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## A Guglielmita Trinity

Nancy Mandeville Caciola

### A Tale of Two Abbeys and One Lost Sketch

About nine kilometers outside Milan's ancient Porta Romana, to the southeast of the city near the Via Emilia, lies the medieval Abbey of Viboldone. Founded in 1176, the abbey was among the earliest and most important foundations of the Humiliati Order in Lombardy.<sup>1</sup> The Humiliati were then a relatively young group, part of the contemporary *vita apostolica* movement that swept across Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries.<sup>2</sup> Humiliati brothers and sisters dedicated themselves to charity and good works, wore simple clothing, and pledged to avoid all pride and display. Like the Dominicans and Franciscans, the group technically was comprised of three separate orders: a first order of monastics that was dominantly male, but that also included some women; a second order of men and women living a regular life in community; and a third branch of lay tertiaries.<sup>3</sup> In practice, however, distinguishing among the different elements of the Humiliati is difficult. As a leading historian of the order has noted, it is "not clear what the distinctions meant," especially since the first two orders followed the same exact rule, and "all types of [Humiliati] houses appear to have included individuals committed to different vows."<sup>4</sup> The medieval Milanese likewise seem to have had a difficult time sorting out the distinctions, using the phrase "third order" as a shorthand to refer to all Humiliati in general.<sup>5</sup>

The Abbey of Viboldone conformed to this pattern of including several different types of religious lifestyles within one foundation. To begin, Viboldone included a variety of different types of male religious associated into a single community. A privilege of papal protection issued to the Abbey in 1186, *Religiosam vitam degentibus*, allowed the Abbey's community to include both priests and laity, yet it also made reference to canons, and to those *regulari vita professis*, those dedicated to a monastic life under a rule.<sup>6</sup> Among the laity at Viboldone were the occasional child offered as an oblate, as well as men and women who retired there. For example, in 1287, a layman named Ambrosinus Polvale donated a large amount of landed property to Viboldone in exchange for the Abbey receiving himself, his seven sons, and his mother Belfiore

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Andrews, *The Early Humiliati* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 44–48.

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, *Early Humiliati*; Sally Mayall Brasher, *Women of the Humiliati: A Lay Religious Order in Medieval Civic Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Giovanni Miccoli, "Sulle origini degli Umiliati," in *Un monastero alle porte della città: Atti del convegno per i 650 anni dell'Abbazia di Viboldone* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1999), 99–112; Annamaria Ambrosioni, "Gli Umiliati: Punti fermi e spazi aperti," in *id.*, 129–42; Grado Giovanni Merlo, "Gli Umiliati nel risveglio evangelico del XII secolo," in *id.*, 113–28.

<sup>3</sup> A good discussion of the issues involved in disentangling the structure of the early Humiliati may be found in Frances Andrews, "A Safe Haven for Children? The Early Humiliati and Provision for Children," in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), 73–84, esp. 74–75.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, "A Safe Haven for Children?," 75.

<sup>5</sup> Grado Giovanni Merlo, "Inquisitori a Milano: intenti e tecniche," in *Milano 1300: I processi inquisitoriali contro le devote e i devoti di santa Guglielma*, ed. and trans. Marina Benedetti (Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 1999), 15–30; cf. p. 18. [Hereafter cited as *PI*].

<sup>6</sup> The privilege was issued by Pope Urban III (1185–1187), formerly the archdeacon of Milan, Hubert Crivelli, and an ally of the house. See Andrews, *Early Humiliati*, 48.

as lay tertiaries (the sons were free to leave after the age of sixteen, if they desired).<sup>7</sup> Thus Viboldone appears to have included a diverse cross-section of different kinds of Humiliati, embracing both sexes (though it was predominantly male) and all ages.<sup>8</sup> Though the Humiliati of Lombardy were sometimes accused of heresy, Viboldone always seems to have been above suspicion. Indeed, the protections that the Abbey received from Pope Urban III were significant: *Religiosam vitam degentibus* confirmed all the Abbey's property, exempted them from certain tithes, and permitted the community to receive bodies for burial (as long as the individual had not committed his or her corpse to another foundation, and was not excommunicate).<sup>9</sup>

The Humiliati had close ties with the Cistercians, modeling some elements of their formal rule, *Omnis boni principium*, after that of the "white monks," and often cooperating with them. Given this background, it is not surprising that the Humiliati house at Viboldone maintained a tight relationship with a neighboring Cistercian monastery: Chiaravalle, founded by Saint Bernard himself in the 1150s. The two abbeys were just over an hour's walk apart, and both also relied upon the ancient Roman system of canals known as the Vettabbia, which flowed through the countryside south of the city towards Pavia: along with the local mills, churches, and agricultural estates, the two monasteries worked to maintain this waterworks system and shared its precious water resources.<sup>10</sup> Architectural clues suggest that many of the same planners and workmen helped construct both Chiaravalle and Viboldone.<sup>11</sup>

The building, expansion, and decoration of the latter continued from its founding in 1176 through 1348. In the late 13th or early 14th century the Abbey Church, dedicated to Saint Peter, was decorated with an elaborate fresco cycle by a follower of Giotto. The colorful paintings, which have been attributed to Giusto de' Menabuoi (fig. 1), were plastered over with a layer of lime at some later, post-medieval point in time, and were only rediscovered at the end of the 19th century.<sup>12</sup> The fresco cycle was completely exposed and restored at a cost of €122,400, in a renewal project begun in the 1970s which only concluded in July of 2015.<sup>13</sup> Since then the interior of Viboldone has been recognized as possessing one of the most vivid medieval series of wall paintings in Lombardy.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrews, "A Safe Haven for Children?," 77.

<sup>8</sup> The abbey also cooperated closely with the ecclesiastical powers, both local and papal. As we have seen, Viboldone received privileges from Urban III; Alexander III (1159–1181) likewise had offered them protection. Thus even though some Humiliati groups were condemned in 1184 for preaching without proper authority, the community at Viboldone was held above suspicion. See Andrews, *Early Humiliati*, 3, 46–47.

<sup>9</sup> Andrews, *Early Humiliati*, 48

<sup>10</sup> Chiara Mauri, "L'Architettura rurale nel territorio di Viboldone," in *Un monastero alle porte della città: Atti del convegno per i 650 anni dell'Abbazia di Viboldone* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1999), 275–91, esp. 277, 279, and figs. 108, 112, 113, and 120. See also Mariavittoria Antico Gallina, "Un ponte medievale di Milano e i segni della continuità," *Arte Lombarda* 121, no. 3 (1997): 43–49 and Giulia Fantoni, "Water Management in Milan and Lombardy in Medieval Times: An Outline," *Journal of Water and Land Development* 12 (2008): 15–25. For more on the need for ongoing cooperation in water management, see Paolo Squatriti, "Digging Ditches in Early Medieval Europe," *Past and Present* 176 (2002): 11–65 and *id.*, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy, AD 400–1000* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Angiola Maria Romanini, "L'arte a Viboldone dal XII al XIV secolo," in *Un monastero alle porte della città: Atti del convegno per i 650 anni dell'Abbazia di Viboldone* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1999), 197–206.

