Humility as a Virtue: Oral and Visual Religious Indoctrination to Purify the Female Gender in Italy in the Early Quattrocento

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ABSTRACT

The Madonna of Humility has been a subject of great interest in the twentieth century. Scholars such as Millard Meiss and H. W. van Os have long dwelled on the origin and dissemination of this emblematic iconography. Nevertheless, scholars have said little regarding its role and possible reverberation on women of the late Middle Ages. The need to domesticate the female gender inspired great orators like Saint Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444), who used humility as a means to control society. Not only could humility, if perceived as a virtue, keep women within their limited social spaces, it would have allowed them—by following a specific fabricated way of life—to spiritually lead their households, gaining the possibility of eternal salvation. This article explores the faith-based concept of humility to unlock the forces that pushed toward the diffusion of a religious iconography, capable of imposing a modest way of life that was more in keeping with the Catholic teachings of the late Trecento and early Quattrocento. Several portrayals of the Madonna of Humility are proposed to investigate the role these paintings might have played in Italy in exalting humility as a noble virtue.

The link between women and sin is ancient: "From the woman came the beginning of sin, and by her we all die" (Eccles. 25:33).[1] Eve played a pivotal role in the Fall: "And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold: and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave to her husband who did eat" (Gen. 3:6). This biblical

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1. Consider O'Brien (2014, 66). Biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version; Translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict, 2009). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

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passage gave birth to an ideological tendency, Christian in nature, which saw women as instigators of sin and corrupted beings to keep under control. Their sinful predisposition granted man authority and control over the female gender for centuries.

Hence, medieval women often played passive roles in society. Their forced submission allowed fathers and brothers to determine their present and future. At the early age of six or seven, Florentine girls could be enrolled in convents "where they would stay until they were married at about the age of sixteen," unless forced to take the nun's veil at the age of twelve (Hanawalt 1995, 6). The latter happened especially when families did not provide girls with dowries capable of favoring respectable marriages (Herlihy 1995, 53). Any circumstance or choice, whether instigated or liberal, provided them with lack of freedom. In a male-dominated society, they had to behave according to the rules of the places in which they lived, and given their sinful nature, their place was confined and limited.[2]

It is noteworthy to point out that, even though women structurally occupied subjugated roles within medieval Christian culture, as suggested by recent feminist scholarship on the position of women in medieval Europe, there were arenas in which the female gender exercised substantial power and agency, not only within the religious spheres but also within those of politics and art. Examples of this kind can be extracted from the lives of Empress Theophanu (died 991), Empress Adelheid (931–99), Countess Matilda of Canossa (1046–1115), Christina of Markyate (ca. 1097–1161), Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), Clare of Assisi (1194–1253), and Catherine of Siena (1347–80).[3]

According to medieval morality, through original sin—and therefore via Eve and Adam as well—not only death but also *luxuria* was brought into the world. The latter was considered as a "source of all evil, which was usually blamed on women" (Guthke 1999, 59). Ergo, the early life of Mary Magdalene became a means to demonstrate the ways in which a woman sins. In one of his open sermons performed in 1425 in Florence, Bernardino of Siena purposed the seven sins of the Magdalene in the hope of providing a teaching capable of affecting

2. In Europe, theologians like Alexander of Hales (ca. 1170–1245), John of La Rochelle (ca. 1190–1245), and Matthew of Aquasparta (ca. 1240–1302) had argued on women's "natural inferiority"; therefore, it was believed that "the submission of women was divinely ordained or in accordance with nature and convention, and that the one time that Adam had listened to female advice it had caused the fall of man" (Roest 2004, 121–22). Also consider the topic of women in society; see Cardman (1978, 582–99); Howell (1986, 178); and Blamires (1995, 135–52).

3. For the most comprehensive studies on the subject, consider Gaze (1997, 3); Davids (2002); Lehmijoki-Gardner (2004, 660–87); Jordan (2006); Martin (2012, 1–33); Wangerin (2014, 716–36); Bennett and Mazo Karras (2016); and Nash (2018).

women's behaviors, ipso facto weakening their natural predisposition toward sinning. Through the seven sins, he listed seven female attitudes concerned with vanity, self-indulgence, and sexual desire (Pacetti 1935, 352–53). Subsequently—and appropriately, considering his rhetoric—he forged four remedies to avoid the *peccato carnale* (sin of the flesh). Through *timore di Dio* (fear of God); *buona compagnia* and *ch'ella sia in casa* (good company and seclusion at home); *ch'ell'abbia vergogna* (sense of shame); and *considerare il pericolo che ne gli seguita se una donna è trovata in fallo* (awareness of the danger that follows if a woman is found in wrongdoing), women could be saved from perdition (Pacetti 1935, 355–56). Indeed, Mary Magdalene is relevant for Bernardino since beauty, wealth, and freedom were considered factors of great *pericolo* (danger) for the salvation of the female gender (Pacetti 1935, 354).

Saint Bernardino and His Ascetic Views

Born in 1380 at Massa, a town near Siena, of noble parents, Bernardino became an orphan at the early age of six. His living relatives Tobia and Bartolomea gave him a morally strict religious upbringing, which culminated in a life devoted to the Holy Name of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, adopted as his mother, consecrating his life to her (Mazzarella 1944, 309).[4] Once a Franciscan, Bernardino restored and reinvigorated in preaching the humble spirit of Saint Francis. This allowed his voice to gain an immense echo and popularity among both religious and laypeople. Many historians and writers have, over centuries, considered him to have lived at a time when "the land [Italy] was steeped in vice and crime . . . the people were without faith . . . bent on acquiring wealth and pleasures [and] parents had lost their love for their children"; according to Benedetto Mazzara, "everything seemed to be returning to paganism" (1722, 270). What is certain is the fact that Bernardino lived in a period of serious disorder in the church. The Great Western Schism (1378–1417) was a time that saw overwhelming, serious papal scandals. There were social wounds left open by the tensions between Guelphs and Ghibellines, and the rise of neopagan philosophers like Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1407–57)—who, being in favor of free will, denounced and advocated against the "overbearing, barbarous, tyrannical Priestly domination" and moral hypocrisy—acted against peace and unity, favoring discord, rebellions, and the emergence of secular values (Huber 1944, 213–17).[5] Individuality and self-indulgence became virtues. Chaos and lascivious lifestyles offered Bernardino

4. On Bernardino's life, consider the biographical works of Barnabo' da Siena and Maffeo Vegio.

5. The works of the humanists Francesco Petrarca (1304–74), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), and Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) can be considered influential, indicative mirrors of the times.

the opportunity to reform, to unite, and to reestablish order in a morally corrupted society. His call was to save souls (Leone 1898, 305).

