

Visualizing the Immaculate Conception: Donatello, Francesco della Rovere, and the High Altar and Choir Screen at the Church of the Santo in Padua

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This essay contends that Donatello's High Altar at the Santo in Padua represents the Immaculate Virgin, reflecting a controversial doctrine of burgeoning interest in fifteenth-century Italy that she was exempted from original sin prior to the first moment of her conception. It ties the altar and scenes on the surrounding choir screen to a sermon promoting the Virgin's immaculacy by Francesco della Rovere (later Sixtus IV), spoken in Padua in 1448 while the altar was being erected. It further connects the liturgical ensemble with bulls by Sixtus IV and liturgical offices sponsored by him after he was elected pope.

INTRODUCTION

THIS ARTICLE ARGUES for an important but neglected interpretation of Donatello's High Altar at the Santo in Padua of the late 1440s and of the choir screen that once surrounded it. It contends that the Virgin Mary is represented in her immaculate state, according to a doctrine of growing interest in fifteenth-century Italy that she was exempted from original sin prior to the very first moment of her conception.¹ This doctrine was vigorously promoted by Francesco della Rovere (1414–84), the future Pope Sixtus IV, first in a sermon delivered in Padua in 1448, while the altar was being erected; then in two bulls he subsequently wrote as pope; and, finally, in two liturgical offices that he commissioned. Francesco had spent almost twenty years in Padua at the Santo convent and was closely tied to it even in his later career.

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¹For the development of the theological arguments about the Immaculate Conception earlier than the mid-fifteenth century, see Lamy.

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This reading of the altar is significant for four reasons. The ways in which the Immaculate Conception was visualized before the late sixteenth century were not standardized, leading to a variety of pictorial expressions of the theme. As a result, modern viewers misread their meaning and overlook occurrences of it. Mirella Levi d'Ancona, the author of an early study on the representations of the Immaculate Conception, observed that the theological positions in favor of the doctrine were almost impossible to depict in visual formulas because they dealt with a concept, rather than a narrative scene.² This led to a series of pictorial depictions of the elusive theme that were singular or rarely repeated, making them difficult to recognize.³ For example, such a major monument as the Sistine Chapel ceiling was only recently reinterpreted in terms of the Immaculate Conception by Kim E. Butler.⁴ Some time ago, Regina Stefaniak launched this rethinking about the Immaculate Conception by linking the iconography of Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rocks*, which is known to have been commissioned by a confraternity devoted to the Immaculate Conception for the church of San Francesco Grande in Milan, to verses from the book of Proverbs that begin the reading on the feast day of the doctrine.⁵ She interpreted Leonardo's landscape as the not-yet-created world whose genesis the figure described in Proverbs preceded, and as this figure was related to the Immaculate Virgin, she used this to connect the altarpiece to the Immaculate Conception. There the dilemma lay not in linking the doctrine to the painting, but in deciphering how the painting's iconography represented the Immaculate Conception.

A second reason that rereading Donatello's High Altar as a visualization of the Immaculate Conception is important is that it is one of the earliest artistic visualizations of the theme in the fifteenth century, when the cult underwent vigorous growth and met with vehement opposition. Its first appearance in the visual arts of the period is usually dated decades later.⁶ Third, like many other early depictions of the theme, it utilizes a compositional format that was rarely adopted afterward. Finally, the High Altar is a major landmark of the fifteenth

²Levi d'Ancona, 50–53.

³For some examples, see Vloberg.

⁴Butler. I am indebted to the author for having collected and translated many of the most important fifteenth-century sources concerning the Immaculate Conception and for analyzing their application to some of the same subjects, for example, Judith and David, that are included on the Santo's choir screen. She provided me a base on which to build. I thank Elena Ciletti for bringing Butler's article to my attention. For the oration written by Sixtus IV and the liturgical offices written by Nogarolo and de' Busti, I have looked at the original texts as well as the translations by Butler and, in the case of Sixtus's sermons, by Francesco Cortese, who edited a volume on them that confronts the Latin with an Italian translation.

⁵Stefaniak, 1997, 5.

⁶Generally, art historians associate the emergence of the theme in altarpieces with the dissemination of the liturgies commissioned by Sixtus IV from Nogarolo in 1477 and de' Busti in 1480. See, for example, Galizzi Kroegel, 2004, 84.

century, if not of the Italian Renaissance. To misunderstand the intentions of its commissioners is unfortunate.

EMERGENCE AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception can be construed as an effort to enhance the sanctity of the body of Jesus, received in the Eucharist, by sanctifying the Virgin's flesh from which he was born.⁷ Not until the eleventh century did the doctrine arrive in the West, and then in a limited way, through the adoption of a feast celebrating Mary's conception.⁸ The spread of the feast and the growing popular assumption that it commemorated Mary's immaculacy led to theological debate. Bernard of Clairvaux openly opposed the feast, even though he was a vigorous promoter of the cult of the Virgin.⁹ Most Scholastics sided with him, including the doctrine's most significant critic, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74).¹⁰ His negative stance would lead the Dominican order to become the most vociferous opponent of the doctrine.

The theological basis for the Immaculate Conception only gradually gained adherents. The most important advocate was the Scot John Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308).¹¹ The focus on the Immaculate Conception in Padua does not derive from the theology of Saint Anthony, who never preached a sermon on the doctrine, although he was sympathetic to the interpretation. A number of sermons by Anthony show his favorable inclinations toward Scotus's later reading.¹² Later Franciscans, including those at the Santo convent, almost uniformly followed Duns Scotus.¹³

The dispute led Alfonso V, the king of Aragon (1396–1458), to repeatedly petition the Holy Roman emperor Sigismund (1368–1437) to promote the feast and doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. He entreated him to arrange that the Council of Basel rule on the issues. By 1436, on the eve of the council's break with Pope Eugenius IV (r. 1431–47), the doctrine was a subject for open debate and written polemic.¹⁴ In 1437, when Eugenius IV and his legates withdrew

⁷Izbicki, 147.

⁸*The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception*, xi–xii; Lamy, 30–37.

⁹Lamy, 42–53.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 237–76; Balić, 1958.

¹¹For other significant adherents of the doctrine before Scotus, see Lamy, 161–212. For a discussion of Duns Scotus's arguments about the conception of Mary, see Le Bachelet; Jugie, 539–41; Sileo; Cross.

¹²See Della Rovere, 63–69.

¹³*The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception*, xiii.

¹⁴Izbicki, 152.

from Basel and left for Ferrara, the council deposed him and elected Amadeus VIII of Savoy (1383–1451) as Felix V. Finally, on 17 September 1438, the council endorsed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. However, the decision had no legal standing as the council no longer held ecumenical status. As John de Torquemada (1388–1468) argued, the doctrine enunciated at Basel was invalid because it was issued after the break with the pope. According to him, the true council had been transferred to Ferrara.¹⁵ The decree of Basel had little impact in Italy where the validity of the council's rulings was never recognized.¹⁶

As a result, the intense controversy over the Immaculate Conception continued unabated. In this heated climate, just ten years later in Padua, the Franciscan Francesco della Rovere took up the cudgels in defense of the doctrine. The crucial event was his oration on the Immaculate Conception, in Padua in 1448, spoken by the bishop of Padua, Fantino Dandolo (1379–1459). The oration was delivered before an imposing group of Padua's most important citizens.¹⁷ At that point, Francesco had lived for at least seventeen years at the Santo convent and had been a professor of theology at the University of Padua for four years.¹⁸ He would remain at the convent and university until 1449, when he began his rise in the church hierarchy.¹⁹

Francesco della Rovere continued to be closely connected with the Santo even after he left Padua. After being elected to the papacy as Sixtus IV in 1471, he was the first pope ever to visit the Santo convent, in 1475, on the occasion of the jubilee. At that time he conferred privileges on the Santo akin to those of St. Peter's. In 1483 he paid for the construction of one of the internal cloisters at the Santo. He also donated to the convent a number of liturgical vestments and furnishings.²⁰ Bishop Fantino Dandolo was no less devoted to the doctrine. Still preserved in the Biblioteca Capitolare in Padua are five sermons he delivered in the diocese of Padua and in Venice about the Virgin's immaculacy.²¹ As his biographer later revealed, Dandolo's profound distress that so respected a theologian as Thomas Aquinas had not believed in the immaculacy of Mary led to Aquinas appearing in a vision to comfort him. According to Dandolo's dream, Thomas renounced the position he had espoused in life about the

¹⁵Ibid., 153.

¹⁶Sebastian, 235.

¹⁷Della Rovere, 72, where the autograph manuscript of the sermon, preserved in the Biblioteca Capitolare, Cod. C46, is transcribed. It begins with a listing of the dignitaries who attended the luncheon and oration in the bishop's palace.

¹⁸Ibid., 12–16.

¹⁹Ibid., 11.

²⁰Ibid., 12.

