Blood, Milk, and My Trusty Old Easel: Re-examining Issues of Salvation in Medieval (and Modern) Altarpieces

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SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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PROJECT TITLE: Blood, Milk, and My Trusty Old Easel: Re-examining Issues of Salvation in Medieval (and Modern) Altarpieces

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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Comments (Optional):
Blood, Milk, and My Trusty Old Easel: 
Re-examining Issues of Salvation in 
Medieval (and Modern) Altarpieces

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Abstract:

All works of art exist between two realms, between the realm of the maker and the realm of the viewer. My existence in this art continuum over the past two years has been defined by my opportunities to function as a critical viewer of and commentator on issues related to depictions of blood and milk in medieval redemptive imagery. I wish then to submit this original work entitled *Save Me* as my attempt to explore the opposite realm of the art continuum, the realm of the maker. Taking precedent from medieval antecedents, I have created a modestly-sized altarpiece that reflects not only my research on issues of blood and milk iconography but also mirrors my own current ruminations on issues of salvation within the American culture. Emphasis has been placed on grappling with the same issues that confronted medieval artists: preparation (how one conceives the piece initially, and what materials are appropriate for the effective conveyance of ideas); craftsmanship (how well the altarpiece is constructed); form (how the altarpiece looks - line, color, texture, spatial qualities, composition, etc.); content (what the subject matter is, and what ideas are embodied in it); and presentation (How effective the piece is for the intended viewer).
Introduction:

Nourishing the Soul: Blood and Milk in Medieval Redemptive Imagery

Advisor (for this portion of my research): Terry McDonald, Education, The Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Nourishing the Soul: Blood and Milk in Medieval Redemptive Imagery focuses on what may at first seem to be two very different types of body fluids: the blood of Christ and the milk of the Virgin Mary. The task at hand is to discuss the complex theological ideas behind the consumption of these two fluids – especially in relation to medieval redemptive images housed at the Cloisters, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

By the time these redemptive images were produced in the late Middle Ages, central church doctrines had been established, and certain liturgical practices had become permanent features in the lives of Christians. Revisions, however, were still occurring. Doctrines were being examined and questioned in detail, new forms of ascetic practices were finding their way into the vitae of saints’ lives, and the relationship between the priest and laymen was beginning to evolve.

The ideas behind the theme of Nourishing the Soul toward salvation truly fall in this vein of re-examination and questioning of church practices in the late Middle Ages.

Before delving into this re-examination of certain theological issues related to salvation, it is perhaps necessary to reiterate the fact that many religions – including those that predate Christianity – involve
rituals of fasting, feasting, and sacrifice (especially the offering of sacrificial animals). These seemingly universal food practices are going to provide the leaping-off point for the exploration of sacrifice, salvation, and nourishment as they were viewed and debated in the Middle Ages.

Food Practices in the Middle Ages

[Cuxa Cloister, 12th century, Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, France, Marble]

Perhaps, the most interesting place to begin discussing the role food played in the lives of people in the Middle Ages is with this rather beautifully carved and energetic capital from the 12th century Cuxa Cloister from the monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa in France [see Figure 1]. The complexity of this architectural element has to do a great deal with its setting as part of a cloister.

By definition, a cloister is a covered walkway, usually located at the center of the monastic compound and built in a rectangular form with an arcade that opens to the outside environment [see plan]. This outside environment provided many opportunities for monks to garden and grow food. In fact, the monks thought of their walled-in cloister garden as a recreation of God's original paradise — the Garden of Eden [see Figure 2]. The Garden of Eden provides an interesting setting to begin talking about food in the Middle Ages.

After all, had Eve not given into her desires and partaken of the fruit and had she not encouraged Adam to partake of it as well, the evil force of sin would not have consumed the human race.