<sup>12</sup> Mina Gregori, "Giusto de' Menabuoi a Viboldone," in *Un monastero alle porte della città: Atti del convegno per i 650 anni dell'Abbazia di Viboldone* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1999), 244–59; Romanini, "L'arte a Viboldone dal XII al XIV secolo."

<sup>13</sup> "Viboldone, terminato il restauro delle volte dell'abbazia," *Il Giorno*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.ilgiorno.it/sud-milano/abbazia-viboldone-restauro-1.1186155> (accessed August 13, 2016).



Fig. 1. Nave of Viboldone Abbey. Attributed to Giusto de' Menabouï. Photo: Giovanni dall'Orto: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2075 - Milano - Abbazia di Viboldone - Presbiterio - Foto Giovanni Dall%27Orto, 31-Oct-2009.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2075_-_Milano_-_Abbazia_di_Viboldone_-_Presbiterio_-_Foto_Giovanni_Dall%27Orto,_31-Oct-2009.jpg), accessed August 13, 2016.

A scene that has attracted far less notice than the frescoes adorning the Church, however, is a sinopia on the ceiling of the sanctuary. To my knowledge this scene never has been analyzed in any depth.<sup>14</sup> The reddish-toned sketch, which would have served as an underpainting for a planned medieval fresco that never was realized, can be glimpsed in Figure 2, below and behind the fresco of the Virgin and Child, on the vault of the sanctuary. This location places it directly over the main altar of the Church. In such a location, the most significant viewers for the planned fresco would have been the celebrants, rather than the congregation. Indeed, the fresco would have been upside-down from the point of view of the congregants; right-side up, from the perspective of a cleric facing out and delivering a sermon. Its position on the groin vault, moreover, would have made the angle of visibility for this fresco rather oblique from the perspective of a viewer in the nave.

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<sup>14</sup> The sinopia was published and very briefly discussed in Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 57–59.



Fig. 2. Nave of Viboldone Abbey, showing the Virgin in majesty, with a glimpse of the sinopia, located on the ceiling of the sanctuary just behind. Photo: Giovanni dall'Orto, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2116\\_-\\_Abb.\\_di\\_Viboldone\\_-\\_Anonimo\\_giottesco,\\_Maest%C3%A0\\_\(1349\)\\_-Foto\\_Giovanni\\_Dall%27Orto,\\_31-Oct-2009.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2116_-_Abb._di_Viboldone_-_Anonimo_giottesco,_Maest%C3%A0_(1349)_-Foto_Giovanni_Dall%27Orto,_31-Oct-2009.jpg), accessed August 13, 2016.



Fig. 3. The sinopia from below. Photo: Flickr photostream of ho visto nina volare, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/41099823@N00/4530906729/in/photostream/>, accessed August 13, 2016.

Having discussed the location of the sinopia, let us now examine the sketch itself. Figures 3 and 4 show the sinopia photographed from below.<sup>15</sup> A pair of winged angels at the top of the composition holds a veil or drapery behind a group of three human figures that form the central part of the composition. These three persons, side by side in identical poses clearly are a Trinity. All three meet the gaze of the viewer straight on; all hold up their right hands in a gesture of blessing; all three wear a cloak draped over their left shoulders and arms; all three bear chalices in their left hands and hold these vessels at the center of their chests. Beyond these gestural parallelisms, however, an additional iconographic element clearly identifies the three figures as a Trinitarian group: all three bear cruciform haloes, a visual detail exclusively reserved in medieval art for representations of the three persons of the Godhead. Such a halo was never bestowed upon ordinary saints.



Fig. 4. The Trinitarian figures in the sinopia. Photo: Author.



Fig. 5. The center and the right figures in the Trinity: the Father and the Son.

Photo: ho visto nina volare, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/41099823@N00/4531539072/in/photostream/>, accessed August 13, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> An additional online photograph of the sinopia is available here: <http://www2.milanoneicantieridellarte.it/abbazia-complesso-abbaziale-dei-ss-pietro-e-paolo-di-viboldone/> (accessed July 15, 2016).

Despite their identical haloes and gestural similarities, however, there are some important differences in the Trinitarian group as well. The figure at center, who is bearded and somewhat older than the other two, must be God the Father—while the sweet-faced, beardless youth at the right is likely a representation of a youthful Jesus (fig. 5). The figure at left is a young woman (fig. 6), her lips pulled into a benevolent, yet mysterious, smile: she could almost be the fraternal twin of the youth on the right. The representation of this person’s sex is most evident in the curve of her full right breast, clearly shown below her upraised right arm. The figure’s waist nips in just underneath the breast, before the drape of her gown flows downward. This woman would be the Holy Spirit.



Fig. 6. The left figure in the Trinity: The Holy Spirit. Photo credit: author.

While it may at first seem implausible<sup>16</sup> to interpret a female as one of the three persons of the Godhead in a medieval work of art, the precise historical context of this sinopia—in this Church, near this city, in this suburban neighborhood—does much to bolster the suggestion. This

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara Newman has published an image of a 14th-century Trinity in Bavaria in the Church of Urschalling that may portray the Holy Spirit as female. See her chapter, “Woman Spirit, Woman Pope,” in Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 182–223, at 199.

unique sinopia is likely the sole surviving work of art commissioned by a devotional group that was closely associated both with the Humiliati order and with the nearby monastery of Chiaravalle. While a handful of later images (including a 15th-century tarot card) have tentatively been associated with legends passed on from this religious circle, none that are contemporary with the group itself have as yet been identified.<sup>17</sup> The members of this cult of devotion were the subject of a lengthy inquisition held from July to December in the year 1300. They are known to historians as the Guglielmites for the object of their devotion: a woman called Guglielma who had died two decades earlier, in 1281, and who lay buried in honor at Chiaravalle.<sup>18</sup> By 1300, however, Guglielma had achieved a postmortem reputation among her dearest devotees as “the true God and Holy Spirit.”<sup>19</sup> The sinopia would appear to be an artifact of this unusual cult of worship for a female Third Person of the Trinity.

