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COUNTER-REFORMATION AGENDA IN THE PAINTINGS OF THE VIRGIN

MARY

By

Sharon Lynne Heaphy

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
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Department of Art History
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2011

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A Thesis Approved on

April 15, 2011

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ABSTRACT

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MARY

Sharon Lynne Heaphy

April 15, 2011

This paper investigates the objectives of Counter-Reformation leaders as seen through the visual culture of the Virgin Mary in the time period. This study was completed by examining three paintings by three different artists: Federico Barocci, *Madonna del Popolo*, 1579; Guido Reni, *Immaculate Conception*, 1627; and Annibale Carracci, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1592. Although these painters all embrace the Catholic ideology of the time, this study highlights the many differences that exist between them as a result of their individualized influences as artists.

In order to accurately interpret the artworks and the complex Catholic doctrine presented, the evolution of the Cult of the Virgin was also examined. This served to uncover the origins of Mary's influential following and the manifold events associated with her, which are not included in scripture yet play a prominent role in the Catholic faith of the Counter-Reformation as they faced criticism from Protestant leaders.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE HISTORY OF MARY.....	5
THE COUNCIL OF TRENT'S RESPONSE TO THE PROTESTANT CALL TO REFORM MARIAN DEVOTION.....	15
FEDERICO BAROCCI.....	20
GUIDO RENI.....	28
ANNIBALE CARRACCI.....	35
CONCLUSION.....	41
REFERENCES.....	43
ILLUSTRATIONS.....	46
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	51

INTRODUCTION

In the early fifth century, the mystery of Christ's nature as a human and divine being was of chief concern to theologians. Some argued that the two were separate entities altogether, while others defended the idea of Jesus as both human and God in one being. The dispute culminated in 431 C.E. in Ephesus, when a prominent group of Church leaders convened to decide on various theological issues, primarily the nature of Christ. The response of the Council of Ephesus to those who advocated disunity in Christ's nature was to officially bestow the title Theotokos, or Mother of God, to the Virgin Mary.¹ The function of the title was to give a legitimate defense to the Council's decree that Jesus was both human and divine in one person. The authority of their judgment rested exclusively in the Virgin Mary's role in Christ's life.

This was not the first use of Mary as a means to solidify the needs of Church leaders in the face of a particular dilemma, and certainly not the last. For centuries to come the Church would shape the Virgin's character based on the agenda specific to each

¹ This challenged the proposal of others, like Nestorius, a priest of Antioch, who believed Mary's title should have been one which simply indicated her function as the bearer of Jesus, a man. A title of specifically limited authority would have divided the role of Christ into two persons: one divine, and one human. Nestorius strongly opposed the title Theotokos because it granted Mary the authoritative role as bearer to a man and God simultaneously and thus established Christ's divinity in union with his humanity. See: Ashlea Rhea Betzen, "The Sexuality of Mary and Renaissance Art" (Thesis, Coe College, 2002); Mary F. Thurlkill, "Blessed Virgin Mary: From Nurturing Mother to Queen of Heaven" (Thesis, University of Arkansas, 1991); or Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) for more.

era, exploiting the tremendous cult following Mary had acquired with the population. A prime example of this church conduct in the modern age occurred during the years of the Counter-Reformation, wherein Catholic leaders enhanced the Cult of the Virgin as an instrument of attack against the charges of the Protestant reformers. Her position in the Catholic faith had begun to vie with the authority of Christ, which was unacceptable and the cause of vehement attacks from the Protestants. The reformers (Martin Luther, in particular) contended that for a figure who is mentioned so little in the scriptures, her overwhelming presence in the Church was not merely unsupported, but offensive.

The Catholic leaders utilized a variety of mediums to strengthen devotion to the Virgin, and thus reinforce church doctrine. Everything from art to music and literature was used to support the Tridentine agenda of the Catholic Church. The role art played in this period of religious turmoil must not be undervalued. In its most basic element art is a visual reflection of contemporary ideas in culture. Artworks of the Counter-Reformation are exceptionally important to consider in their use as communicative devices. Beyond their function as visual aids to church doctrine, it must also be noted that artworks in this particular period were images created according to a patriarchal society largely controlled by the Church, wherein three-quarters of the population was illiterate. Contextualizing these works in this way highlights this society's reliance on works of art to communicate information. This framework of the Tridentine culture exposes the oligarchic control of information the Church maintained over the masses.

Beyond reflecting the ideology of the Tridentine period and functioning as didactic instruments, artworks were meant to profoundly inspire the faithful in their

devotion. After viewers had been properly guided to the meaning of the doctrine presented, it was believed that the artwork should arouse a deep sense of piety and inspiration in the worshiper, as though the image before the spectator was not simply pigment on a support, but a doorway to the splendor felt in the viewing of Christian miracles.²

This paper takes all of these factors into consideration in a study of the Catholic agenda during the Counter-Reformation as seen through paintings of the Virgin Mary. This analysis is executed by examining three paintings of the Virgin Mary from the Tridentine era. The paintings are chosen from different artists to reveal varied artistic interpretations of the Catholic Church's guidelines for proper religious works. Since the Council of Trent outlined relatively general principles for artists to abide by, each artist presented disparate versions of the Catholic program, while still sharing the same affirmation of Catholic belief in the face of Protestant attacks. The differences between the three artists developed from multifaceted influences, which resulted in distinctive paintings of Marian doctrine during this period.

Each image further depicts a different aspect of the Virgin's role in Christian doctrine, illuminating the versatile authority bequeathed to Mary by the Catholic Church. The paintings of this study are: Federico Barrocci, *Madonna del Popolo* (depicting the

² Pierre Janelle, *The Catholic Reformation*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1963), 160. A decree from the Council of Trent states: "...sacred images are the source of great spiritual profit, not only because the people are thus reminded of the blessings and help which Christ has granted them, but also because the marvels and wholesome examples of God are through his saints placed before the eyes of the faithful, so that they may thank God for them, and rule their life and manners after those of the saints, and may be incited to worship and love God, and cultivate piety."

Virgin Mary as intercessor), 1579 (Figure 1); Guido Reni, *Immaculate Conception*, 1627 (Figure 2); and Annibale Carracci, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1592 (Figure 4). As these works are reflections of important precepts of the Catholic faith, the analysis attends to the theological definition of her position and the specific sixteenth-century understanding of Marian doctrine. The study begins by outlining the origins of Mary's rise to power in the Christian faith and the development of the Cult of the Virgin.

THE HISTORY OF MARY

Considering the scarce amount the Virgin Mary is mentioned in the scriptures, it is remarkable that her role in Christianity grew to such prominence. Her position in the first four centuries of the Christian faith was a minor one in comparison to the intense admiration she would attract during the Counter-Reformation. In fact, in the early period she barely had a following at all within the population. This is not to say she went unnoticed by early Christians. Indeed, the faithful had many questions about the mother of Christ. To satisfy these curiosities apocryphal literature presented worshippers with details of her life. The *Proto-evangelion Jacobi*, dating from the second century, identified Joachim and Anna as the Virgin's parents. This text also explained her pure birth of Christ, supported her eternal virginity,³ and articulated the idea of her immaculate conception—a belief particularly vulnerable to the attacks of the Protestants later.