If one assumes that this capital has some lesson to teach these monks in the Middle Ages (who may have sat
and pondered its intended lesson) and if one also assumes that the content of the two forces in the capitals coincides with its setting in a cloister garden, the capital begins to represent the age old struggle between good and evil which started in the Garden of Eden. Now, on the corners of the capital, it appears that the evil forces represented by these fanciful and exotic wild beasts are consuming - or eating - the good forces represented by the more human-like figures. And, perhaps, rightly so.

If one looks at the capital [see Figure 1], it becomes readily evident that the human-like figure has given way to very sensual and fleshly desires; he is playing music, dancing about nude, and his belly appears to be quite full. The figure has been consumed by desire (including the desire to eat) and now must face the consequences of sin, just as Eve gave-in to her desire to eat the fruit in the Garden of Eden and thereby introduced sin to mankind.

Food is thus being equated with something desirous, something that is longed for. What other Christian references could monks recall and meditate upon that include issues of food and control while looking at this capital?

- **The nation of Israel** - Instead of whining and complaining, had the nation of Israel adhered to God’s rules about food while in the wilderness, especially in regard to manna and fasting, they would not have been consumed by God’s anger and fallen from his favor.

- **The monks themselves** - Could they not be consumed by the temptation of gluttony? Could they not be eaten up with greed instead of given their surplus as alms? Could they be tempted by certain foods while fasting?
In each of these scenarios, food is alluring, sensual, and very physical - this was the manner in which food was thought about in the Middle Ages.

As a result, abstinence from eating - fasting - became an important control factor for Christians in the Middle Ages. In many ways, fasting became a form of self-sacrifice -- the giving up of worldly pleasures and desires to bring oneself in-line with Christian beliefs. This self-sacrificing, abstaining attitude as symbolized by the practice of fasting achieved three major things for Christians in the Middle Ages:

- **Fasting as a source of charity** - Note how Pope Leo the Great describes this aspect of fasting in the fifth century: "We order to you this fast of December ... because it conforms to piety and to justice to render thanks to God after having received the fruit of the earth and to offer him the sacrifice of mercy with the immolation of fast. Let each one rejoice in the copiousness of the harvest ... but in such a way that even the poor rejoice in its abundance ...Let all make account of their riches and those who have more give more. Let the abstinence of the faithful become the nourishment of the poor and let the indigent receive that which others give up."

- **Fasting as a purification of all the body's members** - Notice how a mid-fourth century treatise for virgins by the author pseudo-Athanasius describes fasting: "Fasting cures disease, dries up the bodily humors, puts demons to flight, gets rid of impure thoughts, makes the mind clearer and the heart purer, the body sanctified, and raises man to the throne of God."

- **Fasting was also seen as a means to embrace hunger, to join the vulnerability and famine that threatened all things, in order to induce from the
creator and provider of blessings the gifts of fertility, plenty, and salvation.

In the Middle Ages, this gift of salvation that restored one to a state of soundness, a state of livelihood was symbolized by the ritual commemoration of Christ's sacrificial death. Interestingly enough, this commemoration involved a feast instituted by Christ, and it was most vividly represented by bread and wine - the main food staples of Mediterranean cuisine.

The Eucharist Celebration as Ritual Commemoration

[Chalice, Paten, and Straw, ca. 1235, Workshop of Master Johannes, from the monastery of Saint Trudpert near Friburg im Breisgau, Germany, Silver, partly gilt, niello, gems]

Had the function of these objects [see Figure 3] not been known when they were first discovered, it would have been rather simple to decipher their function and their overall theme of redemption. For instance, notice the attributes of the plate-like object. Readily evident are the representations of Abel and Melchizedek (they are labeled, to the left and to the right respectively), and their juxtaposition immediately evokes their sacrificial offerings in the Old Testament.

Above them, Christ is depicted holding the sacraments. Directly below Christ at the bottom of the plate-like object, Saint Trudpert is depicted brandishing his palm of martyrdom - in essence, both Christ and St. Trudpert have given their lives as sacrifices. The inscription around the edge of the plate underscores the theme of salvation through Christ. Thus, this plate-like object is a paten - a
liturgical object used in the celebration of the Eucharist at the monastery of Saint Trudpert.

