

Marie Vymazalová

Forgotten Paintings of the Adoration of Christ in Prague's Hradčany

ANNOTATION

The text interprets the main altar canvas from the Church of the Nativity of our Lord in the early Baroque complex of Prague's Loreta and the entire pilgrimage site through the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Based on the records of the Capuchin Annals and other archival sources, it opens up the hitherto overlooked question of the origin of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord, which was significantly and repeatedly rebuilt in the first half of the 18th century. Despite this, the original altar canvas has been used again and again, which shows the great local respect for this work or motif. The article also points out the relation of this motif with the text of the Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden (* 1303 – † 1373) and other literary sources, especially those associated with Franciscan spirituality, such as the work of Saint Lawrence of Brindisi (* 1559 – † 1619). Comparison of the altar canvas and its older version in the Prague Castle collections with a Lombard group of paintings on the same theme, interpreted as an atypical local representation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, and other described features, allow to assess that the Prague paintings, as well as the layout of the pilgrimage site itself, refer to this theological motif.

SUMMARY

The article interprets the motif of the adoration of Christ by the Virgin Mary, resp. its variant with composition exceptional in the Czech environment, which repeatedly occurs in Prague's Hradčany – in Loreta (the main altarpiece of the Nativity Church, the decoration of the treasures, old prints, etc.) and on a painting from the Prague Castle collections. This motif is unique in its locally limited occurrence and its hitherto unnoticed detailed religious content, which follows the theological teachings of the time and is also reflected in the entire layout of the famous Loreta pilgrimage site.

The main altarpiece of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord in Loreta has been completely overlooked by the literature (Fig. 1). The painting shows the Virgin Mary standing in a landscape, dressed in a dark blue tunic with a gold border. Mary is plain-haired, her attitude expressing a gesture of humility and adoration towards the baby Jesus. The naked child lies on a cloth (textile), one end of which is wrapped around his hand, the other end is knotted. Above the child, a gnarled tree grows from exposed roots. On closer inspection, the canvas has been clearly lengthened at the top and bottom. The authorship and dating of the painting have not yet been fully clarified; the only information repeated is that the painting was based on another older work. The painting is obviously older than the altar and the church itself, which was gradually expanded to its present form between 1717 and 1738.

The pilgrimage site was founded on 3 June 1626 by Countess Benigna Kateřina of Lobkowitz (* 1594 – † 1653) and it took more than a hundred years to develop into the present complex consisting of the Holy House, the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord, the cloister with six chapels and a treasury (sources: ŘK; LRR; KPK; literature: DIVIŠ 1972; VILÍMKOVÁ 1974; BAŠTA/BAŠTOVÁ 2016; 2017; BRČÁK 2022). The Holy House was completed as early as 1627, the cloister with towers around the larger chapel in 1640 (VILÍMKOVÁ 1974, 11). The designation "larger chapel" must have referred to the liturgical space within the eastern building of the complex, as evidenced by the masonry from the oldest construction phase found in the church shell. The canvas of the *Adoration of Christ* could therefore have been intended for the original chapel, since its composition was already known in the Prague Loreta in 1700, as evidenced by the contemporary pilgrimage text *Lauretanischer Blumen-Garten* (BÍLOVSKÝ 1700, 157–161, Fig. 159; Fig. 4).

The reverence for this motif in Loreta site is evidenced by many other depictions - on the door of the silver tabernacle for the Loreta church (BAŠTA/BAŠTOVÁ 2016, 68; Fig. 5), on the Waldstein monstrance and the Waldstein chalice (DIVIŠ 1987, 96, 109, 202, 203; Fig. 6) in the Loreta treasure, and on the portrait of Countess Marie Markéta Waldstein (Fig. 7).

A second large painting with an almost identical composition is in the Prague Castle collections and dates from around 1600 (Fig. 8). The painting was first recorded in the castle collections, specifically in the court chapel, in

1832 as a very fine work by Josef Heintz (OPH 1832, item inv. no. 350). Later, the authorship was variously changed, until finally the work remained anonymous. Olga Pujmanová published the painting as a work of the Venetian school of the second half of the 16th century (PUJMANOVÁ 2000; PUJMANOVÁ/PŘIBYL 2008, 407–408).