Texts like this satisfied the incipient interest in the Virgin Mary, but overall her status remained limited and she was not given much attention in early theological discussions. This persisted until the fifth century, when at the Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E., Mary was officially declared Theotokos, meaning Mother of God. This title of the

³ To obtain a deeper understanding about ancient ideas of virginity and how they influenced the Virgin Mary's purity, see Mary Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002).

Virgin verified Christ's humanity in tandem with His divinity because it established that Mary had birthed the Divine Figure in addition to His human counterpart, Jesus. It was common knowledge that Mary was the mother of Jesus. Officially naming her the Mother of God, in addition to being the mother of His human form, meant that Christ could only have been the two persons in one being.⁴ This simultaneously linked Him to the celestial and terrestrial world. This belief was certain to gain momentum, as any members of the Council who disputed this philosophy were overruled or even excommunicated.

In addition to standardizing Marian theology, the ruling of the Council gave birth to the Cult of the Virgin. The unprecedented title sparked tremendous fascination in Mary and led to intense veneration among the faithful. The growth of interest in the Mother of Christ led to a surge of depictions of her in art. Images of the fifth century explicitly reflect the findings of the Council of Ephesus as she lovingly embraces her Child, reinforcing her role as Christ's mother.⁵ Many of these works were believed to possess miraculous powers as throngs of people prayed to the mother of Christ before the image and experienced relief from suffering afterwards.⁶ These miracles encouraged a deeper devotion to Mary, as they were understood as infallible examples of her efficacy.

Such events led to a flourishing of Marian devotion, steadily increasing her standing in Christianity. Painters showed her as the Queen of Heaven, elevating the

⁴ For more on this see Belting, Betzen or Thurlkill,

⁵ To gain a deeper understanding of the development of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Christ see Belting's chapter: "The Virgin's Personality in the Making: The Mother of God and the Mother of the Gods."

⁶ Steven F. Ostrow, *Art and Spirituality in Counter-Reformation Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 123.

humble, Hebrew woman of the gospels to a position of majesty. Since there were no comparable female subjects of worship in the West, contemporary ideas of royalty were appropriated to Marian worship and imagery.⁷ Almost all of the paintings including the Virgin (with or without Christ) place her in a regal setting surrounded by a large group of saints and angels. Borrowing from the visual format used in contemporaneous portraiture, she typically engages the viewer from a frontal position. This formula was used by the official Roman state, and during the early centuries of Christianity it was adapted to the portrayal of Christian subjects, especially the Virgin Mary.⁸

As her prominence grew, desires for Marian relics and pilgrimage sites arose. The fifth and sixth centuries were punctuated by searches for this kind of material and places pertaining to the Virgin. Explorers discovered that very few remnants existed to satisfy the demand of the devotees. The only things to be found were bits of hair, a sash, and drops of her breast milk. These limited resources did not curtail the heightened requests for artifacts of the Virgin. Those not fortunate enough to procure the few relics were forced to find satisfaction in one of the sacred sites devoted to Mary as a result of such scarcities.⁹

In the fifth century, Byzantine Empress Pulcheria requested a relic of the Virgin Mary's body. It was explained to her that this was impossible, as the Virgin's body had

⁷ Mary F. Thurlkill, "Blessed Virgin Mary: From Nurturing Mother to Queen of Heaven" (Thesis, University of Arkansas, 1991), 12.

⁸ Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 80.

⁹ For more detail on the sacred sites of the Virgin Mary see Harald Ostrow, Steven F. *Art and Spirituality in Counter-Reformation Rome*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

disappeared after death.¹⁰ Instead of Mary's body, the empress received a sash dropped by the Virgin as she was taken to heaven.¹¹ In this period, too, the church leaders resolved that the Virgin's place of death or burial could not be located.¹² Instead, a number of places were alleged to be the location of Mary's departure from earth and ascent to heaven.

The belief in Mary's serene passage into heaven is known as her Assumption. The earliest known interpretations of this event date back to the second century and emerge from the culture of Eastern Christians.¹³ The worshipers in the Byzantine East were the first to celebrate this divine occurrence in one of the many festivals devoted to Mary. Stories of this early period use the Virgin's Assumption as a means to elucidate the paradise bestowed upon those who are blessed, and the peril which awaits those who are cursed. As one story recounts, since the Virgin was a faithful devotee, her place was in heaven. Accordingly, her body was lifted to heaven by an angel to reunite her in body and soul.¹⁴ The story shapes the position of Mary even further in its warning to worshippers that partaking in pleasures of the flesh results in damnation. The tale structures the belief that sins of a carnal nature originated during the Fall of Man and were therefore connected to mortality and death.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ashlea Rhea Betzen, "The Sexuality of Mary and Renaissance Art" (Thesis, Coe College, 2002), 18.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 82.

¹⁴ Warner, 82.

¹⁵ Betzen, 19.

The story promotes several Marian beliefs that would intensify over the centuries of Christianity. An example of this, and of much importance to this thesis, is the Virgin's purity. Since Mary was blessed enough to reach heaven in such a miraculous fashion, she must have been a woman of purity, and thus undeserving of a usual death and the usual putrefaction of the body. This portion of the story suggests several aspects that would become customarily associated with Mary, and serve as foundations for other important Marian beliefs, such as her role as Queen of Heaven.

Beyond presenting the idea of Mary's Assumption to heaven, official accounts supported the notion that Mary was a perpetual virgin throughout her life. If she had not been, she would have experienced the same death of a sinful human. The gospels do little to authenticate this belief. Instead, they suggest that her marriage to Joseph was indeed consummated. Matthew 1: 25 states, "[Joseph] had no marital relations with [Mary] *until* she had borne a son."¹⁶ This implies that the completion of their marriage occurred following the birth of Jesus.

The final postulation corresponds to the story's reliance on the Fall (more specifically, Eve) as the beginning of man's sin and consequential condemnation.¹⁷ This part of the story circumscribes a place for Mary as the second Eve. In her eternal purity,

¹⁶ Bible. NRSV Matthew 1:25 (My emphasis)

¹⁷ Betzen explains that in the story, "rejection of bodily pleasures is a rejection of sin, thus Peter's self-denial puts him in a position of authority over the other apostles. Indulging in pleasures leads to Hell, which Jesus warns them of. As well as being ever-virgin, this story agrees with those who claimed that Mary was sinless. The Church was implementing the concept that sex and sin were evolved from the Fall, and were thus related to mortality and death. The connection that this story makes, then, is that if Mary were pure enough to bear Jesus, then she was too pure to suffer an ordinary mortal death. The Second Eve, who was helping Jesus redeem the world's sin, should not be subject to the curse of the Fall and Original Sin, death." Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) is also a good source for further information on this topic.

Mary functions as a paragon which all women should aspire to emulate. This aspect of the narrative recalls I Corinthians 15: 22, wherein Saint Paul explained that “in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.”¹⁸ Saint Irenaeus, a second-century theologian and bishop, embraced this correlation between Eve and the Virgin Mary. He asserted that “sin entered humanity through Eve and salvation through Mary.”¹⁹ This postulation endows Mary with a level of influence critical to the authority she ultimately gained over the centuries as an intercessor for human souls. Saint Irenaeus’ affirmation highlights her devotion and purity, while also granting Mary a role in the redemption of humanity.²⁰ This kind of perspective on Mary’s position in the Christian faith continued to flourish as festivals commemorating these different roles of the Virgin became more prevalent.

