



IMAGES AND SELF-REFLECTION IN THE *MEDITATIONES VITAE CHRISTI*

IMÁGENES Y MEDITACIÓN EN LAS *MEDITATIONES VITAE CHRISTI*

*Renana Bartal*¹

Fechas de recepción y aceptación: 14 de junio de 2022 y 22 de julio de 2022

DOI: https://doi.org/10.46583/specula_2022.4.1088

Abstract: Personal prayer books often contained portraits of their patrons engaged in devotion, which were gazed at during prayer or meditative reading and could shape the readers' devotional state of mind and conduct. In this article, I examine images that allowed a female reader to see herself in an illuminated manuscript of a different sort: the well-known Franciscan text, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, now Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 410. I will show that the book's illuminations compel the reader's identification with the accompanying text through their emotional intensity or singularity, illustrating and constructing various facets of contemplation. These images are not portraits of the patron or reader that appear in personal prayer books nor are they designed solely to allow the reader to imaginatively place herself within the *vita Christi* narrative. Rather, they depict figures who take part in the biblical story and invite the reader's identification. This article considers two images of Mary and other, less prominent figures that could project the manuscript's reader, very likely a Poor Clare, into the text and teach her

¹ Art History department, Tel Aviv University. Tel Aviv University, P.O. Box 39040, Tel Aviv 6997801, Israel. Mail: renana.bartal@mail.huji.ac.il. This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant No. 1263/20) and is part of a larger book project tentatively titled *Image, Meditation, and the Poor Clares in Trecento Italy*.



how to use it to achieve contemplative ascent. The illuminations instruct her to remain focused on her ceaseless search for God, relentless prayer, and Passion meditation, which will ultimately lead to an unmediated encounter with the divine.

Keywords: meditation, Passion, *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, prayer books, illuminations

Resumen: Los libros de oraciones personales a menudo contenían retratos de sus patrones dedicados a la devoción, que se visualizaban durante la oración o la lectura meditativa y podían moldear el estado mental y la conducta devocional de los lectores. En este artículo se examinan imágenes que permitieron a una lectora verse a sí misma en un manuscrito iluminado: el conocido texto franciscano, las *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, ahora Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 410. Mostraré que las iluminaciones del libro obligan a la identificación del lector con el texto que lo acompaña a través de su intensidad emocional o singularidad, ilustrando y construyendo diversas facetas de la contemplación. Las imágenes que se analizan no son los retratos de patrocinadores o lectores que aparecen en los libros de oraciones personales ni están diseñadas únicamente para permitir que el lector se ubique imaginativamente dentro de la narrativa de la *vita Christi*. Más bien, representan figuras que toman parte en la historia bíblica e invitan a la identificación del lector. Este artículo considera dos imágenes de María y otras figuras menos prominentes que podrían proyectar al lector del manuscrito, muy probablemente una Clarisa, y enseñarle cómo usarlo para lograr el ascenso contemplativo. Las iluminaciones la instruyen a permanecer enfocada en su búsqueda incesante de Dios, la oración continuada y la meditación de la Pasión, lo que finalmente la llevará a un encuentro inmediato con lo divino.

Palabras clave: meditación, Pasión, Passion, *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, libros de oraciones, iluminaciones

For late medieval readers, images in illuminated manuscripts could prompt self-reflection. Personal prayer books, such as Psalters and Books of Hours, often contained portraits of their patrons engaged in devotion as well as markers of their social status. By depicting acts of personal piety, these images, gazed at during prayer or meditative reading, could shape the readers' devotional state of mind and conduct (Hand, 2013; Sand, 2014; Smith, 2003).



The inclusion of such images was not restricted to personal prayer books. An article recently published in this journal (Flora, 2021) examines images of a female supplicant, possibly the reader, in a manuscript of the *Legenda Maior*, Bonaventure's official biography of Saint Francis of Assisi. Portraits of this type might shape the reader's devotion to Francis akin to how Francis refashioned himself after Christ. Here, I examine images that allowed a female reader to see herself in an illuminated manuscript of another well-known Franciscan text, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (henceforth *MVC*). The manuscript under study is the only known, fully illuminated copy of the long Latin *MVC*, now Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 410. I will show that illuminations at its beginning, middle, and end compel the reader's identification with the accompanying text through their emotional intensity or singularity, illustrating and constructing various facets of contemplation.

Now believed to have been written *ca.* 1300 for an anonymous Poor Clare nun from Tuscany (Cooper, 2021), the *MVC* elaborates a well-known meditative technique: it instructs the reader to visualize the events of Christ's life in detailed mental pictures, as if she were present. The vivid *vita Christi* is combined with an elaborate guide to contemplation, meditation, and prayer, heavily influenced by the great twelfth-century authority on the spiritual life, Bernard of Clairvaux. This elaborate compilation had wide influence on both clergy and laity and is often linked with the rise of inwardly directed devotion, individual prayer, and affective meditation (Karnes, 2011; McNamer, 2011).

