

Erasmus and the Lady of Loreto

The Virgin, the Bride, and the Progress of the Church

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Received 11 May 2023 | Accepted 16 September 2023 |

Published online 23 October 2023

Abstract

One could argue that a mass dedicated to the Virgin of Loreto is an unusual choice for Erasmus. His *Liturgy of the Virgin Mother Venerated at Loreto* (*Virginis Matris apud Lauretum cultae liturgia*, 1523, 1525, 1529) would prove such an argument wrong, as this overlooked text reveals much of Erasmus' theory of *accommodatio*, his approach to liturgy and the cult of Mary, and his vision of the church and his spiritual exegesis, even in the midst of the Reformation's turmoil. This article proposes a close reading of the 1525 edition, which will contextualize Erasmus' portrait of Mary in her moral values and in the de-eroticization and purification of the medieval, Catholic model, which he re-affirms in the same years in which his controversy with Luther unfolded. Moreover, the sermon presents a rarefied and intellectual variant of the feminine imagery of the bride, which I will analyze as being systematically integrated into Erasmus' theology of progress and ecclesiology.

Keywords

political theology – *accommodatio* – Mariology – Reformation – Erasmus

A priest, writing at the request of a friend a mass in honor of a popular Madonna venerated in central Italy, in a sanctuary believed to have been miraculously transferred from the Holy Land. This image of a devout man of God writing at the feet of Our Lady is probably the farthest possible from the picture we commonly have of Erasmus of Rotterdam as the writer of scathing parodies of the irrational and superstitious religious habits of the masses. Yet his *Virginis Matris apud Lauretum cultae liturgia*¹ (henceforth referred to as *Liturgy*) proves the *communis opinio* wrong by describing a pastoral, theological, and also controversial attempt at a “rational cult” (λογικὴ λατρεία) of the Virgin that stands out as coherent and clear in the confessional battles.

1 Erasmus’ Mariology in Context

The scholarly literature on Erasmus’ Mariology is rather thin and the anti-systematic nature of Erasmus’ thought gives us only a few glimpses into his position on the matter. This being said, in this era of confessional clashes centered, at their core, on the mediatory system of the Catholic Church in which Mary played no small role, Erasmus proposed some nuanced insights in this area. In general, if historiography has focused more on Erasmus’ *Wirkungsgeschichte* and if cultural history has stressed Erasmus’ role as a predecessor of the Reformers’ doctrine on Mary,² the few studies concerned specifically with Erasmus’ doctrine and pastoral teaching of prayer and Mariology have emphasized the many continuities with traditional Catholic doctrine.

On the one hand, in his groundbreaking new Latin translation of the New Testament, Erasmus touches on Mary’s attributes in ways that foreshadow an important exegetical and theological shift. In his translation of Gabriel’s greet-

1 ASD V-1: 87–109; CWE 69: 79–108.

2 Sometimes with a certain generalization, such as in Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth & the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 302: “Erasmus addressed himself to the nonsense and vulgarity of Catholic cult with trenchant intelligence and biting scorn. His was the most formidable voice in the clamour for Church reform that rose in Europe from the end of the fifteenth century onwards. ... The Virgin Mary was not an important figure in the theological issues raised by the Reformers ... But her cult excited precisely those excesses of external idolatry, with their accompanying hollowness of the spirit, that horrified the men who pressed for reformation; and she was the chief guarantor of a safe conduct to heaven for sinners, however wicked, who performed the right ceremonies. Erasmus was scathing about the shrine at Walsingham and others; and in countries turning towards the Reformers her images, relics, and churches came under attack.” A look at Erasmus’ *Liturgy* would have allowed Warner to reach a more balanced conclusion.

ing to Mary, instead of the canonical Vulgate version of *gratia plena*, he prefers the term *gratiosa*, a term theologically much weaker, and which prepares the way for Luther's translation, similarly substituting "voll Gnade" with "holdselige."³ In this case, Erasmus, willingly or not, prepared the ground for Luther in what is part of what Godin describes as a process of "désacralisation" of the old order,⁴ even though Erasmus' thought on Mary was often expressed in more explicit and polemical terms that rubbed against the view of the Reformers, as we shall see.

On the other hand, as Leon Halkin has judiciously pointed out, Erasmus' spirituality reserves an important role for Mary. Halkin presents her cult as "the touchstone" of his piety and the humanist's explication of the theme as "complex, but coherent";⁵ as it succeeds in "stigmatizing abuses without ceasing to honour and venerate Mary" while disapproving of the more "sentimental and commercialized" aspects of the cult of Mary.⁶ Subsequently, Hilmar Pabel's 1997 *Conversing with God: Prayer in Erasmus' Pastoral Writings* rightly restores prayer to its proper place in Erasmus' writings, stressing the necessity of interpreting "much of Erasmus' scholarship" as "a pastoral ministry to all western Christendom, a ministry exercised through the printing press."⁷ This ministry, according to Pabel, included the learning of the correct prayer, a spiritualized prayer, which, inspired by the hermeneutical and pastoral principle of *accommodatio*, tolerates the masses' excesses of superstition and stimulates a progressive purification of the cult. Such an attitude requires a reform of the cult of the saints, not its abolition.⁸ Pabel thus stresses the necessity of understanding Erasmus' teaching on prayer in context, confronting it with the thought of the Reformers, and emphasizing the link between Erasmus' important treatise on prayer, *Modus orandi Deum*, with the *De libero arbitrio* (an association also made by Erasmus himself in letters to distinguished Roman Catholic inter-

3 See also Erasmus' explanation of his choice in his *Annotationes in Lucam* (ASD VI-5: 458–459, ll. 368–370, 386–390, and 396–397). See also Gary Waller, *A Cultural Study of Mary and the Annunciation: From Luke to the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2015) and "The Annunciation from Luke to the Enlightenment. A Cultural History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. C. Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 354–373.

4 A. Godin, "Du bon usage du sacré: Érasme de Rotterdam," *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* [online] 9 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.4000/ccrh.2803>.

5 Léon-Ernest Halkin, *Erasmus: A Critical Biography*, trans. J. Tonkin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 229. Halkin is also the editor of the 1977 Amsterdam edition of the *Liturgia Virginis Lauretanae*.

6 Halkin, *A Critical Biography*, 223.

7 *Conversing with God: Prayer in Erasmus' Pastoral Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 8.

8 Pabel, *Conversing with God*, p. 18.

locutors, such as Giberti), thereby underlining the anti-Lutheran bent of his pastoral work.⁹ Concerning Erasmus' attitude towards Mary, while recognizing that "Erasmus felt uncomfortable with many of the manifestations of the cult of Mary" and was concerned that piety for the mother not surpass the adoration of the Son, Pabel points out the problems in presenting an image of Erasmus as a "forerunner of the Reformation(s)" in this area,¹⁰ proposing instead devotion to Mary as another aspect of Erasmus' reformist Catholic piety.

Gary Waller articulates a slightly different view on Erasmus' Mariology in his study on devotion to Mary in the English context, where he describes Erasmus' attitude on Marian pilgrimage as "one of slightly superior amusement" in the light of his "consistent though usually understated reverence toward Mary."¹¹ Waller appropriately reminds us that the *Colloquia*, which hosted most of the mocking critiques of the excesses of the cult of Mary and the saints, were written in a time "when humor combined with sound learning rather than destruction might still have seemed a plausible weapon of reform,"¹² while the more heated and iconoclastic times ahead would polarize positions and make irony much more difficult. Waller is particularly attentive to Erasmus' 1512 pilgrimage to the renowned Marian sanctuary of Walsingham, an experience he revisited in his colloquy *Peregrinatio religionis ergo*, written probably during the same years as our mass,¹³ where the pilgrimage experience is described in a Lucianesque mixture of humor, satire, and earnest desire for reform.