The chalice - another liturgical object used in the celebration of the Eucharist at the monastery of Saint Trudpert (it is accompanied by a straw) - reiterates the same theme of salvation through Christ and emphasizes the Eucharist. Christ and His Disciples are depicted talking among themselves within the arcade of the cup. Below on the knob, scenes of Christ’s life are depicted, which are prefigured by the Old Testament scenes on the foot of the cup - the Flood of Noah being the most apparent from this vantage point and a timeless example of redemptive imagery.

Truly, these ideas of salvation and redemption stem from the celebration of the Eucharist, which by definition is a ritual commemoration of Christ’s ultimate example of self-sacrifice. The Christian Eucharistic practice of ingestion is derived from the gospel accounts of the Last Supper; according to the account of the Apostle Matthew (26:26-28):

Christ took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying: Take ye and eat. This is my body. And taking the chalice, he gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples saying: Drink ye all of this. For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for you and for many unto remission of sins.

Notice that Christ emphasizes the drinking of the wine and the eating of bread as a symbol for his redemptive sacrifice - unto remission of sins. It is no wonder then that issues of salvation in the Middle Ages were most often tied to ideas of eating or feasting. The Eucharistic feast, consisting of the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine, became the model for the gathering of the faithful at a communal meal. That is to say, it established a
community within the Christian congregation, something substantial to base faith upon.

By the thirteenth century, however, the Eucharistic feast was doing much more than creating a sense of commonality. In many ways, it was creating a ruckus. Notice how John Tauler in the fourteenth century describes this connection between salvation and eating:

*St. Bernard compared this Sacrament [the Eucharist] with the human process of eating, when he used the similes of chewing, swallowing, assimilation, and digestion. To some people this will seem crude, but let such refined persons beware of pride, which comes from the devil; a humble spirit will not take offense at simple things.*

Tauler’s warning “not [to] take offense” indicates that there was some controversy surrounding this topic of eating and salvation, even as it was presented in the Middle Ages. The cause for such controversy in the Middle Ages grew out of different opinions surrounding the issues of **transubstantiation** and the **Real Presence of Christ** – whether the bread and wine were solely representatives of Christ’s flesh and blood or Christ’s actual flesh and blood on the altar. It is thus important to examine how people in the Middle Ages viewed the Eucharist in connection with transubstantiation.

**The Mass of St. Gregory: Wine, Bread, Blood, Body and Issues of Transubstantiation**


To understand this rather beautiful oil on panel painting of the Mass of St. Gregory [see Figure 4]
executed in 1486 and to better understand how the people of the Middle Ages viewed the celebration of the Eucharist, it is perhaps first profitable to examine the life of St. Gregory.

Gregory was born to a rather well-to-do, senatorial family, and he surely could have chosen a life of leisure and enjoyed a high standing in society. Gregory, however, renounced his worldliness and devoted his life to the service of God. In this matter, Gregory excelled, and he quickly advanced through the church's hierarchy of power. Along his journey to the top, though, Gregory always remained humble, never wishing credit to be given to himself, even though he had remarkable administrative and intellectual skills. His humility and charitable heart coupled with these skills recommended him for the papal throne - to which he was elected in 590. As Pope, Gregory the Great adhered to/examined three aspects that characterize his reign:

- Adherence to a strong asceticism, especially severe fasting that eventually would led to severe stomach disorders;
- An interest in the Mass to which he applied revisionary measures;
- A strong belief in the educational value of Christian art; he believed art was a teaching tool that aided the illiterate to come to a better understanding of God.

Having noted these characterizing traits of Gregory, it is not surprising to see what is going on in this painting. This is a visualization of the sixth-century legend that one day while Gregory was saying mass two of his attendants doubted the Real Presence of Christ and in effect questioned ideas concerning transubstantiation - the change from bread to flesh and from wine to blood. As a result, Christ miraculously appeared atop the paten on the altar,
exposed his wound, and began to fill the Eucharistic chalice with his actual blood. This demonstration decidedly removed the skeptics' doubt, and they began to believe that the wine is indeed changed to blood and the bread is changed to Christ's flesh.