The images I shall discuss are not the patron or reader portraits that appear in personal prayer books nor are they designed solely to allow the reader to imaginatively place herself within the *vita Christi* narrative. Rather, they depict figures who take part in the biblical story and invite the reader's identification. Various biblical figures are described in the *MVC* as examples of the "vehement desire" to follow and unite with Christ. First among them is Mary, whose tender devotion to her son is the major theme in the meditation on Christ's childhood and is elaborated with great feeling in the Passion section of the text. The disciples, for whom Christ is a nurturing parent, also model obedience, listening attentively to his words and gazing lovingly at his face, while the Magdalene is distinguished by her ardor. This article considers two images of Mary and other, less prominent figures that could project the manuscript's reader, very



likely a Poor Clare, into the manuscript and teach her how to use it to achieve contemplative ascent. The illuminations instruct her on the ceaseless search for God, relentless prayer, and Passion meditation that will lead to an unmediated encounter with the divine.

1. OXFORD, CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE, MS 410

Before we explore these images, let us first consider the manuscript more broadly. Several illuminated manuscripts of the *MVC* remain from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, each an exceptional production designed to answer the expectations of specific patrons (Costiner, 2021). Recently, MS 410 has begun to capture scholarly attention.² The style of its illuminations suggests it was produced in Perugia (Bartal, 2021), and the stemma on its first folio points to the Baglioni, cited as one of the two wealthiest noble clans in Perugia's red book of 1333, which records the names of the city's magnates (Heywood, 1910, p. 151).

Along with the inclusion of lengthy chapters on the contemplative life from the long Latin version, the decoration of the first folio also suggests a Clarissan context. At the center of the lower border, a Poor Clare nun or, more likely, Saint Clare of Assisi herself turns in supplication to Saint Francis on the left, who exposes his side wound (Fig. 1).

If MS 410 was produced in Perugia during the first decades of the fourteenth century, then its likely place of origin was Monteluca, one of the oldest, best-documented, and wealthiest Poor Clare convents in the region (Beckers, 2017; Höhler, 1984; 1988; Nicolini, 1983; Wood, 1996). Founded in 1218, it housed the daughters of the most prominent Perugian families. By the fifteenth century, these aristocratic, intellectual women played a crucial role in the

² While the famous scholar Otto Pächt noted MS 410 in 1963, art historians have almost entirely overlooked the book over the subsequent forty years. Its obscurity persisted even after Stallings-Taney chose it for her landmark 1997 critical edition of the Latin version of the *MVC*. In 2009, Holly Flora included it in her detailed study of the Paris *Meditationes*. More recently, she and I published several articles on its iconography, which, we agree, caters to the expectations of a Poor Clare reader (Bartal, 2014; 2020; Flora, 2010; 2017).





Figure 1. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 30r (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

observant reform movement (Knox, 2008). Prolific writers worked within its walls, most notably the sisters Eufrazia and Battista Alfani, and its scriptorium, established in the nun’s choir, produced liturgical and devotional books, including a vernacular version of the *MVC* (Umiker, 2009).

While the fourteenth century is considered a time of decline—the Black Death significantly decreased the number of resident nuns—Monteluce was already a center of learning. Ugolino Nicolini noted at least three girls, de-



scribed as *puella literata*, who sought to enter the convent in the 1320s.³ These records indicate that daughters of the nobility admitted to Monteluca were often literate in the medieval sense of the word and could appreciate the long Latin version of the *MVC* included in MS 410. This version of the text features an elaborate meditation on the life of Christ as part of a structured program toward achieving a full contemplative life. The images I shall discuss help teach the reader how to reach this goal.

2. MEDITATION AS CONSTANT SEARCH

A woman dressed in a brown mantle and a white veil kneels on the lower frame of an image depicting an episode from Luke (2: 41–52). According to the gospel story, elaborated in the *MVC*, at the end of the long Passover holiday, Mary and Joseph started on their separate journeys back to Nazareth, situated about seventy-four miles from Jerusalem. Reunited that evening, the tired parents discovered their boy was missing:

His mother and Joseph, therefore, traveling along different routes, came late in the day to the place where the day's journey was over, and where they had to stay for the night. Seeing Joseph without the boy, who she believed had returned with him, our Lady asked of him "Where is our boy?" But he said, "I don't know, because he didn't return with me. I really thought he had gone back with you". Then overwhelmed with grief and tears, she said: "He didn't go back with me ...". And wanting to go as calmly as she could from house to house, she made the rounds late into the night, inquiring of this person and that asking "Have you seen my son?" (Caulibus, 2000, p. 53).