### Living Saint or Holy Spirit?

Guglielma had arrived in Milan in the 1260s, already in middle age. There she adopted the life of a celibate penitent or *pinzochera*, living singly and simply in a house owned by the monks of Chiaravalle. She likely had entered into a contract with the Cistercian brothers, to whom she bequeathed her worldly goods in exchange for spiritual support, burial rights at the monastery, and other forms of assistance.<sup>20</sup> While little is known of her life before her arrival in Milan, several witnesses at the inquisition asserted that she was the daughter of the king of Bohemia,<sup>21</sup> a claim that has been accepted by some modern historians.<sup>22</sup> According to this school of thought, Guglielma was born to the Přemyslid dynasty and likely christened Blažena (“Blessed”) before she later adopted her Italian name. Regardless of the details of Guglielma’s early life, once in Milan she soon attracted a devoted circle of followers who became convinced that she was a *santa viva*, a living saint.<sup>23</sup> The group, which was tightly bonded and considered itself a *familia*, included an impressively wide range of different types of people. Both men and women were involved in the cult, with origins ranging from the wealthiest and most powerful families of

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<sup>17</sup> The tarot card known as “La papessa” in the Visconti-Sforza tarot deck has been identified as a representation of Maifreda de Pirovano, who was related to this family. Gertrude Moakley, *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti-Sforza Family: An Iconographic and Historical Study* (New York: New York Public Library, 1966), 72–73.

<sup>18</sup> The trial documents first were edited by Felice Tocco, “Il processo dei guglielmiti,” *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia de Lincei, Atti della classe di scienze morale* 5, no. 8 (Rome, 1899): 309–42, 351–84, 407–32, 437–69. I use the more recent edition by Benedetti, *PI*. For studies, see Stephen Wessley, “The Thirteenth-Century Guglielmites: Salvation through Women,” in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1978); Luisa Muraro, *Guglielma e Maifreda: Storia di un’eresia femminista* (Milan: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1985); Janine Larmon Peterson, “Social Roles, Gender Inversion, and the Heretical Sect: The Case of The Guglielmites,” *Viator* 35 (1994): 203–19; Marina Benedetti, “*Filii Spiritus Sancti*: un’aggregazione religiosa per i ‘tempi nuovi,’” in *Religiones novae (Quaderni di storia religiosa, 2)* (Verona: Cierre Edizioni, 1995): 207–24; *ead.*, *Io non sono Dio: Guglielma di Milano e i figli dello Spirito santo* (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, 1998); Newman, “Woman Spirit, Woman Pope,”; *ead.*, “The Heretic Saint: Guglielma of Bohemia, Milan, and Brunate,” *Church History* 74, no. 1 (March 2005): 1–38.

<sup>19</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 226; see also 92.

<sup>20</sup> Benedetti, *Io non sono Dio*, 46–8.

<sup>21</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 56, 130, 172, 302.

<sup>22</sup> Muraro, *Guglielma e Maifreda*, 17–18; Newman, “Heretic Saint,” 8–10; However Benedetti, *Io non sono Dio*, 21–29, is more skeptical.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriella Zarri, *Le sante vive: La cultura e religiosità femminile nella prima età moderna* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990).



Milanese society to lowly paupers of the servile classes. Among the nobles, supporters of both the Visconti and the Della Torre factions in Milan came together in devotion to Guglielma.<sup>24</sup> Individuals with a variety of religious commitments were represented. Among her devotees were two priests, many of the Cistercian monks of Chiaravalle (who often preached sermons in her honor and who possessed her “relics”), a number of Humiliati sisters and brothers (who all called themselves members of the “third order,” as was typical), and laity, including both single and married men and women. The group thus had close ties both with Chiaravalle—the epicenter of their devotion—and with the Humiliati order. Since Viboldone was the closest Humiliati foundation to Chiaravalle it seems plausible, even likely, that Guglielma’s cult of devotion was well known there. The presence in Viboldone’s church of a Trinitarian sinopia incorporating a woman is, then, less unexpected than it might first appear.

Indeed, it is possible that Viboldone was the hitherto-unidentified Humiliati foundation in which Guglielma’s new coffin was ornamented at the time of her body’s translation to Chiaravalle. After her death on August 24, Guglielma initially was buried in her parish church of San Pietro all’Orto. This was due to military disruptions: though Chiaravalle had a legal right to Guglielma’s remains, Milan was then at war with Lodi, and the countryside outside the walls of the city was dangerous territory.<sup>25</sup> Almost two months later, Guglielma’s devotees received an order of safe conduct and were able to move her relics to their destined location. Her body was exhumed and translated to a new sepulcher at Chiaravalle.<sup>26</sup> The luxurious procession that brought her cadaver from San Pietro all’Orto wended its way out the Porta Romana, replete with many candles and a purple *baldacchino* to shelter Guglielma; once there, the body was washed with a mixture of water and wine (the liquid being carefully preserved as a secondary relic)<sup>27</sup>, re-dressed,<sup>28</sup> re-coffined, and located in a place of honor with continual candlelight at her new tomb.<sup>29</sup> An altar constructed above this burial place was ornamented with a fresco of Guglielma being presented to the Virgin and child by Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of Chiaravalle.<sup>30</sup> In regard to the new coffin that was constructed for this occasion, Gerardo de Novazzano testified to the inquisitors that he saw the new casket after it was made, “in domo Fratris Petri Tertii Ordinis qui stabat super murum fossati, qui eam cassam debebat guarnire” [“in the house of Brother Peter of the Third Order which sits above the wall of the canal, and who had the task of decorating the casket”].<sup>31</sup> This location has not previously been identified, though we know that it was a Humiliati house and that it lay above the waters of the one of the Milanese canals, both conditions that were true of Viboldone. The inclusion of the name “Brother Peter” is an additional clue that may strengthen the case further. The passage sustains two possible interpretations. As noted above, the Abbey of Viboldone was dedicated to Saint Peter: the foundation thus “belonged” to him, and he would have been regarded as the ultimate head of the

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<sup>24</sup> Newman, “Heretic Saint,” 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Benedetti, *Io non sono Dio*, 91–92.

<sup>27</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 180; cf. also 80, 106.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>29</sup> Benedetti, “Personaggi e luoghi,” 35.

<sup>30</sup> The fresco later was whitewashed. However, in the 19th century Michele Caffi claimed to be able to discern the lineaments of the scene beneath the white paint: Michele Caffi, *Dell’Abbazia di Chiaravalle in Lombardia: Storico, Monumentale, Epigrafica* (Milan: Editore Giacomo Gnocchi Libraio, 1842), 69. His reconstructed outline of the fresco is reproduced on page 68. The work is no longer visible.