Such unanimity regarding this subject was hard to come by in the Middle Ages. Though the Eucharistic celebration existed prior to 1079, the term transubstantiation did not come into use prior to this date, and Hildebert of Tours was the first to use the term to evoke ideas of change or conversion. The process of transubstantiation has always been tricky to define and/or describe. The Catholic Encyclopedia, however, offers this analogy: just as a nobleman can be knighted and thereby be elevated to a higher state of being and still remain in the same physical body, the bread and wine can be elevated to the higher state as Christ's flesh and blood and yet remain in the same form.

Thus, tradition taught that Christ was present in the Eucharist in some special way, yet Christians disagreed about the mode, the locus, and the time of that presence. For this discussion, it is not necessary to grapple with these issues of the what-ands-whens of transubstantiation (though they are quite intriguing).

What is necessary, however, is that one acknowledges the fact that the congregation, and especially women, viewed the Eucharist as an opportunity to experience the presence of their God and to actually consume his flesh and blood. The Eucharist, for all intents and purposes, was the most intimate form of worship available for Christians in the Middle Ages.

This interest in Christ's physical body is made even more evident by what is depicted around Christ -
the instruments of His Passion. Each of these instruments evokes images and feelings related to his physical, fleshly torture. Whether it is the Cross, the spear, or the crown of thorns, the viewer is drawn back to this issue of blood and flesh. But, the viewer is also asked to notice another detail - Mary attending to the Christ Child in the stained glass window [present in the Cloisters' version; absent here]. Mary's presence here serves as a reminder that this redemptive suffering could not occur without her role as the Holy Mother.

What is interesting about this type of imagery is how pervasive it is, especially the parallelism of Christ and Mary. In fact, Jesus appearing on the altar as an edible sacrificial offering for the faithful permeates the visual depictions of Christ at all stages of his life.

The Virgin Mary's Role in Salvation

[Adoration of the Shepherds, ca. 1350-1360, Bartolo Fredi Battiloro, Sienna, Tuscany, Italy, Tempera on wood]

This is a fourteenth-century panel painting [see Figure 5] that depicts both the Annunciation to the Shepherds at the top of the image and the Adoration of the Shepherds in the bottom four-fifths of the image. Right away, one notices that the representation of Christ as an edible sacrifice that was so explicit in the Mass of St. Gregory is seemingly not present. Indeed, this type of depiction is much more subtle.

Christ appears as a rather stiff and uncomfortable infant who is swaddled very tightly in this quite beautiful white cloth with a red brocaded pattern. He lies not on a soft, inviting bed of hay but appears to be unrestfully placed on this structure that is remarkably reminiscent of an altar's shape. Thus, as
Gertrude Schiller suggests, the Infant Christ's placement on top of the manger prefigures Christ eventual place on top of the altar as a sacrificial offering to be eaten.

This altarpiece panel, however, shares another similarity with that of the Mass of St. Gregory that we just examined - the presence of the Virgin Mary. The presence of the Virgin Mary is an integral part of any depiction of the Nativity; after all, without Mary, Christ's birth as a human child would not have occurred, and Christ would thus not have been able to provide a means for salvation for humankind. Mary, in many ways, is the lynch pin for salvation, and in the Middle Ages, Mary and Jesus become parallel symbols of salvation.

The question thus arises: how and why do Christ and the Virgin Mary become parallel symbols?

Our interest in the Virgin deals greatly with the roles that she assumes in Nativity images; quite often Mary takes on two types of roles: either one of adoration or one of motherly love and nurturer. Each of these roles hints at the type of thoughts that characterized women and the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages.