²¹Ibid., 14; Cortese, 205–06.

maculacy of the Virgin and indicated to Dandolo his true belief in Dandolo's position.²²

Another key figure in the fifteenth-century history of the controversial doctrine was Lorenzo Nogarolo (d. 1486), whom Francesco della Rovere, when later elected Pope Sixtus IV, chose to write a liturgical office about the Immaculate Conception. He was then in Padua as one of Francesco's students.²³ Giacomo de' Zocchi (d. 1457), an eminent legal scholar from Ferrara who taught at Padua for thirty years, was also there. He wrote a treatise that upheld the Scotist viewpoint on the Immaculate Conception, buttressing its legal position.²⁴ Zocchi is buried at Santa Giustina in Padua and commemorated in a gisant tomb by Bartolomeo Bellano (1437/38–1496/97).²⁵ As the names of some of Francesco della Rovere's listeners reveal, Francesco's oration met an enthusiastic audience predisposed to support it. And, in fact, beginning in 1448, the canons of the cathedral of Padua commemorated the day of the oration, 8 December, which Francesco had deliberately chosen because it was the feast of the Virgin's conception, as the celebration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.²⁶ The design of the High Altar took place within the context of this religious climate in Padua and reflects the religious beliefs of the members of the oversight board of the Santo convent, the Massari, which was made up of friars and Paduan patricians, some of them professors at the university. They supervised the construction and decoration of the church and were closely connected with Francesco della Rovere, Bishop Dandolo, Nogarolo, and Zocchi.

The date 8 December 1448 was just months after the provisional erection of the High Altar of the Santo by Donatello (ca. 1386–1466), which occurred on the feast day of Saint Anthony, 13 June. The date for the unveiling had been set a few months earlier, in April of that year, but it had been anticipated ever since Donatello signed a contract on 23 June 1447 agreeing to complete most of the sculptures for the altar within eight months.²⁷ The temporary installation of the altar's component parts within the already-erected choir screen was planned with the express purpose of allowing the church's overseers to check how well the altar ensemble was received by pilgrims and visiting friars and laity, or, as they put it, by

²²Cortese, 214.

²³Della Rovere, 14–15.

²⁴Ibid., 15. A manuscript copy of Zocchi's *Tractatus de Conceptione Beatissime Virginis* is preserved in the Santo convent's library.

²⁵Krahn, 70–74.

²⁶Della Rovere, 15.

²⁷Band, 335 (doc. 17).

“forestieri” (“foreigners”).²⁸ Workmen began in April to move the components of the altar into place within the choir screen to have it ready in time for the feast day. The installation must have met with a positive reception because after 13 June additional features continued to be executed and added to it.²⁹ The sermon written by Francesco della Rovere and read at the Santo on what became the feast of the Immaculate Conception was delivered with the altar and surrounding choir screen on full view nearby. As will be demonstrated, the sermon articulated the doctrinal basis for the future pope’s later campaign to have the Virgin recognized as immaculate. In visual affirmation of this belief, the High Altar and surrounding choir screen were coordinated to express the doctrine. None of the surviving documents concerning the High Altar articulate this relation. No contract survives; most of the documents are records of payment. However, the close connection of Francesco della Rovere with the Santo convent and the provisional erection of the incomplete altar in 1448 for inspection and corrections suggest that the Santo’s oversight board made sure that the artists correlated the iconography of the altar and choir screen with this doctrine articulated by Francesco and enthusiastically supported at the Santo convent.

Francesco della Rovere continued his ardent devotion to the Immaculate Conception even after being elected to the papacy. In so doing, he became the first papal advocate of the doctrine. He was prompted to do so not only by his own beliefs, but by the ongoing, adamant opposition of the Dominicans. His oration of 1448 became the basis for two bulls on the subject, which he enunciated as Pope Sixtus IV: *Cum Praecelsa* (With the most lofty one) and *Grave Nimis* (Important beyond measure). The first was issued in 1477 and established special indulgences for all those who attended the rituals of the feast; the second appeared in 1482–83 and threatened excommunication for those who continued to debate the doctrine.³⁰ The oration was also the foundation for the two liturgical offices he commissioned. The pope prompted Leonardo Nogarolo, his former student in Padua, to write a liturgical office on the Immaculate Conception (*Officium Immaculatae Conceptionis*) for the use of the entire church in 1477. Sixtus also encouraged Bernardino de’ Busti (ca. 1450–ca. 1513) to write a second liturgical office on the Immaculate Conception for

²⁸Sartori, 1976, 91. The document is from the account books of the Archivio dell’Arca, register 337=1447–48, 16^v. Successive records of payment for stages in the execution, transportation, and mounting of the altar follow. The document was first published by Gloria, 9 (col. 2).

²⁹Gloria, 9 (col. 2)–14, also first published the documents describing the phases of completion of the altar.

³⁰Della Rovere, 12.

the Franciscan order in 1480.³¹ Sixtus dedicated his own funerary chapel in Old St. Peter's to the Immaculate Conception and consecrated it on 8 December 1479, the day of Mary's feast. The diarist Jacopo da Volterra recorded that in 1479 and the four following years, until his death in 1484, the pope celebrated the feast in his chapel and then processed from Old St. Peter's to Santa Maria del Popolo to pray to the Virgin in that church.³²

A leading Dominican, Vincenzo Bandello (1435–1506), the later minister general of the order who was elected in 1500, countered these moves to promote the doctrine with a series of treatises arguing the Thomist position against the Immaculate Conception. Bandello's first essay had been published anonymously in 1475 in Milan; the second in 1476, just after Sixtus commissioned Nogarolo to write his liturgical office; and the third in 1481, *Tractatus de Singulari Puritate et Praerogativa Conceptionis Salvatoris Nostri Iesu Christi* (Treatise on the unique purity and privileged conception of our Lord Jesus Christ). It was shortly thereafter republished in an expanded edition.³³

In 1477, Sixtus ordered Francesco Sansone (1414–99), who had been appointed minister general of the Franciscan order in 1475, to debate publicly the arguments for the Immaculate Conception against its Dominican detractors. Sixtus was motivated by the anonymously published treatise by Vincenzo Bandello, who stood as Sansone's opponent in the three-day debate. Legend has it that Sansone was so eloquent in defense of the Immaculate Conception that Sixtus congratulated him effusively and gave him for his debating skills the nickname Sansone, or Samson, by which he was afterward called.³⁴ Nevertheless, despite Sansone's debating triumph, Julius II was forced to deliver another injunction against further debate on the Immaculate Conception in 1503.³⁵

³¹Nogarolo's office appeared in another edition in 1478. De' Busti's office was published independently in 1482, 1494, and 1497, and republished along with his other writings on the subject in a volume entitled *Mariale de Excelletis Regine Celi* (Marian collection about the most eminent queen of heaven), which first appeared in 1483 and was reprinted in Milan by Leonhard Pachel in 1493. The *Mariale* was reprinted seven times before 1515. I consulted the 1493 edition of the *Mariale*. Both offices were reprinted in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, *Armamentarium Seraphicum et Regestum Universale Tuendo Titulo Immaculae Conceptionis* (The Seraphicum [Franciscan order] compendium of resources and a universal register regarding the title of the Immaculate Conception). For a complete publication history of these crucial documents, see Butler, 251.

³²Di Fonzo, 1988, 196.

³³See Ferrua.

³⁴Di Fonzo, 2000, 27. Francesco Sansone was so devoted to the Immaculate Conception that he was the patron of a series of choir stalls at San Francesco at Assisi that represented the major Franciscan proponents of the doctrine, including Duns Scotus, along with the Annunciation, a theme intimately associated with the Immaculate Conception because Gabriel greeted Mary as "full of grace." On the link between the two themes, see Galizzi Kroegel, 2003. On the choir stalls at Assisi, see Magro.

³⁵Oberman, 285.

Like Sixtus, Sansone was closely connected to the Santo convent: he made several endowments to it for benches and cabinets in the sacristy, and, most important, he underwrote the redecoration of the Chapel of the Arca of Saint Anthony where Anthony's relics are enshrined. There is a relief effigy of Sansone that functions as a cenotaph on the chapel's rear wall.³⁶ The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception continued to be supported in the Franciscan community and was reiterated at the Council of Trent.³⁷

HIGH ALTAR AT THE SANTO

Surprisingly, even though the Santo was a hotbed of immaculist thinking in the years during which the altar and choir area were planned and executed, the argument that the Virgin honored in a *sacra conversazione* at the center of its High Altar was planned to represent the Immaculate Conception has been made only once before, in a learned article by Regina Stefaniak.³⁸ She contended that Donatello's Virgin (fig. 1) borrowed her generally classicizing appearance and features, such as the veil cut horizontally across her shoulders, her long waving hair, black color, standing position, and the sphinxes on her throne, from Roman images of the Egyptian goddess Isis that the artist might have seen in Rome (fig. 2). Against this theory is the lack of evidence of such a discovery or even evidence that Donatello would have recognized a figure of Isis. Of these supposed common traits, the one exclusive to Isis is the sphinxes on the Virgin's throne, as sphinxes had long been associated with the Egyptian goddess.³⁹ The other visual links Stefaniak established between the two are more generic. The Virgin's horizontally cut veil can be found on earlier images of Mary, such as the Presbyter Martinus's *Maiestas* from Borgo San Sepolcro (fig. 3).⁴⁰ The Virgin's black color is the same shade as the dark patina of all the bronzes on the High Altar's sculptures. The classicism of the Virgin's face and hairstyle are like those employed by Donatello earlier for the Virgin in his Cavalcanti *Annunciation* from Santa Croce (ca. 1428–33).⁴¹ Finally, Mary's standing position can be explained in another way, as will be argued later in the essay.

