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Authors	Ó Carragáin, Éamonn
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A Renaissance Synthesis of Ancient Christian Themes: Architecture, Altarpieces, and Imagined Spaces in San Giovanni Crisostomo, Venice, 1495–1520

Éamonn Ó Carragáin

One of the fascinations of Venice, a city I have had the privilege of exploring more than once with Alan Thacker and other friends, is the ways in which its Renaissance churches provide fresh syntheses of early Christian and medieval ideas.[1] Those churches that have not been despoiled fascinate in another way: individual works of art often relate, not only to each other, but to the church for which they were designed. The present paper explores these two ideas in San Giovanni Crisostomo, some ten minutes' walk from the Rialto. This church was renovated by Mauro Codussi (1440–1504) and his workshop; [2] three major artists (with their workshops) provided the first three of its new altarpieces: Pietro Lombardo (1435–1515), Sebastiano Luciani later known as Sebastiano del Piombo (*c.*1485–1547),[3] and finally the aged Giovanni Bellini (1430–1516).[4] The individual altarpieces have been much studied; but there has been little discussion of how each relates to the others and to the design of the church.

The Bernabò Chapel: Mauro Codussi, Pietro Lombardo, and their Workshops

In 1475, the medieval church of San Giovanni Crisostomo was damaged by fire.[5] lt was not totally destroyed: the campanile still stood, and appears in the bird's eye view of Venice by Jacopo de' Barbari, published in 1500; the church remained in continuous use.[6] Ludovico (vernacular, Alvise) Talenti was appointed *piovano* (parish priest) in 1480: he would remain in this position until his death in 1516. He set about collecting money, persuading the Senate to obtain from Rome an

1 I am grateful to the lateJennifer O'Reilly, with whom I discussed the first versions of this paper; to Emily Goetsch and Christos Kakalis, who invited me to present an early version at their 'Mountains' conference (Edinburgh, 2014); and to Terence O'Reilly, Daragh O'Connell and Eoghan Ó Carragáin, with whom I discussed later drafts. I am particularly grateful to Don Cesare Maddalena, the present Parish Priest of San Giovanni Crisostomo, for his courteous permission to examine and photograph in the interior of the church. As good photographs of all three altarpieces are easily available on the web, my illustrations are chosen to illustrate the relations between the altarpieces and other features of the church. Full-resolution versions of each figure can be viewed at https://zenodo.org/records/3982241 'Images to accompany "A Renaissance Synthesis of Ancient Christian Themes"'.

2 Olivato and Puppi, *Mauro Codussi*, pp. 215–18; Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, pp. 211–45.

3 Strinati and Lindemann, *Sebastiano del Piombo*, pp. 106–09.

4 Poldi and Villa, *Bellini a Venezia*, pp. 232–57.

5 Olivato and Puppi, *Mauro Codussi*, p. 215.

6 Olivato and Puppi, *Mauro Codussi*, p. 214.

indulgence often years for people who contributed to the restoration. The letter to Rome of January 1489, requesting the indulgence, was no doubt largely drafted by Talenti: it does not even mention the fire, but instead details the age and poor condition of the church.[7] The renovation of the church, in which Talenti was closely involved, got going from 1495.[8] Talenti provided the pulpit between the sacristy door and the Bernabò chapel at his own expense, and it is inscribed with his name and the date (1501) (Fig. 3).[9]

There was a lively debate in early sixteenth century Venice about how one should best serve society: in the active life (such as that of an administrator, soldier or parish priest) or in the contemplative life (that of a scholar, monk, or hermit) ?[10] These preoccupations are progressively explored in the three altarpieces commissioned during Talenti's lifetime. In December 1508, Venice was threatened by the League of Cambrai, a powerful coalition which included France, the Habsburg Empire, the Papacy, Mantua, and Ferrara.[11] Venice suffered a severe defeat at the battle of Agnadello (14 May 1509); the war would not end until 1517. The war had been waged for some four years when the third altarpiece (that by Bellini, for the Diletti chapel) was painted. It is of interest, therefore, that the search for wisdom, implicit in all three altarpieces, is given verbal expression in the third.

San Giovanni Crisostomo was among Mauro Codussi's last projects.[12] His design, a Greek cross within a square and with three apses, around a central dome, was a variant, not only on his earlier designs for churches, but also (appropriately, for a church dedicated to St John Chrysostom) on aspects of early byzantine architecture.[13]

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7 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, pp. 211–12.

8 Olivato and Puppi, *Mauro Codussi*, p. 215; on Talenti's involvement,Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, pp. 212 and 217.

9 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 212.

10 Pinchi, *A quels saints se vouer*?, pp. 45–46.

11 Hale, *Titian: His Life*, pp. 81–86.

12 Other late projects included the church of Santa Maria Formosa (1492–1504), the clock tower in St Mark's square (1494–1504) and Palazzo Loredan Vendramin Calergi (1502–1504): Olivato and Puppi, *Mauro Codussi*, pp. 206–25.

13 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, pp. 229–31; Boccato, *Chiese di Venezia*, p. 171.



Figure 2. The Madonna Greca, legacy of Giacomo de'Bernabò, d. 1438; below, altarpiece by Tullio Lombardo, inserted 1506. Photo by the author.



Figure 3. The Bernabò Chapel and altarpiece; Pulpit donated by Ludovico Talenti. Photo by the author.

The Bernabò family, rich local merchants, commissioned Pietro Lombardo to rebuild their chapel (1499–1500), dedicated to the Virgin Mary.[14] Money for the rebuilding came via the testament of Giacomo de' Bernabò (dated u July 1438, shortly before his death that same year).[15] The chapel stands out in the general austerity of the church. It is the only chapel completely clad in marble, and designed as a chantry: marble benches to right and left of the altar provide seats for up to three persons aside to chant the office or assist at Mass. On either side of the altar, there is a tall window in the external (north) wall: each window overlooks, and provides excellent light for, the nearest bench. The bright marble cladding of the sides of the chapel reflects some of this light back, onto the altar and its altarpiece. Marble cladding encloses the inner and outer sides of each bench: chanting in the chapel would be heard throughout the church, but not all people in the church could easily see the chanters. To construct a chapel as a chantry was to encourage thoughts of liturgical celebration and cosmic harmony: ideas also symbolized by the four sculpted musician-angels in the Bernabò altarpiece.