Let us first examine Mary in the act of adoration, as she is depicted here doing along with Joseph and the two Shepherds. Mary offers reverence to this remarkable child that she has helped bring into the human realm. It is interesting, however, to point out this rather introspective gesture that Mary makes. In essence, she points to herself as to draw attention to the one who has helped form this remarkable child, and in many ways her gesture is correct. Women in the Middle Ages were thought of in terms of physicality. Women symbolized the physical, lustful, material, appetitive part of human nature, whereas man symbolized
the spiritual, rational, and mental. At a child’s conception, it was thought that woman contributed the physical stuff, the flesh, and the man supplied the soul or form. Since Christ did not have a human father, he fit this description perfectly. His soul or form was heavenly, but his flesh, his physicality, was earthly and the product of a woman - from Mary.

The role of Mary as a loving mother and nurturer is equally revealing about the way women were thought of in the Middle Ages. Notice how one succinct passage from a fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript of Meditations on the Life of Christ describes Mary’s role as a loving mother:

In all offices and services, she continually ministered to him, not only to the infant but also to the man. How readily she nursed Him, feeling a great and unknown sweetness in nursing this Child, such as could never be felt by other women.

This passage emphasizes Mary’s ability to nurse and nourish her child - and, perhaps, rightly so. Medieval women were also described in terms of food. For instance, the novelist Elias Canetti says: “A mother is one who gives her own body to be eaten.” Women were most intimately linked with food, for they were the ones who gave the first nourishment with their breasts and prepared and served the meals that sustain daily life.

Therefore, the Virgin Mary is easily associated with food and physicality, which are aspects that we have been discussing in terms of Christ: his physical presence in the Eucharist and the idea of eating his flesh and blood as represented by the Eucharistic bread and wine.

However, does this parallelism between Mary and Christ end here?
Seated Virgin and Child: Blood and Milk

[Reliquary Shrine, 14th century, Attributed to Jean de Touyl, Paris, France, Gilt-silver, translucent enamel, paint]

The answer to such a question can be answered with this fourteenth-century gilt-silver, reliquary shrine of the Seated Virgin with Child [see Figure 6]. Immediately, one's attention is drawn to the revealing gesture made by the Christ child; there is no mistaking that he is reaching toward Mary's breast to be nursed with her milk. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find an exact description of the event that this is being depicted here, but it is only logical to assume that Christ was fed at the breast of Mary to insure his survival. Thus, it may be best to begin thinking about this sculpture not in narrative terms but in thematic terms - what does breast milk and nursing have to do with Christ and his eventual role of salvation in the guise of blood and flesh?

Perhaps, the most logical place to begin looking for answers concerning this relationship between blood and milk is in the medical theory tomes of the Middle Ages, and a startling observation comes to the fore - the production of blood is related to food: "if digestion is a proper one, what is formed is blood." This is important because it defines blood in terms of food or nourishing. This idea of nourishment becomes more complex in light of St. Isidore of Seville's explanation of this subject in the seventh century:

Lac (milk) derives its name from its color, because it is a white liquor, for the Greeks call white le'ekos and its nature is changed from blood; for after the birth whatever blood has not yet been spent in the nourishing of the womb flows by a natural passage to the breasts, and whitening by their virtue, receives the quality of milk.
Another account puts it this way: "Milk is twice cooked blood." The parallel then can be easily drawn: just as Christ's blood feeds the congregation, so Mary's milk - a derivative of her blood that nourished Christ in the womb - fed Christ that he may live for salvation.

This parallel between the body of Christ and the Virgin Mary, however, is much more complex. Here is an unsettling account from a woman from Montailou:

One day as I was going to the church of the Holy Cross to hear mass, I heard some women [...] saying that a woman had given birth on the roadside [...]. Hearing this, I thought of the disgusting afterbirth that women expel in childbearing and whenever I saw the body of the Lord raised on the altar I kept thinking, because of that afterbirth, that the host was something polluted. That's why I could no longer believe it was the body of Christ.