Unfortunately, the Franciscan friar possessed a weak and stuttering voice that limited his reformistic efforts. He therefore invoked divine intervention, asking his fellow friars to pray to the Virgin Mary for him: "While he was in ecstasy, a ball of fire came from heaven and aligned on his lips . . . his voice became strong and powerful" (Oddi 1931, 373). This event convinced him that God had commissioned him to preach His Word, "and thus he began to go about into the villages and towns" (Oddi 1931, 373). Believed to have been preached from Naples to Venice (Gumbinger 1942, 20), Bernardino's sermons were not hindered by the scholastic parts of a discourse (the *thema*, the *corpus sermonis*, and the *conclusio*; Mazzarella 1944, 316). He studied the ancient orators but was not limited himself by what he had learned, since it became clear to him that in order to attract people, he could not use a standardized approach. He considered the various dialects of Italy, turning a "willing ear to local expressions and used them" in his *prediche* (Gumbinger 1942, 17). Hence, he availed himself of many ingenious oral stratagems. As a virtuoso storyteller, he presented "incidents from the holy books, from his own intimate contact with people, and from the various happenings of his times" to hold the attention of his audience (Mazzarella 1944, 317–20).[6] According to Jacob Burckhardt, sermons had the role of awakening people's consciences: "moral exhortations, free from abstract notions and full of practical applications, rendered more impressive by the saintly and ascetic character of the preacher . . . and only thus could men sunk in passion and guilt be brought to repentance and amendment—which was the chief object of the sermon" (Burckhardt 1935, 450–51). Relying on his clear and vigorous voice, Bernardino spoke to large crowds, mostly composed of women, thirsty for knowledge and leadership. During his open-air sermons, "which lasted for two or three hours" (Mazzarella 1944, 317), he often denounced those corrupted values—among them vanity—capable of polluting society (fig. 1).[7] "You

6. When taking into consideration Bernardino's works, it is important to distinguish the differences between his *Prediche volgari* and Latin Sermons. The latter were written by him in Latin. Scholastic and academic in format, they were not performed in the squares of Italy. After his death, they became the sources of inspiration for many religious people around Europe. By contrast, instead, the Vernacular Sermons were performed publicly. As they were not in Latin, they were understood by a wider audience. Some of them have come down to us through self-appointed stenographers approved by Bernardino. One of them was Benedetto di Messer Bartolomeo, who transcribed the course given in 1427 in Campo di Siena. Though they are full of details, one must not forget that they might have been subjected to forms of *coloritura*. Therefore, the concept *verbo ad verbum* might not be applied in this case, given the nature and limits of the process.

7. While denouncing people's weaknesses and vice, Bernardino would make use of a plaque featuring the monogram I.H.S. (Jesus), a visual gesture, a symbol of redemption, and a sign of hope (Gumbinger 1942, 22).

