of the main subjects discussed in the IV Lateran Council, as well as a controversial topic among Dominicans and Franciscans. The connection between the Eucharist and the breastfeeding of Mary was noted by the Beata Gherardesca, who had a vision during the mass in which saw a group of angels who 'broke the bread of the Eucharist, which they were sacrificing, upon the breast of the Blessed Virgin'.¹⁴³



Agnolo Gaddi, Madonna of Humility, c.1350
Perugia, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo

All these elements made the *Madonna lactans* an appropriate motif for an altarpiece. Although, the *Madonna Lactans* was more commonly chosen for private devotion images, during the *Trecento* and in the beginning of the *Quattrocento*, this image was used in altarpieces. Some examples are the altarpieces of Orcagna (1350, Utrecht), Agnolo Gaddi (after 1350, Perugia), Cenni di Francesco di ser Cenni (Montalbino, 1400), Gregorio di Cecco (1423, Siena) or Bicci di Lorenzo (1435, Casentino). On account of that we can state the use of the type of the *Madonna Lactans* or Madonna of Humility became a popular topic in altarpieces from the second half of the fourteenth century, that is, after the Black Death. During the summer of 1348 the Black Death devastated Tuscany, Florence and Siena lost more than half of their population. The population of



Cenni di Francesco di ser Cenni,
Maria Lactans, c.1400
Montalbino, S.Giusto

¹⁴² [Son of God made flesh by the entire Trinity, conceived with the co-operation of the Holy Ghost of Mary ever Virgin, made true man, composed of a rational soul and human flesh, one Person in two natures] Canon 1, IV Lateran Council, 1225

¹⁴³ C. Bynum. *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Suffolk, 1996) P. 199

Siena was reduced from 42.000 to 15.000 habitants.¹⁴⁴ This fact did not just create an interruption in the artistic panorama, but obliged the new generation to adapt to a catastrophic atmosphere. The consequences of the bubonic plague were not just demographic, but also economic and cultural. As reported by Neri di Donato, the inflation in the prices and scarcity of food, as well as disputes and quarrels, were some of the direct consequences of this catastrophe.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, in the gloomy years following the Black Death, artists did not show the same interest as their predecessors in technical innovations or the beauty of classic sculpture. Contrarily, death pervaded the iconographic programmes, as show by the proliferation of Last Judgements and the inclusion of *memento mori* allegories in the art works.

Therefore, the presence of the *Madonna Lactans* was probably a mean to implore for the restitution of the lost prosperity. Before the Black Death the *Madonna Lactans* was instead only included in narrative scenes of the infancy, as the lateral panels of Bernardo and Taddeo Gaddi.

¹⁴⁴ M. Meiss. *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*. (Princeton, 1951) p.65

¹⁴⁵ Donato di Neri, *Cronache Senesi*. (Bologna, 1939) pp. 633-636

Private devotion: the *Madonna Lactans* as exemplum and protection

The images of the *Madonna Lactans* were also a popular theme in private devotion. Domestic devotional practises were common in the Middle Ages, especially among women and books of hours were one of the most popular objects used in private devotional practises. Nonetheless, these precious objects were unaffordable for most of the population. In addition, they were usually written in Latin, a language unknown to the illiterate masses. However, from the twelfth century Mendicant Orders, in particular the Franciscans, strove to spread forms of devotion accessible to everyone. Private devotion was especially encouraged between women, since they were considered to be morally frailer and mentally less capable than men, and therefore, more inclined to fall into temptation.¹⁴⁶ Images representing saints or other exemplar figures known for their behaviour were considered a useful instrument in meditation. Devotional images illustrated the virtues appropriate for women, especially chastity and obedience, which were thought to have an emotional impact during meditation. For example, the prior Giovanni di Dio wrote a treatise in honesty and decorum addressed to young women. In this book, he explains the importance of having a domestic altar decorated with pious images, as a guide to meditation during oration.¹⁴⁷ With the popularity of private devotional practises the acquisition of a religious image was an act of duty. Pious images had a not just a religious importance, but a social one too. Their presence constituted visible proofs of an inner life, and therefore, indicative of the moral rectitude of the family.¹⁴⁸

Among all the saints, the Virgin occupied an exclusive position. According to Aquinas, between all the levels of veneration, exclusively for her was permitted the *hyperdulia*, which placed her above all the saints and just below the Holy Trinity.¹⁴⁹ The devotion to the Virgin Mary, especially among women, was one of the most active and widespread during the Middle Ages. She constituted an unequalled figure to represent feminine virtues such a humbleness, chastity and motherhood.