A standing Madonna *orans* (with her lower arms raised in prayer) is set high in the wall under the chapel's vault, above the altarpiece and within a

14 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, pp. 233- 35.

15 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 232.

rectangular frame of blue marble(Figure 2).[16] The Madonna probably dates from the fourteenth century: it is clear from Giacomo de' Bernabò's testament (1438) that he had long prized it, in his own home, as an object of devotion.[17] It differs stylistically from all Venetian examples: Giacomo had probably acquired it years before, on one of his journeys to the Levant as a silk merchant.[18] In 1499 it was fittingly described as a 'madonna greca'.[19] Soon after 1438, it had been set high in the wall of the chapel, above a wooden altarpiece. As part of the refurbishment that wooden altarpiece was removed to store, and eventually given to another church, Santa Maria Maggiore. The Lombardo workshop carefully remodelled the orant Madonna: they removed gilding mentioned in Giacomo's will, retouched some details of the Madonna, and covered the background of the panel in dark slate so as to make the Madonna stand out clearly, seeming to float within its frame, against the new bright marble cladding of the altar wall.[20]

By January 1500, Giacomo's Madonna had been carefully remodelled and restored to its position in the north wall. The other work on the chapel was completed by April 1501; but it was only much later, in October 1506, that the Lombardo workshop inserted the new marble altarpiece on which Pietro's son Tullio Lombardo (*c.* 1455–1532), had been working since 1501.[21] Tullio designed his altarpiece so as to provide a visual prologue or introduction to the Bernabò family heirloom, the orant Madonna: as we shall see, his new altarpiece was designed to complement the Madonna, visually and theologically. Tullio used two closely-fitting slabs of Carrara marble, an upper and a lower. He sculpted a fictive room, with a coffered vault and a receding colonnade which, as it were, extends the actual Bernabò chapel towards the north. Christ stands at centre foreground, between two fictive ionic columns which support a beam topped by a triangular pediment. On the basis of the accounts for the chapel, which refer to a throne, Bertrand Jestaz has recently argued that this structure is a throne, from which Christ has risen up, to stand before it.[22] The triangular pediment above Christ's head (which has a smaller triangle of porphyry at its centre) points upwards,

16 Zanin, Chiesa S. Giovanni Grisostomo, unnumbered Plate (23). On the orant Madonna, I rely on Annalisa Bristot, 'Note a margine'; Davis, *Byzantine Relief Icons*, Appendix I, pp. 24- 26.

17 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, pp. 234 and 238.

18 Davis, *Byzantine Relief Icons*, pp. 24–25.

19 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 242, par. 34, accounts for 20 December 1499: 'per chonzar una Madona greca'.

20 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 234: Jestaz is highly critical of the account given in Davis, 'La cappella Bernabei'.

21 Tullio had acquired the two plaques of marble on 7 December 1500: Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 238 and par. 99 on p. 245.

22 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 238, and par. 100 on p. 245; earlier, Markham Schulz, The *Sculpture of Tullio Lombardo*, p. 84, suggested that the structure represents the closed door of the room in which Christ appears in John 20. 19.

towards the other members of the Holy Trinity who hover under the fictive barrel vault, just above Christ. A bust portrait of God the Father (with a triangular 'trinitarian' halo) looks benignly downward towards his son, the Virgin Mary, and the gathered apostles. The bust portrait of the Father is flanked by six cherubim. Four full-length angel-musicians, and below them another four cherubim, flank the dove of the Holy Spirit and the rays which stream down towards Christ, Mary, and the apostles. Christ has just placed a crown on the head of the young Virgin Mary. She kneels before him, her arms clasped before her body in a gesture of acceptance: 'be it done to me according to thy word'.[23]

Christ appears as in his thirties, the age of his public ministry or of his post-Resurrection appearances. The long-haired girl who kneels before him seems half his age, perhaps fifteen to eighteen. To understand this reversal of biological facts, a good place to start is the letter *Cogitis me*, composed about AD 835 by the Carolingian writer Paschasius Radbertus (*c.*799–865).[24] Paschasius wished to encourage the aristocratic nuns Theodrada and Emma to celebrate the feast of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, without being distracted by unreliable apocryphal narratives such as the *Transitus Mariae.*[25] He is sceptical about apocryphal stories that Mary's body was assumed into heaven, and makes it clear that this was not the point of the feast.[26] The nuns should concentrate instead on the liturgical chants, based on scripture, for the feast. Some of these antiphons and responsories went back to the time of Ambrose (*c.* 340–397); but the repertoire had greatly increased in Paschasius' own lifetime.[27] Many of these antiphons and responsories adapted erotic texts from the Song of Songs.[28] Paschasius drew on these liturgical *libretti* to argue that it was the intensity of her love for Christ, her longing to be in his presence, that drew Mary towards heaven; and that the Assumption fulfilled her role in the Incarnation, when she became Theotokos (God-bearer). Paschasius therefore devotes much of his letter to the Incarnation; he is the first theologian to use the Assumption antiphons to provide a rationale for the feast.[29]

23 'Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum', Luke 1. 38.

24 References to *Cogitis me* are to the paragraphs in Ripberger's two editions, this numbering is also followed in Dezzuto's edition. Page references to these editions refer to Introductions, notes or appendices.

25 The various *Transitus Mariae* narratives are discussed in Clayton, *The Apocryphal Gospels of Mary*.

26 *Cogitis me*, §§ 7–9.