Stefaniak contended that the supposed transfer of features between Isis and the Virgin was justified on the basis of the commonalities between them. The Egyptian goddess had been interpreted in *De Iside et Osiride*, a treatise by Plutarch (46–120) that could have been available to theologians at the Santo, as the Egyptian goddess

³⁶See Baldissin Molli, 2000; McHam, 20–22.

³⁷Nampon, 215.

³⁸See Stefaniak, 2006. Calore, 1993, 258n32, had earlier recognized that Donatello's Virgin was intended to represent her in her immaculate state, but did not argue the point.

³⁹Stefaniak, 2006, 98–103; Plutarch, 360.

⁴⁰Stefaniak, 2006, 91–92, discussed earlier scholars' linking of Donatello's Virgin to such Romanesque *Maiestas* images and illustrated the sculpture.

⁴¹Janson, 2:107–08.



Figure 1. Donatello. *Virgin and Child*, 1446–50. Padua, High Altar, Santo. Fototeca del Messaggero di Sant’Antonio.

of wisdom.⁴² The Virgin, like Isis, had long been linked to wisdom, and so became associated, according to Stefaniak, with Isis and her characteristics. Apologists for the Immaculate Conception argued that the Virgin had been spiritually conceived in the mind of God from the beginning of time. For example, Francesco della Rovere’s sermon described as follows: “According to Bernard, ‘no one penetrated the abyss of divine Wisdom like the Blessed Virgin; by God and by the grace of the sacred Holy Spirit she was the first enlightened. . . . And just as she is preeminent in martyrdom and learning, so too in virginity that which was conceded to her so abundantly and indescribably as is said in Proverbs 8: “I was already conceived

⁴²Stefaniak, 2006, 100–02.



Figure 2. *Isis*, Roman, second century CE. Naples, Museo Archeologico. Alinari / Art Resource, NY.

before there were abysses,” for she was conceived before the infernal plague could touch her.”⁴³ De’ Busti elaborated on della Rovere’s argument.⁴⁴

⁴³Della Rovere, 96–97 (fol. 6/270^v): “Ait Bernardus, ‘Nullus penetravit abyssum divine Sapientie sicut beata Virgo: a Deo antea et a gratia Sacri Spiritus Sancti edocta fuit. . . . Et sicut preexcellentissima in martirio et doctrina, ita et in virginitate, qui ei adeo habundanter et inenarrabiliter concessa est ut diceret illud Proverbiorum 8.ca.º: “Nondum erant abyssi et ego iam concepta eram,” quia prius fuit concepta quam infernalis plaga eam posset attingere.”

⁴⁴De’ Busti in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:71: “God possessed me at the beginning of his ways, at the beginning before he made anything else; I was planned from eternity and in ancient times before he made the earth. When there were only abysses, I was already conceived.”



Figure 3. Presbyter Martinus. *Maiestas*, 1199. Borgo San Sepolcro, Camaldolese Abbey. Bpk, Berlin / Joerg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY.

These concepts were used to relate the Virgin to the “primordial feminine principle,” and so to Isis in another way.⁴⁵ While many of the visual links

⁴⁵Stefaniak, 2006, 95.

between Roman images of Isis and Donatello's Virgin seem inconclusive, and there is no proof that Donatello could have seen a Roman statue of Isis, the theory that such a theological connection between the two was made during the Renaissance may well prove true; it is substantiated by the commingling of the cults and imagery of the Virgin and Isis in the church of late antiquity and in the earliest painted representations of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁶

Sixtus's espousal of the Immaculate Conception is most obviously visualized by the Virgin's projection of the Child before her womb (fig. 1), the organ apostrophized repeatedly as the "Beatus venter" ("blessed womb") in his public sermon of 1448 and in the liturgical offices in honor of the Virgin that he commissioned. In his sermon, he referred to "Jesus Christ, carried in the virginal womb in order to save humanity."⁴⁷ In his liturgical office Nogarolo took up the theme: "Blessed womb, which carried you. Truly, the blessed womb, which is ignorant of sin, the womb of purity, the womb of innocence, the garden full of all beauty, the holy house of God, the temple made by the hand of God, the ark of salvation, the ark of the covenant between God and man."⁴⁸ So, too, did de' Busti articulate the idea repeatedly, using the same introduction, "Blessed womb, which carried you."⁴⁹

Mary seems to be in the midst of standing and thrusting the Christ Child toward the viewer; he is positioned over her womb and within her body's contours, emphasizing that the baby she is offering to worshipers was once contained within her body. One of the Virgin's legs is already straight while the other is bent as she pushes up, wrapping her foot around the throne base to steady her upward transition. This unusual intermediate position has puzzled historians.⁵⁰ It can be interpreted in two ways: that she is either standing up or sitting down. The Virgin's arm gesture places Christ emphatically within her

⁴⁶See Mathews and Muller. McGuckin, 23–24, argued that the Virgin's name of Theokotos derived from a title applied to Isis. I thank Erik Thunø for these references. More generally, see Curl, 2–92.

⁴⁷Della Rovere, 82–83 (fol. 3/267^v): "Nonne Iesus Christus, virgineo gestatus utero, ut saluum faceret genus humanum."

⁴⁸Nogarolo in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:62: "Beatus venter, qui te portavit. Verè beatus venter, qui nescivit maculam, uterus puritatis, uterus innocentia, hortus omni suavitate repletus, domus Dei sancta, templum manu Dei faturam, arca salutis, arca foederis inter Deum & hominem." See also Della Rovere, 76–77, 82–83, 84–87, 94–95; de' Busti, I.v.7: "Beatus fuit venter et beata ubera ipsius fecunda" ("Blessed was the womb and blessed her own fruitful breast").

⁴⁹De' Busti in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:76, 2:77, 2:104.

⁵⁰Stefaniak, 2006, 105n10.

contours and over her womb, stressing the Incarnation of Christ, the word made flesh within her body. The accent on Christ's placement visualizes the contention of proponents of the Immaculate Conception that Mary had to have been forever free of original sin in order to have been worthy of bearing Christ. In their view, the words spoken by Gabriel to the Virgin, "Ave Maria, gratia plena" ("Hail Mary, full of grace"), as recorded in Luke 1:28, declare her immaculacy by stressing her state of grace.⁵¹ For this reason, a number of fifteenth-century visualizations of the Immaculate Conception include a scene of the Annunciation.⁵²

Furthermore, the Virgin's semi-standing position serves as a metaphor for Sixtus's argument, articulated in his first bull on the doctrine, that she is the necessary intercessory agent in mankind's salvation through the authority vested in her as the immaculate human source of Christ.⁵³ He elaborated in the bull a theme from his sermon of 1448: "For Eve means life; as the mother of the living, the holy glorious lady Mary is truly the life of sinners, and pious succoring mother of all who hope in her, in whom if anyone will come to her in devotion he will certainly find life and will through her find salvation in the Lord."⁵⁴ The High Altar Madonna is given pronounced agency: she rises up, leans forward, and holds the Child out to the worshiper below because she is the necessary intercessory agent in human salvation. Her foot is wrapped around the throne's leg to stress furthermore that she is the throne on which Christ is seated.⁵⁵

Sixtus went further: he proclaimed that through the Immaculate Virgin's intercession humankind could possibly regain the state of grace lost through the sin of Adam and Eve. They are depicted by Donatello on the back of her throne (figs. 4 and 5). The tails of the two sphinxes that support the front of it swirl into Adam and Eve's space, insisting on the Virgin's

⁵¹For a discussion of the possible mistranslation of the Greek in the Vulgate and the interpretation of this phrase by various theologians, see Goffen, 143n16.

⁵²Galizzi Kroegel, 2005, 228–29. As she points out, the role played by the Immaculate Conception as a necessary precondition of the Incarnation derives from the theology of Duns Scotus: see Galizzi Kroegel, 2004, 87–89. See especially Balić, 1954. The theme is articulated by de' Busti in 1493, I.viii. For a discussion of a series of Annunciations that allude to the Immaculate Conception and visualize the tight connection between the themes, see Galizzi Kroegel, 2003.

⁵³Butler, 281n10, quoting from Sixtus's *Cum Praeelsa*.