The accompanying image shows Joseph and Mary on two sides of a grassy hill that represents the different roads they took on their way back from Jerusalem (fol. 30r, Fig. 1).

³ The first girl sought entry in 1321 on the recommendation of Giovanni di Monadolo; Giacomina di Cola entered in 1325, and Peruzzola di Puccio di Bernardolo in 1326. The nuns refused Peruzzola for reasons unknown. Pope John XXII ordered the case of this "puella licterata perusina" to be examined (Perugia, state archive, 0253 copy, 9 November 1326). See discussions in Beckers (2017, p. 76) and Höhler (1984, p. 174).



Joseph is seen behind the hill, accompanied by two young men and led by a third, whose pointing finger directs the reader-viewer's gaze toward the upper right-hand corner of the folio, as if encouraging her to turn it and discover Christ in the following image, sitting amongst the elders in the Temple (fol. 31r). Mary stands on the lower right-hand side, comforted by two standing female companions. The text describes her as overwhelmed with worry (Caulibus, 2000, p. 54). A third woman, dressed in the brown mantle and white veil, kneels at bottom centre, gently touching the cloak of one of Mary's attendants and directing her gaze upward to the pointing finger of Joseph's companion, as if anticipating the rediscovery of the lost child when the page is turned.

This woman's brown mantle, her position in the scene, and her posture are unusual in the book's iconography. Only one other figure in the manuscript wears brown, the prophetess Anna, but her halo identifies her as a saint. This central figure is not haloed—nor are Mary's standing attendants—but she is the only one who kneels on the ground in drab garb and veil. Her garment evokes that worn by members of the Franciscan order and may associate her with the book's putative patron. While Poor Clares are often depicted wearing black veils over white wimples,⁴ they sometimes appear with white head covers, as in the *ca.* 1290 panel now at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College. The upper register shows Christ mounting the cross, while the lower depicts Clare's funeral, including a group of mourning Poor Clares with white veils on the left (Kennedy, 2014, pp. 119–120 n. 13).

Further, a contemporary manuscript of the *MVC*, illuminated in Tuscany for the Poor Clares and now Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Ital. 115, features several images of veiled women clad in brown tunics that echo those of Poor Clare novices. They are presented as companions of the Virgin on several occasions in the picture programme, integrating their communal experience of religious devotion into the story of the life of Christ (Flora, 2009, pp. 64–65). While in MS Ital 115, the putative readers appear in groups, emphasizing the community of Clares as an audience, the single kneeling female figure as well as the coat of arms on the opening folio and the relatively small size of MS 410 suggest that it was produced for the habitual reading of an individual patron.

⁴ On variations in dress of the Poor Clares in northern Italy, see Warr (1998, pp. 415–430; 2010, pp. 134–140).



Why, then, does such a representative figure appear only in the image of Mary and Joseph searching for their boy?

An answer appears in the *MVC*'s text immediately following the Lost Child:

A person living a spiritual life should not be surprised if, while occasionally experiencing dryness of soul, she seems to have been abandoned by God; since this happened even to the mother of God. Let such a one therefore not languish mentally, but let her diligently seek him out through continuous engagement in holy meditations and by persisting in good works; and she will find him once again (Caulibus, 2000, p. 55).

The wish to keep Christ constantly in sight is emphasized in the following verses. Mary goes to her room to pray, imploring God the Father that her son reappear:

Never from the time you were born up to now, have I been without you, have I eaten or slept without you, except only now. But now, I am without you, and I don't know how it happened; you know that you are my hope, my life, and my every good, and without you I cannot go on living. Show me, therefore, where you are, and how I can find you (Caulibus, 2000, p. 54).

As noted, if the reader follows the figures' gaze and the pointing hand of Joseph's companion and turns the page, Christ will become visible to Mary and the reader again, this time in the Temple among the doctors. Reading, looking, and turning the folio activate and enact Mary's search and discovery as allegories of both action and of the goal of the contemplative soul.

Quoting from Bernard on the Canticles, the *MVC* author emphasizes Christ's fleeting nature, noting that the goal of the contemplative is to hold fast to him:

When the bridegroom has finally appeared, having been sought in vigils, with beseeching prayers and with gushing torrents of tears, just when he is thought to be held fast, he suddenly slips away, and once again presenting himself to his weeping pursuer, he allows himself to be embraced, but hardly to be held fast; when suddenly, as if right out of your hands, he flies off. And if the devout soul persists with its tearful prayers, he will return again, and he will not defraud that soul of the desire of its lips (Ps. 20:3), but again he will soon disappear and will not be seen, unless he is once more reached out with all one's heart. (Caulibus, 2000, p. 113).



Bernard continues that the lover—that is, the contemplative—has no choice but to endure these distressing departures until the body can be transcended, then “lifted on the wings of its desires, freely undertaking a journey through the fields of contemplation, and with unencumbered mind following the beloved bridegroom wherever he goes (Rev. 14: 4)”. Such exaltation can be reached only when “tremendous devotion, vehement desire and sweetest affection prove a worthy spouse” (Caulibus, 2000, p. 114).

By placing the figure of the putative reader in the scene of the Lost Child, the designer of the image programme provides her a mirror as well as a model. Her task is likened to a constant search, and her goal will be reached by persistent meditation on Christ’s life, performed with the aid of the words and images in her illustrated book.

3. A WOMAN OF PRAYER

While the kneeling woman in the image of the Lost Child modeled meditation as a constant search, that of the Canaanite woman figures persistent petition. According to the text, when Christ was preaching and healing the sick, a woman from the foreign land of Canaan approached him and asked him to free her daughter from demonic possession (Mt. 15: 22). The lord did not respond, but she persisted, crying and beseeching him for mercy. When Christ answered that giving the children’s bread to dogs was not right, she humbly rejoined that by custom, a dog is allowed the fallen crumbs (Mt. 15: 23–28). Christ met her request.

The figure of the Canaanite woman does not appear frequently in trecento art. In MS 410, it stands out as another image used to promote the reader’s self-reflection (fol. 70v, Fig. 2). The woman is shown kneeling with hands clasped together in prayer, beseeching Christ, who is walking forward outside the picture frame with his back to her, while Peter turns to her in a gesture of speech. According to the text, the Canaanite first appealed to the disciples, who took up her request and communicated it to Christ. The *MVC* author interprets the intercession of the disciples as the angelic petition on behalf of the praying soul, describing how the angel mediates the prayer to the bridegroom either by snatching the soul upward or leading the bridegroom down (Caulibus, 2000, p. 132). Significantly, in the image, the leader of the disciples performs the





Figure 2. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 70v (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

angel's intermediary role. Throughout MS 410's image programme, Peter is depicted as Christ's closest follower; his vehemence is attested by his attempt to walk on water, even if he must also overcome his faltering faith and tribulations. In most of the images of Christ's public life, Peter's white beard and tonsured head appear nearby.

Janet Robson had argued that Francis may have been identified with Peter. Francis was promoted not just as *alter Christus* but also as a new Apostle, perhaps even a new Saint Peter, spiritually rebuilding the Church that Peter founded. The painting of the dream of Pope Innocent III in the upper church at

Assisi depicts Saint Francis physically holding up the toppling papal basilica of St. John Lateran (Robson, 2004, pp. 31–57). The association of Francis with Peter, notes Robson, is communicated directly in cases when the new saint is inserted into the apostolic hierarchy. For example, in the mosaics signed by Jacopo Torriti in the apse of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, dated 1295 and created under the patronage of the Franciscan pope Nicholas IV, Francis stands on the left, directly behind the two papal saints.

For the Poor Clare reader of MS 410, the figure of Peter mediating the woman's prayer might bring to mind the role of the friars in administering the *cura animarium* (cure of the souls) for the sisters. While the frequency of the friars' advisory visits seems to have varied from convent to convent during the late thirteenth century, it was significant for the maintenance of the Poor Clares' spiritual welfare: the *MVC* itself was written by a friar as a spiritual guide for his sister or daughter (Flora, 2009, p. 41; Roest, 2013, pp. 65–67). The order transferred a community of six Franciscans to provide spiritual care for the sisters at Monteluce as well as to help in opposing the requests for payments advanced by the curia (Höhler, 1984, p. 176).

Whomever the figure of Peter represents, the kneeling woman occupies the centre of the composition. According to the text, her faith, persistence, and humility are the qualities that make her a perfect exemplum for a woman of prayer. In the previous meditation, describing Christ's prayer on the mountain after he flees the temptation of pride, the author implores his reader:

If you wish to keep yourself going in the spiritual life and not bother with fleshly desires, be a woman of prayer. If you wish to swat away the buzzing flies of fruitless thoughts, be a woman of prayer. If you wish to buttress your soul with good and holy thoughts, fervent desires and devotions, be a woman of prayer. If you wish to hold your heart steady in God's approval with courageous and unwavering spirit, be a woman of prayer. Finally, if you wish to root out vices and become imbued with virtues, be a woman of prayer. For in that prayerfulness we receive the Holy Spirit's anointing, which instructs your mind about all things (Jn. 14: 26) (Caulibus, 2000, p. 121).

The meditation on the Canaanite woman that immediately follows provides a visual expression of the author's invocation. Her position and gesture embody the action of persistent prayer required to fend off worldly temptations.



Her clothes—an elegant purple gown worn over a red dress—identify her as a noblewoman, but her head is covered with a white veil, indicating her chastity, and the long cord tied across her chest has three prominent knots, suggesting the Franciscan cord. A similar rope appears in the Passion section of the manuscript, tied around Christ's neck as he is led to Calvary. Both head cover and knotted belt would allow the reader-viewer to see herself in the image of the kneeling woman and model herself after her practice and conviction.