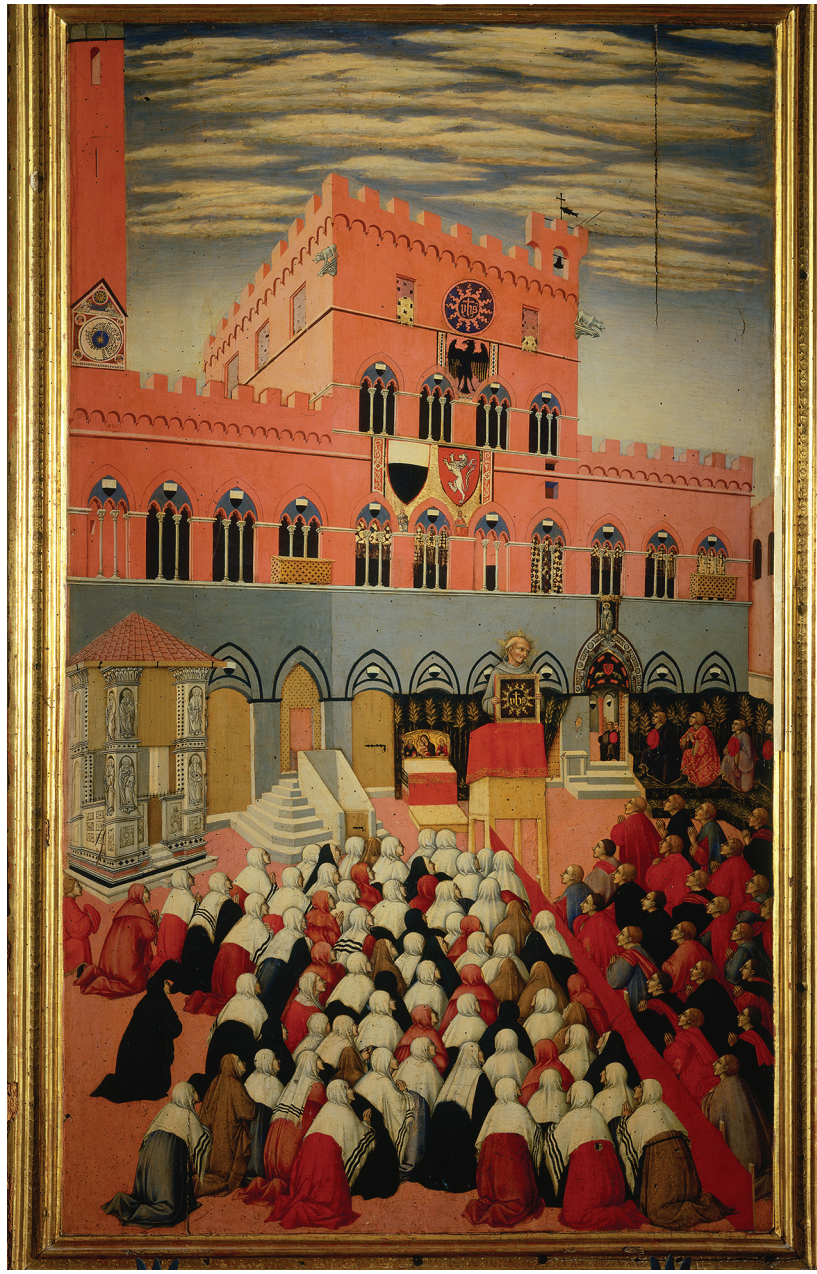

Figure 1. Sano di Pietro (Siena, 1406–81), *Saint Bernardine Preaching in Piazza del Campo*, ca. 1445, tempera and gold on panel (162 × 101.5 cm), Siena, Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana. © 2019. Photo Opera Metropolitana Siena/Scala, Florence.

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wear so many vanities upon your head . . . that is shameful. Some wear battlements, some fortifications and some towers as large as that one . . . I see upon these battlements the devil's banner" (Origo 1964, 48). Did his eloquence have any effect on society? On June 8, 1425, the Comune di Siena voted and approved fifteen bills; among them were sanctions and punishments against blasphemy, sodomy, usury, and vanity. At that point, women were not allowed to wear silk and dresses that left parts of the body uncovered (Pacetti 1935, 43). Modesty became law; humility was imposed.

Vanity and pride were enemies for Bernardino. He saw them in the *vestimenti pomposi* (pompous dresses) women were wearing at the time—the same Mary Magdalene had worn before repenting.[8] According to the preacher and other contemporaries, society needed to be purified, and women had to be taught how to repent. A new way of life was proposed based on a lack of freedom, obedience to God, and subjugation to man. According to Catherine of Siena, a wife was obliged to respect and obey her husband and rear her children "in keeping with God's commandments" (Nelle virtù e nelli santi comandamenti dolci di Dio; Herlihy 1995, 187).[9] Indeed "women were responsible for the upbringing of their children," and in turn they would have "assimilated morality and belief from their mother's example" (Ward 2002, 222). In the squares of Italy, the presence of women during Bernardino's sermons was pivotal. It was there where instructions were given and behavioral expectations were imposed. Only then could women assume spiritual and moral leadership within the home: "What is a household without a wife? It's a house of ruin and filth. Your wife gives you children, raises them, takes care of them, and nurses them when they are sick. The whole burden of childrearing falls on the wife."[10] Bernardino was not the only one emphasizing the role of a compliant wife "who maintained the cleanliness of her home and the physical and moral health of her family" (Herlihy 1995, 19). The Dominican Giovanni Dominici (1356–1419) in his *Regola del governo di cura familiare* appraised the role of a good wife for a healthy society. For Dominici, a wife had to be modest, reserved, obedient, and skilled, especially in guarding her husband against temptation. Through these qualities, she could gain a chance of personal salvation, while the husband gained a good wife (Barone 1999, 71).[11] "Faith, humility, rectitude, and patience"—woman's

8. "La superbia imperò ch'era stata superba nè vestimenti pomposi . . . E però Maria Magdalena a questa superbia satisfece colla umiltà" (Pacetti 1935, 361).

9. Regarding Saint Catherine of Siena as a preacher, consider Scott (1994, 105–7).

10. Extract from the twenty-fifth sermon Bernardino delivered in Florence in 1424 (Rusconi 1996, 182).

11. See also Salvi (1860).

virtues for Bernardino—came to be an inspiring guide for men in search of good wives (Origo 1964, 58).[12]

Humility and Its Interpretations

In the Christian tradition, virtues are seen as tools that help "for the present life but also as habits that prepare us for a deeper communion with God in the life to come" (Timpe and Wood 2014, 29). Salvation could be achieved through humility; considered by the doctors of the church, theologians, and philosophers across centuries, humility is a uniquely Christian virtue and is in complete contrast with pride, ambition, and glory, deemed as pagan virtues and symbols of a wicked society (Finn 1996, 348).[13] Although, as argued extensively by Millard Meiss, "in formal classifications of the virtues, it did not receive a place among the three theological and four cardinal virtues, being usually attached to temperance"—a rational source of self-control—humility was believed to be the root, "the primary condition for the attainment of the other virtues" (1936, 461).[14] Saint Augustine (354–430) put forward the consideration "that ascent to God requires a descent into humility" (Reynolds 2008, 25);[15] this was possible only by eradicating pride, which, according to Saint John Cassian (ca. 360–435) was the source of the vices, the root of all sins (Boyd 2014, 245). Saint Ambrose (ca. 339–97) in his *De officiis* spoke of humility as an act of self-control "if someone claims nothing for himself and judges himself the lesser man" and restraint "if we wish to commend ourselves to God" (Finn 1996, 351). These interesting assessments over time continued stimulating and influencing later pious writers. For instance, Saint Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547) devoted a chapter in his *Rule* to the noble virtue of humility, inspired by Luke (14:11, 18:14): "Because every one that exalteth himself, shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself, shall be exalted" and the Old Testament account of Jacob's Ladder (Gen. 28:12–13), he set down twelve steps of self-awareness and improvement.[16] In them, Benedict denounces pride and emphasizes how—through obedience,

12. For Bernardino, husbands also had important roles to play within families. They should love their wives "as Christ loves the Church with a *diligenza grandissima* [great diligence]," "have compassion for her because she has abandoned home, family, and friends to join his household," and importantly "teach their wives to read and write . . . making them better Christians," occupied, and this, in turn, will purge their vanity (La vanità sua si purgherà in quello leggere). See Mormando (1998, 29–31).

13. A broad and engaging definition of virtues is provided by Wood: "Virtues are acquired dispositions to excellent functioning in some generically human sphere of activity that is challenging and important for human wellbeing" (2014, 37).

14. The *theological* virtues refer to faith, hope, and charity, while prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance are *cardinal* virtues.

15. "Come down so that you can ascend, and make your ascent to God." See also Augustine (2008, 64).

16. "Chiunque se esalta, sarà umiliato; et chiunque se umilia sarà esaltato" (Lisi 1855, 19).

self-control, and recognition of one's own sinful nature, and therefore by descending into humility—it was possible to ascend to heaven: "If we desire to attain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by humility of this present life, then by our ascending actions we must set up that ladder on which Jacob in a dream saw angels descending and ascending. Without doubt, this descent and ascent can signify only that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility" (Gisolfi and Sinding-Larsen 1998, 33). Alternatively, but not exclusively, Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224–74) targeted pride, considering it the "beginning of every sin" (Aquinas 2007, 963), an act of "rebellion against God," and the "vicious" self-priority: the antonym of humility (Boyd 2014, 246–55). Inevitably, Aquinas regarded humility as a virtue that derives from keeping oneself "within his own limits," subjecting himself "to his superior," God (Barbeau Gardiner 2002, 3). This concept was embraced early on by Saint Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181–1226), whose simple way of life, spiritual works—concerned with reviving "the life of Christ and of the Apostles" (Boehner 1942, 217)—and social involvement came to be visual examples of humility, inspiring models through which society could be purified and saved from eternal damnation.

Saint Bernardino, a follower of Saint Francis's way of life, over centuries has been considered a sort of light that brought new hope in a morally corrupted and divided society. The ascetic words he used and *opera* could attest to his will to reform—save—society by instilling Christian virtues and morality into people's lives, reaching even the highest social strata. Bernardino's *prediche* provided the practical as well as the religious and moral training that both women and men needed to save their souls. Also, considering the important role played by wives in society as spiritual and moral leaders within the home, he would have instructed the female gender to run households according to God's law. However, given their sinful nature, who and what could have redeemed them to take on such responsibility? The answers are Mary and humility.

Mary Redeeming the Female Gender

In medieval theology, there often emerges the contrast between Eve and Mary. The first woman is perceived as an example of disobedience, the "instigator of sin," responsible for the fall of humankind, who "set humanity on the path from Eden to death"; the second is portrayed as a "woman who obeyed God's call to become the mother of his Son, Jesus Christ." Ipso facto, "Eve is the originator of sin, Mary the originator of salvation."[17] For Bernardino, "Mary, the blessed

17. "Auctrix peccati Eva; auctrix meriti Maria" (Guthke 1999, 59; and Ward 2002, 3).

Mother, undoes the work of Eve" since "thanks to Mary and her role in the Incarnation, women are no longer objects of shame" (Mormando 1998, 26–28). Bernardino's sermons on the Mother of God highlight the preacher's sentiments and devotion toward Mary, the implicit or explicit embodiment of purity, humility, and salvation: "O Woman, blessed by all and above all things, you are the honor and the preservation of the human race. . . . You are the inexhaustible font of all virtues and of every celestial gift . . . the consolation of your devoted people and the beginning of our salvation" (Facchinetti 1933, 280). Mary as an example for all mothers is an important notion emphasized by a Sienese Franciscan friar in the early fourteenth century. In his *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, he urges his readers to follow the example provided by the humble life of Mary: "Do not disdain humble things . . . nurture the vigor of humility and poverty" (Ragusa and Green 1977, 69–72). Humility comes to "represent the perfect purity of the Virgin required for her selection by God as the appropriate vehicle of Christ's incarnation" (Polzer 2000, 2). Thus, by following the example of humility exalted via Mary's life—opposing pride, vanity, and ambition—the female gender could be allowed to assume spiritual and moral leadership within the home, gaining also the chance to be saved from eternal damnation (Polzer 2000, 2).

The advanced concept and arguments concerning humility were so uncomplicated and convincing that women began to promote them to other women. Some examples can be found in the sermons of Caterina Vigri, also known as Saint Catherine of Bologna (1413–63). She "used the community chapter meetings to lecture to the nuns on issues such as humility and self-knowledge," to become worthy of God's grace (Roest 2004, 147–49). This contributed to the far-reaching diffusion of humility, a notion that developed into a way of life, embraced by both lay and religious women.

The Creation of a Didactic Focus: Portraying Humility and Mothering as a Practice

The image known as the Madonna of Humility refers to a composition in which Mary is seated on the ground, sometimes on a pillow, with her Son on her lap. The etymological connection of *humus* (ground) and *humilitas* (low, humble) refers to her "submission to the divine will,"[18] since "earth, fertile soil, growth, and flowering were all common metaphors for the Virgin and for Christ's Incarnation in the Late Medieval practice of prayer" (Van Os 1994, 90). The Madonna

18. A Spanish theologian, Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636) had observed that the root of *humilitas* was *humus* ("humilis dicitur quasi humo acclinis"); see Williamson (2009, 19). Also consider Frugoni (1996, 151).

of Humility emphasizes Mary as the humblest of beings, a concept expressed on some pictorial examples that carry inscriptions, designating the Madonna as "Our Lady of Humility"; the earliest dated example (1346), by Bartolomeo da Camogli, is inscribed: "N[OST]RA D[OMI]NA DE HUMILITATE" (Williamson 2009, 15). Nevertheless, the Avignon fresco (ca. 1341) by Simone Martini (ca. 1284–1344) is still considered the earliest known representation of the theme despite the existence of a variety of French manuscripts—some dated from the fourteenth century, while others do not present evidence for dating—featuring "Mary seated on the ground suckling the Christ-child" (Williamson 2009, 45). She represented the quintessential example of humility since she accepted "her destiny as Mother of God, to become the *Ancilla Domini*," playing "her part in humanity's salvation" (Williamson 2009, 177).

Historians in the field have already suggested that "for real medieval women . . . Mary was at best an ambiguous role model," a gentle, compassionate, and long-suffering figure lacking adult sexuality (Niebrzydowski 2013, 122). Attributes that would have inevitably made her a different and superior being, providing a fertile ground for the labeling of all women "as destructive Eves rather than redemptive Maries" (Martin 1996, 19). Mary was and still can be considered as the flawless model, "alone, unique, virgin and mother"—a distinct status, impossible for real women to emulate (Rigaux 1999, 73).[19] Therefore, images featuring the Enthroned Madonna and Child—even though in the fourteenth century, they appear to confer a certain air of naturalness and familiarity—came to be less desired and favored, since they did not provide accessible and engaging human inspirational examples (fig. 2). Furthermore, considering the corrective efforts performed by the pious men and women of the period, religious paintings would have not been effective "had they not reflected authentic domestic experiences and emotions" (Herlihy 1995, 171). Unavoidably, late medieval depictions of the Virgin and Child featured human qualities, allowing her virtues to become more achievable, creating a sustainable and practical example of Christian life to imitate.

By the end of the fourteenth century, images of the Madonna of Humility were produced en masse for private devotion by artists like Andrea di Bartolo (active from 1389, died 1428) in their workshops. Mary is not seated on a throne but on a cushion on the ground to delineate her humble nature. The pictorial example of the *Madonna of Humility, The Blessing Christ, Two Angels, and a Donor* (fig. 3), by A. di Bartolo, shows Mary as a devoted mother nursing her

19. On this topic, also consider Warner (2016).

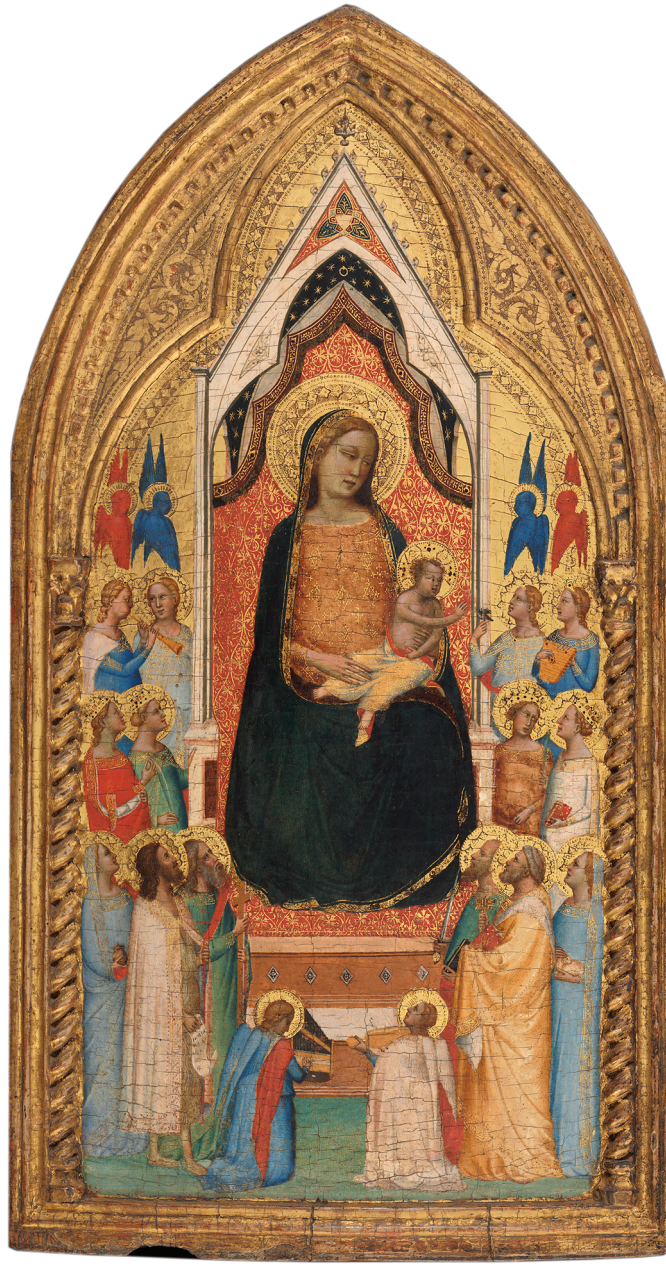

Figure 2. Bernardo Daddi (Florence? Active by 1320, died probably 1348), *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels*, ca. 1345, tempera and gold on panel (57.1 × 30.5 × 2.6 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.61.

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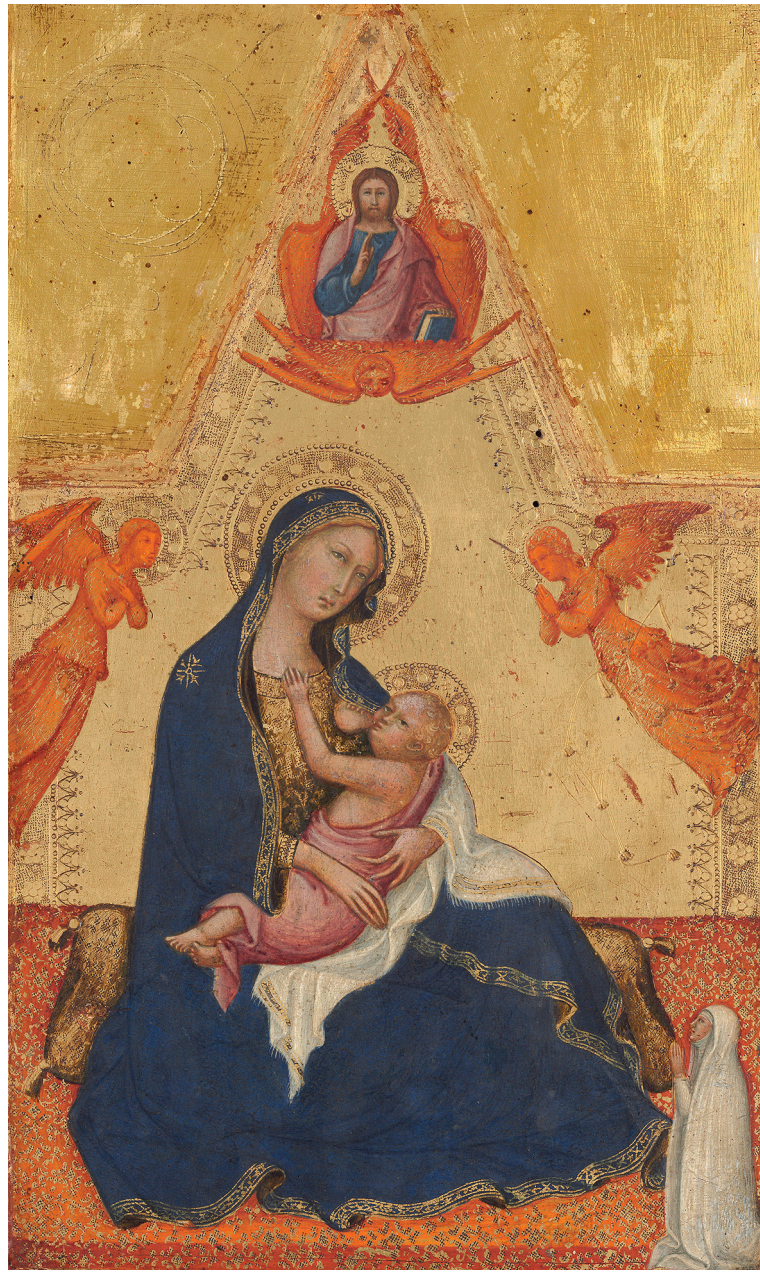

Figure 3. Andrea di Bartolo (Siena, active from 1389, died 1428), *Madonna of Humility, The Blessing Christ, Two Angels, and a Donor [obverse]*, ca. 1380/90, tempera and gold on panel (30 × 18.6 × 0.8 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.20.a.

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child. She is wearing a dark blue mantle—"a colour associated with faith and humility as well as heaven and the sea" (Verdon et al. 2014, 160)—featuring the "best known of Mary's epithets: the 'Stella Maris,' the guiding star who conducts sailors safely to port," the faithful to salvation (Reynolds 2008, 28). She nurses baby Jesus, the symbol of "innocence, the model of sweetness," a reference to the humanity of Christ (Herlihy 1995, 226).

Another crucial element present in several examples of the theme is the motif of breastfeeding, a component linked with the virtue of humility since some have argued that she nurses on the floor "more like a simple housewife."[20] By reflecting an authentic domestic experience, the image of the Madonna of Humility lactating becomes an example of a perfect wife who nourishes the prole. It is a pictorial example, a mirror of concerns, targeted at the patrician class of the period, as it was common practice for wealthy ladies to employ wet nurses to look after their newborns. Indeed, "wet nurses were not always hired out of necessity, but were widely used by wealthy families, likely to assert their superior social class" (Palmer 2002, 11). Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) "reminded his quattrocento reader of the importance of a mother's own milk, not only for the health of the child, but to help cultivate a strong familial bond" (Alberti 1969, 53–54; Palmer 2002, 11). The humanist Maffeo Vegio (1407–58) condemned and labeled the refusal to nurse one's own child as a "monstrous act."[21] Bernardino of Siena, while appraising the role of a good wife for a healthy family and society, strongly criticized those who declined to nurse their children in order "to procure . . . pleasure" and firmly believed in the role of wives in "nursing" and "governing" their children.[22]

The *Madonna of Humility* (fig. 3) conveys a sense of warmth, care, and humanity; the lively spontaneity of baby Jesus accentuates the latter.[23] By drawing her milk into his mouth, he turns his head looking at the spectator, despite his body being turned toward Mary. It is a private, intimate moment that allows Mary to become "the symbol of maternal tenderness and a focal point for meditation" (Hecht 1976, 12). In this depiction, Mary's example of humility is exalted

20. Historians have put forward the notion that the act of nursing signifies "moral qualities, such as benevolence and mercifulness," leading as well to the virtue of charity, "in the form of a female figure with a child at her breast." See Meiss (1936, 460) and Williamson (2009, 19).

21. "Res monstri certe similis" (Vegio 1936, 23).

22. Saint Bernardino quoted in Williamson (2009, 143). "La donna è cagione di farti i figliuoli ed allevargli e governa[r]gli, d'aiutarli nelle infermità" (Pacetti 1935, 127).

23. The reverse of the panel features Jesus's future, *Christ on the Cross*, a symbol of sacrifice, redemption, and submission to God's will. The small-scale format of the object points toward a private use and suggests that it might have been designed to be placed on a table for veneration or hold in the hands and turned over, moving between the images, depending on the faithful's needs.

by two angels flanking her and by the half-length figure of the blessing Christ appearing from above. The presence of a female donor kneeling in prayer at the bottom of the panel acts in accordance with the meditative function of the painting: a means of self-improvement from which people could draw teachings regarding the Christian virtue of humility: the ultimate vehicle to ascend to heaven.

In contrast, the *Madonna of Humility* (fig. 4), by Stefano di Giovanni (also called Sassetta; probably 1392–1450)—stresses the relationship between a mother and a child and offers a compositional variation to the theme, featuring Mary and her baby in a private, intimate moment, when Jesus is engaging playfully with his mother's mantle. They are not looking at the viewer and are sitting on a cushion above a fertile ground. The presence of the dove attests to the fact that Mary conceived Jesus because she had been overshadowed by the Holy Ghost; "the dove, therefore, refers to the miracle of God made man" (Van Os 1994, 55).[24] The Madonna is shown in a way to invite meditation, to stimulate familial interaction, and to inspire maternal love.[25]

As it was a common practice at the time, in A. di Bartolo and Sassetta's depictions (figs. 3, 4), Mary and Jesus are set against gold backgrounds. It is an approach that would highlight and exalt not only the preciousness of the objects but also the sacredness of the images portrayed.[26] Artists have portrayed the Madonna and Child in a variety of ways, from stiff iconic monarchs, sometimes seated on a throne, to humble individuals playing on a lawn. This humanization, making Mary more approachable, allowed art to influence and shape lives by inspiring people via the humility that relatable images of the Mother of God portrayed and promoted.

Designed often, but not exclusively, for private devotion, these paintings could have found their places in both lay or religious environments, since they "spoke as much to wives and mothers as to women who had adopted the religious life" (Matthews Grieco 1999, 161). A nun could identify herself with the Mother of God, finding inspiration in the humility portrayed; this also promoted by the religious orators of the period. It is known that A. di Bartolo was commissioned in 1394 to produce a large number of more or less identical Madonna of

24. The top of the panel is characterized by a "conflation of the Saviour with God the Father, since he wears a cruciform nimbus, yet is borne up by cherubim" (Shapley 1979, 414–15).

25. It has been documented that Sassetta had personally met Bernardino of Siena. The artist "seems to have had a particularly privileged and personal bond with him, most saliently painting at Bernardino's request the high altarpiece for the Osservanza" (Israëls 2007, 113–14).

26. Cennino d'Andrea Cennini (ca. 1370–1440) "called painters to use only the most precious materials and to labor toward the achievement of technical excellence" (Suffield 2000, 17). On the method and materials used by artists in that period of time, consider Cennini (2015).

Figure 4. Sassetta (Siena, probably 1392–1450), *Madonna of Humility*, ca. 1435/40, tempera and gold on poplar panel (48.4 × 21.2 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.246.

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Humility destined "for each nun's cell of a newly built Dominican convent in Venice" (Hyman 2003, 124).[27] The Madonna of Humility acted as *exempli virtù*, promoting "ideals about earthly and spiritual wealth, chastity, and humility and Christ's humanity and divinity" (Bartal 2014, 174). This image is as relevant to laywomen as to nuns since it was capable of providing a perfect example of dedication: that of nurturing, feeding devotion, keeping in mind the importance of humility. Ipso facto, visual representations of the divine made human would have allowed the viewer to relate to the sacred figures represented, interacting with them and embracing as a consequence meditation as a means of self-improvement. The domestic devotional imagery of the Madonna and Child, by focusing on the human aspect rather than divine, came to exalt the loving connection between mother and child, encouraging wives to create the same bond within their families (Palmer 2002, 7). Hence, depictions of the Madonna of Humility can be considered "religious, visual metaphors of the principle of conduct at the time" (Pope-Hennessy 1980, 192). Several texts of the period, including Giovanni Dominici's *Regola*, stress "the educational aspects of these domestic images and the important role that the mother played in the early spiritual education of her children" (Palmer 2002, 8).

Did the Focus on Humility Serve an Indoctrination Goal?

The church fathers exhorted humility to all genders, for the ascent to God required a descent into humility. Nevertheless, given the social and religious crises of the period put forward by historians across centuries, vice and corrupted values could be eradicated—and order established—through words and images that would have reflected specific traditional mind-sets regarding what were considered to be the roles of men and women in society. Bernardino of Siena at times exalted, while on other occasions criticized and blamed the female gender for some of the crises affecting society; he was a contradictory figure and firmly believed in the specific roles that both men and women had to perform in a Christian culture.

Both lay and religious men and women of all ages worshipped images of the Virgin and Child. Authorities even trusted to Mary medieval cities such as Siena because she was a symbol of protection, benevolence, humility, and salvation.[28]

27. See also Van Os (1994, 74).

28. "Gracious Queen of Heaven, I miserable sinner, I give to thee, dedicate to thee, consecrate to thee this city and the country of Siena, and I pray thee, Sweet Mother . . . to free this our city from the hands of our enemies the Florentines" (Burroughs 1926, 191).

The Madonna per se was venerated and considered a lesson of humility by men too. Bernardino of Siena devoted his life to her and constantly referred to her during his sermons as "the mother of all the chosen and all the weary," emphasizing her humility by accepting her destiny as Mother of God, playing her part in humanity's salvation (Origo 1964, 74). The multitude of images depicting Mary demonstrate, in effect, "how deeply Christians have been touched by the woman in whom they have seen not only Christ's mother but also their own" (Verdon et al. 2014, 23).

On the basis of what the Madonna of Humility portrays, aligned to the structural social role of women in the late Middle Ages, and considering the voices of both men and women of the period, I would argue that even though this artistic composition had a message for the male gender—that of placing humility before pride—it also acted as an *exempli virtù*: a guide for women and mothers, that of nurturing the prole. Humility must be understood as a means of salvation, that of souls, though it came to be gendered, at least visually, and turned to women to keep the female gender under control and dependent on men. The Madonna of Humility portrays an image par excellence of a female that reflects the general medieval norms about women's place in society. This composition creates a sustainable and practical example of Christian life to imitate while offering a visual model of motherhood and conduct expected from women; it doesn't exclude its veneration by the male counterpart. The grace of the Madonna of Humility could be revered by both lay and religious men, but it rather would have instigated women to perform the dedicated role of being mothers within families. As a meditative piece—considering the importance of humility within the culture of prayer—it would have inspired humbleness, the ultimate tool for the salvation of the soul. If we consider the Cleveland's *Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve* (fig. 5), recently attributed to Olivuccio di Ciccarello (1360/65–1439), the visual juxtaposition of Mary with Eve is eloquent and relevant here. As recent scholarship in the field has pointed out, this is an example of obedience and disobedience, Fall and Salvation—an image of redemption nevertheless, "in which the place of motherhood is central" (Williamson 1998, 115). Thus, "although sin entered the world by a woman, so too did the Salvation" (Williamson 1998, 132): "Eve . . . brought forth disobedience and death. But Mary the Virgin, receiving faith and grace . . . [gave birth to him] . . . by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men that became like it"[29].

29. Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) as cited in Warner (2016, 61).

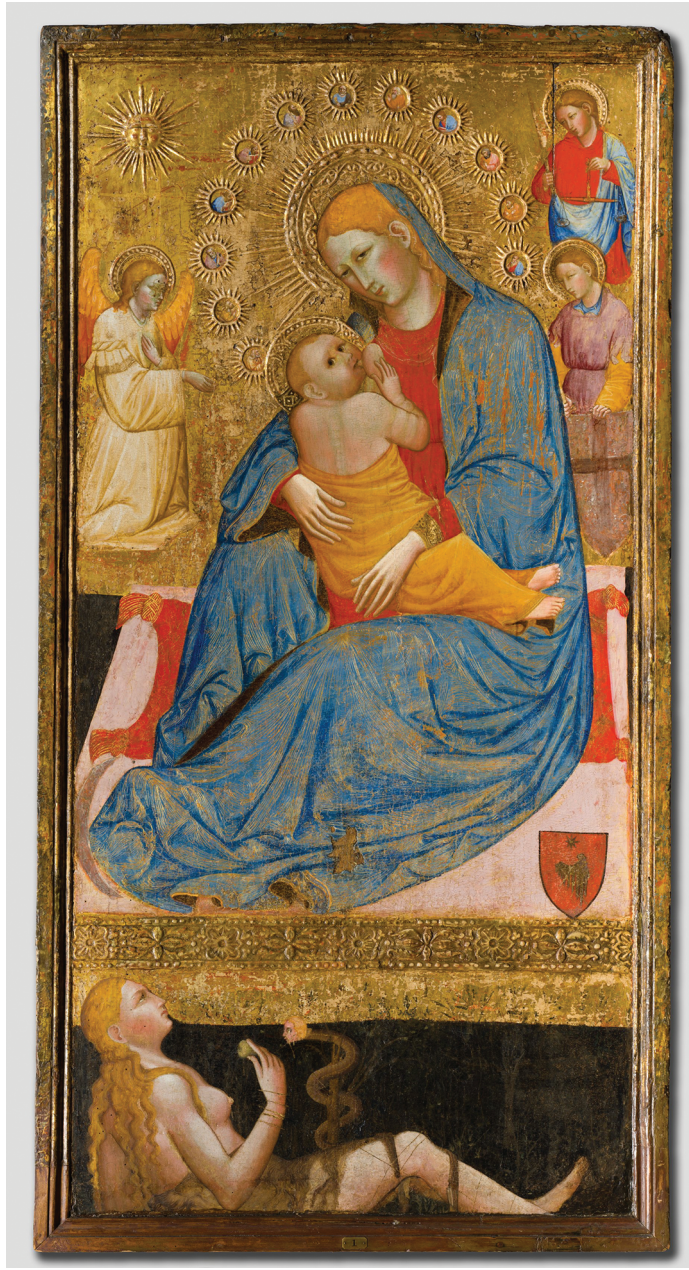

Figure 5. Olivuccio di Ciccarello (Camerino, ca. 1365–1439), *The Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve*, ca. 1400, tempera and gold on panel (191.5 × 99 × 11 cm), Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH. Holden Collection 1916.795.

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Conclusion

The art of "preaching was used to legitimate power and define and control behavior" (Viallet 2013, 40). Humility came to be an essential Christian virtue on which to meditate, and painting to be a vehicle, a means that could nurture forms of cogitation. Even though orators like Bernardino of Siena did not invent the image of the Madonna of Humility, their words—which combined religious and moral teachings—*opera*, and humble lives became models that promoted humility as a noble virtue able to deliver souls from evil; creating a fashion, a mood in society, that inevitably benefited the diffusion of this iconography. These images, imbued with the mentality and rhetoric of the period, came to aid misogynistic ideals of social order, forcing women toward confined positions within the households. The influences radiated by the Catholic doctrine and practices stimulated the demand for "standardized, serially produced devotional images of the Madonna on panel" (Freuler 2002, 427). Andrea di Bartolo produced numberless panels of the Madonna of Humility, mostly after the same pattern, "at capacity to meet the increasing demands of an ever-larger clientele" (Freuler 2002, 427). Meanwhile artists like Fra Angelico (ca. 1395–1455), Lorenzo Monaco (ca. 1370–1425), Tommaso del Mazza (active 1377–92), Jacopo di Cione (active ca. 1360–1400), Sano di Pietro (ca. 1406–81), and many others complied with the same fashion and demand for sacred images imbued with secular experience, for a clientele who wanted to possess and "who wanted to have the scene of their salvation tangibly present before them" (Van Os 1994, 54). These image-based devotions of the Madonna of Humility did not only propose humility but more importantly the opportunity for the eternal salvation of the soul. Thus, these relatable and approachable examples of the Madonna and Child—visual examples for the female gender to follow—can be considered mirrors of specific religious and social attitudes in Italy between the Trecento and Quattrocento.

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