As is clear from this overview,¹⁴ the consensus in Erasmian scholarship is that we need to look at devotion to the Virgin in light of Erasmus' general theory of accommodation and his progressive desire for reform and purification of the Christian cult, a desire that he expressed in a progressively vocal loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. But what does the name Loreto add to this story?

9 Pabel, *Conversing with God*, p. 90.

10 Pabel, *Conversing with God*, pp. 86–90. "Erasmus certainly severely criticized the popular cult of Mary, yet it is insufficient simply to dwell on Erasmus' criticisms and unduly hostile to claim that he cleared the path for 'Lutheran errors.' He did not reject devotion to Mary; he tried to reform it in his own way" (88).

11 Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 89.

12 Waller, *The Virgin Mary*, 93.

13 ASD 1-3: 470–494. See Waller, *The Virgin Mary*, 99–102; see also his *Walsingham and the English Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). Craig Thompson prudently suggests a date between 1523 and 1526 (CWE 40: 619).

14 See also A.M. O'Donnell, "Mary and Other Women Saints in the Letters of Erasmus," *Erasmus Studies* 11 (1991): 105–121.

2 At the Feet of Our Lady: Erasmus' Mass for Loreto

In the 1520s, the sanctuary in Loreto, in the central Italian region of the Marche, was the most important and established place of Marian devotion in Europe. Its fame was due to its history, which involved the miracle of the transfer of Mary's house from the Holy Land to Italy, thus escaping the Muslim conquest.¹⁵ The cult and the story of the transfer had only been standardized in the second half of the 15th century, but it resulted in an increase in the sanctuary's power of attraction. In fact, the presence of the cult in Loreto is documented back to the twelfth century, and it seems that in the beginning the devotion was focused on an image of the Virgin, at first probably a Byzantine icon and then a wooden statue, which was believed to have been carried from abroad by angels. The original founding narrative of the sanctuary, which tells the story of the miraculous transfer of the house of the Virgin, was the *Translatio miraculosa ecclesie beate Marie virginis de Loreto*, by a certain Pietro di Giorgio Tolomei (Teramano), the rector of the church (d. 1473).¹⁶ Reprinted many times in Italy and abroad, it provided a narrative model that would be reproduced in many other devotional texts and would assure the global popularity of the Lady of Loreto. The theological-political importance of the gesture, on Erasmus' side, to write a mass to an 'Italian' Virgin cannot be fully appreciated if one does not keep in mind the theological-political value of the Marian cult in contemporary Papal ideology and its historical nexus with Loreto's increasing success.

The association between Mary and Peter, the Mother and the Vicar, already fully developed with Gregory VII, saw different phases, and culminated in the 15th century with an explicit strengthening of Mary's role in the economy of salvation that went hand in hand with the Papal appropriation of Marian sanctuaries.¹⁷ The Papal interest in Loreto, which we could date back to 1375,¹⁸ saw a notable increase in the 15th century with the pilgrimages of Nicholas V and

15 This occurred either after the seventh-century Arab invasion or the fall of Acre in 1291, according to the various versions of the story: see Margaret Meserve, *Papal Bull: Print, Politics, and Propaganda in Renaissance Rome* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2021), p. 205.

16 Grimaldi, *La chiesa di Santa Maria di Loreto: nei documenti dei secoli XII–XV* (Rome: Archivio di Stato, 1984), p. 54.

17 G. Cracco, "Culto mariano e istituzioni di chiesa," in *Arte, religione, comunità nell'Italia rinascimentale e barocca. Atti del convegno di studi in occasione del V centenario di fondazione del Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno (1498–1998)*, eds. L. Saccardo and D. Zardin (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000), pp. 25–52.

18 G.L. Masetti Zannini, "Loreto e i papi," in *Loreto: Crocevia religioso tra Italia, Europa e Oriente*, eds. F. Citterio and L. Vaccaro (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1997), p. 246.

then Pius II, who both accorded indulgences to pilgrims. In this period, other chapels and churches were dedicated as well to Santa Maria of Loreto throughout Italy.¹⁹ And in the same years, the origin story of the sanctuary of Walsingham, already attested in the twelfth century, appeared in a written source, the Pynson Ballad, claiming that the Virgin appeared in 1061 to a widow, asking her to build a replica of the Holy House of Nazareth.²⁰ In Waller's opinion, "the founding of Loreto was likely the stimulus for the Pynson ballad claim."²¹ Located on the Adriatic coast, Loreto was exposed to a constant threat of invasion from the sea. In a time of renewed fears of Turkish invasion, "the Virgin's house at Loreto was a sacred remnant of the apostolic age that fled Islamic aggression in the East, another relic connected to the life of Christ that sought asylum in Italy with his vicar on earth,"²² a "defiant symbol of Christianity against the menace of the infidel,"²³ fortified after the Turkish attack of Otranto (1480).

Under the pontificate of Paul II, the building of a new sanctuary was begun and in 1470 it was accompanied by a jubilar indulgence to pilgrims. In 1476, Sixtus IV promulgated a bull on Loreto, claiming the Papal See's jurisdiction over the sanctuary. This was the culmination of the papal effort to place all of the Marian sanctuaries under Rome's wing,²⁴ reaffirming the association between the Papacy and Mary, the personification of the Roman Church and its universal value.²⁵ Later, Julius II intervened extensively on behalf of the sanctuary, which was located in the northern regions of the papal territories and, for this reason, part of his plan for territorial dominance: his 1507 bull *In Sublimia* affirmed the story of the miraculous transfer.²⁶ In 1520, Leo X allowed vows of pilgrimage to be commuted to Loreto, putting it on the same level as the major holy places of pilgrimage in Christianity, such as Rome, Santiago da Compostela, and Jerusalem.²⁷ Likewise, the Medici Popes were both

19 Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p. 202.

20 Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 205.

21 Waller, *Walsingham and the English Imagination*, 16.

22 Meserve, *Papal Bull*, 231.

23 E. Renzulli, "Loreto, Leo X and the fortifications on the Adriatic coast against the Infidel," in *Italy and the European Powers: The Impact of War, 1500–1530*, ed. C. Shaw (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 65.

24 See the papal bull of November 26, 1476; see Cracco, "Culto mariano," p. 47.

25 Cracco, "Culto mariano," p. 50.

26 P.V. Murphy, "The Jesuits and the Santa Casa di Loreto," in *Spirit, Style, Story: Essays Honoring John W. Padberg*, ed. T.M. Lucas (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), p. 273; Renzulli, "Loreto, Leo X," p. 65.