⁵⁴Della Rovere, 76–79 (fol. 2/266^r): "Nam Eva vita interpretatur, ut viventium mater, gloriosa domina sancta Maria vere vita est peccatorum, et omnium sperantium in ea pia auxiliatrix mater, quam si quis inveniet per devotionem in eam certe inveniet vitam et per eam auriat salutem a Domino."

⁵⁵I thank Kim Butler for this observation. The Virgin Mary as the throne of Solomon and as the throne of Christ is elaborated in Forsyth, 24–30.



Figure 4. Donatello. *Adam in the Garden of Eden* (the back of the Virgin's throne), 1446–50. Padua, High Altar, Santo. Fototeca del Messaggero di Sant'Antonio.

connection to them. Although Adam and Eve brought on original sin, the apologists for the Immaculate Conception considered them the only other persons besides Christ and the Virgin to have been born free of original sin. As de' Busti wrote in his liturgical office commissioned by Sixtus IV, Adam and Eve's pure flesh and creation in grace were the precedents for Christ and the Virgin.⁵⁶ He specified, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth incorruptible, and so it is believed God created the Virgin free from every

⁵⁶De' Busti, I.vii.1. See also Nogarolo in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:62.



Figure 5. Donatello. *Eve in the Garden of Eden* (the back of the Virgin's throne), 1446–50. Padua, High Altar, Santo. Fototeca del Messaggero di Sant'Antonio.

sin.”⁵⁷ Adam's and Eve's sinlessness — before they ate the fruit — is represented in their ideally beautiful human bodies. Furthermore, Eve's agency in the sinful act of being tempted by the serpent is reduced: she seems to be interacting with the serpent as Adam bites into the fruit.

The Immaculate Virgin is also equated by de' Busti with the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, which is the third form prominent on the back of the Virgin's

⁵⁷De' Busti, II.iii.1: “In principio creavit Deus celum & terram quod incorruptibile et intelligatur quod a deo creata ab omni peccato fuit incorrupta.”

throne. As he wrote in his liturgical office, “O therefore, most blessed Virgin, you are truly that heavenly tree, the wood of life, which God placed in the middle of Paradise (Gen. 2:9); you are that tree of which it is said: here is that tree in the middle of the earth.”⁵⁸ By definition of the tree’s location in the Garden, it was in a state of grace. The faithful who read or heard de’ Busti’s pronouncements linking Adam and Eve with the Virgin would have understood these more rarefied connections that go beyond the standard Mary as the new Eve and Christ as the new Adam.

Thus far, the discussion has involved features of Donatello’s High Altar that are still visible in its reconstructed state. It is important to consider other aspects that are now transformed or lost that were part of the original conception. Most historians who have attempted to reconstruct the altar’s appearance in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, before a series of modifications changed its appearance, agree that Donatello intended it to be a *sacra conversazione* in which six saints all at the same level stood under a stone canopy supported on columns. Three saints flanked the Virgin and Child on each side. Francis and Anthony, the two saints most venerated at the Santo, were closest to the Virgin and Child; next to them were Giustina and Daniel, the civic patrons of Padua. Finally, at the ends of each triad stood the bishop saints, Louis of Toulouse, a venerated Franciscan, and Prodocimus, a former bishop of Padua.⁵⁹

A stone canopy, which is now lost, supported on columns and pilasters, once stood over the heads of the Virgin and Child and six flanking saints. In its center was a roundel of God the Father; this emblematic decoration suggests that the canopy played the role of an architectural equivalent to the metaphor of God’s protection of the Virgin from sin.⁶⁰ It is not a typical feature of *sacra conversazione* compositions. That description of God’s shielding the Virgin, contained in both de’ Busti’s and Nogarolo’s liturgical offices, later found visual expression in parallel terms: painters represented it by God’s flying overhead and shielding the Virgin with his extended mantle.⁶¹ The roundel with God the

⁵⁸Ibid., III.iv.5: “O igitur beatissima Virgo, profecto tu es arbor illa coelestis, lignumque vitae, quod posuit Deus, in medio Paradisi (Gen. 2:9); tu es illa arbor, de qua dicitur: Ecce arbor in medio terrae.”

⁵⁹The most authoritative recent reconstruction of the altar is by Calore, 1994. For a history of the various reconstructions by art historians of the altar’s original appearance, see White.

⁶⁰Calore, 1994, 77, citing documents published first by Gloria, 14 (col. 1). Sartori, 1983, 1:229 (no. 262), transcribed the document as follows: “[23 June 1449] Donatello from Florence received for a God the Father of stone from the great ‘cupola’ of the altar . . . 50 ducats, worth 285 lire.” Ibid., 1:233–35, transcribes Donatello’s repeated installments of payment: Padua, Chiesa di Sant’Antonio, Archivio dell’Arca, reg. 338=1448–49, 39 right, numbered 39b.

⁶¹Galizzi Kroegel, 2004, 85 and n63, provides the references to their offices and to several paintings that use this visual expression. For further examples of Annunciation compositions that include a God the Father above the Virgin Mary in a reference to the Immaculate Conception, see Galizzi Kroegel, 2007.

Father directly above the head of the Virgin in the original canopy can be seen as a schematic version of that formula for God's sheltering her from sin. It was of paramount importance to express God's active role in the creation of the Immaculate Virgin and preserving her free from sin.

The six saints who flank the Madonna and Child, three on each side, have little to do with the interpretation of the Immaculate Virgin that Sixtus was promoting. Their inclusion advances other arguments important to the Franciscan friars at the Santo and to the city of Padua, for which the Santo serves as a state church. Francis and Anthony, as well as Louis of Toulouse, represent major saints of the Franciscan order, and Giustina, Prosdocimus, and Daniel are patron saints of the city. So, too, the reliefs of the miracles of Saint Anthony on the altar's base honor the saint whose relics are enshrined at a nearby altar.⁶² However, it should be noted that both Anthony and Francis were repeatedly linked to the Immaculate Virgin, perhaps because of Sixtus IV's special devotion to them. They were depicted in the pope's private funerary chapel in Old St. Peter's and also in an altar he had erected to the Immaculate Virgin at Assisi.⁶³

THE CHOIR SCREEN SURROUNDING THE HIGH ALTAR AND THE BRONZE RELIEFS BY BELLANO AND RICCIO

The theme of the immaculately conceived Virgin was expanded instead on the choir screen that originally framed the front and sides of the High Altar. Today the worshiper looks over a low balustrade and directly confronts the High Altar, which is toward the front of the choir area (fig. 6). That open access is radically different from the initial conception. It represents an attempt made at the end of the nineteenth century by Camillo Boito (1836–1914) to recover the High Altar's original configuration. The arrangement of Donatello's altar had already begun to be changed in the sixteenth century. The first of several reconstructions of the High Altar area began in 1579, under the aegis of Girolamo Campagna (1549–1625).⁶⁴ Boito intended to return the altar to its configuration in the fifteenth century but most historians judge as inaccurate his rearrangement of the Virgin and Child flanked by Francis, Anthony,

⁶²For an analysis of the reasons behind the inclusion of the six auxiliary saints and the reliefs of the miracles of Saint Anthony, see McHam, 22–28.

⁶³Ettlinger; Pietralunga, 71. As pointed out by Goffen, 65–67, Francis and Anthony were also represented on the frame of Titian's *Assunta* and in the composition of the same artist's *Pesaro Altarpiece*, both in the Frari, Venice, and both depictions honoring the Immaculate Virgin.

⁶⁴Sartori, 1983, 1:231–40; Gonzati, 1:85–87.