<sup>31</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 96. Author’s translation.

community. Thus his name might reasonably be invoked as an identifying element if Viboldone were the Humiliati house in question. However, it also is possible that Gerardo was referring to a living man named Peter who dwelt in a Humiliati house, rather than using the name Peter to identify the foundation itself. Marina Benedetti has further triangulated the above locating language with another, near-identical description of a Humiliati house from the 1250s. The latter mentions a “monastery of the brothers of the Lowly Humiliati, or of the Third Order, located outside the Porta Romana and above the wall of the canal [*supra murum fossati*].”<sup>32</sup> This latter formula, which must surely reference the same foundation, adds the information that the Humiliati house customarily identified as “above the wall of the canal” lay outside the Porta Romana. Together, all these clues point directly to the Abbey of Viboldone. The identification also makes a great deal of sense contextually. As we already have seen, Guglielma’s relics were being relocated to this exact suburban region. Chiaravalle, her ultimate resting place, had close ties with Viboldone and might well have looked to the community there for assistance in the funeral and translation proceedings: the latter foundation had enjoyed the license of preparing bodies for burial since 1186, when the papal privilege *Religiosam vitam degentibus* granted them this right. Thus Viboldone had the workshop and the skills to produce and decorate coffins, the specific contribution that was noted. Moreover, the Guglielmites had close ties with the Humiliati order and would have favored such a plan. Finally, the Abbey of Viboldone was dedicated to Saint Peter, and the testimony about the new coffin’s production can plausibly (though not definitively) be construed as alluding to this fact. If this identification is correct, then there would have been connections between Viboldone and the Guglielma cult dating from at least 1281, the year of her death and translation.

Following Guglielma’s death and translation, her most avid devotees moved beyond veneration of her as a living saint to formulate a far more elaborate theology—or theology. Two devotees in particular took the lead in this process of reformulating Guglielma’s significance. One was a sister from the mostly female Humiliata convent of Biassono, a certain Maifreda de Pirovano, who was first cousin to Milan’s ruling lord, Matteo Visconti. Biassono, like Viboldone, included both professed regulars and tertiaries: Maifreda seems to have been among the latter. The other devotee was a wealthy layman by the name of Andreas Saramita who came from a devout Guglielmite family: his sister Meliora and his mother Ricadonna, both deceased by 1300, had been avid devotees, possibly leaders within the community as well. Even before the death of his beloved “Lady,” Andreas had begun teaching that Guglielma was not just a saint, but actually God—specifically, the Third Person of the Trinity, or the Holy Spirit. A witness named Alegrantia Perusio testified that she had heard this from him while Guglielma still was living; however, Alegrantia continued, when she asked Guglielma about it directly, she received a vigorous denial. Other witnesses told similar stories as well.<sup>33</sup> But Andreas persisted in his teaching, and Maifreda soon began to support this notion with equal energy. In 1284, a group of the leading believers in Guglielma’s identity as Holy Spirit already were being investigated for heresy. They included the whole Saramita family, Maifreda, plus a handful of others; all were released as first-time offenders but soon returned to their convictions. Eventually members of the group began to call their little *familia* “the children of the Holy Spirit” in Guglielma’s honor.<sup>34</sup> Such phrases had real as well as symbolic meanings: the trial record reveals that Guglielma’s devotees sometimes named their actual children either “Paraclete” or “Felix” / “Felicia” in honor

<sup>32</sup> Benedetti, *Io non sono Dio*, 50, n. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 102, 226–28.

<sup>34</sup> As emphasized by Benedetti, *Io non sono dio*, passim.

of her.<sup>35</sup> (Paraclete is a reference to the Holy Spirit, while Felix / Felicia might be translated as “Blessed.” According to Andreas Saramita, this was the name that Guglielma was “first called”—that is, presumably, her birth name.<sup>36</sup>) A second generation of Guglielmites thus was raised in devotion to her as the Holy Spirit; and a few young adult Felixes and Felicias were indeed interviewed by the inquisitors.

## A Spiritual New Age

The doctrine that flowed from the initial identification of Guglielma with the Holy Spirit was clear, elaborate, and systematic. To begin, Maifreda and Andreas’ teaching was strongly marked by the influence of the Cistercian—later Florentian—Abbot Joachim of Fiore.<sup>37</sup> Joachim’s works were held in high regard in duecento Italian piety, though he himself had died at the very beginning of the century, in 1202. A brief excursus upon Joachim’s thought is necessary in order to correctly grasp the emerging devotion to Guglielma as Holy Spirit. In brief, Joachim suggested that the unfolding of history was itself was a form of progressive revelation of the Trinity. He identified three great stages of historical development and of human spiritual evolution: first, an initial epoch under the influence of the Father, expressed through the covenant between God and the Jewish people and chronicled by the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament; second, a succeeding stage of history under the aegis of the Son, dominated by the institution of the Church and morally guided by the New Testament, when Law gave way to grace. However, by extrapolation, or what Joachim called the “principle of concordance,” there would be a third stage to come, in which human history would be regulated by the Holy Spirit. This new age of revelation of the Godhead would bring to true fulfillment all human spiritual knowledge and perfection, and it would flower in the fullness of post-apocalyptic eternity. Grace would then give way to perfect insight and contemplation. Though Joachim did not explicitly mention a date for these prophesized shifts, clues within his writings readily led some readers to conclude that 1260 would be the moment of transformation—precisely the year when Guglielma first appeared in Milan.

Maifreda and Andreas were aware of these ideas, and they claimed that the process of evolution towards this last stage of history had been initiated by Guglielma. As the Holy Spirit incarnate, Guglielma had come to earth to inaugurate the spiritual new age that would fulfill the Trinitarian process of historical evolution towards perfection. She was the Holy Spirit incarnate as a woman, just as Jesus was the Son incarnate as a man. And like Jesus, she would be resurrected from the grave in order to complete her salvific work and to inaugurate a new epoch. In line with the Joachite principle of concordance, which held that certain patterns or figures

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<sup>35</sup> *PI*, 144. In addition, the inquisitors interviewed several witnesses with versions of this name: see *ibid.*, 90, 102, 156.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 144. This could indeed be a translation of her presumed Bohemian name, Blažena.

<sup>37</sup> Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969); *ead.*, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976); Marjorie Reeves and Morton Bloomfield, “The Penetration of Joachimism into Northern Europe,” *Speculum* 29, no. 4 (1954): 772–93; Delno West and Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore* (Bloomfield, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983); Roberto Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti alla fine del Medioevo* (Rome: Viella, 1999); Robert Lerner, “Antichrist and Antichrists in Joachim of Fiore” *Speculum* 60, no. 3 (1985): 553–70; *id.*, “The Black Death and European Eschatological Mentalities,” *American Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (1981): 533–52. Translated extracts from some of Joachim’s writings are available in Bernard McGinn, *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 97–147.

would recur within each epoch of time, Guglielma's devotees continually searched for parallelisms between their beloved "Lady" and Jesus. Such complementarity was central to the group's spirituality: their interpretations of Guglielma's actions and significance were built upon their perceptions of such symbolic *figurae*. Andreas claimed that Guglielma's conception had been announced to her mother by the angel Raphael, just as Jesus's had been announced to Mary by Gabriel.<sup>38</sup> Some said that Guglielma's body bore the marks of the stigmata, and that her flesh was of the same stuff as Jesus's own; another witness claimed she had told him, during her lifetime, that she saw her own body in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the altar.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the twin-like qualities of the two younger figures in the sinopia's Trinity closely reflect the sensibilities of this devotional group: the Guglielmites consistently lay stress upon the essential identity of their Lady the Holy Spirit, with Christ the Son. Each of the three divine persons of the Triune Godhead was, after all, identical with the others.