27 Sensi, *Loreto*, p. 19.

greatly interested in the Holy House, as shown in their structural intervention with respect to the sanctuary and their legislative acts.²⁸ The Society of Jesus, which was particularly close to the sanctuary, helped to reinforce papal appropriation: in his *Lauretanae historiae libri quinque* (1597), the Jesuit Orazio Torsellini memorialized the post-Tridentine fortune of the Lauretan Virgin as a global cult, promoted by the popes.²⁹ Finally, the strategic position of Loreto for Renaissance Popes is shown also in the appointment of a papal protector; amongst them, notable names are those of Antonio Maria Ciocchi del Monte, one of the key players in papal politics in the 15th and 16th centuries, and Gian Matteo Giberti, the papal datary and bishop of Verona; later on, the role was also assigned to Cardinal Gasparo Contarini and the humanist Pietro Bembo.³⁰

In conclusion, in the 15th and 16th centuries there was, in the words of Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel, a “hypertrophy of the cult of the Virgin at Loreto.”³¹ On the one hand, it was extremely popular with pilgrims, who arrived, read devotional tracts printed all around Europe and prayed specific prayers to the Virgin. Its cult was thus probably similar to that in the competing sanctuary of Walsingham, which Erasmus had mocked in his colloquy *Peregrinatio religionis ergo*. On the other hand, it was a connotative theological-political cult appropriated by the Popes, who, seeking to crown the longstanding association of Peter with the mediatory power of Mary, gave the sanctuary not only a global status but also increased its theological status, i.e. as a bulwark both against the Muslim threat and against Protestant criticism (such as the harsh attack on the cult of Loreto professed by the former Catholic bishop turned reformer Pietro Paolo Vergerio).³²

It is clear that Erasmus’ choice of writing a mass for the Lady of Loreto was anything but neutral. His intention in accepting the request is very clear: he unambiguously shows that he was not afraid of taking the side of a popular, ‘Papist’ Madonna. Even a popular cult such as the one at Loreto, he seems to imply, can be embraced and repackaged in *philosophia Christi* for the sake of piety among the masses. Next, we shall see how Erasmus did just that.

28 Masetti Zannini, “Loreto e i papi,” p. 248.

29 Murphy, “The Jesuits and the Santa Casa,” p. 271. Meserve, *Papal Bull*, remarks how this strong association with Papal authority and the Muslim threat does not seem to have been successful with pilgrims, who seemed to be more interested in the sanctuary as a place specifically devoted to the Virgin (p. 228).

30 Grimaldi, *La Santa Casa di Loreto*, pp. 21–22.

31 Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, p. 195.

32 Pietro Paolo Vergerio, *Della camera, et statua della Madonna chiamata di Loretto* (Tübingen: Ulrich Morhart d.Ä., 1554).

3 Erasmus and the *Lauretana Diva*

3.1 *A Gift for a Friend: Erasmus and the Basel-Porrentruy Connection*

As is clear from his correspondence, Erasmus wrote the *Liturgy* to fulfill a promise to a friend, Thiébaud Biétry, the parish priest of Porrentruy.³³ The small city in the Jura was the usual residence of the prince-bishop of Basel, Christoph von Utenheim, a prominent patron of Erasmus, who had lost all secular power over the city in 1521 and therefore settled in his castle in Porrentruy as the Reformation grew in power in Basel.³⁴ While the city of Porrentruy had long been under the temporal power of the bishop of Basel, its spiritual guidance came from the archbishop of Besançon, Antoine de Vergy.³⁵ The latter greatly appreciated Erasmus' mass and wrote a commendation of it (dated 20 April 1524)—probably written during Erasmus' journey to Porrentruy and Besançon during that month, in the company of Biétry³⁶—which was included in the second edition of the *Liturgy*, and granted a 40-day indulgence in his diocese for all who made use of it.³⁷

Erasmus' first response to his friend's query was a *liturgia*, a devotional mass, published by Froben in November 1523. Erasmus jokingly claimed that Biétry could ask him anything he wanted and he would have obeyed, even adding the playful remark "I foresee one danger, that our Lady of Loreto may not listen when you are singing this at Porrentruy" (CWE 69: 83).³⁸ Then he reminds his friend to provide his flock with the right spiritual food, which we may assume is the spiritual food furnished by Erasmus. After the already-mentioned trip to Porrentruy and Besançon, Erasmus prepared a second edition, printed by Froben in May 1525, in which he added a *concio*, a homily to be proclaimed by the officiant; a third edition was published in 1529. We should recall that

33 See A. Chèvre, "Erasmus, le prince des humanistes, et ses amis de Porrentruy," in *Actes de la Société jurassienne d'émulation* 77 (1974): 369–392 and COE 1: 146–147.

34 See S. Henny, "Failed Reformations," in *A Companion to the Swiss Reformation*, eds. A.N. Burnett and E. Campi (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 279.

35 Ibid.

36 The trip was not an entirely happy occasion, as Erasmus suffered from gout and was highly preoccupied with the rumors of his being Lutheran: see esp. Ep. 1440, 1468, and 1534. In a letter to Léonard de Gruyères (Ep. 1956), the official of the archbishop of Besançon, Erasmus speaks of his fears about his reputation, the approval of the Loreto mass, and his harsh assessment of the French Reformer Guillaume Farel. Biétry himself reassured Erasmus of the success of the visit and attributed the rumors to jealousy, urging him to ignore his critics, as Jerome had done (Ep. 1468).

37 CWE 69: 81.

38 "unum periculum video, ne Lauretana diua te canentem Bruntruti non exaudiat" (ASD V-1:95, ll. 5–6).

the intervening year and a half between the first two editions was marked by momentous public stances taken by Erasmus, first of all the publication of the *De libero arbitrio* in September 1524, which was almost simultaneous with the *Concio de immensa Dei misericordia*: another homily inspired by an illustrious protector, none other than Christoph von Utenheim. It has been recently demonstrated that the *Concio de immensa Dei misericordia* can be understood as the other part of an “anti-Lutheran diptych”³⁹ with the *De libero arbitrio*, the *Concio* representing the alternative to Lutheranism based on the faith of an all-merciful, benevolent God, and on a religion of charity. For these reasons, 1524 had been the year of Erasmus’ decisive, public, and controversial alignment with the Church of Rome, putting aside all caution, as well as of his outspoken cultivation of the relationship with the Catholic hierarchy in Rome and Basel, as is evident in the dedication to Utenheim. Thus, the *Liturgia Virginis Lauretanae*, even though (like the *Concio*) devoid of any overt, explicit polemical stance, situates itself within a precise timeframe and a well-crafted network of theological-political moves. Moreover, it bears remembering that the *Concio* was published together with the *Virginis et martyris comparatio* and the *Concio de puero Iesu*, two texts expressing a traditional piety that is particularly close to our *Liturgy*.⁴⁰

In the second prefatory letter to Biétry, dated May 4, 1525, Erasmus sings the praise of the music of the Gospel, which “casts its spell upon us and frees us gently from the spirit of this world and implants within us the spirit of Christ” (CWE 69: 84).⁴¹ Musical imagery was typical of Patristic writers, such as Erasmus’ beloved Origen,⁴² and cultivated the comparison of the expert exegete to a skilled musician who can harmoniously perform the music of Scripture, wielding a power of gentle *suasio*, which enchants and freely moves the hearts and minds of its hearers. The music of the Gospel, “much more effective” than the

39 Gaetano Lettieri, “Machiavelli interprete antiluterano di Erasmo. *L'Esortazione alla penitenza* (1525) epitome del *De immensa dei Misericordia* (1524),” in *Giornale Critico di Storia delle Idee* 2 (2017): 27–103, 34. See also Silvana Seidel Menchi, *Erasmus in Italia 1520–1580* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1987), p. 155.

