The Holy Women at the Closed Door

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THE HOLY WOMEN AT THE CLOSED DOOR

JOANNA LACE looks at a fourteenth century painted panel in the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta depicting the Flagellation of Christ

The first exhibit the visitor encounters upon climbing the stairs to the collection of early paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, is a small painted panel portraying as its centrepiece the Flagellation of Christ. (Fig.1) In all probability it belonged to a confraternity of flagellants established in Fabriano, in the Italian Marches, during the fourteenth century. Some features of the painting that puzzled art historians in the past are now making sense, and proving to be of unusually broad historical interest. Besides covering the foundation and fortunes of the *flagellanti*, explanations touch upon the development of Christian liturgy, and the beginnings of Italian drama. The essential points can usefully be summarised after a few notes on the flagellation of Christ: in the Biblical texts, in the art of the West, and in the spiritual life of the fourteenth century.

The flagellation of Christ is recorded in a mere half-dozen words, and there can be few phrases in the New Testament that have been illustrated so regularly in the West over the centuries. However, before the fourteenth century in Italy, the subject was rarely chosen as the central image of a work of art, but was included as one of the episodes in the complete story of Christ's life. Artists illustrated the Gospel accounts chronologically, creating a series of cycles: the Infancy, the Ministry, the Passion, and the Resurrection cycles. The flagellation thus appears in the Passion cycle, coming after the scene of Christ before Pilate, who ordered it.[1] In practice the cycles are often incomplete, for reasons of space, and/or the wishes of a patron; a full Passion cycle - from the Entry Into Jerusalem to the Entombment - is very rare.

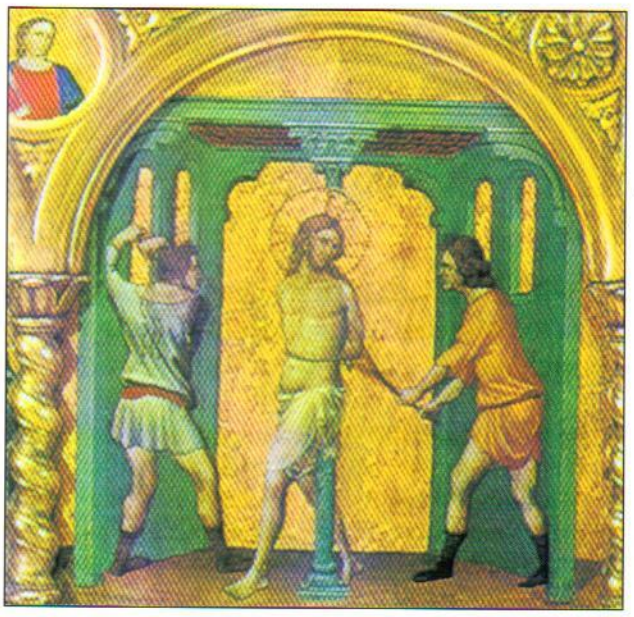
The traditional iconography of the flagellation has remained remarkably constant over time: Christ, in the centre, is bound to a column, unclothed except for a loincloth, and is receiving blows from two jailors, one on either side, wielding whips or flails. Often one of the men is shown older, as if in charge of the proceedings, and as in the Valletta panel, usually appears to the left of Christ. (Figs 2 and 3)

It is a simple matter of history that Roman law required a condemned prisoner to undergo flagellation by his jailors as the prelude to his crucifixion, as a means of extracting a confession; and he had to be standing.[2] Self-flagellation, on the other hand, as a means of self-purification and expiation, is a more complex phenomenon, but we can

1. *The Flagellation of Christ*: School of the Marches, mid-fourteenth century. *Valletta, Museum of Fine Arts*

summarise the main lines of development that are relevant to the Valletta panel. The practice had already been promoted within the reformed monastic orders (see for example Fig. 4) when public processions of '*flagellanti*' (or '*battuti*' as they are also referred to) were first organised by St. Anthony of Padua (1195-1226). It spread rapidly from Perugia with the charismatic preaching of Ranieri Fasasi, first over all of central and southern Italy, and later far beyond. He stressed the necessity of accompanying prayers for divine mercy with personal penance, quoting the words of St. Paul: " I treat my body hard and make it obey me". It was a belief expounded in contemporary meditations on the Passion[4], and one that became almost ubiquitous in the context of thirteenth-century spirituality. Thus when the Confraternities of the *Disciplinati* were founded by Ranieri Fasasi in 1260 or 1261, the *flagellanti* continued as a distinctive component. Their numbers increased particularly rapidly around the mid-fourteenth century, with the spread of the Black Death.