Indeed, in order to further extend the parallelism and initiate the Third Age of history, Andreas composed new Scriptures describing the life and teachings of Guglielma as Holy Spirit, modeled upon the New Testament in language and titles. The inquisitorial dossier seems to quote from these documents, or at least provide a few representations of their style: "for example, 'At that time the Holy Spirit said unto her disciples et cetera,' and 'The Epistle of Sibilina to the Novarrans' and 'The Prophecies of Carmeo the Prophet to such-and-such cities and peoples' and so forth."<sup>40</sup> Maifreda, meanwhile, composed litanies and prayers, which the inquisitors produced before some witnesses.<sup>41</sup> Many devotees ultimately confessed to believing that Guglielma, the Holy Spirit, had become flesh in order to complete Jesus's work of salvation. Jesus, they explained to the Inquisitors, had become a man in order to save males and Christians. Guglielma would complete the work of salvation by extending it to all of humanity, including Jews, Muslims, Pagans and, not least, women.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, after Guglielma was resurrected from the dead she would bring tongues of fire upon her devotees, the new apostles and seed of a revitalized, fresh Church.<sup>43</sup> Four wise men or women would then write four new Gospels, presumably to augment the preliminary scriptures Andreas already had composed.<sup>44</sup> Thus the full revelation of the Triune Godhead would be manifest in the parallelisms of the third epoch of history. And this phase of perfection was only just beginning.

Guglielma's devotees commissioned many works of art: her ornamented casket, various altar vessels (discussed below), and paintings of her. As noted above, a fresco of her was located at Chiaravalle above her tomb. In addition, a priest named Mirano de Garbagnate confessed to having personally painted several portraits of Guglielma under the guise of the popular martyr and virgin, Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Such disguised portraits were displayed in Santa Maria Minore, Santa Eufemia, and "elsewhere in many other places."<sup>45</sup> Devotees dedicated candles before these images and asked for Guglielma's intercession in their lives.<sup>46</sup> All of the above representations were conventionally pious, avoiding portrayals of Guglielma in a divine

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<sup>38</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 172.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 100. Author's translation.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 66, 78.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 108, 112, 114, 162–64, are just a few among many mentions of this belief.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 164, 166.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–74; see also 236, 240, and 272 for later mentions of these paintings.

<sup>46</sup> For instance, Danisio Cotta subsidized oil lamps at Guglielma's painting in Santa Maria for the benefit of his brother (*ibid.*, 240).

role and showing her, rather, as a saint. However, we know that Guglielma was portrayed as part of a Trinitarian grouping in a panel painting that once hung above the altar of the Humiliata house of Biassono. This foundation was Maifreda de Pirovano's home, and she confessed to the Inquisitors that either she herself, Andreas, or the sisters of Biassono had commissioned the painting, "but she did not recall which one of them." It depicted, "three persons, with the ones on the left and on the right dragging captives out of prison." Maifreda explained that, "at the time, she believed that Saint Guglielma had been the third person in the Trinity, and that through her the Jews and the Muslims would be saved; these were the ones who were portrayed on the left."<sup>47</sup> Apparently, then, the painting portrayed a Trinity with Jesus on the right redeeming Christians from the captivity of sin; at left, Guglielma fulfilled the parallel role for other religious groups.

This brings us back, then, to the Trinitarian sinopia. The Church of Saint Peter at the Humiliati Abbey of Viboldone clearly was one of the "other places" that housed Guglielmitic art. Again, this is not particularly surprising. Many leading devotees of Guglielma were members of the Humiliati order; the Abbey of Viboldone was the closest Humiliati foundation to the monastery of Chiaravalle; and the latter was the epicenter of the Guglielma cult. The iconography of the sinopia appears to be similar to that described by Maifreda for her own Humiliati foundation at Biassono: a Trinity, with three persons ranged side-by-side, and the one at the left representing Guglielma.

### **The Vicar of Guglielma**

The iconography at Viboldone is different from the description of the panel painting commissioned for the altar at Biassono in significant ways, however. The latter, Maifreda explained in her testimony, portrayed a parallelism between Guglielma on the left, and Jesus on the right, engaged in the work of salvation. Each one was delivering captives from prison, as a symbolic representation of the two divine persons' spiritual deliverance of various kinds of human sinners: Christians for Christ, and outsiders for Guglielma. The sinopia at Viboldone appears to be emphasizing a different kind of parallelism between the two incarnate Trinitarian persons, however, one related to the leadership of the faithful.

As with the lost painting at Biassono, the portrayal at Viboldone included more figures than the three persons of the Godhead. In the sinopia, at the upper register beside the angels holding the drapery appear some other figures. To the left of the angels are two people with their arms crossed at the wrist over their chests; to the far right there may be one or more people, but this section of the sketch is very faint and the details cannot be made out (fig. 3). The two people at left have haloes, so clearly both were considered to be among the saints. In addition, beside the three main Trinitarian persons kneel two other individuals, located to the left and right of the Trinitarian group (they are most clearly visible in Figure 4). These individuals clearly are *not* captives being released from prison, however, as in the Biassono composition.

Let us begin with the figure at lower right (fig. 7). This individual is male and bearded, and with a tonsured head encircled by a non-cruciform halo, indicating that he is a saint. He kneels before the young Jesus figure; like the Trinitarian persons, he holds up a chalice. Given these details, it seems most likely that this figure represents Saint Peter, conventionally portrayed as bearded and tonsured. Since he is carrying a vessel for the mass, he is clearly a member of the clerical hierarchy; since he genuflects before Jesus it would make sense that this figure is the

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<sup>47</sup> The last three quotes all *ibid.*, 80. Author's translation.

“vicar of Christ”: by tradition, the first pope of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, since the Church in which this sinopia is located was dedicated to Saint Peter, it fitting that Peter be included here. The recurrent Eucharistic references, via the chalices repeated in this sinopia, would have echoed the performance of the mass at the main altar located just below. As the body and the blood of Christ were transubstantiated from bread and wine below, so the visible body of Christ, and the chalice of his blood, were represented above. Peter, the first Pope and honored dedicatee of the Church itself, provides a link between heaven and earth.



Fig. 7. The smaller figure at far right, genuflecting to the Son, detail of fig. 4.  
Photo credit: author.