¹⁴⁶ P. Tinagli. *Women and the visual arts in Italy* (Manchester, 2012) p. 203

¹⁴⁷ G. da Dio. *Decor puellarum: zoe honore de le donzelle: la quale regola forma e modo al stato de le honeste donzelle*. (Venice, 1471) Book 3, Chapter 2

¹⁴⁸ H. Belting. *Likeness and Presence* (Chicago, 1994) p. 411

¹⁴⁹ R. Swanson. *Religion and Devotion in Europe* (Cambridge, 1995) p. 144

The latter had a special relevance in the fourteenth century, when Mary was not just praised as the vessel through which Christ operated his incarnation, but also in her maternal role. The act of breastfeeding is a caring and instinctive gesture, and a universal symbol of maternal love, that was even narrated in the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*:

‘The infant who was at her breast raised his little hand to the mouth and face of his mother and seemed to implore her to weep no more’¹⁵⁰

The Virgin Mary was not intended just as the perfect maternal example, but as well as protector in issues related to motherhood, as infertility, childbirth and guardian of the welfare of the family. Medieval people exhibited considerable concern about the pain and risks in the childbirth, and the survival of the baby.¹⁵¹ St. Margaret was considered as the protector of women during labour, and Biblical mothers such as St. Anne and St. Elizabeth were invoked in prayers related to conception and fertility. Hence, unsurprisingly Mary, in her role of miraculous mother, would occupy a prominent position in devotional practises related to childbearing and motherhood. Many books of hours included childbirth prayers, invoking the Holy Mothers.

‘For suffering in the childbirth say to the mother: Hanna bore Samuel, Elizabeth brought forth John the Baptist, Anna brought forth Mary, Mary brought forth Christ. Child, whatever you male or female, come forth. The Saviour calls you to the light. Holy Mary bore the saviour, she bore him without pain. Christ was born of a Virgin.’¹⁵²

These prayers were usually inserted in the *matins*, and they were usually accompanied by representations of the Annunciation, establishing a visual precedent for the moment of childbirth, when the woman in labour would recall the image of the Virgin in hoping to receive some divine intervention and be released from the pain of labour.¹⁵³ This is also connected to the idea typical of the Middle Ages when images were considered as a powerful instrument, not just in leading the prayers in private oration, but because of their miraculous properties.

¹⁵⁰ *Meditations on the life of Christ*, (Princeton, 1961) p. 33

¹⁵¹ F. Harris Stoerz ‘Suffering and survival in Medieval English Childbirth’ in Itmyre C. (ed.), *Medieval family roles* (New York, 1996), p.102

¹⁵² Typical peperit or genuit formula for prayers in the childbirth, Sloane Ms 3564, fol55r-v. British library as reported in *Holy motherhood*, E. l’Estrange, p.56

¹⁵³ E. L’Estrange, *Holy Motherhood* (Manchester, 2008) p. 57

The *Madonna del Latte* of Ambrogio Lorenzetti constitutes one of the most beautiful examples of this iconographic type. This master was praised as ‘perfect master, man of great talent, more educated than any other’.¹⁵⁴ There is no information regarding the commission of the artwork, or its original placement, however, the small measures of the panel suggest its use for private devotion. The panel shows the byzantine treatment of the three quarters profile and the golden background. Nevertheless, the image shows a gothic influence in the sharpened frame and the realism in the representation. The position of the figures creates volumetric bodies and enhances the physical and emotional interrelation between the Mother and Child. The new born looks at the spectator with surprise while suckling, while his mother glances at him with protection. Freedberg has outlined the significance of the eyes in stating that ‘in images, their presence enables the mental leap to the assumption on liveliness’.¹⁵⁵ Since imagistic devotion is a visual act, the eyes of the child which gaze at the devotee can be understood as the eyes of God examining the soul of the Christian, and therefore, excite the contrition of the penitent.¹⁵⁶