2. *The Flagellation*, detail from the "Rheims Missal": French School, last decades of the thirteenth century.



3. *The Flagellation*, detail from the polyptych of the Coronation of the Virgin: Guariento, 1344

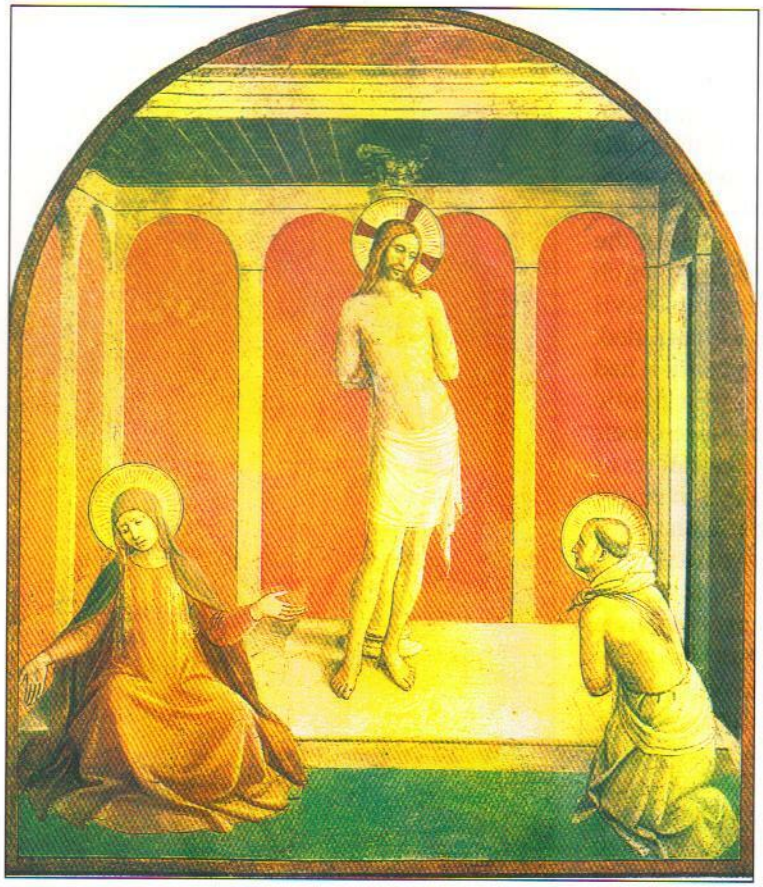
Major studies of the panel began with Federico Zeri, writing in the early sixties.[5] He deemed it a "*unicum su tavola*....unusual .....and [in parts] apparently inexplicable." The "inexplicable" had concerned the animated group of women placed to the left of the central flagellation scene. (Fig. 5) He found no precedent for this in art. Was it a purely personal, free interpretation of the gospel accounts?

Zeri had no problem in ascribing the panel to a confraternity of *flagellanti*, who by the fourteenth century were using the basic three-figure image as a frontispiece to their written statutes. He cites for comparison the *tabella* (wall tablet) of the Confraternity of Saint Francis and St. Nicholas, from the Church of St. Nicholas Reale, Palermo, by Antonio Veneziano, of 1388 .(Fig.6): a similar gabled top for its flagellation scene suggested that the Valletta panel was also the remaining upper section of a larger *tabella*. Also, because he was convinced on stylistic grounds that it was the masterpiece of an artist known as the Master of Campodonico, a village in the vicinity of Fabriano, in the Marches, then the relevant confraternity was to be sought in the same region.