27 *Cogitis me,* §§ 21–23, §§ 38–45, and §§ 57–59; Ripberger, *Der Pseudo-Hieronymus Brief IX*, pp. 36–43; Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, pp. 151–77.

28 There is a concordance between the antiphons quoted in *Cogitis me* and those in the Antiphonary of Compiègne in Ripberger, *Der Pseudo-Hieronymus Brief IX*, pp. 146–50; for some critical comments on Ripberger's identifications of the antiphons, see Dezzuto, p. xxxix, note 103.

29 Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, p. 152.

Where, and when, is Tullio's scene set? Paschasius says that after the Resurrection Mary lived with the apostles in the Cenacle, and instructed them informally about the Incarnation and its implications.[30] The Cenacle (dining room, upper room) in Jerusalem was where both the Last Supper and Pentecost took place: it would have been particularly appropriate to represent the Cenacle just over the altar of the Bernabò chapel.[31] None of the twelve apostles in Tullio's sculpture has been identified as Judas; therefore it seems that the scene is set after Mathias was chosen to replace him, just before Pentecost.[32] This would mean that Tullio's sculpture represents a post-Resurrection appearance of Christ.[33] His pose, calm and authoritative, and his affectionate gesture towards the young kneeling woman, suggests that Christ here formally confirms what Mary has told the apostles informally about the Incarnation. To drive home the importance of the Incarnation, Christ grants the apostles (and the onlookers) an object-lesson: a vision of his mother as a young woman 'gracilis et delicata',[34] as she was at the very moment (some thirty-four years before[35]) when she had consented to became mother of God. The scene is stunningly original: it expresses the mystery of the Incarnation no longer by the mediating image of the angel Gabriel. The omission of Gabriel at the moment of Annunciation is intended to startle the apostles (and the onlookers) into awareness that, in willing the Incarnation, the Trinity itself acted in its fullness:

> And Mary said to the angel: How shall this be done, because I know not man? And the angel answering, said to her: the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee and therefore also, the Holy One which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.[36]

Tullio's Christ, to confirm the mystery, telescopes time. His right hand rests affectionately on the young woman's crowned head, to show that from the very moment she agreed to become God-bearer she was already potentially Queen of

30 The narrative of Acts 1. 13–14 is expanded in *Cogitis me*, §§ 15–16.

31 See Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 315, under 'Cenaculum'. Another link between altarpiece and altar is the fact that the first Good Friday, commemorated in each Mass, was, like the Annunciation, believed to have occurred on 25 March: see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 83–95.

32 Acts 1. 23–26.

33 See, for example, I Corinthians 15. 7: 'after that he was seen by James: then by all the apostles'; see Markham Schulz, *The Sculpture of Tullio Lombardo*, p. 84.

34 *Cogitis me*, § 46.

35 On medieval calculations of Christ's age, see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 83–84.

36 Luke 1. 34–35. A Venetian audience would have been sensitive to any reference to the Annunciation: because tradition held that the city was founded on the Feast of the Annunciation, 25 March AD 421, Annunciation scenes are ubiquitous in the city: Sinding-Larsen, *Christ in the Council Hall*, pp. 49–55.

Heaven. Christ's gesture prophesies that the mutual love between Mary and the Trinity will lead to her final glory.

We can now understand the ways in which Tullio's altarpiece was designed to provide a visual and theological context for Giacomo de' Bernabò's 'Madonna greca'. The mission of the Apostles would be to proclaim to the ends of the earth the startling mystery of the Incarnation: without the Incarnation, they had no message to bring. To enlighten the Apostles, Christ, Son of God combines (in a Pentecostal setting) a vision of the past (Annunciation) with a prophetic gesture (Crowning). He shows how, some thirty-four years before, it was her consent to the proposed action of the Trinity that made his Incarnation possible; through his gesture of crowning Mary, Christ prophesies that Mary's original act of obedient faith ('fiat mihi') will finally lead, after her death, to her becoming Queen of Heaven.

Tullio's fusion of Annunciation and Crowning in this altarpiece had an authoritative Venetian precedent in the Doge's Palace. In the Sala del Consiglio, Guariento di Arpo (1300–1370) had already (1365–1366) flanked his great fresco, in which Christ crowns Mary Queen of Heaven (in the presence of the apostles and angels), with images of Gabriel and Mary at the Annunciation.[37] In Dante's *Paradiso*, St Bernard had called Mary 'daughter of your son' (figlia del tuo figlio).[38] The inscription to Guariento's fresco provides a creative variant of this famous Dantesque conceit: it calls her 'daughter of the Trinity'. Like Dante, and like *Cogitis me*, the inscription sees love as the central motive for the action of the Trinity:

> L'Amor che mosse già l'eterno Padre
> Per figlia hauer de sua deità trina
> Chostei che fu del suo figliuol poi madre
> Del'universo qui la fa Regina.
>
> The love which once moved the Eternal Father
> To have a daughter out of his triple divinity
> (She who then became mother of his little Son)
> Here makes her the Queen of the universe.[39]

Of European cities, Venice was the place where an educated parish priest (like

37 Sinding-Larsen, *Christ in the Council Hall*, pp. 45–56 and Plates XXXIX and XL. The juxtaposition of Annunciation and Crowning is also central to Filippino Lippi's altarpiece (1488) in the Carafa chapel of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome: see Nelson, 'La cappella Carafa', pp. 40 and 44.

38 Dante, *Paradiso*, 33:1–3, p. 907.

39 Sinding-Larsen, *Christ in the Council Hall*, p. 45, note 3, who states that Guariento's inscription was traditionally attributed to Dante hiniself. I am grateful to Dr Daragh O'Connell for help with this matter.