In a resonant allusion, a flowering tree behind her seems to sprout from her head. A similar flowering tree appears behind the kneeling Magdalene, who turns to Christ in the *Noli me tangere* scene (fol. 156r, Fig. 3).⁵



Figure 3. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 156r (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

⁵ The illuminator may have been influenced by the so called Marzolini or Perugia triptych (ca. 1275), now in Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, where this detail, which stems from a Byzantine model, was used for the *Noli me tangere* scene (Corrie, 1996, p. 44, Fig. 6).

As a *pars pro toto* for the garden mentioned in John's Gospel, the tree became a fixed element in *Noli me tangere* iconography. On an allegorical level, it may stand for the garden of Eden and represent the Tree of Life, which was interpreted as a prefiguration of the Holy Cross and used as a simile for it. It may also suggest the new tree of life in Heavenly Jerusalem (Baert and Kusters, 2014, pp. 159–186). Not surprisingly, the tree behind the Magdalene, the perfect penitent lover of Christ, is fruitful; small red orbs hang from its branches. This pairing of fervent devotion and a fruitful tree carries over to the image of the Canaanite woman, whose persistent prayer to Christ eventually bears fruit.

4. ANTICIPATING THE PASSION

The Passion section of the *MVC* is well known to art historians: Emile Mâle cites the text—or Ludolph of Saxony's adaptation of large parts of it—as most influential on late medieval iconographies of the Passion (1913, p. vii). It sometimes circulated as a separate text, and its division according to the canonical hours suggests it could be read in the course of one day.⁶ This part includes the most intense emotional description of Christ's agonies on his way to Calvary, his suffering on the Cross, and his death. In a prologue to this section, the author explains its intent is to lead the reader to the height of her contemplative effort:

If you survey [the Passion's] mysteries and their surrounding events with full force of mind, you will, I believe, have an entirely new frame for meditating. For the soul searching through the passion in the depths of her heart and with every fibre of her being, many unexpected pathways would open up, along which she would encounter new compassion, new love, new consolations, and as a consequence, a certain new state of sweetness, all of which would seem to her like foretastes and shares of glory (Caulibus, 2000, p. 236).

While the prologue explicates how to read the Passion section of the manuscript, the first hour of Prime opens and ends with images that could also function to prepare the reader for what follows.

⁶Prime and Terce describe the events following the Last Supper: Christ among his accusers and on the road to Calvary; Sext and Nones focus on the erection of the cross and Christ's last words; and Vespers on the events after his death, ending with the Deposition.



According to the text, after the sermon that followed the Last Supper, Christ walks from Mount Zion through the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives. He leaves the Apostles in the garden of Gethsemane and, after continuing on alone, falls to his knees. Anguished and fearful of the torture and death to come, he begs his father to take the cup of the Passion from him. According to Luke, an angel descends offering comfort, and Christ accepts God's plan (Caulibus, 2000, pp. 239–243).

For Franciscan writers, Christ's prayer in Gethsemane parallels Francis's own moment of intense prayer (Frugoni, 1993, pp. 121–123). Thomas of Celano likens Francis's stigmatization on Laverna to Christ's stay on the Mount of Olives; like Christ, Francis withdrew to a mountain to pray, anticipated suffering, accepted comfort from an angelic messenger, and eventually submitted to God's will. A number of trecento paintings pair the two analogous scenes (Neff, 2019, pp. 112–113; for a Tuscan image, see Frugoni, 1993, p. 151).

MS 410 devotes four images to the meditation on the Agony in the Garden, generally following the Byzantine formula known from at least the twelfth century (Demus, 1988, pp. 100–105). The four scenes depict Christ praying and urging the disciples to pray. The first (fol. 123v, Fig. 4) is placed next to the words, "Certe orat Patrem, habet hoc expedire negotium ut non moriatur si ei placet" (Certainly he prayed to the father: he was willing to carry out this mission but did not wish to die doing it) (Caulibus, 2000, p. 239). It shows Christ praying at the foot of a mountain, and the disciples sleeping below. Christ does not fall prostrate as described in Matthew and Mark and pictured, for example, in the first two scenes in the San Marco mosaics in Venice. His posture and position at the foot of the mountain recall the two other occasions when he prayed—on Mount Quarantana and in the Galilee (fols. 40r and 65r, Figs. 5 and 6), where he is also shown with his hands clasped in prayer.

The author exhorts his reader to think back and compare Christ's prayer on the Mount of Olives with the two other instances of prayer: "But we read that he had prayed many times up to this point, but in fact, those times for us, as our advocate. Now however he is praying for himself" (Caulibus, 2000, p. 239).