This woman thus equates the Eucharistic wafer with the same fleshy discharge from a woman's womb at childbirth. Earlier, women were discussed in terms of physicality, especially in their role of giving the flesh to the child at its conception. The placenta, in this instance, thus becomes a representation of this physical nature of women - their fleshly aspect. Therefore, Mary in the act of lactation has now been compared to blood of Christ and in the process of giving birth been compared to Christ's body or flesh - the same two elements that are so focal in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, we must now turn our attention to understanding how Mary's milk and the act of giving birth come to be viewed as sacrifice.
Responses to Redemptive Imagery by Women and Men

[Diptych with Scenes of Annunciation, Nativity, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, 1300-1325, Cologne (possibly), Rhine Valley, Germany, Silver-gilt with translucent and opaque enamels]

To understand how Mary's milk and the act of giving birth came to be viewed as sacrifice and a means to salvation, we must set the stage for this type of devotion. By the time of the thirteenth century, the partaking of the Eucharist - a ritual that allowed Christians to feel so intimately connected with their God - was being withheld from the congregation except on high feast days such as Easter and Christmas. At all the other masses, the priest would take communion on behalf of the congregation. This barrier set up by the priests began to "eat away" at Christian women because their intimate connection to salvation had been taken away. As a result, extremely religious women in the Middle Ages began to search for new practices that would allow them a similar intimate and participatory role. Their solution came in the form of food imagery with Christ and the Virgin Mary being central to these ideas, especially in terms of blood and milk.

There are several pieces of artwork on display from the Cloisters' collection that would have served well to demonstrate how women responded to this theme of food in their religiosity. This fourteenth-century diptych [see Figure 7], however, represents the type of precious objects that could have been used in private devotion. The stories of women saints in the Middle Ages tell of such objects and especially their power to evoke deep trances and visions in response to imagery involving Christ and food symbols. In fact, food became an obsessive and overpowering concern in the lives, religiosity, and writings of women in the Middle Ages. Just listen to some of the religious practices involving food that women partook of:
• Spiritual women, like Christina Mirabilis, were reputed to live for years on the Eucharist alone; in fact, her abstinence went so far that normal bodily functions such as her menstrual cycle and excretion ceased;

• Some devout women drank pus or filth from the sick they cared for, while abstaining from ordinary food;

• Devoted women, like Juliana of Cornillon, developed strong eucharistic piety that led to the founding of the cults of the Sacred Heart and the feast of the Corpus Christi;

• Other women, like Elizabeth of Hungary, gave to the less fortunate from their tables despite the severe opposition of their families;

• Still others were reported to have miraculously multiplied food and miraculously excreted healing liquids from their body after their death.

Thus, it is no wonder that Mechtild of Magdeburg spoke of the mass as an ecstatic experience of "eating God":

Yet I, least of all souls,
Take Him in my hand
Eat Him and drink Him
And do with Him what I will!

It is also not surprising that women in the Middle Ages were being drawn to the more racy, fleshy, and food-oriented passages in the Bible, such as those in the Song of Solomon where the breast is compared with choice wine.

Beneath each type of imagery, whether it was drinking pus, "eating God," or comparing breasts with wine, women's food imagery involving the parallel of blood and milk all seem to go back to one issue - salvation. This imagery was the means by which women
could express their hope and devotion to Christ's saving power.

In fact, this diptych with its various New Testament scenes deals greatly with that very subject - salvation. The Annunciation, the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection all deal with Christ's redemptive role explicitly. Perhaps, though, the panels most laden with redemptive imagery are the two endorsed compartments containing the Nativity and the Crucifixion. As has been demonstrated, Mary represents food in her role as Christ's source of nourishment and giver of flesh. Typically, though, food must be broken, spilled forth, and macerated by teeth before it can be assimilated to sustain life. Food then mirrors and recapitulates both sacrifice and fertility. In Christian doctrine, the suffering and broken body on the Cross from which springs forth salvation is food - the Eucharistic symbols of bread and wine. Thus, Mary's body, in the acts of lactation and of giving birth, are synonymous both to ordinary food and to the body of Christ as it died on the Cross and gave birth to salvation.