Ludovico Talenti), who knew not only his Dante and also the local variant of the Dantesque paradox in the Sala del Consiglio, might have worked out with Tullio, during the years (1501–1506) in which Tullio worked on the altarpiece, how the Annunciation (celebrated on 25 March, and understood to be the date on which Venice was founded) might be fused with 'Santa Maria Gloriosa the Qμeen of Heaven (that feast was celebrated on 15 August).Just above the altarpiece, the attitude of prayer of Giacomo di' Bernabò's Madonna represents her role in the present life of this church and its congregation: she prays for humankind to the Trinity, whose love had, for the sake of humankind, made her God-bearer. This role was given classic expression in the traditional hymn for Terce of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin:

> Maria, mater gratiae,
> Dulcis parens clementiae,
> Tu nos ab hoste protege
> Et mortis hora suscipe.
>
> Mary, mother of grace,
> Sweet parent of mercy,
> Protect us from the enemy
> And at the hour of our death receive us.[40]

Placed above Tullio's altarpiece as though soaring through the heavens towards the firmament symbolized by Codussi's 'byzantine' dome, the orant 'Madonna greca' is already 'Sancta Maria Gloriosa' the glorified Mary of the Assumption.[41] Those art historians who interpret Tullio's altarpiece in isolation from the iconography of the chapel as a whole tend to interpret its young kneeling Virgin reductively, as a static and conventional allegory: for example, as an image of 'Ecclesia'.[42] We should instead see the chapel's two images of Mary as forming a dynamic sequence. Giacomo Bernabò's 'Madonna Greca' presents Mary's powerful role as intercessor and protector. Tullio Lombardo's altarpiece, just over the altar where Christ's body would be made present at each Mass, fuses the beginning of Mary's story (the Annunciation) with its ending (the Crowning). Her 'fiat' ('let it be done') made her the preeminent model for human responses to God in Christ: the outstanding Christian exemplar of human wisdom.[43] Several of the apostles are startled to

40 *The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, p. 120; see Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 992, under 'Little Office of Our Lady (Officium Parvum Beatae Mariae Virginis)'.

41 The name of the Venetian church 'Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari; refers to its dedication to the Assumption: Boccato, *Chiese di Venezia*, p. 77.

42 Markham Schulz. *The Sculpture of Tullio Lombardo*, pp. 83–84.

43 From the seventh century, scriptural passages in which Wisdom speaks of herself (such as

see Christ crown the young Virgin (their various reactions provide models for how onlookers might react to Tullio's highly unusual iconography). Christ and the Virgin are flanked by two rows of six apostles. The figures of the front row are identifiable. To the left of Christ, just behind the Virgin, the astonishment of St Peter at what Christ has just done is shared by St Andrew (immediately to the left, identified by his attribute, a cross). On the left of the front row, St Mark is identified by his gospel book. To the right of Christ, however, John the Evangelist looks calmly towards the middle distance, as though he is already contemplating the sign that will appear in heaven: 'the woman clothed with the sun, and with the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars'.[44] John's youth associates him with the youthful Virgin, and recalls that he was 'the disciple whom Jesus loved',[45] to whom Christ on the cross entrusted Mary.[46] Paschasius stresses thatJohn is a model for his monastic audience: 'the virgin to whom the Virgin was entrusted by Christ'.[47] St James the Greater, identifiable by his family likeness (and similar haircut) to Christ his cousin, turns to discuss the scene with St Matthew, who stands, holding his gospel, on the right of the front row.

In this altarpiece the apostles take second place. They will soon be teachers, here they are taught: the good news of the Incarnation is more important than its messengers. How to attain wisdom, of which Mary was the outstanding human exemplar, will be progressively explored in the other two altarpieces commissioned in the lifetime of Ludovico Talenti. Christ will appear once more, as the baby borne by St Christopher (in Bellini's painting for the Diletti chapel). Otherwise, the pursuit of divine wisdom will usually involve a search (by contemplation, study or martyrdom) for something hidden.

The Central Altarpiece: Sebastiano Luciani and Domenico Codussi

When Mauro Codussi died in 1504, the Bernabò chapel was already finished, apart from its new altarpiece; it is likely that the domed roof of the church was also in place.[48] Domenico Codussi, Mauro's son, took over as proto or foreman, to complete the church, its furnishings, and its two ornamental portals. The brown and yellow floor tiling was perhaps laid under Domenico's direction: in an age which did not yet cover the floors of churches with pews, marble floors were an

Proverbs chapter 8, or Ecclesiastes (Sirach) chapter 24) were read at Mass on feasts of the Virgin: CalduchBenages, 'Sapienza', especially pp 1065–72. On the feast of the Assumption, Ecclesiastes (Sirach) 24 was often read. On the importance, in late medieval Italian art, of Mary as intercessor, see Sinding-Larsen, *Christ in the Council Hall*, pp. 46–55.

44 St John's Apocalypse (Revelation) 12. 1 (Douai-Rheims version).

45 John 13. 23, 19. 26, 20. 2, 21. 7, 21. 20.

46 John 19. 26–27.

47 *Cogitis me*,§ 10: 'cui uirgini a Christo uirgo commisa est'; see also § 14.

48 Olivato and Puppi, *Mauro Codussi*, p. 217.

important feature of church design. To flank the altarpiece over the main altar, Domenico erected two matching ionic pillars (they recall the pair of ionic pillars which, in Tullio's imagined room, flank Christ). Sebastiano Luciani, from whom the main altarpiece was commissioned, would make striking use of the floor, of the framing pillars, and of the main altar over which his painting was placed. The altarpiece may have been painted by 1508 or 1509.[49]