In the twelfth century, the Cult of the Virgin intensified. The Church was growing increasingly more organized and prosperous thanks to the Crusades. Cathedrals were erected across Europe as breathtaking sites of worship. Inside, the devotees observed artwork with Christ typically portrayed as the formidable King of Heaven, seated on His throne prepared to judge the souls of humankind—far from a humble man. The largely illiterate population listened keenly to the guidance of the clergymen, who preached about the requirements for admittance to heaven. To avoid a lengthy sentence in Purgatory, the Church taught that the purchase of indulgences was necessary. In

¹⁸ Bible. NRSV I Corinthians 15: 22.

¹⁹ Thurlkill, 10.

²⁰ Ibid.

addition, Christians were directed to pray to saints. Mary was the most commanding saint to pray to for mercy.

The people of the Middle Ages held her in particularly high regard as the intercessor for their souls. She is the saint who begs for Christ's mercy upon the souls of humans at the last judgment. Because Mary was once an ordinary human herself, she empathizes with mankind and feels compassion for their souls. Mary's role functioned as a sharp contrast to that of the terrifying figure of Christ. While He is depicted staring out sternly at His worshipers, seated above the souls of those banished to Hell, the Virgin sits to His right, pleading with Him to show clemency. It was believed that the Virgin's power over Christ's judgment rested in her authority as His loving mother, the woman He could deny nothing.²¹

The worshipers of the Middle Ages embraced the idea that Mary's special link to mankind gave her a strong maternal compassion. This quality of her love and kindness has yielded many names to refer to the Virgin. She is called *maria mediatrix* (Mary the mediator), *mater omnium* (mother of all), *nutrix omnium* (nutrition of all), just to name a few. The latter refers to her breast milk nourishing Christ and those who claimed to have been fed the Virgin's milk in visions of her.²²

Paintings, sculptures, literature, architecture, and other works of art were dedicated to Mary to celebrate her many roles in her position as the Mother of Humanity. Since popular traditions of piety often surpassed scholarly theology, the widespread

²¹ Sister Mary Vincentine Gripkey, *The Blessed Virgin Mary as Mediatrix in the Latin and Old French Legend prior to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: AMS Press, Inc, 1938), 70.

participation in the Virgin's cult helped establish some of the most important principles of Marian doctrine.²³ Although it is not found in the gospels, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception was celebrated in the West as early as the seventh century and ultimately became official Church dogma, known as *Ineffabilis Deus*, in 1854.²⁴ That is to say, the popular observation of the Immaculate Conception anticipated and stimulated its official recognition. Similarly, celebrations of the Assumption of the Virgin appeared in the sixth century, yet the belief, called *Munificentissimus Deus*, was officially recognized only in 1950. This dogma included the concept, posited by Saint Irenaeus, of Mary as the second Eve, officially solidifying her participation in the redemption of mankind with Christ.²⁵

By the sixth century, Mary's authority in the religion was getting dangerously close to rivaling Christ's power and her position only increased in the following centuries. Gone were the days of Jesus' mother being something of an enigma due to the brief mention of her in the gospels. By the late Middle Ages Mary had developed a poignant relationship with humanity as the protective mother to all Christians. She was revered as the bridge between humans and God. Her compassion as a mother and a fellow human made her an approachable portal to salvation for worshippers, rather than the frightening Father and Judge, Christ. If Christians hoped to enter into Paradise, they need not pray to Christ, but only fear Him and pray to His mother, as her influence sways his final decision to bless or condemn her children.

²³ Thurlkill, 13.

²⁴ Paul E. Duggan, *The Assumption Dogma: Some Reactions and Ecumenical Implications in the Thought of English-Speaking Theologians* (Cleveland: The Emerson Press, 1989), 7.

²⁵ Duggan, 37.

Mary's obedience and purity led to her active participation in the redemptive process. These behaviors also served as the perfect model for women touched by the Marian Cult. Examined in its most basic form, the development of Marian theology reflects the patriarchal order of these societies. Mary was structured as the subservient woman who obeyed the orders of her male superior, God. Her maternity extended beyond her own Son and nurtured all of humanity, making her the ultimate mother figure. Being that she was the purest of all women, she was concurrently supreme mother and virgin. These are all things which women of medieval society could never live up to in the harmonized fashion of the Virgin Mary. They were nevertheless expected to aspire for her purity and virtue, to be – as impossible as it was – all things to all men. Perhaps this is why the male leaders of the Church who cultivated her powerful image allowed her such a peculiar amount of authority as a woman. She represents all of the things a woman of propriety should be in all of the early societies her cult affected, but she is the safest model of a powerful woman because her role is impossible to duplicate. All of her qualities are unique to her direct connection to divinity, which ordinary women will never possess and thus never have such an extraordinary amount of power.

Understanding the evolution of the Cult of the Virgin is critical to understanding Marian imagery of the Counter-Reformation. The standardized iconography for works of the Virgin developed in response to her transformation over the centuries. Since men were the people responsible for Mary's position and representation, gender issues are

also observable in works of the Virgin and require consideration. All of these issues will be addressed in the three paintings studied here, but first a brief study of the Counter-Reformation and its leaders is necessary. While the fundamentals concerning the Counter-Reformation are relatively well known, the details specific to the Virgin Mary and art of the period are less commonly known. As these, too, color the paintings of Mary in this period these particulars compel a brief mention.

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT'S RESPONSE TO THE PROTESTANT CALL TO REFORM MARIAN DEVOTION

The Protestant Reformation is probably best known through Martin Luther's criticisms of the Catholic Church. While it is true that he was not the only prominent figure to criticize the Church, he is the leading figure in this study of Marian devotion since he attacked the Cult of the Virgin with more fervency than other notable Reformers, such as John Calvin, who barely mentions the Virgin Mary in his complaints.

The religious battles that began in the sixteenth century catapulted Europe into one of the most significant religious conflicts in history. Martin Luther's *95 Theses* of 1517 attacked a number of Catholic dogmas and practices, such as the sale of Indulgences as a release from Purgatory, the authority of the Pope,²⁶ the sacraments, and the intercession of saints.²⁷ Not least among his criticisms was the reverence of the Virgin Mary and her role in the Christian faith, which he felt had become far too salient. Martin Luther argued that the focus on the Virgin was minimal in scripture, thus her true role was shaped by God to be relatively insignificant. To him, theologians had

²⁶ Dorothy Mills, *Renaissance and Reformation Times*, (New York: Van Rees Press, 1939) explains in more detail why change was needed within Catholic Church and why it finally happened in this period (with regard to the Popes).

²⁷ Laura Fenley, "Confraternal Mercy and Federico Barocci's *Madonna del Popolo*: An Iconographic Study" (Thesis, Texas Christian University, 2007), 9. Also see Edward Maslin Hulme, *Renaissance and Reformation* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1915).

misinterpreted a number of biblical fragments and inflated her position to one which was near or even above that of Christ. He went so far as to charge them with “substituting Mary’s milk for Christ’s blood as a source of grace and redemption,”²⁸ while contending that simply being Jesus’ mother was not enough to determine she possessed intercessional powers. Under the influence of Luther and other critics of the Virgin, Protestant worshippers abandoned most of the devotions and beliefs related to her. Perhaps most upsetting to the Catholics was their condemnation of the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption as nothing more than heresy.