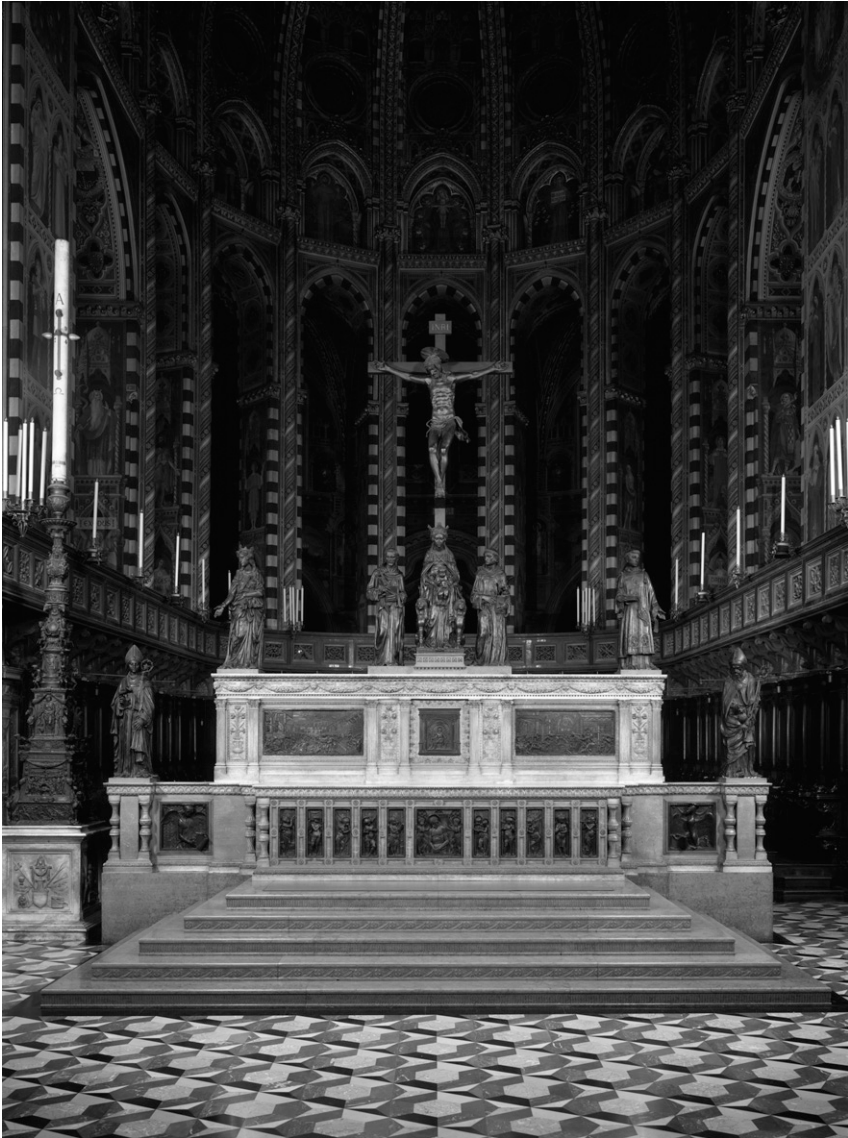


Figure 6. Donatello. High Altar, 1446–50. Padua, Santo. Fototeca del Messaggero di Sant'Antonio.

Giustina, and Daniel on the same level, but separated from the bishop saints that stand on separate projecting, lower plinths.⁶⁵

⁶⁵For a summary of the reconstruction by Camillo Boito, with citations to relevant documents and analyses, see Boito; Papi.

Not only the High Altar was modified after Donatello's departure from Padua. After decades of debate in the sixteenth century about adapting the altar area to the dictates of the Council of Trent so as to make the celebration of the Mass more visible to the laity, the components of the screen were moved from in front to behind the High Altar in 1651.⁶⁶ They remain in that position today. At that time the orientation of the screen was changed so that the outside walls faced the interior of the choir. This meant that the bronze reliefs by Andrea Riccio (ca. 1470–1532) on the outside of the inner front wall of the choir screen and Bellano's on the outside of the side walls, which once faced outward toward the laity and pilgrims in the ambulatory, became visible only to the friars within the choir area and the laity who entered it when Mass was not being held there.⁶⁷

Fortunately, an eyewitness description of the choir screen's original appearance survives, written in 1590 by a friar at the Santo, Valerio Polidoro (sixteenth–seventeenth century).⁶⁸ It provides the basis for all attempts to reconstruct the screen as it was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Polidoro revealed that there was originally a choir screen arranged as a square *u* shape before the High Altar, in general terms akin in shape and materials to the High Altar at the Frari in Venice, which it may have influenced.⁶⁹ According to Polidoro, "The church of the glorious Santo is divided by a choir screen composed of an ancient colonnade positioned atop a continuous pedestal, like a wall, which has at its center a grand entrance."⁷⁰ In a later chapter, he describes how it was composed "of three parts, that is, of that which confronted the high altar, of a right and left [part] which was closed for more than half with a square shape on the outside."⁷¹ In other words, Polidoro was recording a three-sided, square-shaped choir screen with solid walls that enclosed one-half of the High Altar's sides. The choir screen that Polidoro described had been constructed between ca. 1438 and 1444–45, chronologically just prior to the High Altar, which was begun in 1447.⁷²

⁶⁶Sartori, 1983, 1:286–94; Gonzati, 1:91.

⁶⁷They were likely transferred to the interior of the choir screen's walls in 1651, when so much else in the choir was moved around. See Sartori, 1983, 1:286–94, for the documents about all the rearrangements to the choir area.

⁶⁸See Polidoro for a description of the whole church.

⁶⁹Gonzati, 1:68, made the comparison to the choir screen at S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.

⁷⁰Polidoro, 2^f: "Trammezata la Chiesa del glorioso Santo da uno colonnato antico, fondato sopra un pedestallo continuo, a modo di Cortina, che nel mezo suo lascia la forma d'una gran porta."

⁷¹Ibid., 6^v: "Da tre parti, in oltre, cioè da quella che incontra l'Altar maggiore, dalla destra, e sinistra, è chiuso piu che per metà con quadra figura di fuori."

⁷²Calore, 1998, 74–75, argues that designs for the choir screen must have been begun in ca. 1438. The first surviving notice of its construction dates to 1443, but most of the account books between 1438 and 1443 are missing, so it may have been begun earlier. The High Altar project was initiated in 1447 as a result of donations by Francesco Tergola and Beatrice d'Avanzo. See Calore, 1993, 257.

The front side of the screen was conceived as a loggia; the arched central entrance led into an intermediate space and then, through an opening in a solid wall, into the choir.⁷³ The loggia emphasized the transition between the nave of the church and the choir, the world of the laity and the world of the religious. As indicated in this line-drawing elevation of the choir screen (fig. 7), modified from drawings in Bernardo Gonzati's still-fundamental volumes (1852–53) on the Santo, the side facing the congregation consisted of a round-arched arcade atop a continuous base that terminated in pilasters at the corners and sides. The rear wall of the front side, like the side walls, was comprised of solid marble panels flanked by pilasters atop a continuous base. It, like them, had bronze narrative reliefs at the tops of the panels (fig. 8).⁷⁴

Ten Old Testament reliefs by Bellano originally fit into the upper part of panels on the exteriors of the side walls (figs. 9 and 10).⁷⁵ The reliefs by Bellano, which were commissioned and executed between 1484 and 1490, were added to the choir screen before the two reliefs by Riccio.⁷⁶ In 1506–07, Riccio was commissioned to provide two additional bronze reliefs that matched the earlier group in size and in their relative positions on the choir screen.⁷⁷ Marcantonio

⁷³Polidoro, 2^f. The front wall of the choir screen was reconstructed in this way by Gonzati, 1:67–69. Calore, 1998, 79, 84–85, 87, with documents, pointed out that the entrance arch was added in a slightly later (1443) second phase.

⁷⁴Banzato, 343, published documents that refer to panels of Veronese red stone and Istrian stone added to the screen between 1482 and 1484. Sicca published drawings by an eighteenth-century British traveler executed before the fire in 1749 in that section of the church. One may revise Gonzati's reconstruction of the choir screen presented in figs. 6–9, but it does not affect the interpretation of the meaning of the choir screen's bronze reliefs' narratives. The drawing may also reflect a post-fifteenth-century modification of the choir screen. According to the rendition by Talman, an upper zone consisting of an impost block surmounted by a cornice, topped by a semicircular lunette with a shell inside, and finished by a wide cornice with a flat top, divided into colored squares, stood above the portion of the walls holding Bellano's and Riccio's bronze reliefs. I thank Richard Schofield for the reference to Sicca's article.

⁷⁵Michiel, 1, noted that "the two little reliefs in bronze in half-relief on the outside of the choir near the entrance which hold stories of the Old Testament are by the hand of the said master Andrea Rizzo. The other little reliefs around the choir are by the hand of Bellano." According to de Benedictis's introduction in *ibid.*, 11, Michiel's observations about Padua are dated 1537. Polidoro, 15^f, listed the sequence of reliefs by Bellano and Riccio, and explained that the two reliefs near the main entrance into the choir were made by Riccio in 1507. They are the *Judith and Holofernes* and *David before the Ark with the Death of Uzzah*.

⁷⁶For the documents about Bellano's reliefs for the choir screen, see Sartori, 1983, 1:281–83. For discussion about them, see Banzato, 344–49.

⁷⁷For the documents about Riccio's reliefs for the choir screen, see Sartori, 1983, 1:284–85; for an assessment of them, see Banzato, 349–52.