In the foreground of the painting, tiled paving corresponds to the tiles of the actual church (Figs 5 and 6). Counting from the bottom of the painting, there are six rows of white painted tiles, and seven of brown (as we shall see, sixes and sevens recur throughout the painting). In the actual church, two steps mark off the body of the nave from the area around the altar; in the painting two steps of similar height, leading to a much shallower third step, mark off a raised area immediately in front of the painted building (Fig. 5). St John Chrysostom (patron saint of the church) sits on this raised area, together with another aged male saint. To concentrate on his writing, Chrysostom has laid aside his episcopal mitre and staff, placing them conveniently behind him at the base of the building's prominent comer-pillar. Its entrance side, directly behind Chrysostom, is in shadow, but we can make out that it consists of a row of pillars: two large corner pillars and four (or perhaps five?) intermediate pillars. The dark shadow towards the right of the façade makes it difficult to be certain of the number of pillars: this lack of clarity increases our sense of enigma and mystery. The massive and brightly-lit base of the nearest corner-pillar in the painting echoes Codussi's actual ionic pillar, which provides a frame for the left side of the painting (Fig. 6). The viewer's eye moves naturally from the real pillar to the painted one: the imaginary sight-lines thus created converge towards the hill, topped by a little hill-town, on the horizon. References to aspects of the actual church (tiling, steps, pillar-frame) encourage us to see this church as leading into, and extended by, the painted space and landscape. In the painting, as in the actual church, we face east.

49 See Strinati and Lindemann, *Sebastiano del Piombo*, p. 108; Grave, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 248.



Figure 4. View of the Bernabò Chapel. Photo by the author.



Figure 5. High altar, and Sebastiano Luciani's altarpiece. Note its framing pillars, and the steps leading to the altar area: these are echoed by the pillar, and the steps, in the painting. Photo by the author.

The dawning sun, still hidden, is reflected from the salmon-coloured clouds on either side of the distant hill-village. Fictive light also shines from the nave of the actual church, onto the 'west' wall of the painted building on the left of the painting, onto its nearest comer-pillar, and onto the faces of each of the seven human figures in the foreground. The upper half of the painting is divided into blocks of light (the 'west' side wall of the painted building), dark (its pillared entrance wall) and again light (the distant hill and its village) (Fig. 6).

Three female saints advance in the left foreground (Sebastiano has portrayed his favourite model in three different poses).[50] St Mary Magdalen, the central figure of the group, is the only figure in the painting to challenge us with her direct gaze. Light from the nave illuminates her left foot, ample green dress, red bodice and blue silk blouse: relatively few details can be seen of the clothing of her two companions. We know the Magdalen by her attribute, the gold-coloured jar in her right hand. This is the 'spikenard, of great price' which she poured on Christ's feet and dried off with her hair; when Judas objected to such extravagance, Christ defended her:

> Let her alone, that she may keep it against the day of my burial. For the poor you have always with you: but me you have not always'.[51]

50 Luchs, *Tullio Lombardo and Ideal Portrait Sculpture*, p. 75.

51 John 12. 7–8, where the woman is Mary of Bethany; see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 134.

The female saint to the right of the group carries, before her closed, unseeing eyes, a small glass filled with liquid. She may be St Lucy (from the fourteenth century, visual representations represented her as having her eyes put out during her martyrdom); or perhaps St Caecilia (also associated with blindness).[52] Sebastiano apparently added the lady on the left (the third portrait of his favourite model) as an afterthought. It is possible that she represents St Catherine of Alexandria.[53] This group of three female saints visually recalls a famous mosaic in San Marco (at the keystone of the vault between the 'Ascension' and 'Pentecost' domes).[54] That mosaic represents the three women who, in St Mark's gospel, sought out the body of Christ in the tomb at dawn on Easter Sunday morning ('Mary Magdalen, and Mary the mother ofJames, and Salome brought spices, that they might go and anoint Jesus')[55] They find the stone rolled back; a young man (an angel) tells them 'he is not here' (in the mosaic he points at the empty shroud in the tomb). He instructs them to tell Peter and the other disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see him. From the time of St Gregory the Great, references in the gospels to 'the woman who was a sinner', and to various women named Mary, were combined to construct the figure of St Mary Magdalen as the type of faithless Israel who, through repentance and love for Jesus, became the 'teacher of the teachers; bringing the news of Christ's resurrection to Peter and the Apostles.[56] It is interesting that Sebastiano's three women advance from the left of the painting, that is, from the north side of the actual church where the Bernabò chapel (dedicated to Mary) stands. In Luke's gospel, the angel Gabriel and Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist), both, affirm that the Virgin Mary is 'blessed among women'.[57] St Gregory the Great had constructed his 'biography' of the Magdalen to provide a clear contrast between her fruitful repentance and the sinless Virgin Mary, in whom human wisdom had reached perfection.[58] The Gregorian contrast between the Virgin and the Magdalen is reflected in the progression between the

52 Caraffa and others, eds, *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, VIII, cols 252–54, under 'Lucia di Siracusa'; Connolly, *Mourning into Joy*, pp. 23–59.

53 For discussion, see Strinati and Lindemann, *Sebastiano del Piombo*, pp. 106–09. It is perhaps the kind of afterthought a parish priest, aware that larger issues demanded that there should be three women in the group, might suggest.

54 Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, vol. I, Part 1, pp. 204–05 and figs 28–29; vol. I, Part 2, Plate 331; Demus and others, *San Marco: Patriarchal Basilica in Venice*, I, p. 115 (illustration) and p. 125 (discussion); II, p. 67 (iconography and inscription).

55 Mark 16. 1–7. Only Mark names these three women.

56 See Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, p. 15; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 128–37.

57 Luke 1. 28; 1:42.

58 From the seventh century, Luke 10. 38–42, the story of Martha and Mary of Bethany, often came to be read on the feast of the Assumption (15 August): when this happened, the liturgy applied the last verse of the lection, 'Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her' (Luke 10. 42) to the Virgin Mary herself, on the day of her death and entry into heaven: Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 102.

Marian imagery of the Bernabò chapel and Sebastiano's altarpiece for the main altar of the church.