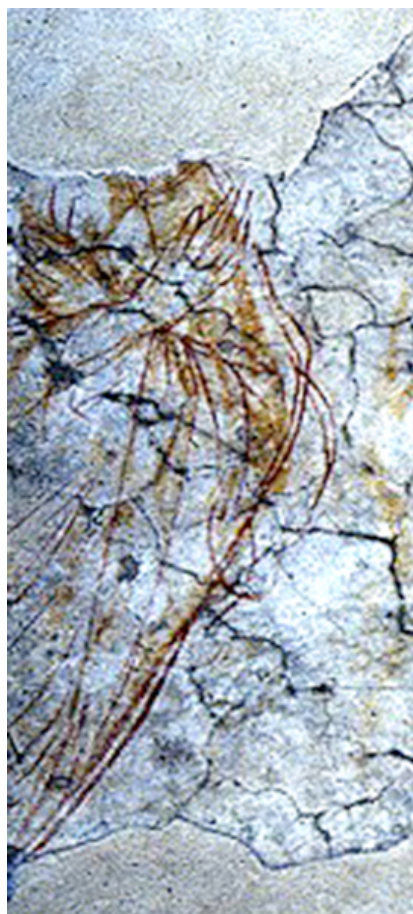


Fig. 8. The smaller figure at far left, near the Holy Spirit, detail of fig. 4.  
Photo credit: author.

What of the person kneeling to the left of the Trinitarian group (fig. 8)? This figure, unfortunately, is incomplete: a large plaster patch on the wall obscures the head. All that can be made out is a posture of humility and acceptance: in an echo of the two figures directly above, the person’s hands are crossed at the wrist across his or her chest, with the fingers relaxed and slightly apart. If my interpretation thus far is correct, then all three people at the far left—two in the upper register, and one below who is kneeling directly before the Guglielma figure of the Trinity—should be understood as some of the leading devotees of Guglielma, individuals

considered saints by the sect. It is tempting to suggest that the superior pair represents Andreas and Maifreda, and a case might be made to this effect. However, in fact I think it more likely that the single genuflecting figure in the lower register is Maifreda, which would leave the upper pair unidentified for now (though I shall later offer a possible suggestion).

My suggestion is guided by the principle of concordance that was so important to Guglielma's devotees. If the figure kneeling at far right is Peter, the vicar of Christ, then the corresponding person genuflecting at left would logically be the vicar of Guglielma. And indeed, Maifreda de Pirovano was identified in the trial record as the vicar of Guglielma, a new, female pope for the new age of the Holy Spirit. As two female witnesses, Lady Petra de Alzate and Lady Katella dei Giozi, together explained to their testimony before the Inquisitors:

Andreas often used to say that Maifreda was going to become the pope, and the vicar of Guglielma on earth, just as the blessed apostle Peter was the vicar of Christ. And so, she would have the power of binding just as Peter did, for just as Guglielma was the Holy Spirit in the form of a woman, so Maifreda would become the vicar of Guglielma in the form of a woman.<sup>48</sup>

Such language was typical: when witnesses discussed Maifreda's role as the first pope of the new Age of the Holy Spirit, they typically drew direct parallels between her role as vicar of Guglielma, and Peter's as vicar of Christ.<sup>49</sup> And just as Peter had established a Church as an instrument of salvation for Christians, Maifreda would initiate a new Church, making it an instrument of salvation for outsiders. With the resurrected Guglielma's backing, Maifreda would take the place of Pope Boniface VIII, who was regarded by some as an invalid usurper who had illegitimately seized papal power while his predecessor was still living.<sup>50</sup> Once safely seated upon the papal throne in Rome, with the papal tiara upon her brow, Maifreda would baptize Jews, Muslims, and other external peoples, thus bringing Guglielma's salvation to these groups.<sup>51</sup> Other devotees of Guglielma would likewise assume important clerical roles: a female pauper named Taria, for example, was slated to become a cardinal.<sup>52</sup>

### **Easter, 1300**

It was this belief in Maifreda's imminent papal reign that, more than anything else, ultimately led to the group's downfall in 1300. The year was significant: a papal Jubilee year, and likewise a year strongly associated with apocalyptic revolution in Joachite circles, after 1260 had passed without incident. Tapping in to this mood of transformation, Maifreda and Andreas convinced themselves and many others that 1300 would be the year of Guglielma's resurrection and initiation of the new world. In keeping with the belief that Guglielma was the Holy Spirit, the event was expected to occur on the feast of Pentecost: May 29, 1300 would be a momentous hinge of history to a new world. The group had prepared extensively for this special day. A luxurious purple gown, a purple cloak with a giant silver clasp, and gold-encrusted sandals were

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<sup>48</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 118. Author's translation.

<sup>49</sup> For example, *ibid.*, 100, 108, 118, 126-8, 132, 140, 164, 166, 222.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 74, 208-10. Boniface's papal predecessor, the saintly hermit Celestine V, had stepped down soon after assuming office. When Boniface was elected, he imprisoned the elderly Celestine in order to prevent a schism; the elderly man subsequently perished. Boniface was widely execrated as a usurper and murderer in consequence.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 120, 166, 174.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

prepared for Guglielma to wear once she arose from her tomb, for example.<sup>53</sup> Lady Petra and Lady Katella testified that they had donated large quantities of pearls to the group out of devotion to “their Lady,” and it seems likely that these items were used for embroidering the clothing.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, Maifreda and Andreas decided to prepare the way for Guglielma’s resurrection with a special Easter mass that spring. It seems that many others in the inner circle of devotion became involved. They commissioned precious altar vessels and cloths, as well as dalmatics and other priestly garb.<sup>55</sup> Then, on Easter Sunday, Maifreda celebrated high mass, assisted by others in the group, both men (including one named Felixino or “little Felix”) and women. As Lady Sibilia Malconzato described the scene months later, in September, to the Inquisitors:

On the last Easter feast that just passed, Sister Maifreda de Pirovano dressed up in the manner of a priest. Sister Flordebellina, Sister Anexina, and Andreas Saramita and Franceschino Malconzato all wore dalmatics; and Albertone de Novate, “Little Felix” Karentano, and Ottorino de Garbagnato all had on white tunics. They prepared a paten for an altar, and they had a chalice and other necessities for celebrating mass. Sister Maifreda said the Mass: she had a Host that she elevated, and she did everything in her mass just as a priest does it.<sup>56</sup>

Soon thereafter the group was denounced to the Inquisition by their very own “Judas,” Gerardo da Novazzano.<sup>57</sup> Maifreda begged the other devotees to say nothing about the mass to the Inquisitors, intuiting that if this event became known, it could mean her own and Andreas’ deaths.<sup>58</sup> Inquiries began on 20 July and continued until December; nearly three dozen individuals were examined and around sixty individuals were named in the testimony.<sup>59</sup>

The materials from the trial, while extensive, are unfortunately incomplete: we lack most of the sentencing phase, for example, and likely certain witness interviews as well. While originally two notebooks were dedicated to the interrogation of those involved in the Guglielmite devotion, only one survives, and even that one appears to have been edited.<sup>60</sup> We do have a few petitions for forgiveness from members of the group, some of whom were excommunicated, and others of whom were fined and forced to wear yellow crosses upon their outer clothing as sumptuary signifiers of their status as convicted heretics.<sup>61</sup> One sentence survives, against a Humiliata sister named Giacomina dei Bassani, of the Humiliati monastery of Nova. She was convicted of being a relapsed heretic, for she had been interviewed during the previous inquiry in 1284. Therefore she was “released to the secular arm” for execution, likely by burning.<sup>62</sup> A reference in the later part of the trial to Andreas Saramita as the “late” Andreas reveals that he died some time between the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 74, 92, 96, 106, 210, 266.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 114–16, 132, 140, 234–36, 254.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 214. Author’s translation.

<sup>57</sup> His detailed deposition on 18 July led to the opening of the formal inquiry. See Ibid., 90–94. Reference to a Judas figure is on page 74.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>59</sup> Marina Benedetti, “Personaggi e luoghi di un’eresia Milanese,” in *ibid.*, 31–48, at 32.

<sup>60</sup> The history of the documentation for the inquisition against the Guglielmites is tangled and fascinating. A concise history, along with a reconstruction of why some of the material appears to have been lost or altered, is offered by Newman, “Heretic Saint,” 21–23.

<sup>61</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 262; 264; 280–82 and 282–84; 286; 288, 290; 292; 294–96;

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 202–04.



second and the ninth of September: most likely he, too, was found to be relapsed and executed.<sup>63</sup> Around the same time Guglielma's remains also were disinterred and destroyed, to prevent any focal point in case her cult should revive.<sup>64</sup> The scriptures and worship rite the group had penned—some of which the Inquisitors had introduced as evidence at the trial—undoubtedly fueled some of these pyres. And while Maifreda de Pirovano survived Andreas for a short time, her days also were numbered. We know from a source from the 1320s that Sister Maifreda de Pirovano likewise perished at the stake.<sup>65</sup>

Clearly by December 1300 any publicly known artworks pertaining to the group would either have been destroyed by the inquisitors, or painted over by their owners. Thus the incomplete state of the sinopia at Viboldone would suggest that it had been sketched before the trial, but was still unfinished when the group was suppressed. Perhaps in the immediate aftermath it was whitewashed before being later re-plastered, along with the rest of the Church, in the post-medieval centuries. However, the parallelism that the Guglielmites perceived between Maifreda and Saint Peter supports the interpretation that the figure at left represents her as the vicar of Guglielma. While such an identification cannot definitively be proven, given the broader historical context and the other figures in the artwork, it is a likely reconstruction. The final detail about this figure that invites analysis, then, is the pose, which differs from Peter's at right but which is similar to that of the pair of figures directly above. Rather than holding aloft a Eucharistic chalice, as Peter does, "Maifreda" has her arms held lightly before her chest and crossed at the wrists. What does this pose mean and how might it relate to the history of this group?

The gesture was to become a conventional one in later medieval painting, for signifying humility and acceptance. In the year 1300, however, usage of this gesture "was considered innovatory by many artists and workshops. [...] [I]ts novelty forms part of the appeal it obviously had at the time."<sup>66</sup> Within the canon of medieval iconography, variations of this pose most frequently appear in two image types associated with the Virgin Mary: the Annunciation and the Coronation. Portrayals of Gabriel's annunciation to the Virgin emphasize the latter's willingness to submit to the will of God. Mary appears in a variety of postures in Annunciation scenes: Michael Baxandall has argued that Mary's different postures correspond to five different moments in her interaction with Gabriel, ranging from her initial surprise, to her interrogation of the angel and conversation with him, to her reflection and consideration, and finally, her humble submission and acceptance of her role.<sup>67</sup> In the latter moment, the Virgin crosses her arms across

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>64</sup> Throughout the early part of the trial, Guglielma consistently is described as "[she] who is buried at Chiaravalle." Later, the tense of this formulation shifts from *est sepulta* ["is buried"] to *erat sepulta* ["used to be buried"] and later to *fuit sepulta* ["once was buried"]. See *ibid.*, 222, 254. These alterations of language show that Guglielma's body was exhumed from its place of honor in Chiaravalle. A later reference to her remains being burned occurs on page 304.

<sup>65</sup> Benedetti, *Io non sono Dio*, 40–41.

<sup>66</sup> Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 74.

<sup>67</sup> See Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, 72–87; Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 50–55. A good introduction to a variety of representations of Annunciation scenes is Ann van Dijk, "The Angelic Salutation in Early Byzantine and Medieval Annunciation Imagery," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (1999): 420–36; a specific exploration of Giotto's influential version of the scene of Mary's submission is Laura Jacobus, "Giotto's Annunciation in the Arena Chapel, Padua," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 1 (1999): 93–107. For discussion of a somewhat later Annunciation in a specifically Humilati foundation, also focusing on the moment of submission, see

her body in a gesture of assent. The Scriptural verse that is associated with the moment is Luke 1:38 *Ecce ancilla Dei* or, “Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord,” a passage that stresses Mary’s submissive service to God. Thus this position is one that specifically signals the Virgin’s acceptance of her special destiny. The other motif, the Coronation of the Virgin, very commonly shows Mary in a similar pose, sometimes with her palms turned slightly upward.<sup>68</sup> Like the theme of the Annunciation, the iconography of the Coronation of the Virgin emphasizes Mary’s humble acceptance of a grace conferred directly by God. The scene appears to be inspired by a portion of the Office of the Assumption of the Virgin, *Veni electa mea et ponam in te thronum meum*, or “Come, my chosen one and I shall set my throne in you.”<sup>69</sup> In both contexts the scene stresses Mary’s submissiveness and humility, and her consciousness of being uniquely honored.

The gesture, then, signifies a state of humble receptivity and blessedness for a person uniquely graced by God. As Moshe Barasch points out, it may also convey a sense of willingness to sacrifice, in order to act as the instrument of God.<sup>70</sup> Such a pose certainly would have been fitting for a portrayal of Maifreda as the designated vicar-to-be of the Holy Spirit. The Guglielmites regarded their society as teetering upon the cusp of a new age of history—a moment of complete reconciliation and fulfillment of all prior historical processes. Maifreda was to be the chief instrument of God in this process, for she was designated as the new pontiff who would lead the Church into the renewal of the Third Age. However at the time the fresco was designed Maifreda’s papacy was still yet to come; the heirs of Peter still occupied that role. Hence the divergence in her posture and Peter’s at right. Ultimately, Maifreda herself was bolder than the Viboldone artist, for she acquired altar vessels for her Easter Mass, celebrated even before the anticipated resurrection of her Lady. The chalice that Maifreda arrogated to herself in life was not granted to her in the planned fresco. To portray Maifreda in a pose that conveys humble consciousness of her own election by God for a favored role, however, makes perfect sense.