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Madonna Lactans*, c.1325
Siena, Palazzo Arcivescovile

¹⁵⁴ L. Ghiberti, *Commentari* (Napoli, 1947) p. 38

¹⁵⁵ D. Freedberg, *The power of images* (Chicago, 1989) p. 202

¹⁵⁶ M. Holmes. *The Miraculous image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven – London, 2013) p.185

The *Madonna Lactans* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the development and the modifications of the iconographic type of the *Madonna Lactans* in Italy between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, by taking into consideration the changes in the artistic practice and the effects of the Counterreformation.

When analysing the *Madonna Lactans* in the Italian art of this period one must take into consideration the stylistic changes, which resulted in the fact that a fifteenth-century Madonna of this type could present to the viewer a breast that was anatomically correct and extremely natural looking. The radical changes in the artistic style brought about by painters from the 1400s such as Masaccio, Alberti and Brunelleschi inevitably left a mark on the religious representations, thereby influencing even the way in which the image of the *Madonna Lactans* functioned within the religious culture.¹⁵⁷ Therefore one must bear in mind the erotic implications that may have risen and what effects this could have had on the efficacy of the *Madonna Lactans* as a religious and devotional image.



Lorenzo Monaco, c. 1410,
Brooklyn, Brooklyn Museum of
Art

A starting point to show how the iconographic type of the *Madonna Lactans* evolved in the course of the 1400s is a painting from 1420 by Lorenzo Monaco. In this image we still find the typical characteristics of the iconographic type that was developed in the *Trecento*. The Virgin is breastfeeding the Child and the bosom of the Virgin is partially covered by her veil and drapery and is painted semi-detached from her body at the height of her clavicle; furthermore her breast distorted both in shape and in size. It is interesting to confront this painting with one painted only five years later by Masolino, which instead is characterised by some novelties, since the breast of the Virgin is bigger and is

¹⁵⁷ M. Holmes, 'Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art', in S. F. Matthews Grieco, G. A. Johnson (ed.), *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 169

located in a position that is anatomically accurate. This is probably due to the new found interest in the human body that inspired paintings of the time, as testified also by Alberti in the *Trattato della Pittura* in which he states that human figures should be painted according to the anatomy.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore there is no attempt to cover the part of the body from which the breast is seen as the opening in her robe is decorated with embroidery. However, Alberti also stated that even though nudity was to be considered acceptable the painter must be always careful to follow the dictates of decorum and modesty by covering shameful parts of the body with robes or other parts of the body.¹⁵⁹ This is why probably Filippo Lippi, in the painting for the Novitiate Chapel of the Franciscan monastery in Santa Croce that also depicts a breastfeeding Virgin, the breast is understated as it shown but at the same time covered by both her veil and the hand of the suckling Child.



Masolino, Madonna of Humility, ante 1423, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

As noted by Megan Holmes the subject of the *Madonna Lactans* is not in fashion in the Florentine art between the 1440s and the 1470s, in fact the most avant-garde painters of the period, such as the Pollaiuolo brothers, Paolo Uccello and Verrocchio, do not depict these kinds of scenes.¹⁶⁰ However the religious literature of the period is still interested in the allegorical and religious meanings of the Virgin breastfeeding the Child. An example is the interpretation given by Saint Antoninus of Florence, a Dominican friar, who in his *Summa theologica* interprets Mary's action as a sign of her poverty and humility.¹⁶¹ Then why did the *Madonna lactans* disappear from the arts in Florence for about thirty years? Holmes suggests it has to do with the fact that the naturalism adopted by these painters may disrupt and undermine the religious meaning that these pictures had to convey. The Virgin could not be associated to other contexts in which women were painted half naked or completely in the nude. This was typical of Venus and of the depictions of scenes that were taken from pagan