Sebastiano's three women advance towards an area (at the foreground of the painting) directly above the main altar of the actual church. The Mass was seen as the memorial of Christ's Passion and death; altars of churches were commonly interpreted as symbolizing Christ, and in particular his dead body, wounded by the spear.[59] The three women in Sebastiano's painting and the three women in the San Marco mosaic have in common the figure of Mary Magdalen. They have something else in common: both groups of women are engaged in a search for Christ. Here, the Magdalen seeks him in love, to anoint his body. St Lucy, even in her blindness, seeks and finds him in martyrdom. If the lady on the left can be identified with St Catherine, she sought him in the intellectual debate (with the learned men of Alexandria) which led to her martyrdom.[60]

At the centre of the painting, against the massive comer-pillar, sits the patron of the church, Saint John Chrisostom. He holds a large clasped book open above his lap, and with his left hand holds open its first quires, so that we can see some of what he has written on the verso of the opening (Greek letters can be deciphered). With a pen held in his right hand,John writes on the recto of the next folio. Thus, his whole right arm can be seen, and is central to the painting: of the 'great many relics' which this church claimed to possess, St John's arm was the outstanding one.[61]

To the right of John Chrysostom, there is a second group of three, this time of male saints. As Mary Magdalen was the central figure of the group of female saints to the left, so John the Baptist is the central figure of the trio of male saints towards the right. Each group of three saints forms a triangle. John the Baptist is the only male saint to stand in the foreground, on the same level as the three women. He leans forward eagerly towards Chrysostom and his book, as though about to deliver an urgent message: indeed, the writing Chrysostom could be taking dictation from the young man. The Baptist grasps with his right hand not only his slender staff, but also the top of a scroll which winds itself downwards around the staff. The inscription on the scroll indicates the likely theme of the message the young man proclaims: the words '[ECCE] AGNUS DE[I]'[62] are visible. The initial word '[ECCE]', is concealed on the scroll, but is clearly implied by John's

59 Martimort, 'Liturgical signs', vol. I, pp. 207–08.

60 Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, pp. 791–92.

61 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 211, quoting the request (29January 1489) for an indulgence, a document in which Ludovico Talenti probably had a large part: 'cujus sacratissimum brachium et alie complures reliquie in ea reperiuntur et maxima devotione custodiuntur' (whose most holy arm, and very many more relics are to be found [in that church] and are kept with the greatest devotion).

62 'Behold the Lamb of God':John 1. 29and 36.

gesture. Near the scroll, the index finger of his left hand points downwards, not at the scroll, but out of the painting, towards the high altar of the actual church. From the late seventh century, Christ was addressed as Lamb of God in the 'Agnus Dei' chant, sung in each Mass, just before communion.[63] The Baptist's pointing finger provides, in addition, an answer to the implied question of the Magdalen and her companions ('where is Christ's body?'). The figures of the Magdalen and the Baptist, the protagonists in the foreground of the painting, together provide a dramatic inner frame to the painting. The question implied by her questioning gaze, and the answer implied by his pointing finger, are central to the painting's discourse.

If the Bernabò Madonna, and altarpiece, together presented the trajectory of a single life (that of the Virgin Mary), this painting provides a wide-ranging epitome of scriptural history. Youth and age are juxtaposed and balanced. Of the four male figures, the military saint on the extreme right (George or Theodore?) is in his mature prime (say, thirty to forty years of age?). He wears armour, which gleams in the 'interior' light source, and he holds a spear which disappears upwards at the top right of the painting. The Baptist is younger: say, about twenty years of age. He is the only one who seems about to speak: all the other figures listen intently to what he is about to say, except for the Magdalen who looks challengingly at us, as though to interrogate us. But there is a particularly intimate relationship (of speaking and rapt listening) between the Baptist and the aged saint who sits on the dais together with Chrysostom. He is not identified by an attribute. Who is he? Of the various scholarly suggestions, the most attractive is St John the Evangelist: no longer young (as he appeared in the front row of the Bernabò altarpiece) but now the aged seer who would die on Patmos: the author, not only of John's gospel, but of his Apocalypse.[64] John the Evangelist not only wrote of the eschatological future (including the 'woman clothed with the sun'); he, alone among the evangelists, saw Christ as the Word who 'was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being'.[65] The Evangelist's comprehensive vision of history complemented that associated with the Baptist. The latter was understood to be the last prophet of the Old Testament, and to sum up what the earlier prophets had to say of Christ: 'to the prophets who went before, it was given to announce beforehand the things that were to come to pass concerning Christ; but to this man it was given to point him out with

63 The origins of the chant are discussed in Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp.160–64.

64 Strinati and Lindemann, *Sebastiano del Piombo*, p. 106. The legendary acts of St John the Evangelist at Ephesus and on Patmos are set forth in the mosaics of the north transept of San Marco: Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, Vol. I, Part 1, pp. 84–93; Vol. I, Part 2, Pl 2, 31–34, 88–102; Demus and others, *San Marco: Patriarchal Basilica in Venice*, I, pp. 113–14 and plates; II, pp. 69–83 (iconography and inscriptions).

65 John 1. 3.

his finger'.[66] Between them, Evangelist and Baptist were seen to testify to the full course of scriptural history.

There is an eschatological dimension to the little hill-village on the eastern horizon. The cross at the top of the Baptist's staff is placed to the right of the head of the aged Evangelist, and just to the left of the hill-village. Its placing may hint at the Crucifixion, which took place outside the walls of Jerusalem.[67] While the hill-town on the horizon represents neither the actual city of Jerusalem nor the heavenly Jerusalem, it perhaps provides a hint of the former and a tiny foretaste of the latter. As for the dawn breaking at the horizon, it is of interest to note that one of the Assumption antiphons addressed Mary as 'quasi aurora consurgens' (like the dawn rising aloft).[68]

What is the significance of the painted building to the left of the painting? The fa ade of pillars, and the closeness of St John Chrysostom to the prominent corner-pillar, suggests an answer:

> Wisdom hath built herself a house: she hath hewn out her seven pillars She hath slain her victims, mingled her wine, and set forth her table.
> She hath sent her maids to invite to the tower, and to the walls of the city: Whoever is a little one, let him come to me. And to the unwise she said: Come, eat my bread, and drink the wine which I have mingled for you.
> Forsake childishness, and live, and walk by the ways of prudence. […] The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is prudence.[69]

The seven saints in the painting are gathered *al fresco* at wisdom's feast, where they are fed by reading, contemplation, listening, and awareness of the real presence of Christ. The proximity of the main altar, to which the Baptist points, suggests that this 'feast' has a Eucharistic dimension.[70] Ifwe imagine the fa ade as comprising six pillars (two corner pillars, four intermediate pillars) the symbolism is particularly powerful. Chrysostom would then figure not merely as the central saint of the seven, but also as the seventh pillar. Paul said that the apostles Peter, James and

66 'prophetis praecedentibus praenuntiare de Christo futura concessum est; huic autem digito ostendere': Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium*, IV;1, ed. Willems, p. 31. Augustine, reasonably, assumes that the repeated 'Ecce' ('behold') of John 1. 29, 36 implies the action of pointing.

67 Hebrews 13. 12–14.

68 Canticle 6. 9; *Cogitis me* § 42; see Ripberger, ed., *Der Pseudo-Hieronymus Brief IX*, p.149: 'Quae est ista, quae ascendit sicut aurora consurgens …'; the way in which this antiphon adapts the Song of Songs is discussed by Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, p. 154.

69 Proverbs 9. 1–6, 10. For another visual reference (1482) to the seven pillars ofWisdom's house (Botticelli's *Rebellion of the sons of Korah* in the Sistine Chapel), see Ó Carragáin *'Ut Poesis Pidura* pp.501–05.

70 From early Christian times, Wisdom's feast in Proverbs chapter 9 was seen to have a Eucharistic dimension: Oden and Wright, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament*, vol. IX, pp. 71–77.

John were seen as 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church; he instructed Timothy to learn how 'to conduct oneself in God's house, which is the assembly of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth'.[71] The images of Sebastiano's altarpiece raise questions relevant to this Venetian church, its *piovano*, and its congregation.[72] From the twelfth century, Wisdom's house was identified with the womb of the Virgin Mary, in which Wisdom, the Word of God, had dwelt, and from which he was born.[73] The powerful Marian references in this painting develop the symbolic discourse begun in the sculptures of the Bernabò chapel.

Giovanni Bellini and the Diletti Chapel

The concern with wisdom is finally put into words in the Diletti chapel (directly opposite the Bernabò chapel), the third and last altarpiece completed in the lifetime of Ludovico Talenti (Figs 7 and 8). The merchant Giorgio Diletti made his will in 1494 and died in 1505; his widow provided money for the chapel in 1509.[74] In his will Diletti specified that his altarpiece should represent the figures of St Jerome, St Christopher and St Louis of Toulouse (St Louis, the patron saint of the *piovano* Ludovico [Alvise] Talenti).[75]

Bellini took account both of the Bernabò chapel and of Sebastiano's altarpiece for the main altar. Like Sebastiano's, this painting has two sources of imaginary light, an inner and an outer (Figs 7 and 8). The painting itself is divided into inner and outer areas, marked off by a waist-high marble chancel and by a broad arch (Fig. 8).[76] Visually, the arch echoes both the actual vault of the Bernabò chapel, and Tullio's sculpted fictive barrel vault within it, both vaults directly across the church. In the mountainous and rocky landscape 'outside', ramparts are visible, recalling Wisdom's invitation (quoted above): 'She hath sent her maids to invite to the tower, and to the walls of the city: / Whoever is a little one, let him come to me'.[77] St Jerome meditates on a large folio placed on the trunk of a crooked and

71 Galatians 2. *9*; I Timothy 3. 15; cf. Revelation 3. 12. If the façade comprises seven pillars (two comer pillars and five intermediate pillars) the symbolism is even plainer, but perhaps less rich. In that case, the seven pillars of wisdom are balanced by the seven Christian saints; in either case, Chrysostom is central.

72 For this wider relevance of the 'building' imagery, see I Peter 2. 5: 'Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God byJesus Christ'.

73 Caldach-Benages, 'Sapienza', p. 1067: see especially Bernard of Clairvaux, 'De domo divinae sapientiae'.

74 Olivato and Puppi, *Mauro Codussi*, p. 218; Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 219: before the widow Diletti provided her husband's bequest, the chapel had been dedicated to the Holy Cross.

75 Jestaz, *Monuments venitiens*, p. 219, gives the text of the will, with French translation.

76 For discussion of the fictive 'inner' and 'outer' in this painting, see Grave, *Giovanni Bellini*, pp. 248–49.

77 Proverbs 9. 4.

almost-bare tree; his eyes are closed in contemplation.[78] Two other large books lie on the rocks near his legs. On the left of the scene, just under the crooked tree and its book, dawn breaks, as in the 'aurora consurgens' of Sebastiano's altarpiece. Both altarpieces therefore agree on where, in this church, the east end lies. The arch is inscribed with a psalm verse in Greek capital letters. Translated, it reads:

> The Lord hath looked down from heaven on the children of men, To see if there be any that understand and seek God.[79]

The short psalm from which this verse is taken paints a corrupt and strife-ridden society. It begins, 'The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, and are become abominable in their ways; there is none that doth good, no, not one'. The next verse is that on the broad arch; then the jeremiad is repeated: '[t]hey have all gone astray, they have become unprofitable together: there is none that doth good, no, not one' (Psalms 14. 3). The psalm concludes with a prayer: 'Who shall give out of Sion the salvation of Israel? When the Lord shall have turned away the captivity of his people,Jacob shall rejoice and Israel be glad' (Psalms 14. 7). As scholars have seen, the psalm was appropriate to the defeats and disturbance of the war against the League of Cambrai, which had by now lasted over four years.[80]

78 Poldi and Villa, *Bellini a Venezia*, pp. 233 and 245. The bare tree recalls St Luke's Passion narrative, where Christ says: 'for if in the green wood they do these things, what shall be done in the dry?' (Luke 23. 31). The original dedication of the chapel, to the Holy Cross, may be relevant to this feature.