The paradoxical nature of this assertion was not lost on the *MVC* author. He goes on to alert the reader to the reflexivity of Christ's prayer: "Although he is a god, coeternal and coequal with the father, he seems to have forgotten that he is God and prays like a man: he acts like any humble little person you





Figure 4. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 123v (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

can think of. God praying to God!” (Caulibus, 2000, p. 242). Indeed, for medieval exegetes, the fact that Christ prayed at all on the Mount of Olives was an occasion to reflect on his humility and humanity. In Bonaventure’s *Tree of Life* (1978, p. 142), Christ’s anxious prayer demonstrates his full humanity. It serves as a sign that he endured the “natural weakness of the flesh” and thus shared “our mortal nature” in anguish and pain. The *MVC* explicates this point





Figure 5. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 40r (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

further, making clear that the divinely omnipotent Christ had no need to ask for help before his voluntary sacrifice, but in so doing, he revealed his full humanity (Caulibus, 2000, p. 239).

In medieval prayer books, the image of the Agony was often placed next to the opening plea of Psalm 101, “Hear, O Lord, my prayer: and let my cry come unto thee,” thus modeling the experience of prayer (see Hamburger, 1997, pp. 80–94). In the *MVC*, most of Christ’s words come from the Psalms:





Figure 6. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 65r (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

My most kind Father, *I beg you to hear my prayer and not spurn my plea. Direct your attention to me and hear me, because I find no rest in my distress* (Ps. 54: 2–3), *and my spirit is crushed within me, and my heart is thrown into confusion within me* (Ps. 142: 4). *Turn your ear to me* (Ps. 85: 1) *and listen to the voice of my supplication* (Ps. 85: 6)” (Caulibus, 2000, p. 240).

Looking at the image of Christ praying and reading his words could provide the Poor Clare both model and content for intimate prayer.



The image that opens the meditation on the Passion—Christ praying on the Mount of Olives, foreseeing his own suffering and death—could provide an example for meditation on Christ’s forthcoming sacrifice on the cross. In his *Legenda maior*, Bonaventure describes how on Mount Laverna, Francis, too, meditates on Christ’s Passion. He prays to God with the help of his companion, who takes the Gospel from the altar and opens it three times in the name of the Trinity. Each time, it falls open to the account of Christ’s Passion, and Francis understands that “just as he had imitated Christ in the actions of his life, so too he ought to conform himself to him in the afflictions and sufferings of the Passion before he passed from this world” (1978, p. 304).

The detail of the tree placed at the top of the mountain in the first Agony image reinforces this point. Trees do not figure prominently in Agony scenes (see Neff, 2019, p. 114), and while one tree appears behind Christ praying in the desert and two on the slopes of the mountain in the Galilee, here the tree is prominently placed on the mountain top as almost the focus of Christ’s gaze. Bonaventure understood his *Lignum Vitae* as both the cross and the Tree of Life in Paradise (1978, pp. 120–121). The tree in the Agony could point to both. It looks ahead to the cross on Golgotha, which is depicted in the two images opening the sequence of Crucifixion scenes a few folios ahead (fol. 135v, Fig. 7); these scenes show the cross atop a similar mount with three steps resembling the ledges of the Mount of Olives. The heavenly sweetness the author promises as the reward for meditating on the Passion in his prologue to this text section could evoke the Tree of Paradise (Caulibus, 2000, p. 236).

The first hour of meditation on the Passion ends with another, perhaps more potent, mirror image for the reader-viewer: Mary at prayer (fol. 128v, Fig. 8). According to the *MVC*, after Christ appeared before the Jewish priests and was bound to the column, John visited Mary and her companions to give them the news of Christ’s arrest. Hearing John’s words, Mary withdrew to a separate room to pray. Like Christ, she turned to the Father: *Pater reverentissime, Pater piissime, Pater misericordissime* (Most revered Father, most loving Father, most merciful Father, I commend my most sweet son to you. You who are kind to all, do not be unkind to him; Caulibus, 2000, p. 245). While Christ prayed for himself, exemplifying his ultimate humility and humanity, Mary prayed and suffered for her son; thus, she models compassion,





Figure 7. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 135v (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

the state of mind that the reader should discover in meditating on the Passion (Caulibus, 2000, p. 236).

Mary's plea is accompanied by an unusually emotionally charged image. It depicts her in a confined space, which brings to mind a nun's private cell, with her head bowed, hands clasped, and eyes downcast, expressing a moment of deep interiority. Like the image of Christ in his agony in the garden, the image of Mary models meditation on the Passion, anticipating and conditioning the reader's state of mind for the forthcoming text.





Figure 8. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 128v (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).



Figure 9. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 154v (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

5. LAST ENCOUNTERS

The emotionally charged image of Mary alone in her room prefigures Mary and Christ's most poignant reunion after his Resurrection (fol. 154v, Fig. 9).