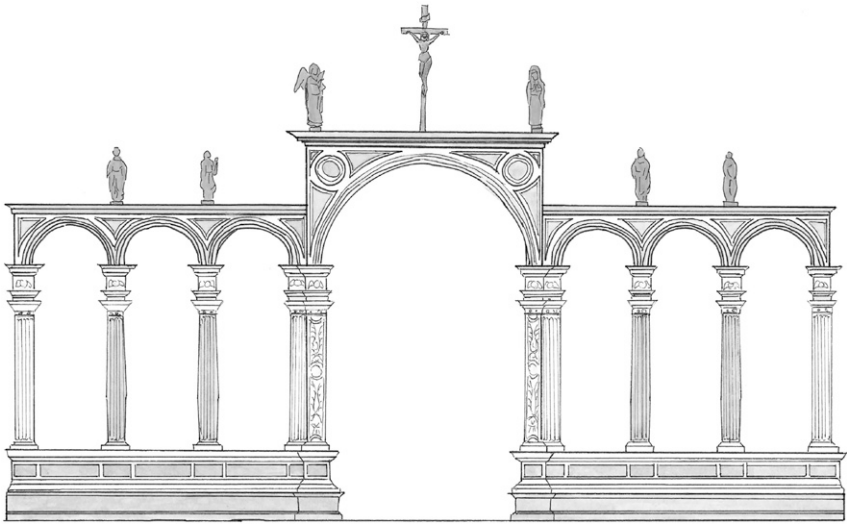


Figure 7. Line drawing of the destroyed front wall of front side of choir screen, ca. 1438–1444/45. Padua, Santo. Original reconstructions by Bernardo Gonzati, supplemented by Grace Chi.

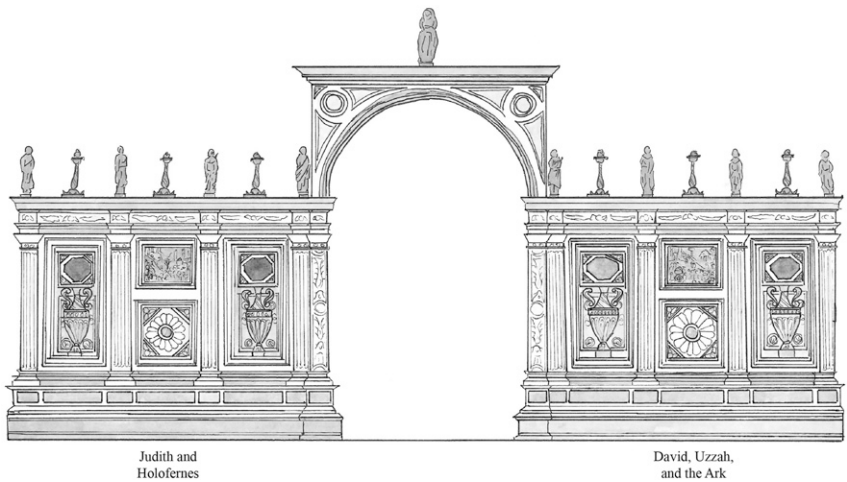


Figure 8. Line drawing of the destroyed rear wall of front side of choir screen, ca. 1438–1444/45. Padua, Santo. Original reconstructions by Bernardo Gonzati, supplemented by Grace Chi.

Michiel (1484–1552), the Venetian nobleman who made inventories of notable monuments in Northern Italy, described two Old Testament reliefs by Riccio flanking the choir-screen entrance when he recorded his notes about the Santo

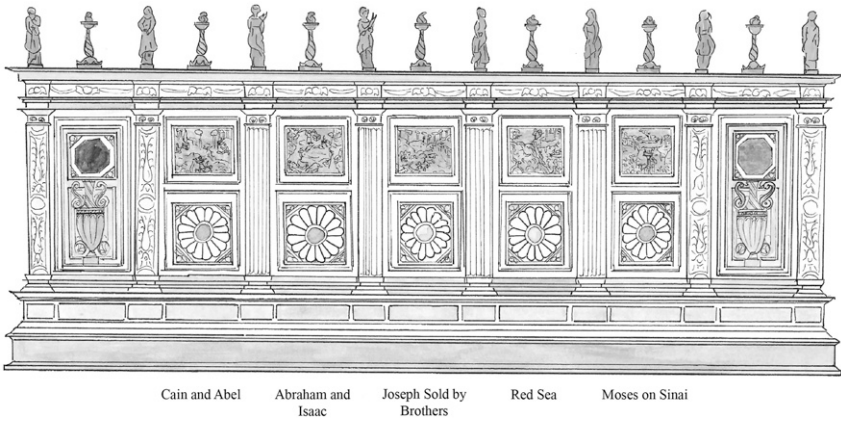


Figure 9. Line drawing of the original placement of the Old Testament reliefs, 1484–90. North side wall of choir screen. Padua, Santo. Original reconstructions by Bernardo Gonzati, supplemented by Grace Chi.

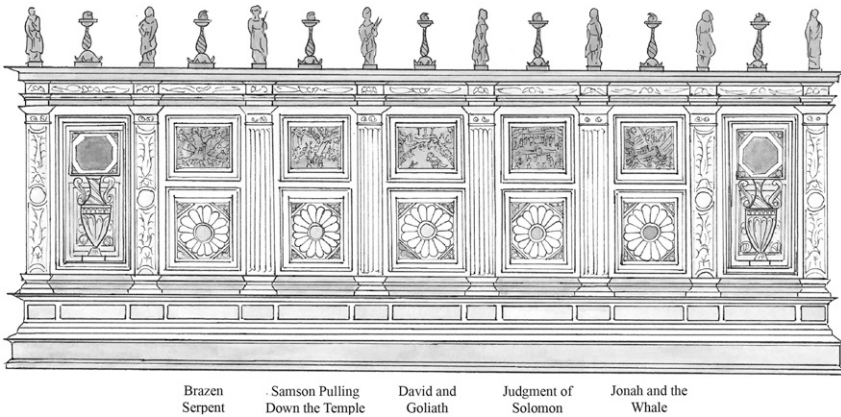


Figure 10. Line drawing of the original placement of the choir-screen reliefs, 1484–90. South side wall of choir screen. Padua, Santo. Original reconstructions by Bernardo Gonzati, supplemented by Grace Chi.

in ca. 1537.⁷⁸ An expanded account was provided by Polidoro in 1590, who recorded the entire sequence of sculptures for the first time. According to his testimony, the reliefs, which measured 65 x 85 cm, ran along the choir-screen walls in the order depicted in figures 9 and 10.⁷⁹ The position of the *Judith and Holofernes* and *David before the Ark with the Death of Uzzah* in the middle of

⁷⁸See Michiel, 1.

⁷⁹Polidoro, 15^f.

the sequence established by Polidoro suggests that he listed the reliefs in their order on the choir screen, starting at the north side entrance of the choir screen, where the first five reliefs by Bellano were installed, moving forward to the front side, where the *Judith and Holofernes* and *David before the Ark with the Death of Uzzah* were positioned, and then from the front to the side entrance on the south side, where the final five reliefs by Bellano were placed.⁸⁰

The key reliefs are by Riccio. His *Judith and Holofernes* (fig. 11) and *David before the Ark with the Death of Uzzah* (fig. 12) were installed out of chronological order and in a special position of prominence, on the inner wall of the front side of the choir screen. There they were visible through the loggia of the front side of the front wall of the screen. Furthermore, they flanked the arched main entrance into the choir area and framed the view of the High Altar. They were meant to be seen in conjunction with it and seem a clear Franciscan response, in terms championed by Sixtus IV earlier in his sermon in Padua, to the decades-long, inflamed dispute first engaged at the Council of Basel.

Riccio's sculptures provide a significant gloss on the Immaculate Conception theme of the altar. Judith had been traditionally linked typologically to the Virgin. Francesco della Rovere extolled this connection and dwelt on it in his sermon on the Immaculate Conception delivered at the Santo in 1448. He quoted Proverbs 31:10–11, "Who will find a strong woman?" as the introduction to the pairing of Judith and David, as had been done frequently in the past.⁸¹ The bronze relief of Judith and Holofernes depicts Judith outside Holofernes's tent at the left of the composition, handing Holofernes's head to her maid after she has decapitated it. In the center of the relief is an unusual intermediate scene of a raging battle, not described in the book of Judith, through which Judith seems to have passed on her way to present Holofernes's head to the elders of Bethulia outside the city walls, on the right of the relief. The battle scene may allude to the warfare that took place afterward, once Judith had commanded the people of Bethulia to hang Holofernes's head on the city's walls, and they became emboldened to attack his scattering army, as is recorded in Judith 15:1–6. It certainly suggests the harrows through which Judith passed safely as she made her way through the enemy camp. Francesco

⁸⁰Banzato, 349, argued instead that the reliefs by Bellano began their sequence on the north wall of the choir screen, moving toward the apse, in the following order: *Cain and Abel*, *Sacrifice of Abraham*, *Stories of Joseph*, *Crossing of the Red Sea*, and *Moses on Sinai*. They then proceeded forward along the south side wall of the choir screen toward the nave in this order: *Brazen Serpent*, *Samson Destroying the Temple*, *David and Goliath*, *Judgment of Solomon*, and *Jonah*.

⁸¹Della Rovere, 88–89: "Mulierem fortem quis inveniet?"