A further observation proved crucial to later research: Zeri was struck by the way the whole composition - flagellation, spectators, and Last Judgment above - resembled a theatrical setting, reminiscent of a dramatised Good Friday *lauda* (a hymn or canticle).

Some thirty-five years were to pass before Zeri's ideas were taken up and studied in any depth.[6] Fabio Marcelli, in studies relating to the Master of Campodonico,[7] agreed with Zeri that this artist had painted the Valletta panel. More importantly, he opened up new lines of enquiry by identifying this anonymous artist with a certain Bartoluccio da Fabriano.[8] Bartoluccio received payments between 1339 and 1348 for the decoration of the oratory and a hospital. owned by the Confraternity of Santa Maria del Mercato in Fabriano. Though the archives included no specific mention of *flagellanti*, Marcelli set out his reasons for linking the Valletta panel to this confraternity. He noted that whilst the *Disciplinati* of the city had St. Francis as their patron, and St. Francis does not appear in the panel, both their statutes and the statutes of Santa Maria del Mercato had proved to be a direct transposition of those of the Assisi Confraternity of St. Stephen: St. Stephen is certainly present - bearing the stones of his *martyrdom*, he is the middle saint of the three depicted to the right of the scene, in attitudes of prayerful participation, outside the praetorium wall. Also, next to him is a bishop, whom Marcelli identified as St. Nicholas of Bari, whose church lay in the vicinity of Santa Maria del Mercato. He thus concluded, as he says "without difficulty", that our panel had indeed come from this famous oratory.

And what of Zeri's "*unicum*" - the group of distressed women - and, above all, his impression that the artist had depicted a Good Friday *lauda*? Marcelli delved into what he called the "*mare magnum*" of recently researched *lauda* texts (there are over 200 from this region), and appears to have solved both questions at one stroke. He has identified the source as a dramatised version of '*la nona lauda*' (the *lauda* for the ninth hour), in a collection for Good Friday known as 'The Sorrows of the Virgin', or 'The Lamentations of Mary', and among the monologues and dialogues in existence. They belong to the most ancient confraternity in Umbria, the Assisi Confraternity of St. Stephen, already mentioned in connection with the presence of St. Stephen in the panel. The *laudi*, as well as the statutes of this confraternity, had become widely diffused ever since its foundation in 1261. Referring to an exposition of *la nona*



4. *Meditation on the Flagellation*, with the Virgin and St. Dominic, from the *modi orandi corporales* (the Nine Ways of Prayer) of the Dominican Rule: Fra Angelico and assistants, c. 1437. Florence, Museum of San Marco, novitiates quarters, Cell 27.

lauda by Arnaldo Fortini, Marcelli quotes a particular passage in which the Virgin indeed declares she was obliged to listen to the torture of her Son "*ante fores templi*" (outside the door of the tribunal).

At this point it is worth our reading further, because the *lauda* continues:

"....The weeping Virgin continued to cry out to men and to Heaven, but no reply came....As night fell, the Holy Women, who were also distraught, and *who had come near upon hearing the cruel news, finally fell asleep.* The Virgin continued her lamentations until daybreak....Then the trumpets sounded [to announce the crucifixion was about to take place]...At this, her cries renewed in strength, she turned to the women *who were beside her*, saying 'Oh daughters of Sion, get up! Soon you will see my Son! Get up, my dearest ones! This is no longer the time to sleep - Look! the soldiers are coming!' And when she had said this, *they began to get up.....*" [my italics][9] The various poses of the women in the Valletta painting are clearly acting out this further passage; and elsewhere we find telling references to "Maria of the great black mantle", and to the Mary Magdalen "in red".