40 See also Lettieri, “Machiavelli interprete antiluterano di Erasmo.”

41 “musica, quae nobis paulatim excantat huius mundi spiritum, et Christi spiritum inserit” (ASD V-1:96, ll. 26–27).

42 See for instance F. Pelosi, “Musical Imagery in Clement of Alexandria and Origen: The Greek Musical World Revised and Accepted,” in *Music and Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, eds. F. Pelosi and F.M. Petrucci (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 153–177. On Origen in Erasmus, see André Godin’s classic *Érasme, lecteur d'Origène*, (Genève: Droz, 1982) and my “Charity and Progress: Erasmus in the Origenian Tradition,” in *Progress in Origen and the Origenian Tradition*, eds. G. Lettieri, A.-C. Jacobsen, and M. Fallica (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2023), pp. 187–200.

sound of Amphion's lyre, Orpheus' lute, or even David's lyre (CWE 69: 84),⁴³ possesses a persuasive power which the addressee of the liturgy should employ, as Erasmus admonishes: "The Virgin Mother will think that her cherished Loreto is crowned with success only if you use your persuasive powers to draw as many people as you can to the love of her son" (CWE 69: 85).⁴⁴ The translation does not do justice to the wordplay, as Erasmus alludes to the Latin *Lauretum*, the laurel, used in antiquity to crown winners, especially in a poetic and rhetorical context. Biétry, by adopting Erasmus' liturgy, is guaranteed the victory/laurel of the effective persuasion of his flock, moved towards and conquered for the Gospel's cause. The allusion to victory—in addition to being a first indication of the pastoral role of the mass—is proleptic to Mary's depiction in the sermon, in which the attribute of victory is notable.

3.2 *A Laurel for the Virgin: Erasmus' Liturgical Experiment*

The wordplay on the laurel appears again right at the start of the liturgy, in the *Introitus*, which honors Mary with praise that will bloom "throughout all the ages" with the delightful aroma of the laurel. The *Collect* then praises Mary as being specially honored by God, who rejoices "in the glory brought to you by the innumerable miracles wrought through her both in the world at large and especially at the shrine of Loreto," and asks for the protection of those who "with piety worship you in the Son and the Son in you, and venerate the Son in the Mother and the Mother because of the Son" (CWE 69: 86).⁴⁵ This prayer contains the only reference to the Marian miracles and to the reason for the popularity of Loreto in the entire mass, and is followed by a Christocentric recapitulation of the just hierarchy of honor between the Mother and the Son. Therefore, right at the beginning of the liturgy, Erasmus places what he believes is the right understanding of the Virgin's cult, strictly subordinate and related to that of her Son, and acknowledges at the same time Loreto as a special place of worship of Mary, remaining vague in respect to the "innumerable miracles" associated with the sanctuary.

43 "si tantum potuit Amphion sono testitudinis; si tantum valuit Orphei cithara, vt saxa moueret et quercus; quanto plus valebit cithara Daud, qui modulis suis spiritum malum depellere solitus est a Saule, quanto erit efficacior euangelica testudo!" (ASD V-1: 96, ll. 28–31).

44 "Ita demum Virgo mater putabit sibi florere suum Lauretum, si quam plurimos allexeris ad amorem Filii" (ASD V-1: 96, ll. 38–39).

45 "Laurus odere iuuat, speciosa virore perenni, / Sic tua, Virgo parens, laus omne virebit in aeuum"; "in vniuerso terrarum orbe, tum praecipue apud templum Lauretanum innumeris miraculis glorificari gaudes"; "qui te in filio et filium in te pie colunt, quique filium in matre et matrem ob filium venerantur" (ASD V-1: 97, ll. 1–2; 10–12).

The chosen reading (“Lesson”) is from Ezekiel 44: 1–3, a passage traditionally used to depict Mary’s perpetual virginity: she is the closed gate which only the Spirit entered.⁴⁶ The opening verses of Isaiah 11 on the flourishing shoot of Jesse, traditionally interpreted as prophesying Jesus’ miraculous birth, compose the *Alleluia*, which gives way to a lyrical *Sequentia*. The latter is a sequence of thirty lines, combined in couplets, each of them in a different meter, in “a dazzling display of metrical virtuosity,” in the words of Clarence H. Miller. Representing Erasmus’ “most daring and original experimentation with liturgical hymnology,”⁴⁷ it combines a retrieval of the best of Medieval hymnology (e.g., that of the 9th century abbot Notker of St. Gall, whom Erasmus admired) with a humanistic reprise of classical meter.⁴⁸ Miller describes its structure as being composed of seven quatrains plus a two-line coda: the first three “invoke the earthly choir and join to it the angels, virgins, martyrs, and saints in heaven; the next three praise Mary by means of analogies with stars, flowers, and trees, especially (of course) the laurel; the last extended quatrain asks Mary for help.”⁴⁹ The choir is appropriately made up of virgins; the martyr and the virgin are compared and associated because of their common victory over the senses: “A martyr conquers / those who kill the flesh, and a virgin subdues / the flesh itself. Both the one and the other deserve the laurel” (CWE 85: 361).⁵⁰ The laurel is praised as the “tree of peace, / putting an end to savage battles.” The Virgin is invited to rejoice in the comparison, to be a laurel, a maker of peace: “turn away / God’s wrath, lest he strike the guilty with his / thunderbolt” (CWE 85: 361) [“iram auerte Dei” (ASD V-1: 98, l. 56)]. Lastly, she is invited to rejoice in the name of Loreto, even if many altars all over the world send their lovely aromas to her.

The brief *Sequentia* could not have provided a better introduction to the Lauretan *Liturgy*—it is a highly refined composition that combines Classical

46 See for instance Jerome, *Commentarii in Hiezechielem* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1964), 646: “Pulchre quidam portam clausam per quam solus Dominus Deus Israel ingreditur et dux cui porta clausa est, Mariam virginem intellegunt” (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vol. 75). CWE 69: 87, n. 4 reminds us that Erasmus uses this passage in the same sense as it is used in the *Explanatio symboli*.

47 Clarence H. Miller, *Humanism and Style: Essays on Erasmus and More* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2011), pp. 40–41.

48 See CWE 85: 361–362: in the case of the *Sequentia*, I use the English translation of Erasmus’ *Poems* (CWE 85), which includes the sequence as “poems embedded in Erasmus’ prose,” and does more justice to the particular rhythmic structure of the text, even as it is translated into prose.

49 Miller, *Humanism and Style*, p. 42.

50 “Martyr carnificem vincit, et edomat. / Carnem virgo, decet laurus et hunc et hanc” (ASD V-1: 98, ll. 37–38).

paideia and the tradition of the Church without all of the extravagant, pagan Marian attributes which Erasmus had often and freely derided in his previous works. Moreover, it is a composition which aligns frequent motifs of Erasmus' thought—i.e. an agonistic, ascetical reading of Christian life, a battle of the spirit with matter, and a fervent afflatus for peace—with distinctively orthodox traits, which began appearing more frequently in this phase of his life, and which were openly anti-Lutheran: praise for virginity (as in the *Virginis and martyris comparatio*) and even an intercessory invocation to Mary so that she would “turn away / God's wrath.”