The sequence of the observed motif of the adoration of Christ at Hradčany can be proposed as follows: around 1600, the *Adoration of Christ* was painted by a master who knew the Venetian artistic environment. Between 1640 and 1663 this motif was reused by an unknown master for the altarpiece in the Chapel of the Nativity of Our Lord in Loreta. In the early 18th century, the altarpiece was enlarged and reinstalled in the new church building and the motif was repeated on other works of art. However, there are many blank spaces in these time series. The iconographic analysis of the composition itself reveals its relationship to the particular spirituality of the Franciscan order. The iconography is based on the text of the *Vision of St. Bridget of Sweden* (* 1303 – † 1373), which describes the painless birth of the Virgin Mary (MORRIS/SEARBY 2012, book 7, ch. 21, 250–251; see OEN 2018). Compositionally, the work is based on the Lombard tradition, specifically from the area around the church Santa Maria della Pace in Milan, which was a monastic church of Amadeiti. In a study of Lombard artworks with this motif Elena RAMPI (1996) describes this composition of the adoration of Christ as a specific local expression of the Immaculate Conception, created through the collaboration of an artist and a theologian, in an attempt to bring the faithful closer to a future dogma that was both controversial and visually difficult to grasp (RAMPI 1996, 13; on the iconography see FRANCIÀ 2005; on the dogma see SEYBOLD/KÖSTER/LECHNER 1994; WOLF 2005).

The paintings in the collections of the Prague Castle and the Prague Loreta thus represent the theme of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary as interpreted by the Franciscan spirituality and the Lombard group. Compared to the Lombard examples, however, it is evident that the painting from Prague Castle is not a copy of either of them. The connection of the very motif of adoration of Christ with Franciscan spirituality is not accidental and the Loreta painting is clearly connected with the neighbouring Capuchin monastery. The painting from the castle's collections, dating around 1600, is also probably connected to the Capuchin Order. In those years the first Capuchin mission led by St. Lawrence of Brindisi (* 1559 – † 1619) came to Prague and the foundation of the monastery in Hradčany became a major controversial event with many prominent actors of the political scene of the time (DRENAS 2018, 57–85; BRČÁK/WOLF 2020b; INGEGNERI 2021b).

As a contemporary example of Franciscan literary theological production, Lawrence's Sermons *Mariale* can offer some support for the specific compositional elements of the two Prague paintings. Olga Pujmanová explains the finger on the mouth (Fig. 12), for example, with reference to the biblical texts of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, in whom God touched their mouths to begin their preaching mission (PUJMANOVÁ 2000, 22–23, 83–84; Isa 6:7; Jr 1:9). However, Lawrence's text relies not only on these Old Testament quotations, but also on the New Testament, in the context of forgiveness, fear of God, and sincere faith in God, which must come not only from the lips but also from the heart (LAURENTIUS 1964, 275; reference to Mk 7:6; English translation LAWRENCE 2007, 259; cf. also LAURENTIUS 1964, 569; reference to Isa 6:6–7, 2 Sam 6:6–7; English translation LAWRENCE 2007, 526). This motif may also be identified with the New Testament verses of Christ's innocence that Lawrence quotes (1 Pet 2:22, which quotes Isa 53:9; cf. LAURENTIUS 1964, 443–444, referring to SCR. 4:7; further, e.g., p. 237; English translation by LAWRENCE 2007, 223, 409). Furthermore, the human and divine nature of the child could also be related to the branching tree that grows above him. Its exposed roots refer to Isaiah's prophecy that from the roots of Jesse a shoot will come forth that will bear fruit (Isa. 11:1; LAURENTIUS 1964, 419, references to Isa. 7:14 and 11:1–2; for further citations see pp. 11, 198, 214, 458; English translation LAWRENCE 2007, 387; further citations e.g. pp. 23, 186, 202, 423). Moreover, the Jesse tree is one of the iconographic themes accompanying the Immaculate Conception (FRANCIÀ 2004, 36) and a symbol of the anticipated coming of the Messiah.

The question of why the theme of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary appears in Prague's Loreta is clearly answered by its local context: the Holy House of Loreta is a reminder of the house in Nazareth where the Annunciation took place. This is one of the fundamental arguments of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Throughout the grounds of the Loreta, other elements also bear the Immaculate Conception motif, such as the dedication of the "great chapel" to the Nativity and the cloister, which can be seen as an allusion to the *hortus conclusus*, also very closely linked to this tradition. All three of these basic components of the Loreta complex (the Holy House, the cloister and the great chapel) thus refer to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Equally important and supporting this conclusion is the political dimension of this pilgrimage site. Within the *pietatis austriacae*, as Marie-Élizabeth Ducreux points out, the Virgin Mary was primarily identified with the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary (DUCREUX 2023, 111, 123).