Martin Luther and others strove to liberate the Word of God from the faults of the Catholic Church. Believing that scripture was “more harmful on walls than in books,”²⁹ Luther helped to revise the use of art in worship, yielding a Protestant form of art in contrast to the traditional works of the Catholics. This art concentrated on Christ, relegating Mary to the minor position Martin Luther read in the gospels. Works dedicated to the Virgin were either destroyed or packed away, to be replaced by works highlighting Christ or other salient figures of scripture. Suddenly, the Virgin’s position had changed yet again to accommodate the cultural current of the time.

Recognizing that the Protestant movement was gaining momentum, the Catholic hierarchy was forced to restructure parts of their practices if they were to persevere. In response to the attacks, the Pope Paul III called the Council of Trent in 1545. A body of Catholic officials met here intermittently until 1563. The Council meetings are most

²⁸ Thurlkill, 21.

²⁹ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 372.

noted for developing a specific outline of Catholic doctrine to counter the Protestants and for reforming the inner life of the Church by eliminating various abuses, some of which had been specifically emphasized by Luther and the other reformers.

The Catholic leadership identified and resolved a number of serious problems within the Church as a result of Protestant criticism. But neither the Virgin Mary nor the importance of art as a didactic and inspiring tool were subject to reform. Instead, they decided to intensify the use of art as a means to ward off the blows against the Virgin Mary from the Protestants.

With more pressing matters at hand, the Council did not focus very extensively on art, but the attention they did give the creative world was enough to impact the artists of the period. In the final session of the Council, in 1563, the assembled leaders announced a decree to standardize religious art set in churches:

The Holy Council prohibits placing in churches any image by false doctrine that might mislead the simple... To eliminate all lures of impurity and lasciviousness, images must not be decked in shameless beauty... To enforce this decision, the Holy Council prohibits setting up in any place or church, no matter what its exemptions, any irregular image unless authorized by the Bishop.”³⁰

This order clearly places some limitations on artistic inventiveness, but the broad quality of the regulations leaves ample room for painters to interpret the Council’s guidelines as they see fit.

The regulation of these restrictions was a very fluid process. Although the prohibition was not officially developed until 1563, the Council of Trent had been meeting for nearly two decades, structuring the beliefs of the Catholic faith against those

³⁰ A. Hyatt Mayor, “The Art of the Counter Reformation,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 4 (1945): 104.

of the Protestants. As art is a medium by which ideological currents are reflected, the notions expressed by the Council had been prominent ideas for years before the 1563 declaration. In addition to the issues discussed in the meetings of the Council, many theologians and Church leaders, such as Cardinal Paleotti, had written extensively about proper representations of the Catholic faith in art, guiding artists toward the outlines prescribed in 1563 before they were officially announced.

Artists of the Counter-Reformation had been reflecting support of the Church and deviating from the lavish style of the Renaissance to a more spiritual form of art for some time before these ideas were officially mandated, but faced with such an unprecedented religious schism Catholic leaders still recognized the importance of supervising the work of the period. As stated above, in 1563 the Council of Trent declared that any irregular images had to be approved by the Bishop before they were placed in any church, reflecting the Church's prominent concern with art viewed by the impressionable masses. Artists who failed to follow the guidelines announced by the Council were brought before the Holy Office of the Inquisition to be reprimanded for their inappropriateness. Some of the period's most celebrated artists were called before the Church, including Paolo Veronese, Tintoretto, and Michelangelo Caravaggio. Those artworks which were not deemed irregular, and thus not requiring the approval of the Bishop, were left to the appropriate Catholic figures to evaluate, such as leaders of smaller churches.

With regard to the Virgin Mary's position in Catholic worship, Pope Pius IV (1559-1565) declared "that the images of Christ and of the ever Virgin Mother of God... are to be kept and retained, and that due honor and veneration is to be accorded them."³¹

³¹ Catholic Creed of Pope Pius IV.

This statement not only highlights the Pope's support of artworks depicting the Virgin, but also underscores the Catholic leaders' continued defense of the doctrine surrounding Mary. Here, too, the Pope reiterates the Catholic claim that Mary was a virgin for her entire existence. Other precepts of Marian doctrine were also confirmed by the Church hierarchy in this period. For example, the Church supported the belief in her Assumption and Immaculate Conception and her role as intercessor for the faithful.

With these directions from the Council of Trent came great variety in paintings of the Virgin Mary. While, as stated briefly above, and as demonstrated in the discussion to follow, much variety and invention was shown by painters of Marian subjects. The tendency of art during the Counter Reformation period was to reject the complex and convoluted iconography of preceding artists and to fashion a less ambiguous representation of the Virgin's position in the Catholic faith. These new works of art clearly illuminated the principles of Marian doctrine that Church leaders wished to convey to all echelons of society as they battled the criticisms of the Protestants.

To study the diversity of artistic expression within this period of Catholic art, three artists are examined in the following chapters. Each selected work depicts a different scene of the Virgin's life, each of which corresponds to the principal concerns of the Counter-Reformation. The first painting to be discussed, Federico Barocci's *Madonna del Popolo*, 1579, portrays the Virgin Mary as intercessor between human and divine worlds.

FEDERICO BAROCCI
MADONNA DEL POPOLO, 1579

Born in Urbino to a family of craftsmen, it seems inevitable that Federico Barocci (c. 1526-1612) would become a talented artist. His gift for painting was observed early in life even by fellow artists outside the family, who encouraged the young Barocci to pursue a career in the arts. His works reflect the diversity of his training, which included an acquaintance with the Venetian artist Battista Franco, who worked in Urbino at the time and the mannerist artist, Taddeo Zuccaro, to whom Barocci was apprenticed in Urbino and later in Rome.³² Although born too late to have studied under Raphael, the young painter was significantly inspired by great artist of the High Renaissance. Barocci admired the achievements of his fellow Urbino native and studied his works as well as those of other renowned painters in Rome.

A devout Catholic who was particularly committed to the Cult of the Virgin Mary, Barrocci's works satisfied the wishes of the most conventional religious patrons.³³ The artist portrayed the Virgin Mary with great frequency in his paintings. Some of his most celebrated works focus specifically on the Virgin. For example, *The Annunciation*, 1592-1596; *Rest on the Return from Egypt*, c. 1573; and *The Nativity*, 1597. Barocci created paintings in support of Catholic belief which radiate the ideology of the Counter-

³² Laura Fenley, "Confraternal Mercy and Federico Barocci's *Madonna del Popolo*: An Iconographic Study" (Thesis, Texas Christian University, 2007) 6.

³³ Fenley, 11.

Reformation. His works endorse the doctrine of the Church in a less complicated way than the art of the High Renaissance, which aimed to intellectually challenge sophisticated viewers, but also expose his various influences and prerogatives as a painter. In this way he brings his own unique artistic interpretation to the Catholic agenda while still appropriately adhering to the Council of Trent guidelines.

Barocci's painting, the *Madonna del Popolo*, 1579 (Figure 1), was commissioned for the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia in Arezzo, a Confraternity sponsored by a Dominican Marian organization. The patrons originally requested the work to be done by Giorgio Vasari, who designed and built the chapel of the church, but he died too soon.³⁴ Barocci was recommended to the confraternity as a suitable replacement. The confraternity, like all others, was founded on the instruction of the Seven Acts of Mercy, a medieval teaching of practices and actions to encourage charity among the masses.³⁵ These included feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the imprisoned, visiting the sick, and burying the dead.³⁶

In the Counter-Reformation, almsgiving (an act closely related to the Seven Acts of Mercy) became an important deed of good works to obtain Christ's blessing. Unlike the Protestants, who believed faith alone was sufficient, the Catholics maintained that good works completed by following to the Seven Acts of Mercy were necessary for entry into heaven. This specific confraternity was especially devoted to the almsgiving practice, as they believed it sufficiently cared for the needs of the poor as listed in the Seven Acts.

³⁴ Nicholas Turner, *Federico Barocci* (Italy: Vilo International, 2000), 69.

³⁵ Fenley, 14.

³⁶ Fenley, 14.

It was common practice for confraternities of this era to commission paintings which portrayed the brotherhood performing charitable acts beneath the mantle of the Virgin Mary, an iconographic formula known as the *Madonna della Misericordia*. Keeping with tradition, the Arezzo Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia wrote to Barocci and requested a work with “figures which represent the mystery of the *misericordia* or another mystery and *historia* of the blessed Virgin.”³⁷ This was a typical Counter-Reformation request not merely because it stipulated the *misericordia* arrangement, but also because it stated the confraternity’s preference for a representation of a mystery of the Virgin. In this period, the Catholics aimed to produce works which were less intellectually complex or sophisticated (such as those of the High Renaissance) or guided solely by emotions felt in viewing the poignant events of Christianity. One would not want to suggest that the art of this era was completely devoid of such qualities. However, the overwhelming concern was that paintings leave the viewer contemplating the higher meaning of the Christian mysteries.³⁸ It was believed that the artists of the High Renaissance had devoted too much attention to fanciful design of paintings and arcane symbols and references, distracting the viewer from the intrinsic Catholic doctrine. This left the Counter-Reformation artists with the prescribed duty of creating paintings that performed appropriate didactic and inspirational functions.

Since the *misericordia* formula was an older tradition, Barocci responded with a letter indicating that he considered this formula outdated and wished to negotiate a different scene of the Virgin:

³⁷ Stuart Lingo, *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 38.

³⁸ Charles McCorquodale, *Bronzino* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 84.

The desire to do the mystery of the misericordia does not seem to me to [provide] a subject that is too apropos to make a beautiful panel; perhaps Your Lordships can decide to have [me] do another mystery, for there are other histories of the glorious Virgin which are more apropos with more beautiful inventions, as would be the Annunciation, the Assumption, the Visitation or other histories which will please Your Lordships more; on this You may decide amongst yourselves...³⁹

The patrons and artist ultimately settled on a painting depicting the Virgin interceding between her Son and the populace, advocating for His blessing upon them.

Following the stipulations of the contract, Barocci portrays the Virgin floating between heaven and earth. She gazes to her Son, seated against the golden backdrop of heaven, with a request of blessing for her earthly children. The gesture of Mary's hands to the people below, coupled with her look in Christ's direction links the two worlds. The people below the divine figures are a diverse collection of common people. Citizens from all walks of life are portrayed: rich, poor, old and young. In the foreground, a blind hurdy-gurdy musician plays the instrument as he turns his head in the direction of a beggar resting on the ground. Just behind this exchange is a woman with a child receiving charity from an adolescent boy as an older gentleman to her left observes the act of kindness.

A number of people direct the viewer's attention to the scene above. On the far right side of the painting, a group of men stand in the Virgin's shadow, looking at the scene above, while other figures on the left mirror their gaze upward. The woman on the left of the painting turns to her child, whose hands are clasped in a gesture of prayer, and

³⁹ Laura Fenley, "Confraternal Mercy and Federico Barocci's *Madonna del Popolo*: An Iconographic Study" (Thesis, Texas Christian University, 2007), 22. For more on the contract discussions between the artist and patron, see Stuart Lingo, *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) or Harald Olsen, *Federico Barocci* (Denmark: International Booksellers and Publishers Ltd., 1962).

points to the heavenly apparition above. She is of particular interest in her correlation to the Cult of the Virgin.

A fascinating addition to the painting, this woman and her children inundate the image with information pertaining to gender roles and the Cult of the Virgin. In compositional terms, it is quite interesting that Barocci chose to position her directly opposite Mary in the work. Her pose even mirrors that of the Virgin's as she, too, rests on her knees and opens her arms to indicate her objective, which is to direct her son to the apparition above. Her young daughter appears innately prepared to contemplate the experience as she clasps her hands and gazes upon her preoccupied brother with a solemn facial expression, waiting for his participation in worship of the Virgin. She, like her mother, who attempts to correct her son's attention, is already performing her proper duties as a female. Both of them attempt to emulate the faithful role Mary performed as a devoted Christian woman in her time on earth.

The woman's son, on the other hand, is distracted by the hurdy-gurdy player. He is noticeably preoccupied as he smiles cheerfully at the musician and his dog, rather than observing the vision above like a devoted young Christian. In this way, the young man also takes on a more active role than his young sister. She quietly watches her brother with her hands clasped to pray, waiting for him to disengage with the events of the earthly world. This highlights the fact that while all worshippers were devoted to the Virgin, women were expected to be exceptionally dedicated to the role of the Virgin, while men were permitted to engage in more involved activities of the world and follow the Cult of the Virgin in a more dissociated fashion.

In the middle, a man stands in the darkness of Christ's shadow as he looks above with a gesture of amazement, guiding the onlooker's eyes to the spectacle above. The position of this man's body connects with the shroud of the woman receiving charity to frame a man directly in the center of the painting. This man, framed in the middle, stands in soft lighting and humbly lowers his head and clasps his hands in a gesture of worship. In the far background are two figures visiting prisoners in a jail cell. One man carries a heavy basket of food, while the other figure passes the items to the prisoners.

Upon close examination, the Catholic doctrine of the Counter-Reformation unfolds in Barocci's careful design of the work. The act of almsgiving is the main action of the populace. This is in keeping with the confraternity's motivation in the community, of course, but is also tied to the Council of Trent's support for the performance of good works as a way of achieving God's blessing. As a reward for the citizens' good behavior, the response of Christ is a gesture of blessing to his worshippers below.

The authority that the Virgin holds in the Catholic faith is saliently presented to the viewer as well. Her powerful role as intercessor is blatantly displayed as she functions as a compositional bridge between humanity and God. Her active role in the event is indicated by the vibrant movement of her robe as it sways in the wind, in contrast to the clothing of the other figures, including Christ. She pleads with her Son on behalf of the benevolent citizens performing their good works to have mercy on their souls. As a participant in the mercy of God on the people, Mary blesses them with the gesture of her left hand and presents their good deeds to Christ with her right.⁴⁰ The artist has designed the work so that her connection with the viewer is enhanced by the arrangement

⁴⁰ Lingo, 50.

of the painting. She is positioned in front of Christ, rather than beside him, bringing her closer in proximity to the spectator as the work is viewed. As his mother, He can refuse her nothing. Her proximity to divinity has worked in favor of the people of Arezzo, indicated by Christ's approval and kind face.

The Arezzo Confraternity was rather unique in its inclusion of women.⁴¹ This was done as a way of building a family structure, endorsing the idea of the Catholic faith as a more universally represented faith.⁴² Support of this idea is obvious in the disparate group of ordinary citizens presented, all of whom are capable of completing the appropriate duties of a good Catholic. Even a youth is performing a charitable act among a group of his elders, who gaze upon his behavior as if to learn from his example. The man occupying the center of the painting was certainly not arbitrarily placed. He serves as an instructive focal point of the work. Amid the commotion of the miracle, he remains calmly concentrated on the mystery of the event, completely devoted to his faith. With all of these worshipers being everyday individuals, viewers would certainly not have failed to imagine themselves as one of the participants in the painting.⁴³

Following the practice of his artistic guide, Raphael, Barocci was an avid draughtsman in preparing his compositions. In fact, nearly two-thousand sheets by his hand have been discovered.⁴⁴ He constantly revised his work and prepared drawing studies along the painting process. One such work reveals the artist's decision to remove

⁴¹ Laura Fenley, "Confraternal Mercy and Federico Barocci's *Madonna del Popolo*: An Iconographic Study" (Thesis, Texas Christian University, 2007), 19. The women included in the Arezzo confraternity were not required to pay the same dues as the men. They were also not permitted to attend meetings or participate in the group's public events. Fenley asserts that the confraternity likely included women (an unusual deed) as a way to create a family structure.

⁴² Fenley, 19.

⁴³ Turner, 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

some members of the confraternity and replace them with everyday people, who ultimately compose the entire populace. The town in the background is likely a study of the local town of Arezzo. These details are important because they function as pointers for average people viewing the work in the chapel, directing them to relate to and emulate all the worshipful figures in the painting, not just the confraternity members.

Barocci's masterful blending of composition and subject matter presents the Counter-Reformation viewer with splendid confirmation of Catholic doctrine. His painting makes it simple for audiences of all kinds to understand this doctrine and the work encourages them to reflect upon the deeper meaning of Christianity as defined by Catholic leaders. As one of the great painters of the Counter-Reformation, he accomplishes this through a method which endorses the artistic guidelines of the Council of Trent and their established Church doctrine, while still managing to reveal his distinctive training as an artist.

GUIDO RENI
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, 1627

In his own time Guido Reni (1575-1642) was considered a remarkable artist. His contemporaries referred to paintings produced by him as having been created by an angel, whereas others were simply made by men.⁴⁵ He was even called the “greatest artist” by Pope Paul V.⁴⁶ Receiving such praise from the highest leader of the Catholic Church in such a challenging period makes Reni an artist especially important to the study of Counter-Reformation art.

Reni was born in Bologna, where he was apprenticed to the workshop of Denis Calvaert, one of the most eminent artists in the city. It was here that Reni was trained to produce paintings with a distinctive polish and surface complexity. The artist eventually left Calvaert’s studio after a disagreement concerning the use of the master’s special varnishes. Reni moved to the Accademia degli Incamminati, operated by the famous Carracci family of artists. The Carracci differed greatly from the style of Calvaert. They trained students to work with paints in a way that evidenced the hand of the artist. They found Calvaert’s method too exacting and taught that it was better to observe the natural world when painting, rather than creating works purely from imagination.⁴⁷ A combination of the divergent styles of these two workshops would become the trademark

⁴⁵ Susan L. Caroselli, ed., *Guido Reni: 1575-1642* (Italy: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1988), 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Susan L. Caroselli, ed., *Guido Reni: 1575-1642* (Italy: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1988), 4.

style of Reni as he left Bologna for Rome. This chapter focuses on this aspect of his work, as well as other methods Reni appropriated into his painting of the Immaculate Conception. One of these is the simplification of Immaculate Conception iconography, which previous artists, like Giorgio Vasari, struggled to develop in such a way that the masses could easily comprehend. The other feature of Reni's work examined here is his use of various artistic traditions and formulas, ancient and contemporary to his time, to conceive a painting with broad appeal.⁴⁸

In 1627 Reni received the commission of the *Immaculate Conception* (Figure 2) from the Spanish ambassador to Rome, Count of Oñate, for Maria, the Infanta of Spain.⁴⁹ Several years after its return to the Infanta, the work was placed in the Seville Cathedral, where it was studied by many artists, such as the Spanish Baroque painter Murillo, and proved to be greatly influential. Although Reni's paintings were greatly admired, he was not the most agreeable artist to work with. In his resentment at the ambassador's continuous pressings for delivery of the painting and after being told he would have to wait for his payment, Reni completed the picture and angrily sent it to Bologna, rather than to the ambassador in Rome.⁵⁰ With diplomatic affairs between Spain and Italy already tense, this redirection of the painting threatened to trigger an international incident, leaving Cardinal Francesco Barberini to send for the painting to be returned.⁵¹ Nonetheless, Reni's behavior was excused because of his tremendous skill as an artist.

⁴⁸ For a more in depth study of Christian Iconography, see Andre Grabar *Christian Iconography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁴⁹ Howard Hibbard, "Guido Reni's Painting of the Immaculate Conception," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 28 (1969): 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The work depicts the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Although this belief did not become official dogma until 1854, it had been accepted as fact by Catholic worshippers for centuries. Feasts celebrating the belief had been going on in the West since the seventh-century.⁵² The creed stems from the notion that because Mary was the carrier of God's Son, God protected her soul from the taint of original sin at the moment of her birth.⁵³

The popularity of the belief comes from Mary's function as the mediator and second Eve. The first sin of humans had been performed with the aid of a woman. Only a pure, human woman free of stain could redeem this fall from grace and could be selected to become the mother of Christ, the source of all human salvation.⁵⁴ For this reason, the Catholic Church maintained, Mary was spared original sin at the point of her own conception. This assertion became a point of theological contention between the Protestants and the Catholics. To corroborate and popularize their belief in Mary's untainted conception, the Catholics produced a number of works depicting the subject.

Reni's version of the doctrine presents the Virgin standing in *contrapposto* on a crescent moon supported by three angels. She wears a red dress covered by a deep blue mantle. Mary holds her hands in a prayerful gesture as she gazes upward. Above her head is a crown of twelve twinkling stars. On either side of the Virgin is an angel. They look upward as they gently fold their arms across their chests. The clouds that surround the scene take the shape of an oval and are punctuated with faces of angels. The majority

⁵² Duggan, 7.

⁵³ Mary Rose Robinson, *Apparitions of Mary and the Immaculate Conception* (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1988), 45.

⁵⁴ Hibbard, 24.

of the painting is colored by a vibrant yellow-orange background. At the bottom of the image, grey clouds separate the scene from a small portion of blue.

Compositionally speaking, the work reflects Reni's training with Calvaert. The arrangement is very controlled and symmetrical. Mary occupies the center of the painting and is flanked by an angel on each side, creating a triangular arrangement of the figures. The influence of the Carracci academy is visible in the roughness of the clouds. Calvaert would most certainly have preferred a smoother technique, hiding the brushstroke. The Carracci, in contrast, taught Reni to paint with a coarser hand, confirming the touch of the artist.

Artists of the more recent periods depicted the Immaculate Conception in ways which presented the viewer with the principles of the doctrine, but were too complex for many audiences to understand. One such example is Giorgio Vasari's *Immaculate Conception*, 1540 (Figure 3). In his era, the mid-sixteenth century, the most effective way to present the Immaculate Conception was still undecided. His painting saturated the image with appropriate theological references, but left the scene far too complicated for most viewers to suitably interpret. Vasari recognized this error and declared the work an unsatisfactory painting.⁵⁵ By the time of the Counter-Reformation, the iconography of

⁵⁵ Howard Hibbard, "Guido Reni's Painting of the Immaculate Conception." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 28 (1969): 24. A translation of Vasari's explanation of the image: "In the middle of the picture I put the tree of original sin and at its roots, as the first sinners against God's commandments, I showed Adam and Eve, nude and bound. Then I showed Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David, and succeeding kings—all tied by both hands with the exception of Samuel and St. John the Baptist, who are tied by only one hand since they were sanctified in the womb. Wound around the trunk I showed the old serpent, and since he is half human, his hands are tied behind his back. Above, the glorious Virgin rests one foot on his head, the other on a moon; she is clothed with the sun and crowned with twelve stars. The Virgin is held in air by a glory of nude angels, illuminated by the rays coming from her. The rays pass through the leaves of the tree and give light to the captives, seeming to lose their bonds by their virtue and grace. In the sky at the top of the picture are two putti holding banners

the scene was simplified and standardized, in accord with the dictates of the Council of Trent. Reni's straightforward presentation of the Virgin in a traditional iconic arrangement, therefore, satisfied the Church officials and became the model for later artists.⁵⁶

The iconography of the Immaculate Conception originates in the story of a vision revealed to Saint John on Patmos. As recounted in Revelation 12:1, John saw "a woman robed with the sun, beneath her feet the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."⁵⁷ Saint John continues by explaining that "she gave birth to a male child, who is destined to rule all nations," which suggested that the woman in his apparition was the Virgin Mary.⁵⁸

Reni's version reflects the simplicity and clarity that the Council of Trent insisted upon. This quality was vital if the doctrine was to be readily understood by a wide range of viewers, that is, intellectuals and the less educated worshippers. In the High Renaissance the mark of a good painting had been its ability to stimulate the viewer intellectually. During the years of the Counter-Reformation, this quality was replaced with a painting's ability to keep the viewer's mind focused on the depicted religious mystery. Reni abided by these requirements and reduced the iconography of the Immaculate Conception to its most basic form, focusing exclusively on the visionary experience of Saint John. The austerity of his work leaves the viewer with nothing to contemplate except the divine mystery.

on which is written: [Those whom the sin of Eve damned, Mary's Grace saved]... It did not satisfy me."

⁵⁶ Hibbard, 25.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

In creating the painting, Reni combined established techniques and formulas from a variety of sources. Some of these he appropriated from the visual imagery of the ancient world, while others were from more recent periods of art. He manipulated these methods in a way that would effectively inspire the faithful, while also incorporating a range of possible visual references to be identified by an array of viewers. In doing so, he strengthened the appeal of the image.

To a modern viewer, Reni's skillful coloring may detract from the simplicity of the image, but this fresh and highly saturated palette was intended to enhance the universal appeal of the work. The magnetism of the bright colors compelled sophisticated and less educated viewers alike to examine the scene presented. Cardinal Paleotti, an exceptionally prominent writer on the artwork of the sixteenth century, was one of the Church leaders who appreciated the resourcefulness of color as a means to cross educational and social boundaries.⁵⁹

Reni's composition recalls techniques from centuries before, and he interprets these techniques into his painting to elucidate the long-standing tradition of Marian devotion in the face of Protestant attacks on her cult. Thus, Mary occupies the majority of the painting in a frontal stance, like ancient icons of the Byzantine period. As the

⁵⁹ Dorothy Eileen Sacksteder, "The Cult of Mary: The Role of the Virgin During the Italian Renaissance," (Thesis, University of Louisville, 2004) presents an excellent summation of Paleotti's significance to art in this period. His writings of the era promoted the idea that artists should learn more about their subjects to avoid errors in their artwork. The artists also, according to Paleotti, had a responsibility to depict these religious subjects accurately and realistically as a participant in the educational teachings of the Church. For more, see Stuart Lingo, *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 191.

clouds surround her, they form an oval shape similar to that of the mandorla used in early Christian art.⁶⁰

Reni's appropriation of the Council of Trent ideology into his painting of Mary's Immaculate Conception yielded a work that testifies to the endurance of the Catholic faith, while also inciting viewers to ponder the mystery of Mary's infinite purity. His clever technique became the standard for later artists as it enabled audiences from diverse backgrounds to understand the scene and contemplate its advanced meaning.

Intrinsically connected to the belief of the Virgin's Immaculate Conception is the philosophy of her Assumption. If she was pure from the beginning, then her exit from the world must have been equally untainted. Scenes of this subject matter became just as significant in the Catholic defense of the Cult of the Virgin against the Protestants. The painting of this topic explored in this study comes from a member of the family Reni studied under, Annibale Carracci.

⁶⁰ Hibbard, 26.

ANNIBALE CARRACCI
ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN, C.1590

Annibale Carracci (1560-1609) is an interesting artist for a study of Counter-Reformation paintings because while all of the artists studied in this thesis were active between the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Baroque period, Annibale's work seems to reveal this transition the most. This transition from one artistic manner to the other, complicated by the Counter Reformation, is especially apparent when his preparatory drawings are examined together with his finished paintings. Annibale's attempts to balance these varied obstacles of his time as a Counter-Reformation artist color his interpretation of the Catholic Marian ideology in a fascinating way.

Born in Bologna, Annibale was a member of the Carracci family of artists. With his cousin, Ludovico, and his brother, Agostino, Annibale opened a painters' studio, which was dubbed the Accademia degli Incamminati, and in that environment he trained budding young artists.⁶¹ The Carracci traveled around Italy, painting in places like Parma and Venice, but frequently did work in their hometown of Bologna. It is here that Annibale's *Assumption of the Virgin* of 1592 (Figure 4) is housed today. Unfortunately, the patron of this work is unknown, but the subject matter and dynamism of the work certainly would have been suitable for a church altar, where so many of the artist's other works were designed to be placed.

⁶¹ Stephen D. Pepper, *Guido Reni* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 19.

The event of the Virgin's Assumption is directly linked to the belief in her Immaculate Conception because both are rooted in the idea that if she was to be the vessel of God's Child, she needed to be completely pure.⁶² Had Mary died in the form of a normal individual, she would have shared in the sin of ordinary humans. This is because even the moral people of the world are corrupt after death. Only after the blessing of Christ on Judgment Day can they reunite with their soul.⁶³

The belief in Mary's Assumption became sanctioned dogma in 1950 by Pope Pius XII after nearly two centuries of written petitions for the final honor of Mary.⁶⁴ Before making the belief official, the Pope composed a papal committee of scholars to investigate the validity of the Virgin's Assumption. In the Catholic tradition, even though such an event is not recorded in scripture, evidence to its truth may be established by the lasting belief and traditions associated with it in the Church, something the Protestants saw as tremendously problematic.⁶⁵

The painting was originally installed in the Bonasoni Chapel in the Church of San Francesco in Bologna.⁶⁶ It shows the Virgin in her usual attire, a red dress with a blue shroud, being lifted by a swarm of angels. As the angels raise her up she floats among a pile of grey clouds and extends her arms. The apostles react to the miraculous event with a range of expressions. Some mirror Mary's gesture as they spread their arms in wonder of the scene. Others concern themselves with the investigation of her now empty tomb in the bottom center of the painting.

⁶² Duggan, 3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Duggan, 9.

⁶⁵ Duggan, 42.

⁶⁶ Stoenescu, "The Visual Narratives of El Greco, Annibale Carracci and Rubens: Altarpieces of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the Early Modern Age" (Thesis, Queen's University, 2009), 166.