The gospel reading chosen for the liturgy is from John (2: 1–11), the wedding at Cana, in Erasmus' own translation. In his *Paraphrase on the Gospel of John*, this episode is the first evidence of Jesus' power, “done privately and in a not very serious matter, and it was almost an indulgence of the desires of his mother and his relatives, who thought of Jesus the more disdainfully because they were connected to him by blood” (CWE 46: 40);⁵¹ Erasmus' exegesis cast Mary as “the image of the synagogue, whose authority is being diminished” (CWE 46: 40),⁵² while Christ is about to join the church to himself as a bride. Cana is, as a dubious etymology says, a “possession of transmigration,” and therefore signals the passage “from the letter of the law to the spirit of the gospel” (CWE 46: 41).⁵³ This passage was criticized by Noël Béda as a slight to the Virgin, an accusation to which Erasmus repeatedly responded, evoking the necessity of following the text without engaging in a selective reading and claiming the authority of the Fathers of the Church for his exegesis.⁵⁴ In the *Liturgy*, Erasmus proposes the passage, which he will explain later on in the sermon, so that the faithful can see a dialectic between the Son and the Mother: Christ reproaches Mary, whose authority is diminished in light of her Son's superiority, but her advice is heeded.

51 “Nam primum hoc in re non perinde seria et privatim gestum est ac propemodum matris ac cognatorum affectibus indultum est, qui hoc contemptius sentiebant de Iesu, quod essent illi sanguinis propinquitate coniuncti” (ASD VII-3a: 92).

52 “mater Iesu, synagogae typum gerens” (ASD VII-3a: 94). Erasmus here follows Augustine, *Tractatus in Iohannem* 9, 10; see CWE 46: 251.

53 “Siquidem ‘Cana Galilaeae’ sonat ‘possessionem transmigrationis’. Iam enim collectum erat seminarium populi novi, qui a littera legis ad spiritum euangelicum, a mundo ad coelum transmigraret” (ASD VII-3a: 94). Here the source is Jerome, *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959) 140, 142 (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vol. 72); see CWE 46: 251.

54 See CWE 46: 249.

3.3 *A Portrait of the Virgin: Mimetic Exhortation and a Mirror of Virtues*

At last, we come to the *Concio* in the *Liturgia* of Loreto, the homily in which Erasmus impersonates the voice of the officiant and broadly expands on the themes suggested in the liturgy. The exordium recalls how “this love for the Mother is an act of piety towards the Son” (CWE 69: 91),⁵⁵ once again establishing the Christocentric direction of the cult of the Virgin. The voice of the pastor promises a most rich spiritual food, which will lead to a “sober intoxication” (CWE 69: 91; “sobria temulentia” [ASD V-1: 99, ll. 83–84]), i.e. a state of rapture which characterizes the frenzy of love described in the last pages of the *Encomium Moriae* and which, in the Alexandrine tradition and especially in the commentaries on the *Song of Songs*,⁵⁶ marked the spiritual delectation brought by the Groom.⁵⁷ A spiritual nourishing is promised, one that will make the readers soberly intoxicated: insane with the insanity of the Gospel.

The corpus of the text is dedicated to this spiritual cult of the Virgin that is fulfilled in her imitation and that brings the faithful to a truly Christian life. Erasmus says that “the cult of the most holy Virgin consists especially in four things—praise, honour, invocation, and imitation” (CWE 69: 92).⁵⁸ As Pabel rightly notes, Erasmus did not exclude the intercession of the saints altogether, at least not in the case of Mary.⁵⁹ However, it is true that imitation, in Erasmus’ view, surpasses and embraces all other forms of cult. In fact, the *mimesis* of Christ’s virtues was for Erasmus the true pattern of a Christian life and the only hope for a purified Christianity. As Leushuis has written, Erasmus, especially in the *Paraphrases*, presents Jesus as an “affective exemplum”; he is portrayed in a way that triggers the reader’s “responsive mimesis.”⁶⁰ This mimesis is free and loving, gently encouraged by a merciful and patient God: the soteriology of the *De libero arbitrio* and the *Concio* is always silently at work in presupposing a free and responsive agency. The agent of this mimesis is human free will, which is thought to be proactive and dynamic, capable of assuming the vigorous stance of the athlete or the soldier, two metaphors for the Christian life privileged by Erasmus.

55 “Affectus hic in Matrem pietas est in Filium” (ASD V-1: 99, l. 79).

56 See Michael Andrew Screech, *Erasmus: Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin, 1988), 74.

57 See *Song of Songs* 1: 4; Origen, *In Canticum Canticorum Homiliae*, 1, 3; 11, 7. See also Ludovico Battista’s essay in this issue.

58 “sanctissimae Virginis cultus quatuor in rebus potissimus consistere, in laudibus, in honoribus, in inuocatione et in imitatione” (ASD V-1: 100, ll. 92–93).

59 Pabel, *Conversing with God*, p. 81.

60 Reinier Leushuis, “Emotion and Imitation: The Jesus Figure in Erasmus’s Gospel Paraphrases,” *Reformation* 22.2 (2017): 82–101.

In the *Liturgy*, Erasmus' imaginary flock, the parish of Porrentruy, is invited to imitate Mary's virtues:

lest she too says of us: 'This people honours me with songs, pipes, and flutes, but their hearts are in these things which I, with Jesus, my son, ever hate, in riches, pleasures, impious games, filthy stories, arrogance and pride. They give me first place in shrines and on altars, but they grant me no place in their heart. They sing in my honour, 'Queen of heaven,' 'Mistress of the angels,' 'Our life, our sweetness, and our hope.' On every side I am saluted with the most honorific titles, but not everyone who says to me, 'Lady, Lady,' will enter the kingdom of my son, but those who, following his example, obey the commands of God and, striving zealously to copy my example, seek the grace of the Son by imitating the Mother, in whom whatever is worthy of imitation is the gift of the Son.'⁶¹

CWE 69: 92–93

The *prosopopea* of the Virgin, who asks for a spiritual cult, despising the empty, grandstanding epithets which are not followed by deeds, is relevant inasmuch as the Virgin reiterates and makes her own the words of Christ (*Mt* 7:21), quoted in "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven,"⁶² where in the place of the Father there is the Son. The dialectic between the honor given to the Virgin—who assumes as her own Christ's words that contain the secret and the keys of the kingdom—and the priority given to the Son is subtle and often re-negotiated throughout the sermon. In this passage we can note the chain of imitation, recast into a Mother-Son filiation, prescribed by the Virgin, which seeks the response of the hearer.

The Virgin having exited the scene, the speaking voice in the *Concio* returns to the preacher, who, having stigmatized the luxurious cult which adorns Marian shrines instead of honoring Mary with charitable deeds, proceeds to the

61 "ne et ipsa dicat de nobis: Hic populus cantionibus, fistulis ac tibiis me honorat, cor autem eorum in his rebus est, quas ego semper odi cum Filio meo Iesu, in diuitiis, in voluptatibus, in lusibus sceleratis, in turpibus fabulis, in fastu et superbia. Dant mihi principem locum in templis et aris, in pectore illorum nullum mihi locum concedunt. Occinunt mihi: Regina coeli, Domina angelorum, vita, dulcedo et spes nostra. Salutor vndiquaque titulis honorificentissimis, sed non omnis qui dicit mihi, Domina, Domina, intrabit in regnum Filii mei, sed qui illius exemplum sequentes obtemperant praeceptis Dei, quique meum exemplum exprimere studentes, Filii gratiam ambiunt, in imitanda Matre, in qua quidquid imitatu dignum est, Filii donum est" (ASD V-1: 100, ll. 104–115).

62 CWE 69: 92.

main portion of the homily, the list of Mary's virtues proposed for imitation. As Stephen Bates points out, Erasmus' exhortation to both men and women to imitate Mary is a distinctive characteristic of his writings, and is present also in the *Enchiridion*, where he invites his readers to imitate Mary's humility.⁶³ In the *Liturgy*, the portrait of Mary is characterized by "simplicity ... wisdom ... bliss ... modesty ... chastity in wedlock, a mother's diligence in her duty, invincible strength of mind in a member of the weaker sex" (CWE 69: 94).⁶⁴ It is a gendered catalogue of virtues, traditionally intended for members of the "weaker sex," not containing any major surprises. The discourse is punctuated by actualizing examples suggesting appropriate behavior, which interiorize the outer practice of the specific virtue, and targeting, e.g., virgins indulging in games and conversations with young men or the use of cosmetics, spouses who treat their wives or husbands with lewdness, disobedient wives who spurn their husbands, and so on. To all of them, Mary's example is proposed as a mirror of chastity and silent prudence, including obedience to her husband and solicitude to her son.

The tone of the sermon is narrative, with some textual similarities, despite its brevity, to the speaking voice in the *Paraphrases*, and proposes episodes from the life of the Virgin to facilitate the reader's identification and mimesis:

There is no doubt but that she will have cared for her son with as much assiduity as she showed obedience to her husband. She brings him to the temple each year to show him from his tender years that piety must be absorbed. With what solicitude does she seek him when he is missing? She does not rest until she finds him. Why did Mary fear for her son? Was it because she had seen some signs of levity in him? By no means. She was warning you, mothers, that no care that can be shown is too great for one of tender years.⁶⁵

CWE 69: 97

63 ASD V-8: 194, ll. 439–440; See Stephen Bates, "Mary, Gender, and the English Reformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. C. Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 374–385.

64 "virginea simplicitas, cum summa coniuncta prudentia, summa felicitas, coniuncta cum summa modestia, summa castitas in coniugio, matris sedulitas in officio, invictum animi robor in sexu fragili" (ASD V-I: 101, ll. 134–136).

65 "Nec dubium quin quanta obseruantia vsa fuit erga coniugem, tanta sedulitate curarit filium. Ducit quotannis ad templum, vt a teneris annis monstraret imbibendam pietatem. Desideratum quanta sollicitudine quaerit? Nec conquiescit donec inueniat. Quid Maria timuit Filio suo? Num quod leuitatis indicium viderat in illo? Nequaquam, sed vos admonuit matres, aetati tenerae nullam satis magnam curam praestari posse" (ASD V-I: 103, ll. 213–218).

Mary's teaching is made more approachable through the description of her feelings, human feelings the reader identifies with, thus making the latter more open to receiving the admonitions, the spiritual food patiently administered.

The final virtue to be praised and offered as a model is Mary's "fortitude" (*fortitudo*), her "greatness of soul", which consists in "not to grow haughty in prosperity and not to break down in adversity" (CWE 69: 98).⁶⁶ The words of praise for the Virgin are here formulated almost in the same manner as they appear in the *Enchiridion*, canon six, dedicated to the necessity of avoiding the crowd's opinions and customs and of following Christ's example; in that context, Erasmus praises the happy few who practiced true virtue in the midst of corruption, serving the state or living a honorable life, or "who did not grow proud in prosperity or become discouraged in adversity" (CWE 66: 87).⁶⁷ Similarly, Mary is praised for her "great soul," like a ('pagan') classical man, such as a Cato or Brutus, and upright and virilizing in her attributes, according to a centuries-old trope of Western literature.⁶⁸ Throughout all the tragic events of her son's life, Erasmus muses, "What did a mother's heart feel here? She was not without feeling. She suffered through the sufferings of her son, but she restrained her human feeling by the strength of her spirit, she repressed her sobs, she held back the tears that were bursting forth, and when the other disciples had melted away in fear, she alone together with John kept her place beside the cross of her son" (CWE 69: 98–99).⁶⁹ The ritual lamentation for the grieving son, a universal human experience, is affirmed (expressed by the term *sensus*, affection, which Mary did not lack) but right away denied in the exemplary model of the Mother at the cross: she is wisely consoled by a knowledge of the economy of salvation, setting "the happiness of the many above her private grief" (CWE 69: 99).⁷⁰

66 "nam umtrumque magnanimitatis est indicium, nec inolescere rebus prosperis, nec aduersus frangi" (ASD V-1: 103, ll. 233–234).

67 "qui neque prosperis rebus inolescere, neque aduersis frangi potuerunt" (ASD V-8: 222).

68 From Thecla to Macrina, the examples of ancient Christian women showing 'virile' traits are innumerable; see for instance E.A. Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Contexts of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. J. Epstein and K. Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 29–49.

69 "Quid hic sensit pectus maternum? Sensu non caruit. Doluit dolore Filii, sed affectum humanum spiritus robore coeruit, compressit singultus, repressit erumpentes lacrymas, ac caeteris discipulis metu dilapsis, sola cum Ioanne stabat iuxta crucem Filii" (ASD V-1: 104, ll. 241–244).

70 "publicam felicitatem anteponebat dolori priuato" (ASD V-1: 104, l. 250).

Erasmus strongly criticizes the artistic depictions of Mary as a weeping, frantic woman prey to her feelings, calling them insulting.⁷¹ If his *De taedio Iesu* had depicted a tormented Jesus that was intended to show his disciples his true human nature, with all its struggles and frailties,⁷² here the Virgin is presented as stoically superior to her feelings, invincible in her strength: "Perhaps you suppose that it is a lowly and feeble thing to be the servant or handmaiden of the Lord: nothing is more invincible" (CWE 69: 99).⁷³ This image can be contrasted with that of the Virgin as it had been celebrated a few years earlier by Luther in his *Magnificat* (1521), where the German reformer praises Mary's faith as a gift of the divine omnipotence alone, and criticizes the praises of her humility. While Mary is described in her "insignificance, lowliness, poverty, and inferiority,"⁷⁴ she is above all featured for celebrating the glory of the cross. The emphasis in Luther is completely on the almighty glory of God who recreates Mary with his gift. The invincible and impenetrable Madonna painted by Erasmus and proposed for the imitation of the Lord's people is another story entirely.

After this first and longest part of the sermon on the virtues of the Virgin, Erasmus briefly returns to the Gospel passage about the miracle at Cana. The first, literal sense of the reading from John encourages married people to rejoice that the honour of seeing Christ's first miracle was shown to wedlock.⁷⁵ Mary's role in the episode, i.e. pointing out that the wine is lacking, is described here in very favorable terms: "She does not regard it as a burden to speak to the Son on behalf of such people if there should be anything lacking that has a bearing on the happiness of the marriage," and showing at the same time "benign solicitude" and "wise restraint" in yielding to her Son's authority (CWE 69: 100).⁷⁶

Erasmus then proceeds to a "more profound meaning" (CWE 69: 101; "reconditoris aliqua sententia" [ASD V-1: 105, l. 293]), the miracle of the transformation of water into wine as the joining of the divine and the human natures.