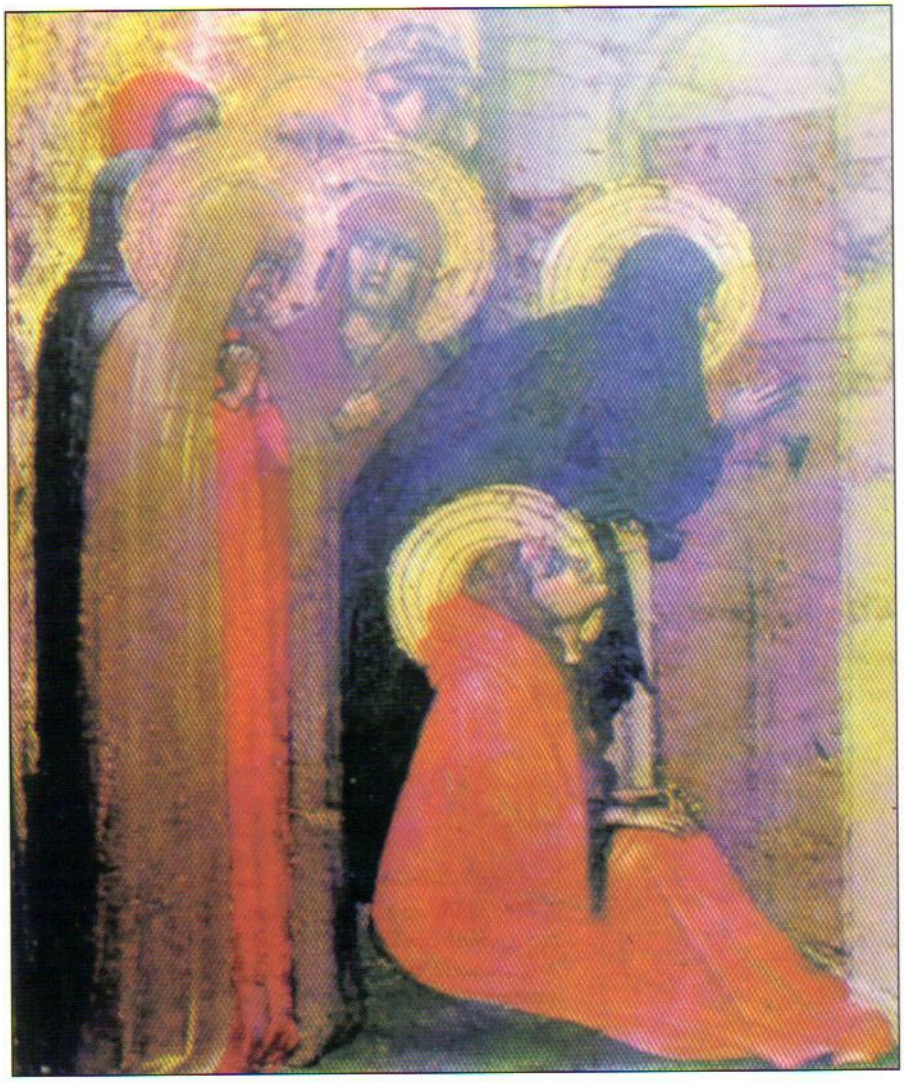
The notion that we are, in truth, witnessing the enactment of a fourteenth-century *lauda*, takes on a further dimension when we discover a little of its origins. At the time the Valletta panel was painted, the *lauda*, a devotional hymn or canticle, already had an intriguing history, and one that in Italy is interwoven with the history of drama.[10] The emergence of drama in a Christian milieu had been surely inevitable: certain forms of Jewish worship incorporated processions, choirs, music and dance; pagans celebrated the death and the annual return of harvest gods. Christian prayer and devotion followed a liturgical calendar, that celebrated, not the fruits of the earth, but the second birth of Man. And Christian drama was an embellishment, like painting and the other arts, but one that, in an ambience of popular piety, perhaps offered a more immediate 'reality'. As has been said: "Personages came down from the walls into the midst of the people."[11] Seeing was believing.[12]

Drama may have been inevitable, but its development was slow, and at different rates in different countries. There is evidence of voice modulation from the end of the ninth century, to which were added gesture and action, progressing gradually from monologue, to dialogue between priest and choir. Where the latter sang a *lauda* with a musical accompaniment, verse tended to replace prose. And texts gradually became more literary. In Italy St. Bonaventure himself (c.1218-1274) had written *laudi drammatichi*, and, later on, texts by eminent intellectuals of a city were frequently used. It must be stressed however, that