What though about men's response to this type of redemptive imagery?

The Cloisters also houses several objects that would have been used by male priests depicting this same type of blood/milk imagery. In fact, men - though not as often as women - responded to this type of imagery by participating in visions in which they were fed at the breast of Mary - as was the case with Bernard of Clairvaux - or in which they fed the Infant Christ at their breast. It is no wonder then that this seemingly focused and private imagery makes its way into imagery intended for much larger viewing audiences in the form of altarpieces.
The Double Intercession Altarpiece: A New Type of Redemptive Imagery

[Double Intercession Altarpiece, prior to 1402, Tuscan, Italy, Tempera on canvas]

This [see Figure 8] rather beautifully painted late-thirteenth-century Italian altarpiece was probably originally displayed in the Cathedral of Florence. It depicts God the Father, the Holy Spirit, Christ showing his wound, and Mary exposing her breast. Even though one can only speculate about the circles of artists that the hand of this image belongs to, one can certainly say that he was an inventive painter, especially in the depiction of the redemptive theme.

The depiction of the Trinity is quite different, even unconventional. Most often in medieval iconography God the Father holds a cross to which Christ is affixed. In this image, though, Christ is kneeling and pointing to the wound in his side, becoming a living Man of Sorrows. This, however, is not the only invention in the painting. Christ has a dual role, and it is the second function as an intercessor that decisively influences his attitude and appearance in the Trinity.

In the course of a book devoted to the praise of the Virgin Mary, Ernaldus of Chartres described a scene off double intercession that caught the imagination of the later Middle Ages. So widely was the image disseminated that it was soon ascribed not to the little-known Ernaldus but to Bernard of Clairvaux, the most famous of the twelfth-century worshippers of Mary. The passage reads:

O man, you have a secure access to God when the Mother is before her Son, and the Son before his Father. The Mother showed her breast to her Son,
the Son showed his wounds to his father: there where the proofs of love so many no one can be denied.

The image was further disseminated by the *Speculum humanae salvationis* which was composed in the early-fourteenth-century and soon became one of the most widely read religious texts. The double intercession is the focus of chapter 39 of this treatise; in its illustrations the act of Christ showing his wound is always depicted on a separate folio from that of Mary exposing her breast. This altarpiece thus seems to be one of the earliest instances in which both proofs of love are combined within a single frame. What then does this combination achieve?

- First of all, it creates a definite hierarchy. God the Father is depicted as a detached and superior being - God is fully contained within the aureole except for his hand that emits the Holy Spirit. Christ is the only one who interacts with God the Father directly; in turn, it is Mary who interacts with Christ. It is thus the family of sinners that are the lowest on rung and apply to this hierarchical chain for salvation.

- The depiction of the double intercession also emphasizes the parallelism of blood and milk. Christ is depicted in his usual red mantle emphasizing his bloody cloth, and he says: "My Father, let those be saved for whom you wished that I suffer the passion." Immediately compared with this is Mary who is wearing a white cloth rather than her normal blue mantle - emphasizing the color of milk. She says: "Dearest Son, because of the milk that I gave you have mercy on them."

Therefore, this painting really touches on almost all of the aspects of the theme *Nourishing the Soul* toward salvation. The development of the theme began with an exploration of food in relation to self-
sacrifice - in this altarpiece Mary is a symbol of self-sacrifice. She demonstrates both charity and humility by making this loving gesture in behalf of this family of sinners. The theme was then explored in terms of Mary as the nurturer of Christ and the giver of His flesh - becoming the instrument from which salvation springs forth. Christ, in turn, is the ultimate symbol of self-sacrifice. These parallel symbols of self-sacrifice allowed the food parallel of Christ's redemptive role, via the ingestion of his blood and flesh during the Eucharist, to be drawn with Mary's role as food, via the processes of lactating and giving birth. From all of this, then, the overarching theme of salvation was deduced - a dominant theme for pious viewers in the later Middle Ages.
Figure 1
Capital, Cuxa Cloister, 12th century, Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, France, Marble.
Figure 2