The theological idea of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary is thus related both to Franciscan religious spirituality and to the political situation of the Bohemian lands after the reign of the Habsburg dynasty, and its reflection can be found not only in parts of the artistic decoration of the Prague Loreta, but also in its entire architectural layout.

Fig. 1. Unknown Master, 1640s–60s: *Adoration of Christ*. Painting from the high altar of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord, oil on canvas, 320 × 192 cm (inv. no. Lor-002, Loreta, Prague-Hradčany; photo © Province of the Capuchins in the Czech Republic, 2022).

Fig. 2. Anonym, 1682: The oldest known depiction of Loreta pasted into the manuscript of the account book *Verzeichnusz desz jenigen Geldts*. Copper engraving on paper, 153 × 75 mm (NA ŘK, inv. no. 69, s. p.; photo © Province of the Capuchins in the Czech Republic).

Fig. 3. Gerard de Groos, 1694: Loreta in Prague at Hradčany. Frontispiece of Prager Laureten-Büchlein guidebook to the pilgrimage site, Copper engraving on paper, 125 × 74 mm (taken from COCHEM 1694; photo © Province of the Capuchins in the Czech Republic).

Fig. 4. Graphic depiction of the *Adoration of Christ* altarpiece in the Lauretanischer Blumen-Garten guidebook from 1700 (taken from BÍLOVSKÝ 1700, 159).

Fig. 5. Leopold Lichtenschopf, Prague, ca 1718–1725: Tabernacle. Silver, partly gilded, gilded brass, wooden construction, 186 × 132 cm (Loreta Treasure, inv. no. N-107, Loreta, Prague-Hradčany; photo © Province of the Capuchins in the Czech Republic, 2022). On the **left** – complete work; on the **right** – detail of the *Adoration* relief on the door.

Fig. 6. J. M. Schick, Prague, 1721: Monstrance and chalice of a Waldstein set. Complete set and details of medallions with *Adoration*: Chalice (**right**) – silver partly gilded, amethysts, quartz crystals, enamel; h. 31 cm; monstrance (**bottom**) – silver partly gilded, quartz crystals, amethysts, smoky quartz, citrines, enamel; h. 82,5; w. of glow 40 cm (Loreta Treasure, inv. no. P-068C and P-070C, Loreta, Prague-Hradčany; photo © Province of the Capuchins in the Czech Republic, 2022).

Fig. 7. Anonym, 1st half of the 18th century. Portrait of Countess Marie Markéta Waldstein, née Czernin of Chudenice with a miniature of the *Adoration* altarpiece. Oil painting on canvas, 230 × 144 cm (inv. no. P-002, Loreta, Prague-Hradčany; photo © Province of the Capuchins in the Czech Republic, 2022). On the **left** – the painting; on the **right** – detail of the *Adoration* miniature.

Fig. 8. Unknown Venetian master, ca 1600–1602: *Adoration of Christ*. Oil on canvas, 210 × 162 cm (Prague Castle Picture Gallery, inv. no. O 161; © Prague Castle Administration, photo Jan Gloc, 2021).

Fig. 9. Unknown Italian master, undated (16th century): *Adoration of Christ (Madonna della Pace)*. Side chapel of the church, former convent of Santa Maria della Pace, Milan (photo by Enrico Engelmann, 2016; available at <<http://www.milanofotografo.it/englishFotografiaDettagliFoto.aspx?ID=1644>>).

Fig. 10. Giovanni Ambrogio Bevilacqua (attributed), late 15th/early 16th century: *Adoration of Christ (Madonna in adorazione del Bambino)*. Oil on wood panel, 144 × 85 cm (Musei Civici di Pavia, La Pinacoteca Malaspina, inv. no. P10; available at <<https://malaspina.museicivici.pavia.it/SCHEDA/?id=9>>).

Fig. 11. Giovanni Ambrogio Bevilacqua, early 16th century (c. 1500/1510): *Adoration of Christ (Maria, das Kind anbetend)*. Tempera on canvas, 152 × 107 cm (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, sign. Gal.-Nr. 68, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Dresden; available at <<https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/217845>>).

Fig. 12. Unknown Master, 1640s–60s: *Adoration of Christ*. Detail of the Fig. 1. Altarpiece in the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord (inv. no. Lor-002, Loreta, Prague-Hradčany; photo © Province of the Capuchins in the Czech Republic, 2022).

Translation by Linda Foster