Finally, we turn to the two haloed figures above, to the left of the angels, who also surely were leading “saints” in the development of the Guglielma cult. (A magnified detail of this pair is shown in Figure 9.) One unusual detail is the eyes of these individuals, which appear to be enlarged and glowing, as if in ecstasy, as they gaze down adoringly at Guglielma. The individual in front has an uncovered head, whose abundant cropped curls indicate a man; his arms are crossed in a pose similar to “Maifreda’s” below. The individual in back is somewhat harder to read but may possibly be wearing a veil, which would indicate a woman; and her hand gesture seems to be the conventional one of palms steeped in prayer or devotion. Clearly these two must be likewise have been important vessels for the Guglielmite group, though in a different way than Maifreda. Inevitably, Andreas Saramita seems to be a likely candidate for the front one of

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Julia Miller and Laurie Taylor-Mitchell, “Humility and Piety: The ‘Annunciation’ in the Church of Ognissanti in Florence,” *Studies in Iconography* 30 (2009): 42–71.

<sup>68</sup> The version of the Coronation of the Virgin that survives in the Abbey of Chiaravalle features this gesture. See Gregori, “Giusto de’ Menabuoi,” fig. 64. For other examples see Philippe Verdier, *Le Couronnement de la Vierge: Les origines et les premiers développements d’un thème iconographique* (Montreal: Vrin, 1980); Keith Christiansen, “The ‘Coronation of the Virgin’ by Gentile Da Fabriano,” *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 6/7 (1978/1979): 1–12; Simona Di Nepi, Ashok Roy, and Rachel Billinge, “Bernardo Daddi’s ‘Coronation of the Virgin’: The Reunion of Two Long-Separated Panels,” *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 28 (2007): 4–25.

<sup>69</sup> Gertrude Coor-Achenbach, “The Earliest Italian Representation of the Coronation of the Virgin,” *The Burlington Magazine* 99, no. 655 (Oct., 1957): 332; Caroline Villers and Astrid Lehner, “Observations on the Coronation of the Virgin Attributed to Guido Da Siena in the Courtauld Institute Gallery, London,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 65, no. 3 (2002): 292, also note this verse, though they mistakenly changed the final word to “coro.”

<sup>70</sup> Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, 85.

these two figures. He was, after all, sometimes referred to as Guglielma's "firstborn son,"<sup>71</sup> and the herald of her revelation. The similarity of his gesture to Maifreda's would make sense since the two of them were acknowledged as collaborators and leaders by the others. Intriguingly, in an artwork from around 1450, which Barbara Newman has argued shows Maifreda and Andreas being blessed by Guglielma, Andreas is shown in exactly the same crossed-wrists pose the Viboldone artist utilized in the sinopia.<sup>72</sup> Newman's suggestion is that the later painting may have been closely modeled after a private devotional image that was created by the original group of devotees and handed down through the generations. If Newman's interpretation and my own both are correct, then this would indicate that the gesture of crossed wrists was one of particular iconographic significance to the Guglielmite group.



Fig. 9. The two smaller figures at top left, magnified detail of fig. 3.  
Photo credit: ho visto nina volare.

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<sup>71</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 254.

<sup>72</sup> The painting is reproduced in Newman, "Heretic Saint," 3, fig. 2.

A potential identification for the individual behind “Andreas” might be the latter’s mother Ricadonna, who appears to have been an early and quite ardent devotee of Guglielma. She was deceased at the time of the inquiry, having died naturally some ten years before,<sup>73</sup> but she had been interviewed in the earlier, 1284 inquisition against the group. Though at that time Ricadonna Saramita foreswore her beliefs before the inquisitor, Andreas later testified that his mother maintained the belief that Guglielma was the Holy Spirit right up to the time of her death.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, perhaps Andreas even “inherited” a leading status within the group from his mother, since devotion to Guglielma appears to have been shared by the whole Saramita family (including Andreas’s sister Meliora as well). It would make sense to pair these two family members together, though ultimately the suggestion that the pair represents the two leading Saramitas remains speculative.

### Final Thoughts

If the Abbey of Viboldone was involved in the Guglielmite devotion, then why did the inquisitors not interview any members of this Humiliati foundation so very close to Chiaravalle? A final answer remains elusive. The most obvious suggestion would be that testimony was indeed solicited from members of the Viboldone community, but was recorded in the lost second notebook of the trial. Yet it is worth noting that the apparent exclusion of Viboldone from the materials we possess is not an isolated oversight: no monks from the Abbey of Chiaravalle were ever interviewed in the surviving record either, despite the very clear centrality of Chiaravalle to Guglielmite devotion. We know that the Cistercians of Chiaravalle hosted gatherings of her devotees on her feast days; and that on these occasions they preached about Guglielma’s merits.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the abbot of Chiaravalle actually pursued legal challenges against the legality of the inquisitorial inquiry: together with a monk named Marchisio da Veddano, the abbot attempted by various means to declare the inquisitors’ authority in Milan illegitimate in 1300.<sup>76</sup> Such behavior must surely have raised red flags about the involvement of the brothers in the worship of Guglielma and what they might have to hide. Likewise, we know that the Abbott’s collaborator in this enterprise, Marchisio da Veddano, was a particularly ardent devotee of Guglielma. Several witnesses recalled how he avidly preached about her on several occasions, once before a large assemblage of 129 persons; yet he, too, was never interviewed.<sup>77</sup> In fact, he even became abbot of Chiaravalle in 1303, just three years after a handful of the others in the group were burned at the stake. As Marina Benedetti has argued, the cult of Guglielma had both an orthodox and a heretical arm: in the years before the inquisition of 1300 the monks of Chiaravalle may well have regarded Guglielma as a typical medieval *santa viva*, even as Andreas and Maifreda were disseminating unorthodox teachings about her as the Holy Spirit incarnate. Whatever the case may be, given the absence of any interviews with the monks of Chiaravalle, the lack of any testimony from the Viboldone community seems less surprising. Either no members of the community in either foundation were interviewed; or (more likely) their testimony was kept in a separate dossier of documents and then lost—the tantalizing second notebook.

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<sup>73</sup> Benedetti, *PI*, 124. See also 58, 176.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 144, 146, 148, 152, 184, 268.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 184; 206–08.

<sup>77</sup> Newman, “Heretic Saint,” 14.

Perhaps some day we will learn more about the relationship between the Abbey of Viboldone and the devotees of Guglielma as a female Holy Spirit. The sinopia is our best clue, yet an enigmatic one. For now, Guglielma's image simply continues to smile down mysteriously upon the altar of the Church of Saint Peter in the monastery.