71 "The pictures are insulting which represent her in a state of collapse, benumbed by a faint and rendered senseless by grief" (CWE 69: 99).

72 See CWE 45: 345, and Leushuis, "Emotion and imitation," 89.

73 "Vos fortasse suspicamini rem humilem et infirmam, esse seruam aut ancillam Domini, nulla res magis est invicta" (ASD V-1: 104, ll. 256–258).

74 See Martin Luther, *The Magnificat*, 1521, ed. B. Kreitzer, in *The Annotated Luther. Pastoral Writings*, ed. M.J. Haemig (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 316.

75 CWE 69: 99.

76 "Nec illa grauatur pro talibus interpellare Filium, si quid defuerit quod ad matrimonii laetiam pertinet ... Quod interpellans Mater dicit: Vinum non habent, benignae cuiusdam sollicitudinis est, quod cedit auctoritati Filii respondentis in speciem durius: Quid mihi tecum est, mulier, prudentis cuiusdam modestiae est" (ASD V-1: 104–105, ll. 271–272; 277–280).

From this Christological level, Erasmus proceeds to another “coniugii mysterium” (ASD V-1: 105, l. 302), the love of the Son of God for the church, which he purified with his blood: “Through love of her a wonderful suitor descended from heaven, came into a virgin’s womb, and, clad in the robe of our flesh, came forth from there, like a bridegroom from his chamber” (CWE 69: 101–102).⁷⁷ The discourse passes from the image of the immaculate conception of Jesus in the virginal womb of Mary, the closed gate of Ezekiel 44:1, to the sublime wedding between the Groom and his bride, the church, ransomed from captivity by His death.⁷⁸ Again, the spousal imagery taken from the Song of Songs dictates the relationship between Christ and the Church, Christ and the soul: “The soul of each one of us is the spouse of Christ.” Christ is “the jealous lover, who has at so high a price joined his spouse to himself” (CWE 69: 102).⁷⁹ As he deemed proper in the *Modus orandi Deum* (1524) and then also in the *Ecclesiastes*, Erasmus restores the mystical-ecclesiastical exegesis of the *Song of Songs* (groom and bride = Christ and soul/church).

The Loreto mass can be seen as Erasmus’ response to the medieval liturgy, but at a deeper level also to the hermeneutical and therefore theological problem arising from the misattribution of Mary’s qualities involved in her casting as ‘Solomon’s’ bride, such as in the image of the Virgin Mary that appears in the medieval Book of Hours, which he had deemed troublesome.⁸⁰ A later passage of Erasmus’ *Ecclesiastes* further clarifies the issue:

All the ancients unanimously make the mystical Song of Solomon an allegory of Christ as groom and the church as bride. More modern writers have wrenched this into a reference to the most holy Virgin, Jesus’ mother according to the flesh, but this requires no small degree of equivocation. They admit that the Song pertains to Christ and the church but say that it is not absurd to apply it through tropology to the mother of the groom, who holds first place among the brides of Christ. But all the souls of the pious are brides of Christ. After the head, which is Christ, Paul assigns first place in the body of the church to the apostles, who were the groom’s nearest associates. It was a beautiful idea to attribute first place among

77 “Huius amore procius admirabilis descendit e coelis, venit in vterum Virginis, inde trabea nostrae carnis velatus processit tamquam sponsus e thalamo suo” (ASD V-1: 105, ll. 304–306).

78 CWE 69: 101–102; ASD V-1: 105, ll. 306–310.

79 “cuiusque nostrum anima, carissimi, Christi sponsa est”; “Merito zelotypus est amator Christus, qui tam care sibi sponsam asseruit” (ASD V-1: 106, ll. 313–314, l. 322).

80 See CWE 70: 224.

the groom's associates to the Virgin Mother. But even when one accepts the extraordinary dignity of the most blessed Virgin and allows that even the majesty of the apostolic order yields to it, there are nevertheless in that Song things that it would hardly be modest to attribute to the most chaste Virgin, that is, in the way they sound to human ears. In any event, I do know that there is nothing in that theme that is not mystical ... it is obvious that mystical Scripture has been twisted somewhat from its genuine sense contrary to the interpretation of all the ancients.⁸¹

CWE 68: 919–920

In contrast with the interpretations of the ancient exegetes—Erasmus is undoubtedly thinking of Origen—medieval Mariology is neither chaste nor appropriate. Just as earlier in the sermon he had reproved a sentimental, impressionistic artistic depiction of the Virgin, he now criticizes the erotic undertones that could be involved in the depiction of Mary as the Bride. This is a major theme of Erasmus' criticism of Marian pilgrimages, who often heavily emphasized the Virgin's feminine attributes, such as her breasts.⁸² For Erasmus, however, this misappropriation concerns not only the place of the Virgin in respect of Christ, but also the role of all of God's people in respect of Christ.

What we see in the *Liturgy* is a simplification and universalization of the mystical and nuptial theme, which for Erasmus had become unduly eroticized. God's love is directed to all creation, and men and women are able to freely and progressively respond to this loving call. The perfect state of Christians

81 "Omnes veteres vno ore mysticum Canticum Salomonis per allegoriam accommodant Christo sponso et Ecclesiae sponsae. Hoc recentiores pertraxerunt ad sacratissimam Virginem Iesu matrem iuxta carnem. Nec deest quod tergiuersentur. Fatentur Canticum ad Christum et Ecclesiam pertinere, non tamen absurde per tropologiam applicari ad sponsi matrem, quae inter Christi sponsas primas tenet. Omnes autem piorum animae Christi sponsae sunt. Paulus in Ecclesiae corpore, secundum caput quod est Christus, primum locum tribuit Apostolis, qui fuerunt proximi sodales sponsi. Praeclarum autem erat inter sponsi sodales principatum tribuere Virgini matri. At sit eximia beatissimae Virginis dignitas, ac cedat huic etiam ordinis apostolici maiestas, multa tamen sunt in eo Cantico, quae parum verecunde castissimae Virgini tribuerentur, loquor iuxta sensum humanarum aurium, alioqui scio in eo argumento nihil esse non mysticum ... Verum vtcunque hic tergiuersetur aliquis, illud in confesso est, Scripturam Mysticam praeter omnium veterum interpretationem nonnihil deflexam a sensu germano" (ASD V-5: 208, ll. 168–180, 184–187).

82 In a comment on *Peregrinatio religionis ergo*, Waller points out that Erasmus himself is not above making slightly lascivious jokes about Mary (Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*, p. 93). If it is probably true that his language sometimes expresses a certain coy pleasure, Erasmus' humor is ultimately aimed at denouncing the risks involved in this eroticization of the Virgin's body.

is the perfect joy of the bride, who is almost transfigured and purified from the sordidness of the body by a frenzy of pure love, the *sobria temulentia*, that inebriated state of the soul which has drunk the wine of the Spirit. For this reason, the preacher exhorts his flock to “be intoxicated with the spiritual wine of instruction which the spouse pours forth for us in abundance” (CWE 69:103),⁸³ progressing from milk to solid food (1Cor 3:2). The *Liturgy* exudes a progression from a material and superstitious cult to a spiritual one, occurring as part of a progressive hermeneutics, according to the Johannine image of the wine served last, which has the meaning of true spiritual understanding. The result will be harmony and peace, the flourishing of the spouse, the end of contention and blame, the true praise of the Virgin.