Compositionally, the painting is constructed along powerful diagonals. In the lower left corner of the bottom register, two men curve their bodies downward to examine the tomb. The arc of their combined bodies guide the viewer's eyes to the right side of the work, where a group of men form, each stacking up to a higher position and finally reaching the foot of Mary. The assembly of men on the left, behind the figures studying the tomb, also pulls the eye up towards the Virgin's assumption, as they compose a diagonal that recedes into space.

The upper register is equally energetic with its diagonals pointing in various directions. As Mary ascends, she follows the route of a diagonal slanted from the upper left to the center right of the image. Her gaze is directed in the opposite direction of her body as she looks upward. Meanwhile, the numerous angels that accompany her in the sky direct their bodies, gestures and looks in a multitude of directions.

Evidence to Annibale's struggle with the design of the work is seen in a preliminary drawing he did, which is now housed in the Windsor Castle collection (Figure 5). In the sketch, Annibale envisioned a completely different pose for the Virgin as she is assumed to heaven. Rather than the diagonal ascent carried out in the completed painting, Annibale sketched Mary in the frontally positioned icon of the Byzantine age. She floats high above the apostles beneath her, far from their reach. The clouds further separate her from the men below as they envelope her. Annibale undoubtedly considered the positioning of Mary in the drawing as a visual reference to the permanence of the Catholic faith and its traditions of Mary.

To properly examine this important compositional change and its meaning, one must first consider a few other modifications which show the difficulty the artist

encountered in combining the guidelines of the Church and his artistic prerogatives.

Chief among these is the relationship between Mary and the apostles. Annibale put a considerable amount of effort into this relationship, as it also functions to connect the viewer to the work of art.

In the painting, the Virgin is so close to the apostles that they could quite literally reach up and touch her. Her dangling foot almost grazes the hand of one apostle with outstretched arms. This deviates greatly from the relationship of Mary to the figures in the preliminary sketch. The drawing presents the Virgin high above her empty tomb, which was more exactly what the Church suggested to artists. Cardinal Paleotti stated in a letter to fellow cardinal, Silvio Antoniano, that he preferred the Virgin to be “raised highly above the tomb, assisted by angels, and with apostles around the tomb.”⁶⁷ Since this was not officially established in a session at the Council of Trent, which in fact offered no specific criteria for religious subjects, artists like Annibale had some the liberty to design an Assumption scene on their own accord.

In the final piece, Annibale followed the majority of Cardinal Paleotti’s preferences, but opted to bring the Virgin closer to the apostles. The reason he chose to change the placement of Mary becomes clear by examining the placement of the figure on the right in the foreground. In the drawing study, he was turned away from the viewer to look upwards at the scene. This position functions to distance the viewer from the event. In the finished painting, however, the artist rotated the man so that he now faces

⁶⁷ Stoenescu, 162.

the audience. This changes the relationship between the viewer and the picture tremendously.⁶⁸

Now the spectator is an active participant in the event. The viewer could easily imagine stepping right into the scene and sharing in the bewilderment of the others, who are so close to the Virgin. The figure to the left of the tomb has even been moved further to the side to make room in the foreground, as if to open a space up for the viewer to stand among the apostles and nearer to Mary.⁶⁹ This careful design of the composition allows the viewer to actively join the apostles in observing the extraordinary moment. The onlooker is encouraged to feel closer to the Virgin, just as the figures in the work. This design is quite effective when considered alongside the large size of the painting, which places the spectator at approximately the same height as the apostles.

Annibale's changes to the composition reveal more than his struggle to arrive at an appropriate design for the representation of an important Catholic doctrine. They also expose the difficulty of an artist attempting to come to terms with the shifting tides in art. An assortment of artistic influences flowed through Annibale's culture. The Renaissance artists failed to create works which emphasized the mystery of the Christian faith, but inspiration from the style of certain artists, such as Raphael, still lingered. Trailing behind these painters were the rebellious Mannerists, who were closely followed by the impact of Baroque artists, like Caravaggio. Painters of the Counter-Reformation, like Annibale, faced the challenging task of creating solemn representations of Church doctrine in tandem with the ideology of the changing artistic movements of the time.

⁶⁸ A.W.A. Boschloo, *Annibale Carracci in Bologna*, Volume 1 (The Netherlands: Government Publishing Office, 1974), 19.

⁶⁹ Boschloo, 14.

Annibale's vivacious painting compared with his more stringent sketch underscores this struggle of Counter-Reformation painters.

CONCLUSION

While the Virgin Mary held little authority in the beginnings of Christianity, due to the fleeting mentions of her in scripture, her cult developed into a force of tremendous influence. Much of the expansion of the Cult of the Virgin was the consequence of men who made use of her following to promote their own particular agendas. Over the centuries of the Christian faith, Marian theology was shaped to accommodate the goals appropriate to its particular society.

The Catholic leaders of the Counter-Reformation were some of the most significant developers of Mary's following since the religious leaders at Ephesus in 431 C. E. Faced with some of the most detrimental criticisms in Catholic history, the Church organized at the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century to determine the most effective way to maintain their authority in the midst of the division of Christianity. An important part of this plan was the Virgin Mary and the artworks portraying her.

By this time Mary's close connection to humankind had been established with the population through her roles as intercessor, Mother of Christ, mother to all humans, the Second Eve through which humans could reach salvation, and much more. The Virgin had developed a fervent following, which the Catholic leaders of the Counter-Reformation could not afford to waste as they formulated a challenge to the Protestants, who were gathering supporters.

Counter-Reformation painters of the period answered the call of the Church as they portrayed the Virgin Mary in ways which embraced and saliently advanced the Catholic agenda. To effectively accomplish this task, the artists were forced to adapt their creativity to the current religious conflict of the time. In being forced to balance their inventiveness with the solemn guidelines of the Catholic Church, artists of this period produced unique interpretations of the same ideology.

Some, like Barocci, formed images wherein the Virgin and other figures were so accessible and relatable that the Counter-Reformation viewer could easily connect to the scene and imagine stepping right into the moment. His *Madonna del Popolo* of 1579 makes brilliant use of everyday individuals to reinforce Catholic doctrine and the Cult of the Virgin Mary, while also exposing fascinating information about gender roles of the period. Guido Reni relied on familiar visual formulas of the past as he reinvented them alongside more contemporary techniques to accommodate Church doctrine. In contrast to the difficulty previous painters of the Renaissance and Mannerist periods experienced as they attempted to represent the Immaculate Conception, Reni's *Immaculate Conception* painting of 1627 simplified the complex subject matter for viewers so successfully that his format became a model for later artists.

In a comparison between the preliminary sketch and the finished painting of the *Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1590, Annibale Carracci exposed the diligent efforts that went into creating precisely the right balance between Church agenda and artistic prerogative. A study of these two works distinctly revealed the struggle of a Counter-Reformation painter attempting to conform to the objectives of the Catholic Church while also being caught between some of the most significant art movements to have ever

evolved. Thus while all of the artists studied here presented the Counter-Reformation viewer with disparate interpretations of Marian theology, they all performed the same role as critical participants in the Cult of the Virgin to enhance the agenda of the Counter-Reformation.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1

Federico Barocci, *Madonna del Popolo*, 1579

Figure 2

Guido Reni, *Immaculate Conception*, 1627

Figure 3

Giorgio Vasari, *Immaculate Conception*, 1540

Figure 4

Annibale Carracci, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1592

Figure 5

Annibale Carracci, Study for the Assumption of the Virgin, c. 1590

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