79 Psalm 14. 2; Septuagint and Vulgate, 13. 2. Poldi and Villa, *Bellini a Venezia*, p. 237.

80 Poldi and Villa, *Bellini a Venezia*, p. 237.



Figure 6. Nave of San Giovanni Crisostomo, showing steps and tiled floor, both echoed in the altarpiece. Photo by the author.



Figure 7. Diletti Chapel (viewed from the Bernabò Chapel), showing the light from the side windows. Photo by the author.



Figure 8. Diletti Chapel, showing St Christopher and St Louis of Toulouse standing inside the painted chancel, and looking across the nave towards the Bernabò Chapel. Photo by the author.

The 'inner' scene in the painting is illuminated (as in Sebastiano's altarpiece) by imaginary light from the interior of the church. Here, however, the interior light is greatly strengthened by imaginary light from the right-hand (western) side-window of the chapel.[81] Firm contrasts of light and shadow define the pillars of the painted arch, and the two saints who stand beside the pillars on this side of the marble chancel (Fig. 8). The chancel (to which Bellini has fixed his signature, dated 1513) shows the inner scene to be part of this very church. A gleaming pilaster, at its centre, is decorated with grotesque ornament. Part of the ornament is a bearded head,[82] which echoes two similar grotesque heads at the top of an external pilaster, just to the east of the nearest (south) door of the actual church. In Bellini's painting, St Christopher, bearing the Christ-child, is about to set off towards this very door: he stands, not in a river, but in this Diletti chapel (Fig. 8).[83] St Louis carries another large folio, bound in red. The title 'De civitate dei' has been added later to the binding (perhaps at the suggestion of the parish priest?).[84] This added

81 Jestaz, *Monuments vénitiens*, p. 219, suggests that the chapel was extended towards the south, and that the two side windows were inserted, in the period 1511–13, to provide good light for Bellini's altarpiece. We might therefore have here a good example of architect and painter working together.

82 Good illustrations in Poldi and Villa, *Bellini a Venezia*, p. 248, and Grave, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 247.

83 Contrast Bellini's polyptych of St Vincent Ferrer in Santi Giovanni e Paolo, where the saint crosses a river: Boccato, *Chiese di Venezia*, p. 227; Poldi and Villa, *Bellini a Venezia*, p. 30; Caraffa and others, *Bibliotheca Sanctorum,* IV, cols 349–64, under 'Cristofaro di Licia'.

84 Poldi and Villa, *Bellini a Venezia*, pp. 237–38, 244.

title identifies the book as St Augustine's classic treatise which sees the heavenly Jerusalem as the goal towards which the Christian Church travels through history. St Louis is in full and elaborate canonical dress (unlike the two theologian-bishops painted in the church, St John Chrysostom and St Jerome). Bishops were understood to be successors of the apostles. This bishop looks out, with a calm and level gaze, not only straight at us, the onlookers, but also across the nave to the apostles, his forebears, in the Bernabò altarpiece. We have seen that in the Bernabò chapel (to paraphrase Psalm 14. 2, quoted in the Diletti chapel) God the Father looks down from heaven: not only on his own son (who brought salvation to the world) but also on Mary, the virginal 'daughter of Sion' *par excellence*, whose perfect response to the Trinity has led to her becoming queen of heaven. In Bellini's altarpiece, St Christopher also looks across the church at the Bernabò chapel. His strikingly intense and visionary gaze is fixed, not on the apostles, but higher: towards the orant 'Madonna greca' who soars above Tullio's altarpiece. After all, St Christopher, like Mary herself, was a bearer of Christ.[85] Saint Jerome, the contemplating scholar-hermit, searching for wisdom in the breaking dawn ('aurora consurgens') would have been understood to provide authority for the unusual Marian imagery of the Bernabò chapel, opposite. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jerome was thought to be the author of the letter *Cogitis me*. This mistaken attribution ensured that the letter would become a major authority: clerics who wanted to understand the Feast of the Assumption went primarily to *Cogitis me*.[86] We need not suppose that the large folio which Jerome reads is a text of his letters: rather, it is more likely to be his Vulgate translation of the Bible, the source of the many scriptural allusions, and antiphons, in *Cogitis me*.

To conclude: three masterpieces were commissioned for the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo when Ludovico Talenti was its parish priest. They have hitherto been studied separately, and without much reference to their functions within the church for which they were made. However, they are better understood as a progressive series, designed to complement each other, and to expand the liturgical space of the church. Each of the altarpieces leads the viewer's gaze from the actual church towards visionary perspectives and landscapes. The altarpieces progressively explore what, in a Christian context, wisdom and understanding might involve. They present the Virgin Mary, in her cooperation with the divine challenge of the Incarnation which led to her crowning, as the primary example of human wisdom. The church and its early altarpieces exemplify a central concern of renaissance humanism: the need to return, with greater understanding, to

85 For the implications of the term 'bearing Christ' in early Christian commentary, see 6 Carragiin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 137–41.

86 Jerome's authorship was first disproven by Erasmus (d. 1536); Paschasius Radbertus was identified as the author in 1880: Ripberger, ed., *Der Pseudo-Hieronymus Brief IX*, pp. 7–14; Dezzuto, ed., *La lettera di Girolamo*, p. xxxvii, note 98.

the classics of early Christian and medieval theology, such as the works of John Chrysostom, Augustine and Jerome (or, as we now know the author of *Cogitis me* to be, Paschasius Radbertus). It is likely that the guiding intelligence behind this dynamic synthesis of early Christian theology was the learned *piovano*, Ludovico Talenti. It is reasonable to think that it was under his guidance that the artists made the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo a place of contemplation and a *lieu de mémoire*.

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