¹⁵⁸ L.B. Alberti, *Della pittura*, ed. L. Mallé, (Florence: 1950), p.18

¹⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 40

¹⁶⁰ M. Holmes, 'Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art', in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. S. F. Matthews Grieco, G. A. Johnson, (Cambridge, 1960), p. 178

¹⁶¹ Antoninus, *Summa Theologica*, (Graz, 1959) IV 15: 2

mythology and related to amorous conquests. The setting was usually the bedroom, as testified by the *cassoni*, and one cannot forget the erotic impact of these images on the male gaze.¹⁶²



Sandro Botticelli, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned*, c. 1484, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

As a result, painters that as of the end of the fifteenth century chose to depict the iconographic type of the *Madonna lactans* tried not to show too much flesh to avoid impure thoughts. Botticelli, for example, in 1484 when he painted a nursing Madonna for the altarpiece of the Bardi family in the Church of Santo Spirito used Lippi's technique previously discussed, in which the breast is uncovered but covered at the same time. Domenico Ghirlandaio instead, in the painting originally in Santa Maria Novella, which depicts the Virgin suckling with the Saints Dominic, Michael, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, instead tried to underplay the sensual aspect thanks to a series of distancing devices. The Virgin, who is surrounded by angels, is set higher than the other figures present, so that her bare breast is less accessible to the viewer. The Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola is among those who harshly criticized the religious representations that were likely to distract the believer from the spiritual message, and in the *Sermon on Amos* wrote that by depicting the Virgin as a richly dressed woman is a dishonour to God and that in reality she was dressed as a poor woman, while the painters of his time made her look like a prostitute.¹⁶³



Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Virgin and Child with Saints*, c.1490, Munich, Altepinakotek

Therefore on the one hand the naturalisation of the figures in the fifteenth century was deemed as distracting from the symbolism conveyed by the medieval images. However, on the other hand, the fact that the nursing Virgin and Child are strongly

¹⁶² M. Holmes, *Ibidem*, p. 184

¹⁶³ G. Savonarola, 'Sermon on Amos 1496', *Italian Art, 1400-1500: Sources and Documents*, (ed.) C. Gilbert, (Englewood Cliffs, 1980), pp. 157-158

humanised was also read in a positive manner, because it was able to inspire religious thoughts rather than blasphemous ones. With the *Madonna lactans*, the exposure of a realistic breast of Mary highlighted and emphasized the incarnation of Christ, who is represented as a simple child that faces the human need to feed, in a feeling of loving and mutual intimacy with his mother.¹⁶⁴ The child initially does not raise particular interest. Then, with the development of the representations, it became an child grasping with hands the breast of his mother, such as in the paintings by Lorenzetti, Lippi and Botticelli. The humanization of both the Mother and Child promoted a deeper religiosity because it sanctified the act of breast-feeding in which women could identify themselves, and thus could feel emotionally involved. As a result, the more the nursing Madonnas are realistic, the more they could arouse religiosity.¹⁶⁵



Leonardo Da Vinci,
Madonna Litta, 1490, St.
Petersburg, Hermitage
Museum

Painters, in the course of the sixteenth century, tended to depict their figures in a strongly idealised manner. As noted by Rona Goffen, the heroic nudity of the young Christ shown breastfeeding in Leonardo's painting known as the *Madonna Litta* reflects the ideas on breast feeding and on the relationship between mothers and their children.¹⁶⁶ Plutarch had asserted that a mother's love towards her child was enhanced by the act of breastfeeding and the images of a well-fed and plump Child underlined this idea.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, at the time, as testified by Francesco Barbaro in *De re uxoria* of 1415, it was still believed that the milk was good for the child also

spiritually as it contained moral and intellectual ingredients. The iconography chosen by Leonardo, in the *Madonna Litta*, reflects the standardised one of time, in which the breast is seen and concealed at the same time, even though its largeness could have aroused erotic thoughts in the male viewer. Religious subjects that aroused impure thoughts were not uncommon at the time, as testified by Leonardo himself in the

¹⁶⁴ M. Holmes, 'Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art', in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. S. F. Matthews Grieco, G. A. Johnson, (Cambridge, 1960), p. 188

¹⁶⁵ C. Capone, 'La maternità nascosta', in *MEDIOEVO* (Num. 155, Dec. 2009), pp. 30-39

¹⁶⁶ R. Goffen, 'Mary's Motherhood According to Leonardo and Michelangelo', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 20, No. 40 (1999), pp. 35-69, p. 59

¹⁶⁷ Plutarch, 'On Affection for Offspring', in *Plutarch's Moralia*, tr. W.C. Helmbold (Loeb Classical Library, London and Cambridge, MA, 1939), 496

Paragone. Leonardo recalls an incident involving a religious painting he had made for a patron who then demanded he get rid of the religious attributes so that he could kiss it without blasphemy.¹⁶⁸



Michelangelo, Madonna of the Stairs, c. 1490, Florence, Casa Buonarroti

intercession and charity.¹⁶⁹ Instead, in the statue known as the *Medici Madonna* the Child is trying to reach for Mary's breast but she seems to be denying both her breast and her embrace. Interestingly enough it was made for a funerary chapel in the Sagrestia Vecchia in San Lorenzo.



Michelangelo, Medici Madonna, 1521, Moscow, Pushkin Museum

Michelangelo has also addressed this iconography, in sculpture, in two different ways, thus conveying two different symbolical meanings. The so-called *Madonna of the Stairs*, a relief sculpture dating from 1491, shows the Virgin offering her breast to the Child that appears to be asleep. In this case the breast is completely covered by the Virgin's robe and by the Child's head. Since the Virgin is still offering her breast even though the Child is asleep it could be seen as her offering it to the spectator as a promise of her

intercession and charity. Instead, in the statue known as the *Medici Madonna* the Child is trying to reach for Mary's breast but she seems to be denying both her breast and her embrace. Interestingly enough it was made for a funerary chapel in the Sagrestia Vecchia in San Lorenzo. Michelangelo is representing the denial of breastfeeding. The Christ presses his face on the chest of the Virgin Mary, whose body is shown completely concealed by a chiton. The Virgin does not seem willing to offer her breast to the Child, in fact she does not even look at him. The preparatory drawings for the sculpture show that this denial was achieved through various compositions, indeed in the first examples, today at the Louvre and the Albertina, the Madonna is either watching the child or offering the breast.¹⁷⁰ If images such as this one are to be understood as a

¹⁶⁸ Leonardo, *Paragone*, ed. J. Richter, (London, 1939), vol. 1, p. 64

¹⁶⁹ R. Goffen, *Ibidem.*, p. 59

¹⁷⁰ R. Goffen, 'Mary's Motherhood According to Leonardo and Michelangelo', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 20, No. 40 (1999), pp. 35-69, p. 59

spiritual message for the faithful then the Virgin is not only denying her breast to Christ but also to the spectator. Rona Goffen has interpreted this refusal as a denial of mercy and hope that could be read as a foreshadowing of the abandonment of Christ in Gethsemane. However, it could also reflect the deep pessimism that pervaded Michelangelo at the end of his life, and his supposed affiliation to the group of the *Spirituali* during the Reformation.¹⁷¹

The iconography of the *Madonna Lactans* began to fade away and diminish in the late sixteenth century in the years after the Council of Trent (1545-1563).¹⁷² Following the criticism of the Reformers on the sacred images even the Roman Catholic Church took action around the same issue.¹⁷³ Both Molanus and Erasmus had dealt with the provocative element in certain art works, as in certain depictions of the Virgin and Saint Agatha, that were said to provoke lasciviousness rather than piety.¹⁷⁴ Interestingly enough Saint Agatha's attributes are usually her breasts as her martyrdom involved their mutilation.