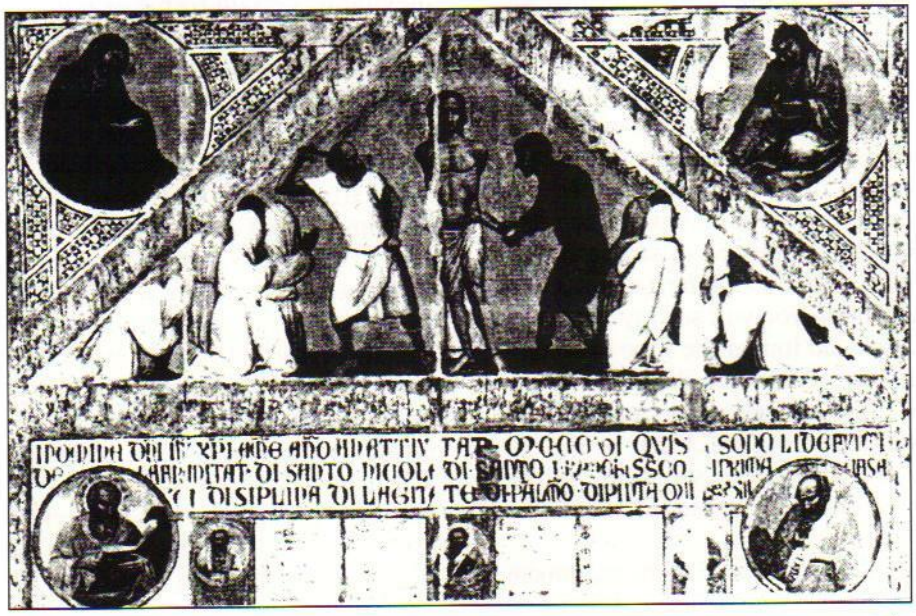
having evolved from the liturgy, the *lauda*, whether dramatised or not, never lost its sacred character. Two types of performance developed: (i) the singing of *laudi* by the *laudesi* (the most usual); and (ii) the *lauda drammatica* - the 'play' - into which *laudi* were inserted as embellishments. Both types always remained under the auspices of the Church, whether enacted within the church building or outside; and bishop, civil authority, rich and poor, all the city attended.

The *flagellanti* from their inception had drawn upon the *lauda* tradition for public ceremonial. Once they had acquired their own property, the routine discipline of flagellation was practised in the privacy of their oratories, and it was on particular feast days, for example that of their patron saint or the patron saint of the city, that they joined in public processions, accompanied by the singing of a *lauda*. And it was on Good Friday that they were required to perform a Good Friday *lauda drammatica*, "for the people, who understand above all with tears rather than words". Then they would process through the city to the singing of the 'Sorrows of the Virgin', pausing at each prescribed 'station' for the enactment of the relevant passage. And at the start of the flagellation episode, the crowd, looking up at the 'stage', would have witnessed the 'live' original of our painted scene - the scene that the *flagellanti* had chosen to represent on their confraternity's tablet.

This discussion has concentrated inevitably upon *flagellanti* ceremonial, but it



5. *The Virgin and the Holy Women* at the closed door of the tribunal: detail from the Valetta Flagellation.



6. *The Flagellation*: Antonio Veneziano, 1388. Wall tablet, now in the Diocesan Museum, Palermo

7. *The Madonna dei Battuti*, part of a processional standard, from the Marches: Pietro di Domenico da Montepulcrano (doc. 1418-22).

8. *St. Christopher*: huge fresco attributed to Antonio da Treviso, 1410. Treviso, Dominican Church of St. Nicholas

should not be forgotten that the contribution of confraternities to the welfare of a community was unique. They founded hospitals (*Santa Maria del Mercato*, for instance, with a following from the most prosperous families of the city, founded one, and governed three others). In central and north Italy at least, these became the nucleus of many city hospitals, and the *flagellanti* or, as they were also known *battuti*, are often commemorated in the names of streets and squares. They ran hospices for pilgrims, for foundlings, for the poor, and the vulnerable in general; they provided decent burials for the poor. For each flagellant (and their names were secret) these activities were part of what has been called "a freely-chosen life-long penance of Christian behaviour", made possible through Christ, and always with the ever-present help of their intercessor and protector, the Virgin Mary. (Fig. 7) And in the same devotional spirit, when they were tending the sick, they also reminded them that for the healing of the body, their spiritual welfare was just as important.