Figure 11. Riccio. *Judith and Holofernes*, 1506–07. Originally flanking front entrance of choir screen. Padua, Santo. Fototeca del Messaggero di Sant’Antonio.

insisted on the perils of her journey, which she could have only conducted safely because of God’s grace. Drawing on the book of Judith, he described how the elders of Bethulia lighted torches and poured out of the city’s gates when they saw Judith approaching, just as Riccio sculpted it. He quoted Judith’s address to them: “‘God lives who protects me both on my coming and going and has prevented His handmaiden from being defiled. God has allowed me to enjoy His victory without the pollution of sin.’ All the people cried as though with one voice, ‘Daughter, you are blessed by the Lord God in Heaven before all the women on earth, because through your merit all the seed of Israel has been liberated from the King Holofernes.’”⁸²

Francesco continued, berating those who denied the Virgin’s immaculacy: “Oh human ignorance! Oh the intellects of men too caught up in their own opinions! If all the other sayings of divine scripture also do not press us to affirm this Sacred Conception, the sole figure, this sole mystery, ought to force

⁸²Ibid.: “Vivit Deus qui custodit me et euntem et redeuntem non permisit Deus ancillam suam coinquinari, sed sine pollutione peccati fecit me Deus gaudentem in victoria sua’ et omnis populus clamavit una voce, ‘Benedicta es tu filia a Domino Deo Eccelso pre omnibus mulieribus super terram, quia per te liberatum est universum semen Israel a manu Holoferni regis.’”



Figure 12. Riccio. *David before the Ark with the Death of Uzzah*, 1506–07. Originally flanking front entrance of choir screen. Padua, Santo. Fototeca del Messaggero di Sant’Antonio.

us to confess the purity of the Virgin from all the sordidness of sin.”⁸³ He further admonished in his continued analogy between the Virgin and Judith: “Perhaps that glorious Virgin who when she avowed and glorified the omnipotence of God saying ‘Behold the handmaiden of the Lord’ did not merit cutting off the head of Holofernes, that is, the head of our infirmity and distancing from divine commandments? Therefore she was blessed among women, and coming into the world, and going out of it, the Lord kept her from every stain of sin.”⁸⁴ Nogarolo, who wrote the liturgical office of the Immaculate Conception for the entire Latin church at Sixtus’s behest, in an antiphon drew on Judith’s safe journey through the enemy camp as a metaphor

⁸³Ibid.: “O ignorantiam humanam! O intellectum hominum nimium propriis obvolutum opinionibus! Etsi cetera totius divine Scripture dicta nobis in fidem non pressarent ad hanc sacram conceptionem affirmandam, hec sola figura, hoc solum mysterium Virginis puritatem ab omni sorde peccati nos ad confitendum cogere deberet.”

⁸⁴Ibid.: “Nonne Virgo gloriosa, cum confiteretur et glorificaret omnipotentiam Dei dicens, ‘ecce ancilla Domini’ meruit abscondere caput Holoferni, id est caput nostre infirmitatis et dissensionis a divinis mandatis? Ideo benedicta fuit in mulieribus, et venientem in mundum et exeuntem a mundo custodivit eam Dominus ab omni labe peccati.”

for how God had protected the Virgin Mary from every evil and guarded her soul throughout the ages: “The Lord protected you from every evil, Maria, protected your soul, your entry and your exit through the ages.”⁸⁵

The companion scene to that of Judith, the narrative of *David before the Ark and the Death of Uzzah*, was singled out to be placed on the other side of the choir screen’s entrance because the Virgin descended from the house of David. Francesco della Rovere, after being elected to the papacy, wrote a prayer to the Virgin entitled “Stella Maris,” which put this notion succinctly: he called Mary “born according to divine plan from the royal house of David.”⁸⁶ De’ Busti emphasized in his liturgical office that another proof of Mary’s immaculate status was that she was unique among women because her genealogy could be traced back through the generations of the Old Testament to David. He explained that other women had no family histories for several reasons. Basing his pronouncements on Albertus Magnus, he argued that Eve had been born from the rib of Adam, that women were an inferior sex, that Eve had sinned first in the Garden of Eden, and that women were weak and corruptible: “Descending from the tribe of David, the Virgin would not have been betrothed unless she were from the Jewish tribe and the house of David. . . . The blessed Virgin was, however, exempt from every defect and bad womanly quality . . . and through her husband her genealogy was described.”⁸⁷

Francesco della Rovere had stressed in his sermon of 1448 the agency of the Immaculate Virgin in human salvation and that its effects would be felt throughout all the generations of the Virgin: “Indeed to her was conceded the grace of mercy to all the human race. For which grace all those who are predestined will be saved in eternal glory. . . . ‘Her mercy is felt by those who hold her in awe and by their progeny.’ And in the sermon ‘Missus est,’ St. Bernard said that, when the glorious Virgin uttered her words in divine response to the angel in the angelic salutation, she saw in spirit all the generations who were going to be saved in the future through her son, Jesus Christ.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, the ark of the covenant was

⁸⁵Nogarolo in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:63: “Dominus custodit te ab omni malo Maria, custodivit animam tuam, introitum tuum, & exitum tuum in saeculum.”

⁸⁶See di Fonzo, 1988, 197–200, where the prayer is found at the beginning of Sixtus IV’s bull of indulgences, *Stella Maris* (Star of the sea), of 5 June 1472.

⁸⁷De’ Busti, II.ii.3: “ex David stirpe descendens non desponsasset beatam virginem nisi fuisset de tribu iuda et de familia David . . . autem beata virgo exempta fuit ab omni defectu et maledictione muliebri . . . per sponsum suum ei genealogia describit.”

⁸⁸Della Rovere, 76–77 (fol. 1/265^v): “Secunda mirifica gratia gloriose Virgini concessa est preexcellens manifestatio misericordie Dei erga genus humanum. Verum subdit, ‘et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies timentibus eum’ et ideo Bernardus in sermone super ‘Missus est’ ait quod in angelica salutatione et in divinis responsis ad angelum clara visione beate Virginis apparuerunt omnes generationes que salve fieri debebant per Iesum Christum filium eius.”

associated with the Immaculate Virgin by the doctrine's promoters. In his liturgical office, Nogarolo wrote, "The womb of the Immaculate Virgin is the ark of salvation and the ark representing the covenant between God and man, the most ornate tabernacle in which was hidden the sweetest manna."⁸⁹ Similarly, de' Busti called the Virgin the ark of the testaments,⁹⁰ and the ark of the treasury of God and the ark of the tabernacle.⁹¹

The decoration of the ark in Riccio's relief links it tightly to the Immaculate Virgin by depicting the *Creation of Eve* and the *Temptation*. The scene of the *Temptation* recalls closely the one depicted in larger scale on the back of the Virgin's throne. As noted earlier, Eve and Adam were singled out as being uniquely similar to the Virgin because of their immaculate state before they ate the fruit. The ark's architecture recalls on a miniature scale the canopy with a round arch lunette adorned with a roundel of God the Father that once surmounted the High Altar by Donatello. This quotation of the altar's architecture and its decoration further connects the small-scale tabernacle to the monumental architecture of the altar and to the Virgin it honors. This is not a unique instance of scenes of David and the ark and Judith and Holofernes glossing the Immaculate Virgin, although it is not common. For example, nearly two centuries later, shortly after 1629, Domenichino (1581–1641) depicted *David Dancing before the Ark*, *Judith Triumphant over Holofernes*, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, and *Solomon and His Mother* in the pendentives of the Bandini Chapel at San Silvestro al Quirinale, Rome.⁹² There they framed an altarpiece of the *Assumption of the Virgin*, which had become by then a standard iconographic formula for the Immaculate Conception.⁹³ The painting was signed and dated 1585 by Scipione Pulzone (ca. 1542–98).⁹⁴

Bellano's Old Testament reliefs are also tied to the High Altar. They continue the sequence of scenes begun on the back of the Virgin's throne with the

⁸⁹Nogarolo in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:62: "Verè beatus venter . . . domus Dei sancta, templum manu Dei factum, arca salutis, arca federis inter Deum & hominum. Ubi reconditurum manna suavissimum."

⁹⁰De' Busti, I.i.5.

⁹¹Ibid., III.i.3.

⁹²Ciletti, 366–67. On the cycle, see Bernardini; and Uppenkamp, 112–17, who recognized the iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the ensemble. I thank Elena Ciletti for bringing these references to my attention.

⁹³On the close relationship between the cult, liturgy, and depictions of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, see Goffen, 68–71.

⁹⁴On the altarpiece by Pulzone, see Dern, 135–37. On the conflation of the Immaculate Conception with the Assumption, or a vision of the Madonna in heaven, see, for example, Mussolin.