The decree on images from the twenty-fifth session of the Council in 1563 had a strong effect on the pictorial arts in Italy and on the way certain subjects were represented. With this decree the Catholic Church introduced the control of works by local religious authorities. The art works had to adhere to the sacred scriptures and clarity and decorum were the required essential characteristics.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, through the decree on images, the Roman Catholic Church tried to abolish elements that could be subject of controversy or could distract the devotee from the religious message expressed in the work. As stated by Emile Mâle, 'the Catholic Reformation does not condemn the genius of the Renaissance; it is content to bring decency into religious art'.¹⁷⁶ The first ban established by the decree, and afterwards repeated by all the post-Tridentine ecclesiastical authors, was the depiction of nudity. This is why, in 1564, Pope Pius IV ordered Daniel de Volterra to cover the nude figures in

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 61

¹⁷² M. A. Hinsdale, K. Dugan, J. Owens, *From the Pews in the Back*, (St. Joseph, 2009), p. 10

¹⁷³ See also: Scavizzi G., *The Controversy on Images from Calvin to Baronius*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 1992

¹⁷⁴ D. Freedberg, 'Molanus on Provocative Painting Johannes Molanus on Provocative Paintings. De Historia Sanctorum Imaginum et Picturarum, Book II, Chapter 42', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 34 (1971), pp. 229-245, p. 234

¹⁷⁵ *Decisioni dei concili ecumenici*, ed. G. Alberigo, tr. R Galligani, (Torino, 1978), pp. 712-714

¹⁷⁶ E. Mâle. *L'art Religieux de la Fin du XVI Siècle*, (Paris, 1951), p. 4

Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. It is true that the Virgin when nursing is never shown completely naked, however her naked breast could have been perceived with a sexual connotation that did not adhere to the concepts of decorum.

Art literature treatises from this time also reflect the influence of the Council of Trent. Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della pittura* well reflects the ideas of the Counterreformation even though it was published in 1557, therefore before the decree on images. However, the idea of decorum and adherence to the sacred text seem to reflect the same ideas expressed by the Council. When discussing Raphael's art Dolce asserts his superiority over Michelangelo by stating that the Virgin Mary when painted by Raphael was always characterised by a certain divinity and sanctity that would take away impure thoughts from the minds of men.¹⁷⁷ Giovanni Andrea Gilio in the *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori* published in 1563 criticised the use of nudity in works of art, but stated that it can be permitted if the narrative contexts justifies it and if the 'shameful parts are covered'.¹⁷⁸ He also wrongly reported that before Michelangelo no one dared depict saints or the Virgin naked, except for martyrs, but even in that case they would cover certain parts of their body.¹⁷⁹ Another writer that also criticised the indecency of certain sacred images is Bartolomeo Ammannati in his 1582 *Lettera agli Accademici del disegno*, in which he wrote that it was inappropriate to display both in churches and in private homes depictions that were not honest and sacred.¹⁸⁰

Therefore the decline of images showing the nursing Madonna in the late sixteenth century is unsurprising if taking into consideration the Council of Trent and all the treatises produced under its influence that strongly condemned nudity and inappropriate subjects in religious art. The images of the *Madonna Lactans* were considered to be amidst the most dangerous to morality, because this image was heavily inspired, as we have seen, by the stories of the Apocryphal Gospels that the

¹⁷⁷ L. Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari, 1961), I, pp. 141-206 p. 168

¹⁷⁸ G.A. Gilio, *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'isotie con molte annotazioni fatte sopra il giudizio dei Michelagnolo et alter figure, tanto de la nova, quanto de la vecchia Capella del Papa. Con la dichiarazione come vogliono essere dipinte le sacre immagini*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari, 1961), II pp. 1 -115, p. 39

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 40

¹⁸⁰ B. Ammannati, *Lettera di Messer Bartolomeo Ammannati, architetto e sculptor Fiorentino, gli onoratissimi Accademici del Disegno*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari, 1961), III

Church had placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. According to the moralists of the time, the bare bosom of the Virgin, profaned the image of the Virgin Mary and distracted the faithful from meditation and prayer, by causing temptation. The existing images were generally tolerated, except to be corrected or retouched to reflect the new morality; or hidden and reserved for private devotion.¹⁸¹

Renaissance art had favoured the union and penetration of the profane in the sacred context, and by this period the theme of the Virgin nursing had in some cases lost its didactic and symbolic value, and became an excuse to show off the female body.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ C. Capone, 'La maternità nascosta', in *MEDIOEVO* (Num. 155, Dec. 2009), pp. 30-39

¹⁸² N. Perego, *Una Madonna da nascondere. La devozione per la «Madonna del latte» in Brianza, nel lecchese e nel triangolo lariano*, (Milan, 2005)

Conclusion

This work has shown the development of the iconographic type of the *Madonna lactans*, its function and the theological ideas associated to it, from the thirteenth century to the end of the sixteenth century.