With this over-riding devotion to the sick and the needy in mind, some details in the Valletta painting come into sharper focus - details that have, as far as is known, received scant attention. For instance, who is the third saint - the layman? He seems indistinguishable from the tall robed figure of St.Christopher, often seen in churches (in northern Italy at least), placed in the nave so as to be seen immediately we enter by the main door (Fig. 8): merely to see St. Christopher's likeness was to be protected that day against illness, and, especially, sudden death. One of the hospitals in Fabriano run by Santa Maria del Mercato went by the name of St. Christopher, so if our identification were to prove correct, we may have discovered the original owners of the panel.

Finally, close inspection of the scene of the Last Judgment in the apex reveals none of the usual horrors - no devils, no suffering souls. Instead, as far as the damage in this upper section will allow, we can make out souls, some swimming, others being rowed, progressing landwards. It does not seem too fanciful to suggest that we are witnessing the eager journey of the already redeemed souls towards the mountain island of Purgatory. As they land, at dawn on Easter Sunday, they will joyfully begin the final trials that will lead them, fully cleansed from sin, upwards to their Eternal Father in Heaven. This, in effect, is a vision immortalised by Dante (1265-1321): his *Divine Comedy* was already in wide circulation and being illustrated by artists. It is a vision that does seem to encapsulate the unique faith and aspirations of the fourteenth-century *flagellanti*.

NOTES

The Holy Women at the Closed Door (page 67)

1 The account in St. Luke's Gospel is a little different: it includes the sending of Christ first to **Herod**, who mocked Him and sent him to Pilate. Pilate then handed Him over to the chief priests and people "to do with as they pleased"; see Luke 23 :26. *The Jerusalem Bible*. London. 1966.

2 Flagellation (whipping) without the connotation of execution, continued for centuries as a punishment. The remains of what is reputed to have been a pillory or 'whipping post', can be seen in Valletta at the junction of St. John's Street and St. Paul's Street.

3 See **1** Corinthians, 9:27. *The Jerusalem Bible*. London. 1966.

4 For example, St. Bonaventure's *Vitis mystica*, Chap. XXII on flagellation: see J. De Vinck (trans.). *The Works of St. Bonaventure*. Vol. 4. p. 198.

5 See F.Zeri. *Bollettino d'Arte*. 4. 1963. pp. 325-31.

6 Discussions have passed back and forth intermittently regarding the identity of the artist. It is an on-going debate, and, in as much as it involves questions of style, it lies beyond the scope of the present essay. Some useful references can be found in an article by E. Neri Lusanna. 'Maestro di Campodonico', in *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale*. VIII. Rome.1997. pp.84-87.

7 See F. Marcelli. 'Un possibile nome per il Maestro di Campodonico: Bartolucciо da Fabriano', in *Commentari d'Arte*.II, 3, 1996. pp. 21-28; and F. Marcelli (ed.), *Il Maestro di Campodonico: Rapporti artistici fra Umbria e Marche nel Trecento*. Fabriano. 1988. especially F. Marcelli. 'Il Maestro di Campodonico', op.cit., pp. 116-148.

8 The Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta in fact gives both attributions.

9 See A. Fortini. *La Lauda in Assisi e le Origini del Teatro Italiano*. Assisi. 1961. p. 408 ff. which gives folio references and further bibliography.

10 The same sources also provide the evidence for the gradual use of the vernacular in place of Latin - a subject beyond the scope of this enquiry.

11 See P. Toschi. *Le Origini del Teatro Italiano*. Turin 1955. p.640 ff.

12 In England too, "preachers in Warwickshire told their congregations that if they had any reason to doubt what they heard they should go to Coventry where they would see it all acted out on the stage. Seeing was believing ..." See P. Collinson. 'The late medieval church and its Reformation (1400-1600)', in J. McManners (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*. Oxford. 1955. p. 253.