3.4 *An Italian Epilogue: Erasmus in Venice*

It is worth pointing out that Erasmus' mass for Loreto, published three times during his life, encountered a non-negligible Catholic success: it was translated by the Italian Giovanni Angelo Odoni (1535) in a version which did not survive, and the bishop of Besançon wrote a commendation and granted an indulgence for those clergymen who made use of the mass. Erasmus himself, in his *Manifesta mendacia*, referred to his authorship of the text to provide evidence of his Marian orthodoxy against charges by Vincentius Theoderici.⁸⁴

The illustrated 1526 edition of Erasmus' *Liturgy* in Venice deserves special attention in the text's *Nachleben*: the prolific and eclectic publisher, printer and street singer Niccolò Zoppino, active in Venice in the years 1505–1544,⁸⁵ published in 1526 an edition of the complete, illustrated mass.⁸⁶ Zoppino is also known as the publisher of the first Italian translation of Luther's texts, including the short catechism *Eine kurze Form der zehn Gebote* (1520),⁸⁷ first printed

83 “Nos in sponsi nostri mensa accumbentes inebriemur vino spirituali doctrinae quod nobis largiter effundit sponsus” (ASD V-1106, ll. 329–331).

84 CWE 69: 81.

85 See Lorenzo Baldacchini, *Alle origini dell'editoria in volgare. Niccolò Zoppino da Ferrara a Venezia. Annali (1503–1544)* (Manziana [Rome]: Vecchiarelli, 2009); *idem*, “Rossi, Niccolò d'Aristotele de', detto lo Zoppino,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 88, online at https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/rossi-niccolo-d-aristotele-de-detto-lo-zoppino_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

86 Erasmus Roterodamus, *Virginis Matris apud Lauretum cultae liturgia* (Venice: Niccolò Zoppino, 1526). See Baldacchini, *Origini dell'editoria in volgare*, 190.

87 *Uno libretto volgare con la dechiaratione de li dieci comandamenti, del Credo, del Pater noster* (Venice: Niccolò Zoppino, 1525). See Silvana Seidel Menchi, “Le traduzioni italiane di Lutero nella prima metà del Cinquecento,” *Rinascimento* 17 (1977): 31–108; L. Baldacchini, “The First Luther's Edition in Italy,” *Nuovi Annali Della Scuola Speciale per Archivisti e Bibliotecari* 33 (2019): 75–87.

anonymously in 1525, and subsequently reprinted in 1526, 1532 and 1540 under the name of Erasmus. This momentous translation of Luther on Italian soil has been seen as proof of Zoppino's Reformed tendencies, and his publication of texts by Erasmus, or the use of his name, as a confirmation rather than a rebuttal of those tendencies. At the same time, however, the continued release of papal privileges for Zoppino's works, and his publication of an anti-Lutheran tract invited his readers to appreciate his prudence and confessional neutrality.⁸⁸ In fact, what emerges from even a cursory reading of Zoppino's catalogue is his interest in Marian texts, which were evidently bestsellers. It is thus clear that he saw Erasmus' Marian liturgy as a profitable investment, and particularly apt for the Italian market due to its subject. Moreover, the text stands out in the context of Zoppino's catalogue as one of its few volumes in Latin and not in vernacular. In conclusion, this Italian episode of the editorial history of the Loreto Mass testifies to the interest in a Catholic, devotional Erasmus that was palatable to Italian audiences.

4 Conclusion: a De-eroticized, Universal Femininity

Adopting an Origenian scheme,⁸⁹ Erasmus' theology of history understands the fruit of the Spirit of God as being involved in a gradual process of learning and rational formation. In this theological framework, there is a reciprocal adaptation (*accommodatio*): that of the Spirit, which accommodates itself to human weakness, leading believers gradually to the philosophy of Christ, and that of Christians, who are invited to progress from the law of nature to the gospel. In his immense mercy, God has tolerated the blindness and obtuseness of his people for many centuries with a tireless patience, progressively revealing his light and truth. For this reason, the Church progresses gradually, allowing for the common people to slowly progress away from superstitious cults yet tolerating the latter because it could be worse to forcibly proscribe them.⁹⁰ Such an intellectual, elitist, yet reformist view, also shapes Erasmus' doctrine of the

88 Lorenzo Baldacchini reminds us that in 1532 Zoppino printed the vehemently anti-Lutheran work of Giovanni da Fano, which he interprets as a reparation or a political gesture. Baldacchini generally paints a more subtle picture of Zoppino as someone who likely sympathized with the Reformation while taking care to protect his interests and personal safety (see *Origini dell'editoria in volgare*, p. 43 and "First Luther's edition in Italy," 79).

89 See G. Lettieri, "Progress: A Key Idea for Origen and Its Inheritance," in *Progress in Origen and the Origenian Tradition*, pp. 17–53.

90 See CWE 70: 201; ASD V–I: 156.

Marian cult: if the *Colloquia* present the ironic and corrosive aspect of this attitude, the *Liturgia Virginis Lauretanae*—in tandem with more systematic and programmatic works along the same lines, such as the contemporary *Modus orandi Deum*—proposes a cult which gradually progresses, incorporating the best of the tradition of the Church, according to Catholic consensus. As far as Erasmus was concerned, the Italian Marian cult in Loreto deserves reformist attention in this vein, which is not harsh or forceful (qualities that Erasmus often associated with the Swiss Reformers), but gradualist and slowly aiming to embrace a larger audience in a spiritual landscape characterized by both orthodoxy and renovation.⁹¹

This paradigm is structurally built on the mystical-intellectual dialectic between Jesus and the church that is derived from the *Song of Songs*: every soul is called to a relationship with his Lord that requires an agonistic and mundane askesis like the one described in the entirety of Erasmus' theological production beginning with the *Enchiridion*. This explains why it was crucial for Erasmus to correct the exegesis of the bride and the groom in the *Song of Songs* in relation to the femininity of the Virgin Mary: Mary, whose victorious image is proposed for invocation and above all imitation, is embraced as part of a common destiny of femininity in the church and in the souls of all Christians. This call for the purification and simplification of the Marian cult, therefore, means the de-eroticization of the imagery derived from the *Song of Songs* and the re-semanticization of the feminine as the common end. From this perspective, the de-activation of the vivid, imaginative and powerful medieval exhibition of the Body of the Mother can be described as a 'democratization' of the use of the feminine in an Origenian/Erasmian theological framework of gradual and reciprocal adaptation (*accommodatio*) of the Spirit, which leads to positive and intellectualistic and egalitarian outputs: both men and women are primarily souls that need to be educated and re-formed towards their Maker. In the *Liturgy*, the Virgin Mary's de-eroticized femininity establishes men and women as equal souls and both of them as brides in a spiritual marriage.⁹²

91 See also Halkin, *Erasmus: A Critical Biography*, 229: "It is reasonable to think that Erasmus regarded Loreto with the mixture of respect and detachment which characterized his attitude to pilgrimages. He has not gone to Loreto, but he believed in the Madonna's miracles. The translation could only be for him a very ancient tradition, whose origin he did not know, but whose success he recognized." If Erasmus' own belief in the miracle of Loreto is unlikely and anyway unknowable, Halkin's point on the success of Loreto stresses the value Erasmus assigned to tradition and consensus in a true Catholic faith.

92 This project has received funding from the European Union's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action under grant agreement No 101105789.