The image of the Virgin nursing the Child was strongly related to the theological ideas of the thirteenth century that intended the milk of Mary as a form of processed blood and thus it was symbolically connected to the blood the Redeemer. This then lead to the Virgin being seen as Co-Redemptrix alongside her Son. The image of the *Madonna lactans* therefore did not only refer to the infancy of Christ. Thus the Virgin was not only mother, but also as crucial figure for the Redemption of humanity because of her being the bearer of the Incarnated Christ and this also explains why these images were related to funerary functions.

In the manuscript tradition, starting from the fourteenth century, the image of the Virgin suckling the Child is in some cases associated to the Woman of the Apocalypse. In other cases, as in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, her role as intercessor is furthermore underlined by her identification of Second Eve. Usually in manuscript illuminations the image of the *Madonna lactans* was included in narrative scenes, as the Nativity or the Flight to Egypt. While when decorating penitential psalms the breastfeeding motif is intended the milk as salvific substance, and this theme is in some cases related to the sacrifice during the Passion, especially in the fifteenth century.

In Siena images that show the Virgin nursing Christ are all related to the Madonna of Humility, a new iconographic type that originated there in the *Trecento* and Simone Martini is the Sienese artist whose works best exemplify this type of Marian image. Since in the Middle Ages breastfeeding was associated to the lower classes of society and the inclusion of this motif in the images of the Madonna of Humility helped to enhance its message. Furthermore the personification of Charity was also associated to breastfeeding, and this virtue was a moral imperative in fourteenth century Italy. Moreover, the ideas of humility, charity and penitence were those preached by the Mendicant Orders, as the basis of their moral programme. Therefore, the image of

the *Madonna lactans* when associated to the Madonna of Humility perfectly embodied and transmitted the message preached by the Franciscan and Dominican orders.

Furthermore, this analysis has shown that the images of Mary breastfeeding the Christ appeared both in altarpieces destined to private chapels and in small panels of private devotion because of different factors. Firstly the association of this iconography in altarpieces to the Eucharistic ritual was due to of the relationship between the milk of Mary and the blood of Christ. Secondly it was also due to the Black Death, which ravaged Italy in the late 1300s and caused thousands of deaths, and therefore images of the *Madonna lactans* became a mean to implore for future prosperity. In panels for private devotion the images of Mary nursing the Child were chosen mainly as *exemplum*, especially for women, who had to look up at the Virgin, as she embodied the virtues chastity and obedience. Furthermore she was also the perfect maternal example, and often images of the Virgin were deemed miraculous in helping in issues related to childbearing. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Madonna lactans* perfectly exemplifies this type destined to the private devotion.

Finally, this work by investigating the modifications in this iconographic type between the fourteenth and fifteenth century has shown that the *Madonna lactans* was strongly affected by the Counterreformation. The technical advancements in painting and sculpture and the new found interest in naturalism permitted the creation of images in which the human body was anatomically faithful and correct. In the case of the nursing Virgin this lead to an issue of decorum and modesty as now the risk of arousing impure thoughts, rather than piety and devotion, was much higher. Therefore painters, such as Lippi and Botticelli, tried to devise strategies to uncover and cover at the same time the bare breast. The criticism on religious images, which were deemed inappropriate, as testified by the treatises of Paleotti and Gilio, culminated with the Counterreformation, and in particular the decree of images of 1563. This had a strong effect on the *Madonna lactans* iconographic type, which was deemed as dangerous to morality and therefore the existing images were generally retouched in order to adhere to the new morality. In conclusion, this is why in general there is a decline in this type of iconography especially after the Council of Trent.

Word count: 1645

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