Temptation. In the fifteenth century, the High Altar was located originally at the far end of the choir, close to the arcade of the ambulatory, as indicated in a small sketch of its ground plan, probably from the mid-sixteenth century, preserved today in the Uffizi.⁹⁵ This means that the faithful at the Santo standing in the ambulatory were close to the back of the altar and could have easily seen the *Temptation* on the back of the Virgin's throne through the openings in the decoration of the metal screen that linked the ambulatory piers behind the High Altar.⁹⁶ They would have naturally linked the *Temptation* to the series of Bellano's Old Testament cycle, which were once on the exterior of the choir-screen side walls, because of their similar size and bronze material. Furthermore, the High Altar's *Temptation* would have provided the Creation scene beginning that the cycle otherwise lacks.⁹⁷

Visitors to the Santo were encouraged to move along the choir screen's side walls and through the ambulatory and observe its decoration. The church is a major site of pilgrimage to which hordes came to venerate the relics of Saint Anthony in the left transept chapel, from which they exited along the north side of the choir-screen wall, and from there into the ambulatory.⁹⁸ Partial relics of Anthony were preserved in the sacristy on the other side of the ambulatory so they were induced to continue their circuit around the back of the choir past the back of the Virgin's throne, and then along the south side of the choir screen.⁹⁹

A number of Bellano's sculpted narratives can be read in connection with the theme of the Immaculate Conception, although most cannot. Francesco della Rovere had linked Moses's rod, which he received from God and which allowed him to lead the Israelites across the Red Sea, to the Virgin, thus connecting the Immaculate Virgin to the relief of the *Crossing of the Red Sea*: "Moses, Exodus 14, he freed the children of Israel from the hand of the Pharaoh, having them walk through the middle of the dry sea. . . . And all these things, and every one of them, were done by the touch of a rod received from God for who will be this rod that allows us to cross the surging waters of this

⁹⁵Uffizi, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, no. 3205; see Calore, 1998, 78 and fig. 3.

⁹⁶The metal screen is described by Polidoro, 6^{r-v}: "the choir . . . that is, the part of it inside is surrounded by an arc of eight columns . . . and these leave short distances between each other that remain shut by some grates of iron of many small pieces that are linked together in such a manner that they form a variety of very beautiful openings through which one can see inside easily." See also Calore, 1998, 93.

⁹⁷I thank Amy Bloch for pointing this out to me.

⁹⁸On the traffic flow of pilgrims to the Cappella dell'Arca di San Antonio, see McHam, 98–100.

⁹⁹Relics of Saint Anthony's finger, tongue, chin, and other body parts were preserved in separate reliquaries in the sacristy, according to an inventory of the sacristy's holdings compiled in 1396; see Baldissin Molli, 2002, 88–89.

world securely, other than the blessed Virgin alone?”¹⁰⁰ De’ Busti repeated a shorter version of the theme in his office.¹⁰¹

The scene of *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* has at its heart Moses’s rod, already linked directly to the Virgin. It also suggests one of the most common symbols of her immaculate status: because she is protected from the serpent’s bite, or sin, she can crush the serpent with impunity. As Della Rovere put it in his sermon: “Perhaps this is not that woman of whom in Genesis, chapter 3, it is said that she will tread on the head of the serpent? This is that Virgin who by herself destroys diabolical astuteness and dangerous temptation and emphatically makes her servants vigilant and resistant against the evil maneuvers of the devil.”¹⁰² De’ Busti, in one of his sermons dedicated to the Virgin, picked up the theme.¹⁰³ He also linked her to David in terms of the boy’s battle with Goliath, as he had earlier in terms of lineage. The connection to David and Goliath was made by de’ Busti according to the following parallel: “You are called the door to heaven. . . . You were not even wounded by the weapon of Goliath.”¹⁰⁴

The Virgin is often named the Temple of Solomon, which helps to explain the dominance of the building in the scene of the *Judgment of Solomon*: “Solomon, in book 3, chapter 5, of Kings, that great and wise king, built a grand and very beautiful temple, of carved and perfect stones . . . and when it was built no hammers and axes and other metal tools were heard. Who doubts that the true temple of the Lord is the glorious Virgin alone? In whose very holy flesh, both the purest vessel of the Lord and the prepared dwelling place of the Lord, one must firmly believe that there was no need of hammers, that is, of contact with sinners.”¹⁰⁵ De’ Busti repeated the essence

¹⁰⁰Della Rovere, 82–85 (fol. 3/267^v): “Moises, Exodi 14^o ca^o liberavit filios Israel a manu Pharaonis et eos per medium sicci maris ambulare fecit. . . . Que omnia et singula per virge contactum a Domino accepta facta sunt. Quenam hec virga est que tutos huius mundi fluctuosum mare nos pertransire facit, nisi sola Virgo benedicta?”

¹⁰¹De’ Busti in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:71.

¹⁰²Della Rovere, 78–79 (fol. 2/266^v): “Nonne etiam hoc est illa mulier ut Genesis 3^o dicitur, que conteret caput serpentis? Hec est illa Virgo sola que diabolicam astutiam et perniciosam temptationem destruit et servos suos contra diabolicam nequitiam vigilantes et fortiter resistentes facit.”

¹⁰³De’ Busti, I.i.5.

¹⁰⁴De’ Busti in Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente, 2:71: “Porta coeli tu vocaris. . . . Nec Goliae es transfixa pugione.”

¹⁰⁵Della Rovere, 84–85 (fol. 3/267^v–fol. 4/268^r): “Salamon, Regum, li^o 3^o, ca^o. 5^o, rex ille magnus et sapiens [fecit] templum magnum et speciosum de lapidibus dolatis atque perfectis . . . quod cum edificaretur maleus et securis et alia ferramenta non sunt audita. Quis dubitat verum templum Domini esse solam Virginem gloriosam? In cuius carne sanctissima et vase Domini purissimo et preparato Dei habitaculo non adfuisse opus malleorum, id est contagio peccatorum, firmiter tenendum est.”

of Francesco della Rovere's comparisons between the Immaculate Virgin and the Temple of Solomon in his liturgical office, calling her a true temple of Solomon.¹⁰⁶

The Immaculate Virgin was also linked to Jonah, making the inclusion of the narrative of his being swallowed by the whale relevant to this doctrine. In one of his sermons, de' Busti wrote: "As Jonah endured in the belly of the whale and was kept safe . . . so God could protect his mother from the fire, from the bite of the devil, and from every sin. . . . Thus Christ chose his blessed virgin mother from eternity."¹⁰⁷ Nogarolo provided patristic backing for the theme: "Listen, as Augustine says, because it was fitting that the Holy Spirit kept Jonah safe in the belly of the whale, against natural use, yet wanting to keep him safe only through mercy, would not Mary be preserved immaculate through grace and outside of nature?"¹⁰⁸

CONCLUSION

Sixtus IV, the former Francesco della Rovere, was the foremost advocate of the Immaculate Conception in the fifteenth century. He was tireless in its support: he wrote a major sermon focused on it while at the Santo convent in Padua, composed two bulls, and commissioned two liturgical offices, all in honor of the controversial doctrine. It should come as no surprise that the High Altar of the Santo, the major liturgical focus of the church with which he was intimately associated for over four decades, should be the first major visual depiction of the interpretation in fifteenth-century Italian art. Sixtus delivered the sermon propounding the doctrine in Padua as the altar was being constructed. Many of his descriptions articulating the Virgin as immaculate are given visual form in the altar and the choir screen that frames it — the veneration of her womb, the insistence of the Virgin's agency in humankind's salvation, and the parallelism of Adam, Eve, and even the tree of knowledge with her as free from sin. Furthermore, he closely associated the Immaculate Virgin with the Old Testament figures of Judith and David, whose narratives are represented in

¹⁰⁶De' Busti in *Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente*, 2:71.

¹⁰⁷De' Busti, I.i.3–4: "Jonah in ventre ceti perservavit incolume. Jonah II. Potuit etiam matrem suam ab igne peccati & a morsu diaboli atque ab omni originali macula praeservare . . . cum igitur Christus ab eterno elegerit beatam virginem matrem." He summarized the idea in his liturgical office in *Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente*, 2:100: "Jonam in ventre caeti custodivit incolumen" ("He kept Jonah unharmed in the belly of the whale").

¹⁰⁸Nogarolo, dedicatory letter to Sixtus IV in his liturgical office, in *Alba y Astorga and de la Fuente*, 2:53: "Asculata, quia Spiritum Sanctum decet Ionam inquit Augustinus, servare in ventre coeti praeter naturalem usum, voluit in corruptum sola misericordia; Mariam incorruptam praeter naturam non servabit gratia?"

the bronze reliefs on the choir screen, out of order with the rest of the Old Testament cycle and separately commissioned. These scenes flanked the front entrance to the choir screen, and so pilgrims and congregants looked between them to see the Virgin on the High Altar, reading the three representations together. Other Old Testament narratives positioned along the sides of the choir screen visualize key components of Immaculate Conception iconography.

The ensemble of High Altar and choir screen, which was being executed and erected in the period that Francesco della Rovere wrote the sermon, and the choir-screen reliefs, which were commissioned in the later fifteenth century, when Francesco, elected Pope Sixtus IV, pronounced bulls and sponsored liturgies in honor of the Immaculate Conception, announce in powerful visual terms the Virgin's immaculacy, the doctrine to which Sixtus was so ardently devoted throughout his whole life.

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