According to the *MVC*, Mary again prayed alone in her room, this time in John's house on Mount Zion, while her companions went to the tomb to anoint Christ's dead body. She begs:

Most gentle father, most loving father ... please restore him to good health, and give him back to me. Where is he? Why does he delay for so long his return to me? Please, send him back to me, because my soul finds no rest until I see him (Caulibus, 2000, p. 280).



Deviating from the events narrated in the Gospels, where Mary Magdalene is the first to witness the risen Christ, in the *MVC*, the Virgin first beholds him. She kneels to adore him before holding him in her arms. The accompanying image shows Mary and Christ facing each other and kneeling, their hands together, united in a confined chamber that evokes the empty tomb depicted in the lower register.

This image opens a sequence of fourteen scenes that depict Christ's encounters with his followers, including some that are not mentioned in the Gospels. His meetings with his female followers stand out: he appears to the Magdalene in the *Noli me tangere* scene and twice to the three Maries, who kneel before him in devotion (fol. 168r, Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410, fol. 168r (photo: by permission of The President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford).



The text itself does not mention the second encounter with the three devoted women. The illuminator appears to have added this scene, perhaps in response to the author's assertion that the reader is free to imagine more meetings that occurred between the resurrected Christ and his loved ones:

But you can include other close friends remarked on in the Gospels in meditating on the appearances. For it is likely that our considerate Lord visited his mother and disciples often, including Magdalene, a dearly loved disciple: comforting and cheering those who had been so deeply saddened and terrified over his suffering. This seems to have been the opinion of blessed Augustine, in speaking about the time after the resurrection: "Not everything," said he, "was written down" (Caulibus, 2000, p. 317).

Christ's frequent encounters with his faithful followers offer emotional relief after the long and intense meditation on the Passion. The author exhorts his reader to consider every Sunday an Easter Sunday, so she can joyfully celebrate the Resurrection every week. Only the reader who has shared Christ's Passion on Friday and Saturday can fully rejoice in meeting him on Sunday.

However, this type of rejoicing need not be fixed to that day. The reader can experience an Easter every day, if she fixes her mind and diligently uses her book.

I think that if you knew how to share in his sufferings, and kept your mind fixed on that, and not distracted by worldly affairs, or by frivolous pursuits or concerns, you would realize an Easter in each and every one of these appearances. It could happen for you on any day, if you would prepare yourself for it with an uncompromised mind: with meditations on the Lord's passion every Friday and Saturday. For it is in that sense especially that Paul says, "If we become associates of his sufferings, we shall be (consoled) (2 Cor. 1: 9)" (Caulibus, 2000, p. 295).

That the designer of the image programme added encounters between the risen Christ and devoted women is not arbitrary. The female figures embody the manuscript readers, and their unmediated encounter with the risen Christ may be understood in Bernard of Clairvaux's terms as the reward for the vehement soul of one who has searched diligently for Christ through the pages



of her book throughout the week. These images and the others I discuss here allow the reader of MS 410 to see herself within the *vita Christi*, as a witness to Christ's deeds and suffering. They also instruct her on the steps to take in her contemplative ascent. For her search—in her mind's eye and on the manuscript page—her persistent petition, and her compassionate meditation on Christ's Passion can lead to an unmediated encounter on Easter Sunday—or on any other day, if she practices well.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baert, B. and Kusters, L. (2014). The tree as narrative, formal, and allegorical index in representations of the *Noli Me Tangere*. In P. Salonijs and A. Worm (Eds.), *The tree: Symbol, allegory, and mnemonic device in medieval art and thought* (pp. 159–186). Brepols.
- Bartal, R. (2014). Repetition, opposition, and invention in an illustrated manuscript of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Corpus Christi College, MS 410. *Gesta* (53) 2, 155–174.
- Bartal, R. (2020). Text, textile, blood: Mary under the cross in Oxford Corpus Christi College, MS 410. *Studies in Iconography* (41), 131–164.
- Bartal, R. (2021). Reading the *Meditationes* on the “Mount of Light”. In H. Flora and P. Tóth (Eds.), *The Meditationes Vitae Christi reconsidered: New perspectives on text and image* (pp. 111–128). Brepols.
- Beckers, J. (2017). Invisible presence: The Poor Clares of central Italy: Families, veils and art patronage, c. 1350–1550. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Catholic University of Leuven.
- Bonaventure (1978). *The soul's journey into God; the tree of life; the life of St. Francis* (E. Cousins, Trans.). Paulist Press.
- Caulibus, J. (2000). *Meditations on the life of Christ* (F. X. Taney, A. Miller and C. M. Stallings-Taney, Eds. and Trans.). Pegasus Press.
- Cooper, D. (2021). Fra Jacopo in the archives: San Gimignano as a context for the *Meditations on the life of Christ*. In H. Flora and P. Tóth (Eds.), *The Meditationes Vitae Christi reconsidered: New perspectives on text and image* (pp. 43–74). Brepols.



- Corrie, R. W. (1996). The Perugia triptych and the transmission of Byzantine art to the Maniera Greca, In I. Ševcenko, G. Litavrin, and W. K. Hanak (Eds.), *Acts: XVIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies; Selected Papers, Moscow 1991*, vol. 3. *Art history, architecture, music* (pp. 35–56). Byzantine Studies Press.
- Costiner, L. (2021). An illuminated fifteenth-century Milanese manuscript of the “Meditationes Vitae Christi”. *Burlington Magazine* (163), 324–331.
- Demus, O. (1988). *The mosaic decoration of San Marco, Venice*. University of Chicago Press.
- Flora, H. (2009). *The devout belief of the imagination: The Paris Meditationes vitae Christi and female Franciscan spirituality in Trecento Italy*. Brepols.
- Flora, H. (2010). Empathy and performative vision in Oxford Corpus Christi College MS 410. *Ikon* (3), 169–176.
- Flora, H. (2017). Fashioning the Passion: The Poor Clares and the clothing of Christ. *Art History* (40), 464–495.
- Flora, H. (2021). Passion, charisma and gender in an illuminated manuscript of Bonaventure’s *Life of Saint Francis*. *Specula* (1), 123–151.
- Frugoni, C. (1993). *Francesco e l’invenzione delle stimmate: Una storia per parole e immagini fino a Bonaventura e Giotto*. Einaudi.
- Hamburger, J. F. (1997). *Nuns as artists: The visual culture of a medieval convent*. University of California Press.
- Hand, J. (2013). *Women, manuscripts and identity in Northern Europe, 1350–1550*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Heywood, W. (1910). *A history of Perugia*. Putnam.
- Höhler, P. (1984). Il monastero delle Clarisse di Monteluca in Perugia (1218–1400). In R. Rusconi (Ed.), *Il movimento religioso femminile in Umbria nei secoli XII–XIV* (pp. 61–82). Regione Dell’Umbria: La Nuova Italia.
- Höhler, P. (1988). Frauenkloster in einer Italienischer Stadt: Zur wirtschafts- und social Geschichte der Klarissen von Monteluca und der Zisterzienserinnen von S. Giuiana in Perugia. *Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* (68), 167–270.
- Karnes, M. (2011). *Imagination, meditation, and cognition in the Middle Ages*. University of Chicago Press.



- Kennedy, T. (Ed.). (2014). *Sanctity pictured: The art of the Dominican and Franciscan orders in Renaissance Italy*. First Center for the Visual Arts; Philip Wilson Publishers.
- Knox, L. S. (2008). *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan identities in later medieval Italy*. Brill.
- Mâle, É. (1913, reprint 2000). *Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century*. Dover Publications.
- McNamer, S. (2011). *Affective meditation and the invention of medieval compassion*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Neff, A. (2019). *A soul's journey: Franciscan art, theology, and devotion in the Supplicationes variae*. Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies.
- Nicolini, U. (1971). I minori osservanti di Monteripido e lo "Scriptorium" delle Clarisse di Monteluca in Perugia nei secoli XV e XVI. *Picenum seraphicum* (8), 100–130.
- Nicolini, U. (1983). *Memoriale di Monteluca: Cronaca del monastero delle Clarisse di Perugia dal 1448 al 1838*. S. Maria degli Angeli, Porziuncola.
- Pächt, O. (1963). Review of *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. *Medium Ævum* (32) 3, 234–235.
- Robson, J. (2004). Judas and the Franciscans: Perfidy pictured in Lorenzetti's Passion Cycle at Assisi. *Art Bulletin* (86) 1, 31–57.
- Roest, B. (2013). *Order and disorder: The Poor Clares between foundation and reformation*. Brill.
- Sand, A. (2014). *Vision, devotion, and self-representation in late medieval art*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, K. A. (2003). *Art, identity and devotion in fourteenth-century England: Three women and their books of hours*. Toronto University Press.
- Umiker, M. B. (2009). I codici di s. Maria di Monteluca e l'attività scrittoria delle monache. In P. Messa, A. E. Scandella, and Mario Sensi (Eds.), *Cultura e desiderio di Dio: L'umanesimo e le Clarisse dell'osservanza* (pp. 73–107). Editrice Porziuncola.
- Warr, C. (1988). The stripped mantle of the Poor Clares: Image and text in Italy in the later Middle Ages. *Arte Cristiana* (86), 415–430.
- Warr, C. (2010). *Dressing for heaven: Religious clothing in Italy, 1215–1545*. Manchester University Press.



Wood, J. (1996). *Women, art, and spirituality: The Poor Clares of early modern Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