Cuxa Cloister, 12th century, Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, France, Marble.
Figure 3

Chalice, Paten, and Straw, ca. 1235, Workshop of Master Johannes, from the monastery of Saint Trudpert near Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. Silver, partly gilt, niello, gems.
Figure 4

Mass of St. Gregory, 1486, Master of the Holy Kinship,
Museum of the Catherineconvent, Utrecht, Oil on panel.
Figure 5

The Adoration of the Shepherds, 14th century, Bartolo di Fredi, Siena, Italy, Tempera on wood, gold ground, arched top.
Figure 6

Reliquary Shrine, Second quarter of the 14th century, Attributed to Jean de Touyl, Paris, France, Gilt-silver, translucent enamel, paint.
Figure 7

Diptych with Scenes of the Annunciation, Nativity, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, 1300-1325, Cologne (possibly), Rhine Valley, Germany, Silver-gilt with translucent and opaque enamels.
Figure 8

The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin, Early 15th century. Attributed to Lorenzo Monaco (Piero di Giovanni), Florence, Italy, Tempera on canvas.
Bibliography:


Artist's Statement:

Salvation—what an elusive term! On Sunday mornings amidst crying babies, snoring men, and head-nodding women, we are told that salvation is deliverance from the power and effects of sin: salvation, then, is nothing more than a chemical, a potent formula that wipes sin away just as “409” cuts through grease on contact. Everyone in attendance wants some of that undiluted chemical coursing through their veins, and why not—it’s FREE to all who seek it, or work for it, or pray for it, or something like that. And, it gives off such a warm fuzzy feeling inside!

Salvation, like everything else in our consumer-crazy nation, has become a product—a product that one expects to attain via a prescribed mode which ultimately guarantees some sort of tangible benefit, whether that is peace of mind, an assured afterlife, or the self-centered desires of the consumer.

Did someone scream sacrilegious, or was that heretic I heard? Perhaps, that was just my conscience, my little Jiminy Cricket who is so eighties and so out-of-style. Ah, but it is that out-of-date stuff, history, that proves my point. In the Middle Ages, salvation was a product: it was “marketed” through the all-powerful, all-influential Church; made into a tangible object through iconic images; and turned into a widely-distributed, concrete item by the mendicant orders. So, should we gasp for air when someone says that today’s form of salvation takes on aspects of commercialism and self-centeredness? ...that was me exhaling.

Materialism. Politics. Popularity. All such things provide some sort of salvation to the individual who gains the greatest quotient of power in each of the respective realms. Forbid it that
someone be good at all three! What an image that person would have: an image, now that will definitely save you! Medievals turned to images of the lactating Virgins, bloody Christs, and super-heroic saints; us moderns turn to boob-bearing divas, wallet-worn dollar bills, and bomb-slinging presidents. Salvation is iconic.

Am I religious? Yes.
Do I religiously believe everything that I say? Should I? More importantly do you?
Is my altarpiece religious? Good question.
I want to say that it is nothing more than juxtaposition, a paragone of salvation then and now, but I have written myself into a colon: it is religious. If salvation is iconic, how can it not be religious? The altarpiece oozes with icons, some tasteful and others vulgar. Yet, I seek validation. My redemptive altarpiece with all of its mystic powers and iconography has to have a modern, penny-pinching, portfolio-building consumer. Perhaps, when that consumer bows down before the altarpiece and lights a candle in the name of salvation, maybe then I’ll buy into it.
Save Me Images:

Full Views, including from left: Lactating Madonna, Strata of Mankind’s Fall and Redemption, and Christus Patiens:
Detail of Lactating Madonna:

Detail of Christus Patiens:
Detail of Adam and Eve with Sinners from Strata of Mankind's Fall and Redemption:

![Image of Adam and Eve with Sinners](image1)

Detail of Satan from Strata of Mankind's Fall and Redemption:

![Image of Satan](image2)
Details of the Predella: