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The Birth of Sacrifice: Iconographic Metaphors for Spiritual Rebirth in Master Matthias' Isenheim Altarpiece

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THE BIRTH OF SACRIFICE: ICONOGRAPHIC METAPHORS
FOR SPIRITUAL REBIRTH IN MASTER MATTHIAS’
ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE

by

Katherine Anderson Tuft

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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ABSTRACT

THE BIRTH OF SACRIFICE: ICONOGRAPHIC METAPHORS FOR SPIRITUAL REBIRTH IN MASTER MATTHIAS’ ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE

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Department of Humanities

Master of Arts

While little is known concerning the events surrounding the commission of the Isenheim Altarpiece or of the artist known to us as Master Matthias Grünewald, much can be ascertained about the message of the Altarpiece through careful study of the socio-historical-religious context from which the work was commissioned and iconographic analysis of the images portrayed by Master Matthias. This thesis explores iconographic metaphors for birth and sacrifice, metaphors which work to create a theological dialogue about Christian redemption within the nine painted panels and the underlying sculpture that makes up the Isenheim Altarpiece.

First, we will address the panels in the middle position of the Isenheim Altarpiece, which reveals events from the life of Mary. Since the Madonna is a prominent figure in the Altarpiece panels, understanding her role in sixteenth century Christian theology as birth mother of the Savior and as an especial example of bringing forth good fruit by virtue of obedience and humility is crucial to understanding the Marian iconography of
the panels. In the center of the triptych, immediately following the *Annunciation* panel in the middle position, we see a celebration of Christ’s birth in the *Concert of Angels* panel. When replaced by the folded wings depicting the Crucifixion, the *Concert of Angels* panel creates a discussion of rebirth through the sacrifice and death of the Savior which is symbolized by the Resurrection displayed in the final panel of the middle position. Through the use of iconographic devices which reference different panels within the Altarpiece, Grünewald creates a dialogue of redemption and rebirth through Jesus’ mortal birth mother, the Virgin Mary. This dialogue extends to images of saints and disciples who find spiritual rebirth through conversation and help to build the kingdom of God on earth through their exemplary lives. Even the faithful followers of Christ numbered in the audience of the Isenheim Altarpiece are given a role in the dialogue of rebirth through conversion by bearing virtue, rather than vice, in the attitude of Mary and the saints.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents, my best friend and husband, and our growing family.
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1 The Role of Mary in Doctrine and Devotion Leading up to the 16th Century

1.1 Introduction
The Isenheim Altarpiece is a double winged triptych consisting of nine painted panels including a predella by the artist known as Matthias Grünewald. The panels open to reveal one set of sculptures in the center position and another in the predella attributed to the atelier of Nicolas de Haguenau. The Virgin Mary figures prominently in the Altarpiece, particularly when the wings are in the closed and middle positions (see figures 1, 2, and 3). As a key character in the Isenheim panels, Mary can aid our understanding of how the seemingly disparate scenes of the Altarpiece panels, from the Savior’s Crucifixion to scenes of the hermits Paul and Anthony, fit together in a unified theme. As birth mother of the redeeming Christ, and therefore, of His Gospel, Mary’s prominence in the Altarpiece becomes a symbol for the overarching theme of spiritual rebirth through “bearing” Christ’s gospel.

With this in mind, the scenes of the middle position of the Altarpiece, transitioning from scenes of Mary’s life beginning with her consent to be the Savior’s birth mother in the Annunciation to the Resurrection scene, becomes a natural sequence paralleling Christ’s physical, mortal birth with his “rebirth” in the Resurrection (fig. 2). The same cycle can also be seen in the Crucifixion panel (fig. 1). Christ is shown suffering on the cross, symbolic of his atonement by which mankind can be cleansed from their sins and be “reborn” into a perfect state through conversion. Mary, the birth
mother, faints in the swoon of childbirth, reminding sixteenth century audiences of her role in the birth of the Savior whereby mankind was given the opportunity to be spiritually reborn through Jesus. The remaining panels of the retable show images of the saints. The faithful, who are portrayed both in painting and sculpture, can be seen as “birth mothers” of the Savior because they bear the Word of God by preaching His gospel.

In this chapter, we will contemplate the handmaiden of the Lord who nurtured the baby Jesus and fulfilled the literal role of birth mother to Jesus. In examining the role that Mary held in doctrine and devotion leading up to the sixteenth century, we may more fully understand the significance that the Isenheim panels held for their contemporary audience. Although the first woman, Eve, brought death through her disobedience, Mary brings the hope of eternal life through her obedience in birthing the Savior, even becoming Theotokos, Ecclesia, Intercessor, and the ultimate example of righteousness in both Catholic and Protestant circles. In chapter two, we will move from the discussion of Mary’s motherhood to a more general survey of the motherhood role fulfilled by sixteenth century women in order to understand the extensive use of feminine experience to describe the process of spiritual rebirth during the period in which the Isenheim Altarpiece was created. Finally, chapters three and four will delve into the iconography of the Altarpiece, explaining the symbolism used to unify the seemingly disparate panels in their message of birth and redemption through the death and sacrifice of the Savior.

1.2 The Eva / Ave Parallel

While the full complexity of Marian devotion cannot be extensively explored in this paper, it is necessary to understand some early beliefs that persisted into the sixteenth

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1 For more on the iconography of the swoon, see chapter three of this thesis.
century in order to grasp the full meaning of Marian iconography in Grünewald’s panels. Perhaps one of the most important legends surrounding Mary is her parallel with Eve. Indeed, most of medieval Christianity saw Mary as the new Eve and this idea persisted into the Renaissance, even for many reformers. The angel’s greeting of “Ave” signified the reversal of original sin caused by “Eva” in the fall. Indeed, with the Angel Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary, the first mortal being, even a woman, was brought in to play “a pivotal role in salvation history.” The Eve/Mary comparison was made by Justin Martyr (c. 100/114-c. 162/168) in Dialogue with the Jew Trypho in which Justin Martyr tells of his conversion. The actual event is said to have taken place between 155 and 161, but the account comes down to us in writing from a codex at Paris dating from 1364, which shows the acknowledgment of the story in the late medieval period. In chapter 100 of the defense, Justin Martyr compares Mary with Eve. He says,

He [Christ, the Son of God] is born of the Virgin, in order that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it had originated. For Eve, an undefiled virgin, conceived the word of the serpent, and brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary, filled with faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her, and therefore the Holy One born of her would be the Son of God, answered: "Be it done unto me according to Thy word." And, indeed, she gave birth to Him. . . by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who have

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4 Kreitzer, Reforming, 36.
become like the serpent, but frees from death those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ.\textsuperscript{5}

Even in this early example, Mary is held up as an example of the goodness which comes from obedience, while Eve is the ultimate example of spiritual death caused by disobedience. Both Mary and Eve are “undefiled” virgins. According to Justin Martyr, Eve “conceived the word of the serpent,” while Mary conceived the Word of God, which would crush the serpent. In short, Eve brought forth disobedience and death, while Mary brought forth redemption and life. In the second century, Irenaeus (ca. 130-202) makes the Eve/Mary parallel even more deliberate. Whereas Justin Martyr merely suggests a correlation between Eve and Mary, Irenaeus directly states this association. For Irenaeus, Eve and Mary began in much the same place: both were virgins espoused to men and both were visited by angels;\textsuperscript{6} however one “fled from God” [italics added] and transgressed His word while the other fled to God and bore His Word. In Against the Heresies, Irenaeus states,

\begin{quote}
. . . For just as the former [Eve] was led astray by the word of an angel, so that she fled from God when she had transgressed His word; so did the latter, by an angelic communication, receive the glad tidings that she should sustain (Portaret) God, being obedient to His word. And if the former did disobey God, yet the latter was persuaded to be obedient to God, in order that the Virgin Mary might become the patroness (advocate) of the virgin Eve. And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so is it rescued by a virgin;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} Justin Martyr, The First Apology; The Second Apology; Dialogue with Trypho; Exhortation to the Greeks; Discourse to the Greek; The Monarchy, or the Rule of God, vol. 6 of The Fathers of the Church, translated by Thomas B. Falls (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1977), 304-305.

\textsuperscript{6} Kreitzer Reforming, 36.
virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal
obedience. . .

Amadeus of Lausanne (1110-1159) described Mary’s role in reversing the curse of Eve
by changing the salvific phrase in Paul to “as in Eve all die, so also in Mary all shall be
made alive.”

The Eve/Mary parallel continued into the early modern period. The devotions to
Mary in an illuminated text of prayers, hymns, calendars, and psalms from the first half
of the fifteenth century is a good example of the type of prayer book used by
contemporary Catholics. The Burnet Psalter is named after Gilbert Burnet who owned
the manuscript and donated it for study. In this text, the unknown author of the psalter
refers to Mary as “she who breathed life into Adam and relieved the plight of Eve.”

However, it is also important to note that while the author clearly finds a great
significance in Mary’s role in the history of salvation and the reversal of Eve’s curse, he
also recognizes that it is Christ who suffers the atonement and provides the necessary
power of redemption. He later writes, “Eve’s fall deprived us of the bliss which was later
conferred upon us by the word made flesh, when Christ suffered death and took away sin.
We, her servants, cry to the Virgin, beseeching her to help us. . .”

Thus, it is Christ who

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[9] Burnet (1643-1715) was Anglican Bishop of Salisbury however the Church of England remained Catholic in doctrine and ritual until the late 16th Century, under Edward IV. Since this text was written in the first half of the fifteenth century, we can trust that its Marian devotion is in line with Catholic prayer books of the period. For more on this, see http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/denom1.html


his death. However, the author of the Burnet Psalter calls upon Mary who birthed the New Adam, and in doing so, took upon herself the role of the New Eve, bringing life where Eve brought death.

While early fifteenth-century Protestant thought emphasizes the role of Christ as the New Adam and the idea of Marian intercession is rejected, the Eve/Mary parallel still persisted. For example, Nicolaus Selenecer (1530-1592), who studied under Melanchthon, spoke of Mary as the sanctified bearer of Christ. He also states, “Ave is opposed to Eva, the letters inverted.” Nordhausen pastor Johann Spangenberg (1484-1550), to some extent, places the opportunity for grace and the reconciliation of men with God on Mary’s shoulders. He states that “Mary brought back that which Eve had lost” and that with this event, mercy and eternal life is once again made available to mankind. Joachim Mörlin (1514-1571) also made the Eve/Mary parallel, stating that Mary bore the “heavenly Apple,” thereby removing the curse for all of mankind. These are just a few examples of Protestant leaders who continued to cite Mary as a key player in the plan of Christian salvation because she reversed Eve’s disobedience.

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12 I am indebted to Beth Kreitzer for her research and translation of Protestant sermons.
13 Quoted in Kreitzer, Reforming, 39. See Kreitzer, Reforming, 79 for the original text. For further information on Selenecer, see Kreitzer 150. Selenecer studied in Wittenberg, taught at Jena, worked as superintendent to Hildesheim. He was a court preacher at Dresden and as well as in the court of Julius in Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel where he helped found the university. He also helped with the Formula of Concord.
14 Quoted in Kreitzer, Reforming, 39. From Aufllegung der Epistle und Evangelien von den fürnembsten Festen durchs ganzte Jar. Durch Johann Spangenberg (n.p., 1584), 34r: “Und hat Maria widerbracht/ was Eva verloren hett. Vnd tie ist der Vatter versönet worden mit dem menschlichen Geschlecht / tie is taller zorn aufgehoben / vnd zugesagt alle gnade vnd barmhertzigkeit / vergebung der stünden vnd das ewige leben / Amen” (Kreitzer note 74 on page 166-67). Spangenberg attended the university in Erfurt. He served as rector at Stolberg and a preacher at St. Martins before serving as pastor at St. Blasius for twenty-two years (Kreitzer, Reforming, 151).
Although Mother Eve first received attention for partaking of the forbidden fruit, whereby she “gave birth” to death and sin, Mary demonstrates obedience and gives birth to grace and redemption through her maternity. It is through Mary’s motherhood that she reversed the curse of Eve. As St. Anselm says, “by [Mary’s] child-bearing / I am brought forth from eternal death.” While Eve is not represented in the Isenheim Altarpiece, Mary’s role in reversing the curse of Eve is part of the theme of rebirth explored in the piece. For Christianity, it is sin and death brought about by the Fall of mankind that provided the need for redemption. Grünewald’s Crucifixion is perhaps one of the most gruesome depictions of death and suffering, thereby showing the depth of corruption in mortality and the need for redemption. At the foot of the Cross, between Mary and Jesus, Mary Magdalene kneels with arms raised in both mourning and supplication (fig. 4). She is the symbol of the penitent sinner who can be saved through Jesus’ atonement which is brought by Mary’s childbearing. Thus, Grünewald has placed the penitent Magdalene directly below the image of the swooning Mary, or between the birth of the Church and the Crucified Christ. This also leads us to the important middle sequence of the Altarpiece which shows the circumstances leading up to salvation and the birth of the Church: First, Mary’s acceptance of God’s will and the Holy Ghost descending upon her, second the birth and Nativity, and third the glorious Resurrection (fig. 2). Like all who are converted, Mary Magdalene hopes for forgiveness from her sins through conversion. She represents mankind’s hope of turning corruptible mortality into immortality through Jesus who is shown transforming the darkest suffering of the Crucifixion to brightest life

in the Resurrection. For Christianity, this hope was made possible through the chosen
God-Bearer.

1.3 Theotokos: Mary as the God-Bearer

One of the first defining moments in Mariology was the Council of Ephesus
which named Mary as the Theotokos, the bearer of God. The council decreed that “he
[the only-begotten Word of God] took flesh from the holy virgin and made it his own,
undergoing a birth like ours from her womb and coming forth a man from a woman.”
The decree further explains that this is not done out of the necessity of being born in
mortality, but “in order that he [God] might bless the beginning of our existence, in order
that seeing that it was a woman that had given birth to him united to the flesh, the curse
against the whole race should thereafter cease. . .” This doctrine is followed by twelve
Anathemas, the first of which reads, “If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God
in truth, and therefore that the holy Virgin is the mother of God, for she bore in a fleshly
way the Word of God become flesh, let him be anathema.” This early doctrine of 431
clearly suggests that Mary is not just the mother of Jesus, but the mother of God in the
flesh—the Theotokos or God-bearer. The importance of Mary’s motherhood in the
Incarnation and Atonement is a key part of Catholic doctrine and devotion that gained
significance in the eleventh century with the rise of the cult of Mary and maintained an

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18 Cyril, of Alexandria, Saint. “Third Letter of Cyril to Nestorius and Twelve Anathemas Proposed by
Cyril and Accepted by the Council of Ephesus,” The Council of Ephesus. Catholic Church. Ephesus. 431
A. D. Translation taken from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. Edited by Norman P. Tanner. *Daily
19 See Forsyth, Ilene *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France*
the 11th c was the “siècle marial” because of the number of churches, hymns, and literature dedicated to the
Virgin (noted by Forsyth 92-3). Moreover, as further noted by Forsyth, Urban II called for the First
Crusade under the sign of the Virgin in 1095 (93).
important position for Christians in the early modern period, particularly with the advent of humanism.

Many texts leading up to the sixteenth century accentuate the idea that no man took part in the birth of Jesus. These authors, however, are not only pointing to the miraculous conception and Incarnation, but also frankly underscore the role of the woman—that only a woman was involved in making Jesus’ mortal body. For medieval Christians, the body of Jesus must have been made only from Mary since His Father was not a being of flesh and blood. This idea also ties into the medieval notion that the fetus was fed by the uterine lining of a woman’s body. Thus, the saving power of Jesus’ blood is related to Mary’s own body, both her blood and her milk (which was thought to be purified blood) were the matter from which the atoning blood of Jesus was made. Michel Menot (1440-1518) says, “This beautiful body [of Christ] . . . was so dear, so precious, so noble, so heroic, because it was formed from the very pure blood of blessed Mary.”

21 See Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s *De Secretis Mulierum*, edited by Helen Rodnite Lemay (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) in which he explains that the fetus is made from female menses. The role that the male seed plays in reproduction, however, is still debated. According to Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, philosophers believe that the male seed does not contribute matter. He states, “for philosophers say that the male seed has the same relationship to the female menses as an artificer does to his work. For just as a carpenter alone is the efficient cause and the house is the effect, in that he alters and disposes the matter of the house, so the male seed alters the female menses into the form of a human being.” However, medical authorities, however, believe that the male seed does contribute matter to the fetus. The medical authorities say, “man is made from the most noble material, and thus the male seed must enter the fetus materially, because the female menses is a superfluidity of the second digestion and the male seed is better cooked and digested. Therefore, it is necessary that it enter into the matter and substance of the fetus” (64).
addresses the idea of Christ coming from Mary saying, “For through her the son of God took flesh and united it with his divinity, and with his blood redeemed the world.”\textsuperscript{23}

The Burnet Psalter also emphasizes the fact that Jesus is the son of a woman only and that Mary was able to accomplish the act of obedience that led to redemption without the aid of a man. The unknown author says, “She was the virgin chosen to be the mother of Christ without the intervention of a man and to suckle him in a miraculous way.”\textsuperscript{24}

The Burnet Psalter again states that Mary bore Jesus “without pain and without the seed of a male. . .”\textsuperscript{25} Martin Luther also comments on Mary’s motherhood and emphasizes the fact that motherhood is the unique responsibility of woman. Of Mary’s sacred motherhood, Luther states, “in this birth [of Christ] none but a woman was involved. . . that is, everything connected with it was reserved to the woman; the conceiving, bearing, suckling, and nourishing of the child were functions no man can perform.” He continues, “A mother can be none other than a woman.”\textsuperscript{26} Luther also writes words of comfort to laboring women, saying that childbirth is “a noble deed” and that even if it is only for this one event, it is worth wishing to be a woman for.\textsuperscript{27} It is Mary’s motherhood, a uniquely female responsibility, which enables her to birth the Word of God. By fulfilling this duty in perfect obedience and virtue, Mary brings dignity to the role of mother. In these texts, the role of mother is recognized as a special duty that God assigned to women.

\textsuperscript{23} Burnet, 88r.
\textsuperscript{24} Burnet 100r. Ave virgo mater Christi tu que sola \ meruisti esse mater sine viro et lactare more m\i\ro.
\textsuperscript{25} Burnet 102r. Deprecor te p\i\issima domina propter illam leticiam quam ha\buisti in illa nocte quando peperisti filium tuum \ redemptorem mundi sine dolore et sine virili \ semine ut me letifices in omnibus tribulacio\nibus temptacionibus et necessitatibus meis et libera me ab insidiis diaboli invidi et carnis \ et ab omnibus malis linguis preteritis presentibus et futurus.
\textsuperscript{26} Martin Luther, Faith and Freedom: An Invitation to the Writings of Martin Luther, edited by John F. Thornot and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 264.
\textsuperscript{27} Luther, Faith, “Marriage,” 250.
Furthermore, at least for medieval Christians, it is Mary’s genealogy that makes Christ the heir of the royal house of David. While the Gospels set forth the genealogy from Joseph, he takes no part in the divine birth and it is only through his spouse, Mary, that Jesus comes. Tree of Jesse iconography shows the lineage of King David coming through Mary to Christ, not through Joseph. Isaiah says, “For there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse;” (Isaiah 11:1) the rod was usually portrayed as the Virgin Mary. See, for example, an illumination of a Germanic Tree of Jesse from the 12th century (fig. 5). This illumination opens a section for prayers for the Assumption and shows genealogy from Jesse to Mary and finally to Christ himself. The scroll running from Jesus reads, “*Virgo d[e]i genit[ri]x v[ir]ga e[st] flos filius eius* (The virgin mother of God is the rod [and] the flower her son).” Beginning with Tertulian as early as the third century, Isaiah’s “stem” is Jesse himself, the rod (*virga*) represents the Virgin (*virgo*) and the flower is Christ.28 Perhaps one of the most celebrated renditions of the Tree of Jesse appears at Chartres. The Tree of Jesse window shows Jesse in a white linen bed, a tree growing from his loins in which the first four kings of Judah are entwined in the branches. The next figure is Mary, not Joseph, since she bears the seventh figure, Christ.29

Caroline Walker Bynum also notes the popularity of images—especially in Northern Europe—portraying baby Jesus and Mary with her mother Anne during the Middle Ages. Indeed, in his book *Christianity in the West*, John Bossy also notes the importance of the “kith and kin” of Jesus, implying that the popularity of these images

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was due to the extent to which they reflected familial relationships of the time. Bynum notes that these portrayals not only show the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, but also point to the importance of the female genealogy for Christ, that it is through the Tree of Jesse, Mary’s genealogy leading back to King David, which makes the boy Jesus a rightful heir to the kingdom on Earth. Bynum even goes so far as to suppose that representations of Anne, Mary, and Jesus “perhaps reflect the importance of women in late medieval conceptions of family despite the development of primogeniture.”

While Grünewald does not represent the genealogy of Christ directly, he does use Tree of Jesse symbolism in the winding vines around the columns and architecture of the Concert of Angels. This scene, between the Annunciation in which the Holy Ghost comes to Mary in the form of the Dove and the Nativity which shows the infant Jesus, celebrates the birth of Christ—a very appropriate scene in which to portray the vines of the genealogical tree.

1.4 Ecclesia: Mary as Mother of the Church

Mary’s motherhood, however, is not limited to being the mother of the Savior. She also becomes the mother of the church and Christians become children of the Virgin. John 19:26 says, “When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!” It is here, at the Crucifixion, that Mary is accorded a “spiritual motherhood” to act as mother of the disciples, and symbolically, as mother of the church. The concept of Mary as mother of all converted Christians is well understood in devotional practice. For example, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) states in one of his prayers to Mary, “the mother of

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30 Noted by Kreitzer, Reforming, 11. Indeed, Bossy dedicates an entire section of his book to the title “Kith and Kin.”
31 Bynum, Fragmentation 80.
God is our mother. / The mother of him in whom alone we have hope, / whom alone we fear, / is our mother. The mother of him who alone saves and condemns is our mother.”

Christ gives birth to His church and to all mankind through his ministry and then his death. Since Mary is the birth mother of Jesus, she is also the mother of the church and the mother of all Christians. Julian of Norwich states, “Thus our Lady is our Mother in whom we are all enclosed and of her born, in Christ: for she that is Mother of our Savior is Mother of all that shall be saved in our Savior . . .” Similarly, Benedictine abbot Rupert of Deutz (d. ca. 1135) says, “. . . in the Passion of her only Son, the Blessed Virgin gave birth to the salvation of all mankind: in effect, she is the mother of all mankind.” At the other side of the spectrum of Christianity, Anabaptist Ludwig Keller states that only Christ, the sinless one, can make us into children of Mary.

In fact, Mary is not only the mother of the church, but often represents the church itself as Ecclesia. Guibert of Nogent (d.1125) compared Mary to the church writing, “ecclesia illustrator Maria” and further refers to Mary as the Throne of Solomon, or the “seat” of divine Wisdom. Making Solomon into a type for Christ, his ivory throne then symbolizes the pure Virgin Mary. 1 Kings 10:18 reads, “the king made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with the best gold.” Thus, medieval images which show the miniature Christ “enthroned” upon a monumental Mary represented the Godhead seated

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33 St. Anselm, Prayers, 122. Anselm repeatedly addresses this issue. For example, in the same poem he calls Mary, “Mother of the life of my soul, / nurse of the redeemer of my flesh, who gave suck to the Savior of my whole being. . .” (122). And again in the second prayer to St. Mary, “In this he shows himself to be you sinner, / as indeed he is, / for he knows you to be both son and mother / for the salvation of sinners. / Indeed I am the sinner who belongs to you both” (112).
36 Kreitzer Reforming, 37-8.
within the Church. 37 While early modern artistic renditions change the image of enthronement to emphasize the humanity of Mary and Jesus and mother and son, the images are still reminiscent of the enthronement, in which the Child-King sits upon the Queen of Heaven. Peter Damian stated, “Our Solomon [i.e. Christ], not only wise but indeed the Wisdom of the Father . . . has prepared a throne, manifestly the womb of the chaste Virgin, in which sat that Majesty which shakes the world with a nod.” From this medieval heritage, we can look to a deeper understanding of the Mother and Child scene of the Nativity, in which Mary is portrayed as a monumental figure (fig. 6). Her knees are bent and large in proportion to her upper body, turning her lap into the sedes sapientiae for the Word Incarnate. 38

The tradition of using Mary to symbolize the Church can be traced back as early as the fifth century. St. Augustine’s disciple, Quodvultdeus (died c. 450) is the first in written record to adapt Mary into the role of Ecclesia. Hilda Graef notes that the early church fathers “unanimously” regarded the woman of the Apocalypse as a symbol of the church, which in turn leads to Mary fulfilling both these roles. 39 Revelations 12:1 reads, “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.” The woman is often seen as a symbol of the Church, who is personified by Mary. Numberless representations show Mary as the woman of the Apocalypse who brought forth a “man child,” who was to “rule all nations with a rod” (Rev. 12:5) which angered the Red Dragon. The great

37 See Forsyth, Throne, especially pages 23-30.
38 Forsyth mentions Adam of St. Victor in particular as calling Mary the Thronus Solomonis. She gives examples of Romanesque sculptures of Mary enthroned with Christ in her lap, which she calls the Thronus Salomonis and the Sapientia Patris. She says, “Together Mary and Christ represented the seat of wisdom and Divine Wisdom itself, allowing the pair to be further understood as Church and Godhead” (59).
39 Graef, Mary, 28.
dragon, Satan “went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 12:17).

Grünewald’s Mary can also be seen in this role in the portrayal of the kneeling Mary in the Concert of Angels panel. While we do not necessarily see the moon beneath her feet, she is certainly “clothed with the sun,” even reflecting the light of the Son in the Resurrection panel with the crown of stars on her head (fig. 7). Grünewald even portrays Mary with more traditional apocalyptic iconography in a surviving sketch from c. 1520 (fig. 8). In this image, Mary wears her tall crown and stands upon a brilliant yellow orb with scepter in one hand and baby Jesus in the other. This surviving sketch demonstrates Grünewald’s acknowledgment of Mary as the Woman of the Apocalypse, or as the symbol of the Church of Christ in the last days.

1.5 Mary as Intercessor

It is because of Mary’s motherhood that she has access to heaven and even has power of intercession. Germanus (d.448) says, “But you [Mary], having maternal power with God, can obtain abundant forgiveness even for the greatest sinners. For he can never fail you, because God obeys you through and in all things as his true mother.”40 For Germanus, it is the power of the Mother-Son bond that gives Mary the power of intercession. She is able to obtain forgiveness on behalf of the penitent as the mother of Jesus in the flesh. Interestingly, Germanus states Jesus’ allegiance to His mother in a sort of divine parallel to the obedience that ordinary mortal sons are commanded to pay to their mothers. It is through this kind of love that Germanus explains the allegiance between Mary and the faithful Christians as well. He says, “You [Mary] turn away the just threat and the sentence of damnation, because you love the Christians . . . therefore,

40 Quoted in Graef, Mary, 146-47.
the Christian people trustfully turn to you, refuge of sinners.” As early as the fifth century, Christians feel a trusted kinship with Mary as a charitable and merciful mother.

Key to the concept of Marian intercession is the passage in Genesis 3:15, which states, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; it [ipse] will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” The Latin vulgate translated “ipse” as “ipsa,” changing the pronoun to the feminine. This one letter opened the interpretation of this important passage to provide a role for Mary in the Genesis prophesy of atonement and salvation. While Protestants and Humanists changed the pronoun back to “ipse,” the Council of Trent upheld Jerome’s translation of “ipsa,” thereby securing Mary’s role in the history of salvation.

Mary’s special role as intercessor did indeed remain important from as early as Germanus, culminating with the rise of the Cult of Mary in the High Middle Ages. In his second Prayer to Saint Mary, St. Anselm asks, “Who can more easily gain pardon for the accused / by her intercession, / than she who gave milk to him. . .” Here, Anselm directly points to the Mother-Son relationship. Mary is Jesus’ mother, the one person chosen to suckle the Christ child at her breast. Their bond, as mother and Son, is one that cannot be paralleled. St. Anselm called Mary the “Mother of Salvation” and points to her intercessory role in praying for sinners as the “Reconciler of the world.” Anselm further parallels Mary’s motherhood with the “fatherhood of God,” giving her a role in the judgment as the compassionate mother of mercy in contrast to the Father’s more strict, judiciary role. He says, “So God the Father of all created things, / and Mary is the

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41 Quoted in Graef, Mary, 147.
42 Kreitzer, Reforming, 36. Humanists and Protestants changed the pronoun back to “ipse.”
43 Anselm, Prayers, 110.
44 Kreitzer, Reforming, 13.
mother of all re-created things. / God is the Father of all that is established, / and Mary is the mother of all that is re-established. . .”45 Speaking of the emphasis on the relationship of Mary and Jesus in art of the Middle Ages, Ioli Kalavrezou notes, “A visual language has thus been created through which the love and human emotions between Mother and Son make the divine plan intelligible to mankind.”46 It is through the Mother/Son relationship that Medieval and early modern audiences found understanding of mercy, and it was often through the tender loving Mary that Christians found their way to divine love.

In the Burnet Psalter, the author calls upon both the love of the mother and the love of the son. In the section devoted to prayers and hymns to Mary, he first asks for Mary’s intercession “to persuade her son, with a mother’s tenderness.”47 Later, in the hymn *Ave Mundi spes*, he pleads for Jesus to listen to Mary’s intercession on his behalf, remembering his “love of the mother who bore him.”48 The author even goes as far to say that we are “delivered by her from hell” so that “we may follow the way of her son.”49 Gabriel Biel also finds great significance in Mary’s role. While her earthly status is clearly “after Christ,” in heaven Mary becomes *Corredeptrix, Mediatrix* and practically *Concreatrix*, notes Heiko Oberman in his book *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*.50

45 Also, the third *Prayer to Saint Mary* reads, “So God the Father of all created things, / and Mary is the mother of all re-created things. / God is the Father of all that is established, / and Mary is the mother of all that is re-established. . .” (Anselm, *Prayers*, 121). See also Kreitzer, *Reforming*, 13.
47 Burnet Folio 86v. *Advocata libera coram salvatore*, Postulare propera tu consueto more, Ac pro gente misera benigno favore, Natum tuum mitiga materno amore.
48 Burnet Folio 100v. *Christe fili summi patris pro amore <per amorem> tue matris, . . .
49 Burnet Folio 85r. Ad te clamant miseri multum desolati, Nobis aures aperti pectoris sacrati, Ut a fauce inferi per te liberati, Consequamur liberi viam tui nati.
Mary is often represented alongside Jesus in artwork of the period in order to show her intercessory role. For example, inscribed in a piece commissioned by Ulrich Schwarz, Hans Holbein the Elder portrays God as judge between Christ and Mary (1508). This type of painting shows what is commonly referred to as a “double intercession.” This work, however, is particularly helpful since the visual language of the painting is reiterated in the written words inscribed in the banners above Mary and Jesus, directly stating that the intercession is performed both by Mary and Jesus (fig. 9). Above Jesus, a banner reads, “Father, see my red wounds, help men in their need, through my bitter death.” Above Mary, it reads, “Lord, sheath thy sword that thou has drawn and see my breast, where thy Son has sucked.”

Here, Holbein displays in artwork the well accepted concept of Marian intercession. It is both through Christ’s sacrifice and through Mary’s obedience that mercy is obtained.

Mary is attributed a greater role in Intercession through her own pain at the foot of the Cross. Mary’s motherhood adds a dimension of suffering at the Son’s Crucifixion, which allows Mary to have greater compassion for mankind who is in danger of not only suffering physical death, but also spiritual death. In “Stond wel, moder, under rode,” a thirteenth century Germanic poem, Christ speaks to Mary from the Cross saying, “Mother, now at last you must learn / What pain they suffer who bear children / And what sorrow they have that their children lose. . .” Mary, who was not believed to have suffered the “pain they suffer who bear children,” or labor pain, during the birth of Jesus, is able to answer after suffering at the foot of the cross, “Son, I know, I can thee tell / That lest it be the pain of hell / I know no greater sorrow.”

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51 See Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 106.
52 Quoted in Neff, “Pain,” 268.
between Mother and Son at the foot of the cross surely adds to the humanity of the Virgin Mary, making her more accessible to the sinner; moreover, Mary is shown to suffer the pain of motherhood with the sacrifice at the Crucifixion.

While Mary is thought by many Christians in the medieval and early modern periods not to have suffered the pain of childbirth because she was not subject to the curse of Eve, Christians of the period often considered Mary to have suffered physical pain—even the pain of childbirth—at the foot of the Cross. During the wedding at Cana, Jesus’ says, “My hour has not yet come;” the “hour” is generally regarded as the Passion. As it is often used in St. John, for example in 13:1, “Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father.” So, when we read, “The hour of the woman will have come when that of Jesus has come,” the interpretation becomes clear: Mary will share in the Passion, as she will have her “hour” when Jesus has his “hour.” The “hour” is further compared to the pain of birth in John 16:21-22,

>A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”

Moreover, in Luke 2:35 the words of Simeon foreshadow Mary’s suffering when he says, “a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.” The prophecies of Mary’s “hour” and of the “sword” are both understood to be speaking of Mary’s suffering at the foot of the Cross. Rupert of Deutz of the Rhineland monastery states, “[At the foot of the cross,
Mary] is truly a woman and truly a mother and at this hour, she truly suffers the pains of childbirth. When [Jesus] was born, she did not suffer like other mothers: now, however, she suffers, she is tormented and full of sorrow, because her hour has come . . . in the Passion of her only Son . . .” 55 As we also read in the poem, “Stond wel, moder, under rode,” Mary was traditionally believed to have suffered the pain of labor, not at Jesus’ birth, but at His death, when she shares in the passion by giving birth to the Church and becoming the mother of the Church.

Mary’s labor at the foot of the Cross is especially poignant in the iconography of the period and in the Isenheim Altarpiece in particular. The iconography of birth will be further discussed in chapter three, but let us take a brief look at the iconography of childbirth in Konrad van Soest’s Crucifixion (fig. 10). In van Soest’s rendition, attendants support Mary’s elbows as she faints in the swoon of childbirth at the foot of the cross. John is connected to the group of midwives, but wears priestly garb with a book on his lap, looking up at the Savior. Christ is clearly the subject of the scene, the upward lines of the painting directing the eye to his Crucifixion. However, the small group surrounding Mary is not focused on the Crucifixion, but on the Virgin Mother as she swoons in the pain of labor, deflecting for a moment the emphasis on the Crucified body of Christ to the birth of Salvation in the flesh and made from Mary’s flesh.

Similar iconography is used in Grünewald’s Crucifixion. Mary is clothed in white and faints beneath the Cross. While she doesn’t have a number of attendants to support her, she is supported by Saint John, who has just been designated as her son in the Church of Christ as we discussed in the earlier section on Ecclesia. Grünewald would not be the first to replace the female birth attendants with Saint John. Rogier Van der

55 Translated by Neff, “Pain,” 256.
Weyden does this in his *Seven Sacraments* altarpiece (1445-50) and again in the *Abegg Triptych* as we will further discuss in chapter three (ca. 1445). Grünewald’s Mary swoons in the pain of childbirth, her pregnancy alluded to by the thickening of her white robe around her abdomen, to which John’s extraordinarily long arm and fingers direct the viewer’s eye. Thus, Grünewald’s Mary partakes in this iconographic tradition, whereby she becomes mother of the Church and Intercessor for the faithful by sharing in the Passion with the Son.

### 1.6 Mary as Exemplar

Mary is also simply an example for all Christians to follow. Kreitzer notes, “Often the moral import was directed to all Christians, men, women, and children: Mary’s faith and example of humble service were to be followed by *everyone* as true Christian virtues.”

Martin Luther states that we should “picture [bilden] the Virgin’s example in our hearts” and that “it must happen in our hearts as it happened to her: we too must become pregnant with the Holy Spirit and receive Christ spiritually.” Mary symbolized the doctrine of faith and she was held up as an example of faith for all Christians.

Indeed, Luther says, “This is a happy and charming gospel . . . for we will hear how the Virgin Mary had such a high faith, the equal of which we have not often found in the scriptures.” Festivals to the Virgin were even maintained by Protestants. The Annunciation festival, for example, was retained as a full day celebration in Lutheran constitutions of the sixteenth century. However, the festivals were sometimes called

58 Kreitzer *Reforming*, 29.
59 Quoted in Kreitzer, *Reforming*, 29. See Roth’s *Festpostille* of 1527 (preached in 1522) in which Luther argues that the “gospel is all about faith” (Kreitzer, *Reforming*, 29).
60 See Kreitzer, *Reforming*, 27.
Conceptionis Christi or Empfängnis Christi in church texts in an effort to take the focal point away from Mary and put it back on Christ. Still, about two thirds of the sermons speak of Mary and the Annunciation as a moral lesson. Freyburg preacher Hieronymous Weller states that the festival to Mary is important because Mary is “an example of faith, humility, and chastity.” While Mary is perhaps an especial example for the “feminine sex” in particular, Weller states that “all men of all ages might imitate her piety and virtue.” In accordance with Weller’s statement, Johannes Brenze says Mary is an example of prayer and turning to God. While other saints might be examples of prayer, Mary is the “main example.” Even with this Marian devotion, however, protestant thought continues to stress the idea that God listens to our prayers not because of Mary, but because of Christ. “She does not reign either in heaven or in this world, but she does take the highest place among women.” Steinhart stresses Mary’s example of faith, which also testifies of the importance of preaching the word of God, since faith is born from the spoken word.

Mary, as exemplar, is easily accepted by Protestants, though certainly not limited to them. Bynum explains that Mechtild of Magdeburg, for example, considered Mary to be “a symbol of our suffering . . . we do and should suffer as she suffered at the foot of the cross.” For Mechtild, Mary was not necessarily unable to sin, but so close to God that she had no desire to sin. Truly, this makes Mary more accessible to Christians, for she is “a complete human being in womanly nature.” Believing Christians must look to

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61 Krietzer, Reforming, 28.
62 Krietzer, Reforming, 48.
63 Quoted and Translated in Krietzer, Reforming, 56. “
64 Quoted in Krietzer, Reforming, 55.
65 Krietzer, Reforming, 59.
Mary with the hope of attaining such a close relationship with goodness that they no longer chose sin.

Mary thus becomes a great example for mortal men and women because she required God’s grace and received it through obedience and humility. For some Christians Mary’s humanity makes her a more accessible example than Christ himself, for Jesus was a “God-Man” rather than a “pure man.” Indeed, for Gabriel Biel, Mary occupies a “kerygmatic priority over Christ” when it comes to her example to mankind. For medieval Christians, “in life and word [Mary] reveals the will of God; she is at once the example to be imitated and the staircase to be climbed [to Christ].”

Thus, we might see the dominant Marian theme in the Isenheim Altarpiece as an invitation to “picture the Virgin’s example in our hearts” that we might follow her example in obedience and conversion, even giving “birth” to the Word of God through conversion.

Mary takes her place in the history of salvation through her role as mother. Through her virtue and her obedience, Mary becomes the vessel of salvation, reversing the curse of Eve. She thus becomes Theotokos, Ecclesia, Intercessor and saintly example. Not only can the faithful call upon Mary for help in conversion, they can also look to her example that they might also become “pregnant” with the Spirit, thereby “giving birth” to Christ spiritually. Moreover, Mary’s role in birthing the Savior provides a foundation for women to see their unique maternal role as one of supernal importance.

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67 See Bynum, Jesus, 234.
68 Kreitzer, Reforming, 15.
69 Oberman, Harvest, 322. Oberman argues that, according to Biel, Mary was exalted above angels; however, she was not exalted to the status of the Trinity. She had greater humility than any creature, “but her way to glory is essentially the same as that of any other creature” (italics added). However, when it comes to her “relation with mankind,” Biel finds Mary taking precedence over Christ because “in every respect there is a strict parallel—though, of course, in different proportions—between the Virgin Mary and the sinner.”
Furthermore, it leads to a celebration in Christianity of motherhood and virtues that are seen as feminine in both medieval and early modern periods.
2 Motherhood and Childbirth in Medieval and Early Modern Periods

While women were severely limited in opportunity and privilege leading up to the sixteenth century, society did often recognize the important position designated to women in the domestic sphere as mothers. It was through Mary’s divine motherhood that the curse of Eve was reversed. As discussed in chapter one, only a woman could bear the “heavenly apple.” The rise of Marian devotion in the middle ages provided an avenue of communion with divine love, which opened an alternate discourse of mercy and redemption to the traditional emphasis on mortal culpability and shame over the Fall. The example of Mary as mother of Christ provided Western Christianity with a positive female model that used maternal experience to come to Christ. Interestingly, the language surrounding salvation through the atonement often speaks in terms of the female experiences of labor and maternity.

Within the Isenheim Altarpiece, religious experience is also portrayed in terms of female experiences of childbirth and motherhood. Rather than emphasizing the Fall, Grünewald redirects the conversation to one of redemption, even emphasizing the role of Mary in the spiritual rebirth of mankind. In the late middle and early modern periods, the love of God is often portrayed in terms of maternal compassion and the analogy of mother-son relationships is often used to convey the magnitude of divine love to a human audience. The emphasis on female experience and feminine religious language is largely carved out by mystical writings, like those by Bernard of Clairvaux, Anthony of Padua, and Julian of Norwich, which provide a broadening space for women. In order to understand the role of birth and motherhood addressed in the Isenheim Altarpiece we
must briefly address attitudes concerning women and the feminized language of salvation that took place leading up to the sixteenth century. Although women of the medieval and early modern periods are often seen as fallen daughters of Eve, the role of “mother” is revalued in the increased attention given to marriage and motherhood beginning in the high middle ages and in the usage of female experience as symbolic of religious experience, even applying attributes considered to be “motherly” to Jesus himself.

2.1 Between Eve and Mary

Whereas Mary freed herself from the curse of Eve through her obedience in bearing the Son of God, most women in the medieval and early modern periods were still considered to be under the curse of the Fall and therefore were more likely to be aligned with Eve. Women in general were not “correspondingly blessed” with Mary’s faith and obedience since they were considered mortal humans condemned by the Fall. Protestant Caspar Huberinus (1500-1553), for example, says in one postilla that Mary is “unlike her mother Eve and other women” who still suffer under the curse. Here, Huberinus groups Eve and all “other women” together under the curse of the Fall, while Mary is set aside. Joachim Mörlin states a more optimistic view for women, but still groups them with Eve in their need for salvation. He says that Mary “will help all women on earth out of their shame again to honor, and they will no more be cursed.”

While most women were considered to be Eve’s daughters, they were also blessed with the opportunity to create life and rear children in the ways of the Lord. Through

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71 Kretizer, Reforming, 38.
their motherhood, women were allowed a significant opportunity to participate in building the kingdom of heaven through their participation in bringing children into the world and taking charge of the spiritual welfare of their souls. Indeed, ideas concerning women in the medieval and early modern periods are dynamic in that they establish virginity and divine contemplation as supremely important while also recognizing the importance of marriage and family in perpetuating the human race and building the kingdom of God. To understand the way that virtues of chastity work together with ideals regarding the importance of motherhood and childbirth we will take a brief look at Christian conceptions of virginity beginning in the middle ages.

While virginity is the highest state of chastity for medieval Christians, motherhood is considered an important blessing and marriage a secondary good for late medieval and early modern Christians. Mary is praised and held up as an example of purity through her virginity. However, it is her humility, and the faith and obedience that she demonstrated through her motherhood that are the key virtues to be emulated by most Christians. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, praises Mary’s humility over her virginity. In Homily 1 he states that Mary’s “humility was raised by motherhood” and that her virginity was “consecrated by her childbearing.” Bernard advises, “If you are not able to imitate the virginity of this humble maid, then imitate the humility of the virgin maid . . . humility is by far the more necessary” (italics added). In words that strangely

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73 Thomas Aquinas also points out that, while he sees virginity as the greatest virtue of chastity, it is not “the most excellent of the virtues” simply. Virginity is only great in that it allows the mind a greater capacity to think of the things of God (Q. 153 Art. 1, 1804). Indeed, Aquinas notes that “a married person may be better than a virgin” (Q. 152 Art 4, 1803). St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica : Complete English Edition in Five Volumes. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Q. 153, Art. 2 (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 1804-05.
foreshadow those of Martin Luther, he even scorns religious orders that make too much of virginity, saying,

   to the extent that you [believe yourself] more worthy of respect because you have received a singular gift of chastity, you do yourself more harm, because you tarnish its beauty by thy adulteration of pride. It is better for you not to be a virgin than to be puffed up over your virginity.  

Interestingly, in the sixteenth century, Luther echoes these words, saying “cursed be this and every other virginity if it exists for its own sake, and accomplishes nothing better than its own profit and praise.” 

Protestants, of course, rejected the doctrine of virginity and embraced the institute of marriage. It should not be forgotten, however, that while Catholic doctrine continued to uphold the virtue of virginity as singularly important, the Church recognized that most believers would not be able to uphold this principle and endorsed the estate of marriage as a secondary good. Beginning in the thirteenth century, church leaders became increasingly vocal concerning the goodness of marriage. Jacques de Vitry, for example, called marriage an “order,” pointing to the fact that it has its own duties parallel to the selfless duties of a monastic order.  

Beginning in the thirteenth century, marriage was even enlisted as one of the seven sacraments.

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75 Luther, Martin, “That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew,” *Faith and Freedom: An Invitation to the Writings of Martin Luther*. Edited by John F. Thornton and Susan B. Vareene (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 264. Like Bernard of Clairvaux, Luther also scorns religious orders that emphasize virginity over other virtues. However, he goes much farther than Bernard, to the point of raising the unwed mother over the prideful nun. In “The Estate of Marriage,” he says “nuns and monks who lack faith, who trust in their own chastity and in their order, are not worthy of rocking a baptized child. . .They cannot boast that what they do is pleasing in God’s sight, as can the woman in childbirth, even if her child is born out of wedlock (Luther, *Faith*, 250).
The writings of St. Thomas Aquinas further help us to reconcile the virtue of virginity with the importance of childbirth and childrearing. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas states that a sin is “that which is against the order of reason.” Therefore, the “use of venereal acts directed to the preservation of the whole human race” is not a sin because it is an act within the order of reason. Aquinas further distinguishes between the preservation of the bodily nature of mankind, which is a “true good” and the preservation of the nature of the human species which is a “great good.”

The multitude is commanded to procreate in body in order to maintain the human species; marital sex is appropriate when it is used to meet the end for which it was created, which is for procreation only. However, since each individual need not have children in order to maintain the species, some individuals may preserve their virginity in order to advance spiritually, which is the preservation of the soul rather than the body. For medieval Christians, then, to procreate in body is the duty of the multitude and is one crucial way to replenish the earth, while to advance the human race spiritually by attending to contemplative matters of the soul is a second, and more holy option. This second option is the way that a virgin can assist in advancing the human race by “birthing” the human soul and thinking on “the things of the Lord” rather than “the things of the world” (1 Cor 7:34).

In this same vein, Bernard of Clairvaux instructs the virgin “to give birth to God.”

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79 Aquinas, *Summa* V. 4, Q. 152 Art. 2, 1801.
80 See Aquinas, *Summa* Q. 152 Art. 4, 1803.
2.2 Motherhood in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

Women attained a degree of public privilege and respect in their social responsibility to rear children. As a *minor mundus*, a woman’s pregnancy and childbirth were linked to God’s creation of Adam and Eve, echoing the processes of regeneration in the natural world. The “frucht” of the womb was akin to the fruit of the harvest. Moreover, leading up to the sixteenth century, women were often thought of in terms of their motherhood, regardless of whether they had children or not. They were regarded in terms of whether they were mothers, potential mothers, or not mothers. Moreover, women who were not mothers often took upon themselves mothering roles for other children, particularly for sisters or other female relatives. Parental love and concern about a child’s soul was not seen as an inappropriate earthly attachment as long as the parent continued to put God first. Rather, it was thought that appropriate devotion to a child’s soul would bring one closer to God. The sixteenth century saw the role of mother as divine in responsibility to rear God-fearing children and in the opportunity to share in the redeeming pain of childbirth.

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82 Johannes Dryander (1500-60) called man the *minor mundus*, or little world, stating that everything in the universe could be seen in the microcosm of the human body. See Kathleen Crowther-Heyck, “‘Be Fruitful and Multiply’: Genesis and Generation in Reformation Germany,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 55 (Aut 2002), 919.

83 Walther Ryff uses the word *Frucht* in his 1541 treatise on human anatomy. The forming fetus was referred to as “frucht” until the soul was believed to have entered the embryo around the 45th day. Ryff in particular makes the parallel between the miracle of creation within a woman’s body and divine creation. He opens his treatise connecting human procreation with God’s creation of man from the dust of Earth. See Crowther-Heyck, *Fruitful*, 912-13. Medieval and Early Modern texts also refer to the womb as the place in which seeds are sown, again connecting the process of human regeneration with the natural world. See also Hildegard of Bingen who writes, “the Word of God, in the strong will of the Father and supernal love, considered the poor fragile matter from which the weak frailty of the human race, both bad and good, was to be produced. . .and warms it so that it is made flesh and blood. . .and nourished it with moisture, as a mother gives milk to her children. . .(56).

84 Atkinson, *Vocation*, 27.

Women indeed felt a great responsibility to rear their children. The role of mother was regarded with the highest importance as mothers were charged with the care of another soul. Two examples from Birgitta of Sweden reveal the enormity of the role of mother as guardian of a child’s soul. The first story concerns Birgitta’s own son, Karl, who died while Birgitta was alive. She worried greatly concerning the welfare of his soul and prayed intensely for his salvation. In a dream, Birgitta saw a vision of Karl before the judgment seat, the demons standing ready to take his soul. However, the angels informed the demons that Karl was saved because of his mother’s pleadings. They said, “His mother’s tears have robbed you . . . so much do her tears please God.” The demon responds cursing the mother’s womb “that had such water in it.”86 The second story concerns a mother’s failure. For, while mothers have the power to assist their children’s souls into heaven, their neglect and unrighteousness can also have the contrary effect for both mother and child. Birgitta tells of a daughter who died before her own mother and was residing in purgatory because of her mother’s poor example and failure to teach her in the ways of the Lord. Likewise, the grandmother of the girl in purgatory also visits the living mother, saying “Woe is me that I was ever your mother…See how my womb, that you lay in, is eaten with worms! . . . As often as you follow my sins and my teachings, so often I have a new torment.”87 In these two examples we see the mother’s responsibility in the spiritual welfare of her children. Motherly examples and teachings were crucial to the salvation of their own, as well as their children’s souls. Moreover, one woman’s bad example could cause the downfall of her entire family line for generations.

87 Atkinson, *Vocation*, 179.
While little was written by women in the Early Modern period, what was written is often in the form of mother’s advice books. One reason that these books are particularly interesting for understanding women’s roles as mothers is because women felt their maternal roles to be so important that they stepped out of the private domain by writing and sometimes publishing instruction for children. Mother’s advice books gave women a voice that was often heard not only in the home, but to public readers as well.88

One such pamphlet written in 1622 and first published in 1624 became a popular text published in several editions. Elizabeth Joscelin wrote, “The Mothers Legacy to her Unborn Childe” as a private work meant only for her husband and child. However, it was published posthumously and read by both men and women.89 Since women were often looked down upon for any public achievement, writing included, Joscelin was taking a risk in writing down her advice for her child. In fact, she opens the piece with a letter to her husband justifying her need to write in which she explains that she was finally able to express her “motherly zeale” only because she was writing to a child, and more importantly, she says, “I comforted my selfe that my intent was good.”90 She explains that the mother’s duty was something she contemplated even before she was pregnant, saying, “I no sooner conceyved a hope that I should bee made a mother by thee but with it entered the consideration of a mothers duty. . .” Joscelin states that she is compelled to write out of “the apprehension of danger that might preuent mee from executing that care I so exceedingly desired,” which care she defines, saying, “I meane in religious training

89 Jean LeDrew Metcalfe, Reading Early Modern Women: An anthology of Texts and Manuscripts in Print, edited by Helen Ostovich and Elizabeth Sauer (New York: Rutledge, 2004), 12. It should also be noted that the title was assigned not by Joscelin herself, but by Thomas Goad.
Joscelin then addresses her child and instructs her to serve God, even outlining the times of day for prayer, meditation, study, and recreation.\textsuperscript{92}

While mother’s advice books did not gain public attention until the middle of the seventeenth century with the establishment of works such as Joscelin’s, these books do establish the fact that a woman’s mothering role was seen as crucial to the spiritual well-being of children in the early modern period.\textsuperscript{93} Indeed, women were able to take up the socially admired role of teacher through motherly responsibilities with their own children or other female relatives. The role of mother-teacher was particularly admired due to the Humanist movement, which theorized that morality could and should be taught.\textsuperscript{94}

In her book, \textit{The Oldest Vocation}, Clarissa Atkinson notes that Humanism produced “an outburst of attention to the teaching role of the mother, who provided with her milk a child’s first lessons, the basis for all future education.”\textsuperscript{95} Indeed, Christian Humanists often saw the ultimate example in motherhood—the Virgin Mary—as a symbol of learning because of the representational tradition of portraying her immersed in scripture study.\textsuperscript{96}

Joscelin’s advice book is also interesting because her work was originally found and published by an Anglican clergyman, Thomas Goad. Joscelin had locked the letter in

\textsuperscript{91} Joscelin, \textit{Legacy}, 47 lines 4-6.
\textsuperscript{92} See Metcalfe, \textit{Reading}, 111. Joscelin states, “where learning and wisdome meet in a virtuous disposed woman, she is the fittest closet for all goodnesse. Shee is like a well-ballanced whip that may beare all her saile. Shee is—Indeed, I should but shame my slefe, if I should goe about to praise her more” (Joscelin, \textit{Legacy}, 51, 66-70).
\textsuperscript{93} It should also be noted that mothers were not the only authors of advice books. While men often wrote conduct books for women, women who were not mothers also wrote these books of motherly advice. Indeed, women who were unmarried or who simply were not mothers, were often relied upon to take a motherly role for female relatives, particularly sisters, and some wrote advice books for this purpose.
\textsuperscript{94} Atkinson, \textit{Vocation}, 157.
\textsuperscript{95} Atkinson, \textit{Vocation}, 157.
her desk only to be found in the event of her death, which did indeed follow shortly after the birth of her baby girl. This event is important in that it demonstrates the clergy’s support of the mother’s role in the religious training of her children. Indeed Goad states in his *Approbation*,

> Ovr laws disable those, that are under *Couert-baron*, from disposing by Will and Testament any temporall estate. But no law prohibiteth any possessor of morall and spirituall riches, to impart them unto others . . . vertue and grace haue power beyond all empeachment of sex or other debility, to enable and instruct the possessor to employ the same vnquestionably for the inward inriching of others.  

Another similar work written for a Catholic audience is Elizabeth Grymeston’s *Miscelanea, Meditations, Memoratives*, first published in 1604. In chapter one of her work, Grymeston instructs her son, “When thou risest, let they thoughts ascend, that grace may descend . . . Remember that Prayer is the wing wherewith thy soule flieth to heaven.”

Grymeston also begins her legacy book with a letter, this time to her son, in which she explains her need to write so that she may tutor him in the Catholic faith. While both Jocelyn and Grymeston’s works were published after Grünewald’s completion of the Isenheim, they clearly show the importance of the mother as a religious instructor for children during the period. Furthermore, the sincere words written in spite of the possibility for public scorn make evident woman’s devotion to the role of motherhood and her perceived duty as religious and moral instructor.

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97 Thomas Goad, *A Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 41. Interestingly, however, Metcalfe notes that women at this time actually were allowed to leave a will and that Joscelin herself is thought to have left an inheritance for her child (24).
2.3 Labor and the Cross

The labor of childbirth also provided women of the early modern period a unique opportunity to identify with the atoning Christ due to the feminization of religious language during this period. While the pain of childbirth might be the punishment of Eve, it was also the opportunity to suffer in a manner similar to Christ on the cross. Because childbirth caused such intense pain, it became associated with the sufferings of both Jesus and Mary in the Middle Ages. Christians were expected to suffer this kind of pain if they were to become saints. This is perhaps particularly underscored by the widespread famines and diseases that devastated European populations in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Atkinson says of the late medieval period, “Pain and sorrow and the shadow of death were never far . . . the eternal association of birth with death, of suffering with motherhood, was dramatically underlined during these hard years.”

By the end of the fifteenth century, European populations had nearly recovered, however, the associations with Christ and Mary suffering labor-like pain during the passion persisted. Christianity still tied the pain of childbirth to the pain of the cross.

This imagery was particularly poignant among sixteenth century Lutherans, who “sanctified” the pain of childbirth by referring to it as a “cross” to be endured. For example, a 1543 ordinance from Pfalz-Neuberg refers to labor pains as “a holy [and] blessed cross.” Jakob Zader’s Cross-School for Pregnant and Bearing Women (1612) advised women to look to Christ’s example on the cross in order to cope with labor. Crowther-Heyck notes that his advice is similar to that given to the sick and that “taking

100 Atkinson, *Vocation*, 145.
101 Atkinson, *Vocation*, 149.
up one’s cross’ was the duty of every Christian.”

Furthermore, since the pain of labor—a result of human weakness and a reminder of the fallen nature of mankind—resulted in the birth of a new life, the laboring woman was also a type or a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross in order to atone for man’s weakness and give to all humans the opportunity of rebirth. Thomas Günther’s 1564 text states that “when a woman is in labor, she provides faithful Christians with a public sermon on the cross.”

2.4 Birth as an Analogy for Conversion

Of course, it is not only women who are expected to experience the “labor” of conversion. All Christians are encouraged to give “birth” to Christ by becoming converted and spreading His gospel. The analogy was first used by Origen in the third century. However, the metaphor becomes increasingly more colorful in the thirteenth century and flourishes throughout the late medieval period.

The birth/conversion analogy which utilizes a naturally occurring event, even a biological event, and applies it to spiritual matters is typical of the Fifteenth Century and a familiar sermon methodology. In his dissertation on early Catholic and Protestant sermons, Elmer Carl Kiessling notes that preachers of 15th century Germany, “took all knowledge to be their province . . . they garnered in facts, or what passed as facts, from every science and from every phase of life and used them with effect.” The process of childbirth is a perfect example of using a natural process as a metaphor for spiritual rebirth. Scientific observations of this essential and fundamental biological event were

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108 Atkinson, Vocation, 162-63.
easily adapted for spiritual significance. Indeed, the enormous physical stress and danger of death lends child birthing to the contemplation of a spiritual significance. Maternity and childbirth continued to be meaningful spiritual metaphors for German lay people well into the sixteenth century. As Crowther-Heyck states, there was “tremendous symbolic and spiritual significance ascribed to procreation in early modern Germany . . . the physical and spiritual meanings of generation were inextricable intertwined.”

One perfect example of the childbirth metaphor for conversion can be read in *Sermones for the Easter Cycle*. St. Anthony of Padua (1195-1231) was one of the early church fathers to explain maternal imagery in detail as it related to the soul. Saint Anthony’s writings play an important role in Catholic tradition because he was assigned by Saint Francis of Assisi to teach theology. His *Sermones for the Easter Cycle* is designed specifically to aid preachers in their sermon preparation. While the childbirth metaphor is drawn upon by many individuals, Saint Anthony is one of the early saints to explain the analogy in depth and since his work was the foundation for many later sermon writers, it is important to understand his usage of the metaphor.

Saint Anthony drew upon his own knowledge of vast subjects which he gained predominately from São Vincente. Thus, he must have drawn inspiration from the standard works of theology—largely made up of the writings of Saint Augustine and commentaries of his work—as well as the library’s books on the natural sciences. Thus, it is not surprising that within the *Sermones*, we find numerous references to the

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111 See Charles McCarron’s introduction in Anthony of Padua, *Sermones for the Easter Cycle*, translated by George Marcil (Saint Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 1994), 56. McCarron states that St. Anthony’s *Sermones* was to be “a source-book for the friar-preachers that would aid them in furthering the pastoral vision laid out by Lateran IV” (56).
natural or biological workings of the body. Saint Anthony spends an entire section of the *Sermones* on the imagery of childbirth, relating each perceived stage of pregnancy and birth to the process of conversion. Referring to John 16:21, “A woman when she is in labor experiences sorrow,” Anthony explains, “The Lord has proposed to us this figure of the pain of a woman giving birth to teach us to weep in sorrow for our sins and then to give birth to good deeds.” Anthony then outlines his sermon for the third Sunday after Easter, saying “we will describe in detail the process of conception in the womb, the formation of the fetus, the nine month gestation, and the painful birth. Then we will make a moral interpretation of these natural developments.”

In Anthony’s analogy, the obstetrician represents the priest who assists the sinner in confession and spiritual rebirth. St. Anthony states, “Obstetricians are so called for the fact that they stand (*stet*) in front of (*ob*), i.e. to assist. The obstetricians are priests who have to assist, and minister to, sinners who are trying to confess. . .” This explains the passage in Job 26:13, “His obstetric hand brought forth the coiling serpent.” In other words, the priest must first bring forth confession, drawing out sin which is often likened to an old man, so that the individual may enjoy a spiritual cleanliness akin to a new birth. Obstetricians and midwives thus represent the important task of clergymen in drawing out confession and assisting in the birth of a new soul.

The parallel between the priest and the midwife can also be seen in popular religious dramas performed independent of Mass which show the story of Christ’s

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114 Anthony, *Sermones* 158.
birth. In these plays, the usual characters, like Magi, are present. Perhaps somewhat surprising, however, is the addition of midwives who point the way to the Christ Child. It falls to the midwives to “reveal the Child” by “uncovering the Presepe,” probably by uncovering a curtain to reveal either a painting or statue of the Madonna and Child. The action of pulling the curtain aside and the words of the midwives, “Behold, here is the Child whom you seek” (“Item Obstetrics aperiendo Presepe dicant: ECCE Puer ADEST QUEM QUERITIS”), is repeated in texts from the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries, leading to the conclusion that this was a well known tradition. Moreover, the texts are very specific concerning who should play each of the roles, making it clear that the midwife/obstetrician was to be seen as symbolic of the priest and his important role in pointing the way to Christ.

However, priests are not only to be midwives, but to be mothers themselves. They are encouraged to be pregnant with the spirit and give birth to Christ by sharing his gospel. St. Anthony prays in behalf of his brothers, “We beseech you, Lord Jesus, that . . . you help us to conceive the spirit of salvation and bring to birth through a sorrowful heart an heir to eternal life.” Along a similar vein, St. Francis says, “We are mothers when we carry Him in our hearts and body . . . we give birth to Him through [his] holy manner of working.” These early church fathers are not the only ones to use the childbirth metaphor; however, they set a foundation for its later popularity. The childbirth metaphor is used extensively in Christian literature in vibrant portrayals that

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118 Anthony, *Sermones* 147.
119 Qtd in Neff, “Pain,” 269.
extend far beyond original modest scriptural references. These early church fathers present a foundation for the elaboration of the metaphor. Some of the most interesting uses of maternal imagery are found in the writings of female mystics who would have been quite influential to fifteenth century audiences. Birgitta of Sweden, as previously mentioned, uses maternal imagery extensively and was widely popularized in the fifteenth century, the first edition of *Revelations* being printed in 1492 and the re-affirmation of her canonization in 1414 and 1419.  

2.5 The Maternal Nature of Jesus

Maternity and motherhood are not only used as metaphors for the priest, but are also symbolic of Christ himself for medieval and early modern Christians. Julian of Norwich (1342-ca.1416) says that Jesus “knitted” himself to the mortal body in Mary’s womb. She uses maternal imagery, stating that Jesus “enclosed” mankind within himself. She further calls Jesus, “our Very mother in whom we be endlessly born.” It is through Christ’s atonement that sinners are able to repent and become renewed or “reborn.” The church, or *ecclesia*, is a feminine noun and represented by a woman. Since medieval audiences saw Christ’s body as the church, or the church being born out of Christ’s side, theological texts often discussed Jesus as the mother of the church. Moreover, the salvific acts of Jesus’ body are associated with maternal qualities of nurturing and birthing. For example, Jesus was the ultimate example of the virtue of

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120 For more on maternal imagery, especially among female mystics, see Atkinson, *Vocation*, especially page 163. See also Rosemary Hale’s “Imitation Mariae” *Mystics Quarterly* 16 (1990), 193-203. Hadewich of Antwerp and Birgitta of Sweden use maternal imagery extensively, not to mention Julian of Norwich and Marguerite d’Oingt. Fourteenth century German nun Christina Ebner (1277-1355) and Adelheid Langmann speak of personal mystical experiences of birthing/nursing the Christ child.  
charity which is often seen as a motherly attribute and personified as a woman. Catherine of Siena used this metaphor for Jesus, saying,

We cannot nourish others unless we nourish ourselves at the breasts of divine charity . . . We must do as a little child does who wants milk. It takes the breast of its mother, applies its mouth, and by means of the flesh it draws milk . . . We must attach ourselves to that breast of Christ crucified, which is the source of charity, and by means of that flesh we draw milk.\textsuperscript{123}

Caroline Walker Bynum notes that Christ’s body does “womanly things,” she continues saying that his body “bled, it bled food and it gave birth.”\textsuperscript{124} Bleeding was associated with menstruation, and thus, with purging.\textsuperscript{125} Clearly, Christ’s blood purged all mankind of sin. Breast milk was thought to be purified blood and Christ’s blood feeds Christians through the Eucharist. As Catherine of Siena said, “[Jesus] made of his blood a drink and his flesh a food for all those who wish it.”\textsuperscript{126} Finally, through conversion, we are given renewed life. Marguerite of Oingt (d. 1310) proclaimed,

My sweet Lord. . . . are you not my mother and more than my mother? . . . For when the hour of your delivery came you were placed on the hard bed of the cross . . . and your nerves and all your veins were broken. And truly it is no surprise that your veins burst when in one day you gave birth to the whole world!\textsuperscript{127}

It was not just female mystics that used this imagery. In Bernard of Clairvaux’s Song of Songs commentary, he wrote of Christ, saying, “For your breasts are better than

\textsuperscript{123} Quoted in Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation}, 97.
\textsuperscript{124} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation} 101.
\textsuperscript{125} See Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation}, 215. She points out that physicians used leeches to encourage bleeding and thus purify the body.
\textsuperscript{126} Quoted in Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation}, 87.
\textsuperscript{127} Bynum \textit{Fragmentation} 97. See also Neff, “Pain,” 269.
wine.” Carolyn Walker Bynum notes that the reference to breasts was understood by medieval audiences to be a symbol of feeding.\textsuperscript{128} Thus, it is akin to the symbol of Christ as the living bread. William of St. Thierry (1085-1148) wrote, “It is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish . . .” He goes on to refer to Christ’s disciples as “babes in the church who still needed your milk . . .”\textsuperscript{129} Further evidence that maternal imagery was understood by a wide audience is in its iconographical use. Quirizio of Murano, for example, shows Jesus feeding a nun from the wound in his side, using the same gestures used to portray Mary offering her breast (fig. 11).\textsuperscript{130}

It is important to acknowledge the limitations that women of the sixteenth century faced, particularly in entering into the public sphere. Due to the restrictions placed upon women throughout medieval and early modern Europe, we have very few resources from which we can hear women’s voices. However, the role of mother seems to be one which was continually regarded with respect. Mary’s motherhood and her faithfulness are supreme examples to be followed in “birthing” the church of Christ. Mother’s advice books testify of the loving concern with which women regarded their roles as the religious trainers of their children. Moreover, maternity and childbirth became important metaphors for spiritual conversion and thus played a crucial role in religious imagery. Finally, the role of mother spread to saints, priests, even Jesus himself was described maternally. The renewed emphasis on marriage in the thirteenth century and the feminized language of salvation served to revalue the role of woman as mother and

\textsuperscript{128} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation}, 93.

\textsuperscript{129} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation}, 93.

\textsuperscript{130} I am once again indebted to Carolyn Walker Bynum for directing me to these images. See Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation} 110-15. She also points to \textit{Man of Sorrows and Mary Intercede with God the Father} in the style of Konrad Witz (ca. 1450). In this painting, Christ’s side is again equated with Mary’s breast before God the Father in the tradition of the “double intercession.” This same imagery again in Goswyn van der Weyden’s 1407 \textit{Triptych of Antonius Tsgrooten} (Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation}, 113-15).
emphasize the important duty of the mother in the future salvation of her children’s souls. Furthermore, it seems clear that the imagery of maternity and childbirth were familiar to early modern audiences who were accustomed to associating conversion to birth and salvation with feminine nurturing.
3 The Victory of Sacrifice: Jesus as the Instrument or Song

For medieval Christianity, birth is associated with death as both eternal life and spiritual rebirth are made possible through the sacrifice of the Savior. Because of Christ, death is not seen as an end, but merely as an entryway leading to new life. The theme of birth coming from death and sacrifice is key to understanding the program of panels and sculpture that makes up the Isenheim Altarpiece. This important progression of rebirth can be seen in the *Concert of Angels* panel as well as the *Crucifixion* panel and works to link Christ’s sacrifice with his birth. One way in which the *Concert of Angels* and *Crucifixion* panels point to one another to create a circular dialogue of birth/death/birth is through the metaphor of the instrument or song in referring to Christ or His Atonement. The metaphor of the song is one of the most misunderstood components of the Altarpiece and it is crucial to understanding the iconography of both the *Concert of Angels* panel and the *Crucifixion*.

3.1 The Musicality of Martyrdom

The Isenheim is probably most famous for its powerful and perhaps gruesome portrayal of Christ on the cross. Grünewald has painted Christ suffering all manner of pains, from the crown of thorns at his head to his shrunken and concave abdomen.¹³¹ F. P. Pickering notes that the intense suffering portrayed in the Crucifixion scenes of the late Middle Ages were meant to communicate that Christ suffered “as never a man before” had suffered. The flagellation was thought to be connected to Isaiah’s “stripes” with which we are healed and the “‘forty-less-one strokes’” written about in 2 Cor 11:24 were

¹³¹ See F. P. Pickering, *Literature & Art In the Middle Ages* (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1970), 281. Saint Bridget’s *Revelations* put forth the idea that Christ’s abdomen “was so shrunken and desiccated as to be a concavity.”
each counted and designated to a part of the body. The result was a *quasi leprosus* Christ with so many wounds and so much blood that he indeed looked like one who had “‘trod the wine-press alone.’”\(^{132}\) The Isenheim *Crucifixion* is particularly intriguing because Grünewald seems to have deliberately associated Christ’s suffering with the disease suffered by those in the Isenheim monastery hospital so that the sick would literally see Christ suffering for their sins and sicknesses. Indeed, Jesus’ skin is red with boils similar to those caused by ergotism, the disease which plagued the Rhineland during this period and caused pilgrims to seek help from the Antonites at Isenheim where the Altarpiece was commissioned. Jesus’ skin is thus shown developing sores akin to those developed in the early stages of ergotism, before the skin turned black like coal and lead to the loss of limbs. It has even been suggested that the two panels of the *Lamentation* were meant to slide apart (fig. 12), suggesting the amputation of the leg just below the knee, a common medical treatment for gangrene limbs caused by ergotism.\(^{133}\)

Another interesting aspect of the Altarpiece that seems largely ignored by modern audiences is the musicality of the Crucifixion. The association of Christ on the cross with stringed musical instruments was an important and well understood Christian symbol in the Middle Ages.\(^{134}\) Nevertheless, the cross and the Crucified as “instruments” of God is a concept largely forgotten by modern audiences. They were among the *omnia de me* consisting of prophecies and symbols of Christ’s Crucifixion.\(^{135}\) Grünewald’s Christ is stretched from arm to arm, and head to toe across the bed of the cross; so much is the tension of his sinuous body across the wooden frame that his arms and legs seem

elongated. His arms and legs are pinned to the wood of the cross like the strings of a harp or a viol, almost as if stretched to the nail holes as strings strung and pegged to an instrument. His stomach is so emaciated as to reveal large, exaggerated indentations in his side below clearly visible ribs, akin to the indented ribs of a viol. In fact, the viol is a useful analogy for the “instrument” of Jesus on the Cross because it was among the most popular stringed instruments of the Renaissance, replacing the classically popular cithara or harp. The bow of the cross bends with the weight of the Savior like the concave bow of the Renaissance viol (fig. 13). The footrest at the bottom of the cross is attached to Christ’s sinuous feet by means of the nail much like the tail piece and endpin of the viol which attach the strings to the wooden body of the instrument (fig. 14). Jesus’ mouth even hangs open as if a sonorous moan might escape his lips.

Christian martyrdom has long been associated with music. St. Ambrose connects the song of testimony with martyrdom, comparing the body to a musical instrument. Beautiful music is played when an individual testifies of Christ; thus the imagery becomes particularly useful in portraying painful situations in which testimony is sealed with suffering. Ambrose describes the tortured bodies of the Macchabees as strings in an instrument; the testimony of their death is a sweet song. He says,

What cithera could give forth sweeter song than her dying sons in their final glory? For a natural but uninvited groaning burst from them . . . You might look upon their mangled bodies arranged in a row as the strings of an instrument. You might hear in their victorious sighs the sounding of the seven-string psaltery. Not in such a fashion could those alluring songs of the sirens—or so they were said to
be—attract their listener, for they were attracting him to shipwreck; but these 
songs were leading him to the victory of sacrifice.¹³⁶

In this passage, Ambrose contrasts pagan songs with Christian songs and celebrates the 
sacrifice of life for God. The song, or the gospel of Christ, is compelling; Ambrose even 
suggests that its attraction is comparable to the song of the siren. The shipwreck of the 
faithful, even martyrdom, actually leads to eternal life for the soul. It is “the victory of 
sacrifice.” Moreover, the martyr is like a beautiful instrument and his sighs are victorious 
testimonies.

We also see the association of music with torture in the strange compositions of 
Hieronymous Bosch. In the inner right wing of the Garden of Earthly Delights, devils 
and demons torture human bodies with various musical instruments (fig. 15). One figure 
is trapped inside a drum while a devil beats upon it menacingly. Another man stands 
over him, impaled with a flute and bearing a horn instrument rather like a cross. A 
hurdy-gurdy, or stringed instrument with a crank, is yet another instrument inflicting 
torture on at least three other individuals. To the left of this, a man is tied to the neck of a 
lute reminiscent of one of the thieves of the Crucifixion. Another is strung up, even 
crucified, upon a harp.¹³⁷ Bosch’s symbolism has been interpreted in a myriad of 
ways,¹³⁸ however, we can at least conclude that he understood the musical imagery of 
suffering and associated it with the pain of death by crucifixion.

This type of musical imagery used to convey suffering survives into the late 
medieval and early modern period. Hildegard of Bingen described the conquering of

¹³⁶ Quoted in Bruce W. Holsinger, Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture (Stanford, California: 
¹³⁷ Holsinger, Music, 254-55.
¹³⁸ For a discussion on this, see Holsinger, Music, 255-58.
Satan, saying that Christ would come and that “a harp is lying with its strings across his body; which signifies the joyful songs of those who will suffer dire torments in the persecution that the son of iniquity will inflict upon the chosen, torturing their bodies.”

Here, Hildegard associates the harp and the “strings” strung across the body with the torture sustained by Jesus, suggesting his body stretched across the cross at the Crucifixion. She even turns the “dire torment” into a “joyful song,” or the song of martyrdom is a joyful song because it is a testimony of salvation. Illustrations to fit the text also show the stringed instrument laying across Jesus’ lap, suggesting the “coming forth” of such sacrifice (fig. 16).

In fact, some of the most poignant religious musical symbolism in Christianity describes the sacrificed Christ upon the cross as an instrument. After all, the ultimate martyr is Jesus Christ who, with his death, gave birth to the world through his sacrifice on the cross. Cassiodorus explains, “The harp [Cithara] denotes the glorious passion, performed on stretched tendons and individuated bones, which made the virtue of patience resound with the song as it were of the understanding.”

It is easy to see how this association would have taken place since a harp is little more than animal tendons stretched across wood.

Augustine makes the association of the Crucifixion with music in the form of flesh spread across wood as in the making of a drum. In first Samuel, also called the

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139 Both the instrument and the head of the Antichrist symbolize the birth: the birth of salvation, and of the “old serpent” that must be birthed first. The two are symbolized and reference is clearly made to reproductive organs, which make birth possible. The image of Ecclesia is also linked to the image of Christ by the wrist, which foreshadows the Crucifixion which, of course, will cause the wrist to be stretched to the wood of the Cross. See Holsinger, Music, 100-101. Bosch seems to also reference this in The Garden of Earthly Delights, right panel., in which a man is stretch across a harp and a beast with a rope from his mouth sits to the bottom right. Hildegard, Book of the Rewards, 130.

140 Holsinger, Music, 201. Ambrose implies that Christ will suffer musical torture for the sins of mankind in De Jacob et vita beata.
Book of Kings, chapter twenty-one, King David flees in fear when recognized by the
servants of Achish. Verse thirteen states that David “changed his behaviour before them,
and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate.”
Augustine interpreted this passage, in which David “scrabbled,” or in another translation,
“drums” upon the doors of the gate, as being a prototype for Christ falling upon the wood
of the Cross.

We must inquire what that also may be, he affected and drummed upon the
doors...what is He [Christ] affected? . . . *He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto
death, even to the death of the cross* [Phil 2, 8]. Therefore He affected,
because He came even to the death of the cross. And because whoever is
crucified is extended upon wood, and that to make a drum, flesh—that is, skin—is
stretched on wood, therefore it is said, *He drummed*, that is, He was crucified, He
was stretched upon wood.\(^{141}\)

Christ’s martyred body was likened to a musical instrument, testifying of God in its
martyrdom on the cross. The analogy was a familiar one in the medieval period, even if
it has largely been forgotten today. In his book on Passion iconography in Northern
Europe, James H. Marrow notes that by the twelfth century these musical metaphors for
the Crucifixion are found “in such out-of-the-way places as commentaries upon church
customs and implements,”\(^ {142}\) suggesting that they were commonplace by the High Middle
Ages.


\(^{142}\) Marrow, *Passion*, 124-25.
One of the most influential texts of the medieval period, the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, deliberately links the invention of music with the Crucifixion, both in text and illustration. Written in the fourteenth century, the *Speculum* was so popular that it was translated into many vernacular languages and so many copies were made that approximately 350 manuscripts still survive. In chapter twenty-three, the manuscript tells of the invention of musical instruments by Jubal who developed the concept of music from listening to Tubalcaín hammering metal. Tubalcaín is featured in the Old Testament as the first blacksmith and he is thus given a role in the New Testament through the nails in the Crucifixion. The *Speculum* then links the invention of hammering to the invention of music, and then to the Crucifixion. It says,

> When Tubalcaín struck the hammer, Jubal invented music from the sound of the hammer striking the iron. To such a melody, the sound of the pounding of iron, we can compare the prayer of Christ from the cross. When his torturers fastened him to the cross, Christ chanted to his Father a most pleasing melody, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do, for they do not recognize me to be your Son. . . This blessed melody was so pleasant and pleasing that 3,000 were converted at that same hour. . .”

Numerous illustrations exist which accompany this text and expound upon the written word with visual iconography. The text states that the musical rhythm of the pounding nails is like the music of Jesus’ prayer. Illustrations designed for the text take the analogy one step further in linking Jesus’ body tied upon the cross to strings attached to

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an instrument. A fourteenth century German illustration from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (fig. 17) shows two blacksmiths hammering on an anvil next to an illustration of two soldiers hammering nails into Christ’s hands and feet on the cross. A harp player stands behind the blacksmiths, echoing the adjacent composition in which a string is strung from Jesus’ hand across his body.

Another German text from the Darmstadt Landesbibliothek (fig. 18) also shows the strings across Jesus’ body from his arms and feet. The stringed instrument in the neighboring picture is in the shape of a cross and the holes in the instrument echo the wounds in Christ’s hands, feet, and side. In an example from the British Library, Sloane 346, fol. 15r from the fourteenth century, the hands of the thieves are connected by tightly stretched strings, showing the musical parallel for the guilty. 146 Interestingly, the two thieves crucified next to Christ are depicted as musical instruments, despite the fact that theirs was not the song of salvation.

The Speculum illustrations explicitly link the blacksmiths themselves to the men hammering nails into Christ’s hands and feet in almost every illustration. While the Staatsbibliothek makes the correlation between Christ on the Cross and the harp played behind the blacksmiths, the Landesbibliothek image even adds rope to the body of Christ which echoes the strings of a harp. The text does say that ropes were used to stretch Jesus’ arms and legs to the cross to fit holes that had already been made for the nails, however, the text itself does not specifically link this event to any musical symbolism. The illustration thus assumes that the general audience would understand the musical symbolism portrayed in the image without any additional explanation.

146 Holsinger, Music, 204-207.
The fact that this text enjoyed widespread popularity further indicates that the analogy of the Crucifixion with musical instruments was also widespread. Moreover, the liberty of associating the Crucified Christ with stringed instruments in illustrations attests that the analogy was understood. Pickering suggests that modern audiences have forgotten that the cithara or harp was perhaps the “most influential of all Christian symbols—of the Crucifixion as a ‘historical event,’” and thus, fail to recognize what would have been a widely understood analogy to medieval audiences.¹⁴⁷

*Die Erlösung*, a German poem from the fourteenth century, is a powerful example of using the imagery of string instruments to celebrate Christ’s sacrifice. It says, “... Thus exactly did our Lord Christ. Yes, spanned and direly stretched, struck again and again, the sweet music of God which he makes for his faithful was heard.”¹⁴⁸ With the recognition of the important association between stringed instruments and the Crucifixion in medieval art, this passage becomes particularly interesting when read in companion to Grünewald’s *Crucifixion*, in which Christ’s arms are stretched to the cross, like sinews strung to a wooden viol. Indeed, Grünewald adds to the illusion of stretching by elongating Christ’s arms and legs and bowing the cross almost as if the body of the Redeemer is stretched so tightly that the wood must bend. The skin is stretched so thin that even the ribs appear obvious and individuate, like the musical bones made from the ribs of animals. This tradition comes from the passage in Joel 1:7, “He hath. . .barked my fig tree: he hath made it clean bare, and cast it away; the branches thereof are made white.” Interpretations of this passage associated the bark of the tree with the flesh of the

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Savior “barked” by the flagellation until the white of his ribs could be seen.\footnote{Marrow, \textit{Passion}, 138.}

Acknowledgment of such an analogy is seen in Grünewald’s \textit{Crucifixion} in which the wood from the cross still bears some bark, another oft-used iconographical device (fig. 19). The nails of the cross are even portrayed as large rounded buttons reminiscent of the pegs that attach strings to the viol.

How powerful the Crucifixion scene must have been for the sufferers of ergotism! The sick suffered in the body, their skin blistering as if burning, turning gangrene, and even sometimes fragmenting their bodies. Before them hung the Christ with whom the sick were asked to identify. The crucified Christ suffered in agony each time he moved on the cross as the only support for his weight was the tearing of muscle and skin. Flayed and stretched to the wood of the cross like the sinuous strings of a harp, the crucified Christ, the New Song, is depicted suffering the pains of ergotism. Despite the agony of the flesh, Jesus is shown finishing the Lord’s work, singing the last verse—even sealing his testimony with the song of sacrifice.

\section*{3.2 The Metaphor of the Song in the Concert of Angels Panel}

The symbolism of Christ as the Instrument of God links the event of Christ’s death in the \textit{Crucifixion} panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece with the celebration of life in the \textit{Concert of Angels} panel. In this manner, life is linked with death in a circular progression. Death is not left as an end, but as a means for new life. The panels of the Altarpiece are thus brought full circle as Christ’s birth points to his death and his death points the way to new life. The \textit{Crucifixion} panel of the Altarpiece often overshadows the \textit{The Concert of Angels} panel, however the \textit{Concert} is one of the key panels of the
Altarpiece which works to tie together the theme of birth and death, testifying of the possibility for Christians to be saved in Christ by linking sacrifice with rebirth.

While instrument playing angels abound in sixteenth century art, Grünewald’s *Concert of Angels* is unique in its prominent placement within the portrayal of the history of salvation as a main event between the angel’s Annunciation to Mary and the Resurrection of the Savior. Furthermore, Grünewald’s angels are placed in the forefront of the painting, dominating the left half of the central panel. While the *Concert* is clearly linked to the *Nativity* in the next panel, the division of the two scenes cannot be ignored, the first scene taking place in an interior space and the second in an exterior space (fig. 2). It is clear that Grünewald has delineated the two images into separate scenes, giving the *Concert of Angels* a dominating presence that has been rather enigmatic to art historians. Ruth Mellinkoff calls it, “more impervious to explanation than any other element of the Altarpiece and is, in its own right, one of the great interpretive puzzles for critics and historians of art.”¹⁵⁰ However, if we look to the symbolism of music in Christianity, this seemingly incongruent placement becomes an ingenious visual language for the celebration of salvation through the Incarnation, which fits perfectly between the *Annunciation* and *Nativity* sequence.

In fact, the panels in the middle position of the altar are chronologically composed and emphasize the theme of the Madonna as birth mother of the church, fitting the theme of birth and growth that permeates throughout the rest of the Altarpiece as will be further discussed in chapter five. In the middle position, the Isenheim Altarpiece shows, from left to right, *Annunciation, Concert of Angels, Nativity*, and *Resurrection*. It is easy to see how the Annunciation precedes the figure of Madonna and Child and the Resurrection,

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but why has Grünewald interrupted the sequence with the *Concert of Angels*? I propose that the *Concert of Angels* panel is a symbolic reference to the birth of Christ, the “New Song,” which was brought into the world by the Incarnation and must be further spread amongst mankind by followers of Christ who echo Mary’s Song by birthing Christ in their hearts.

As previously discussed, musical imagery was often used to refer to the gospel, and specifically to Jesus himself. The tradition began early as the church fathers endeavored to spread Christianity across Greco-Roman culture. The imagery may have been particularly poignant among early converts because of the widespread use of music and musical imagery tied to religious portrayals of Greco-Roman deity and mythology like the story of Apollo and Marsayas or Orpheus. In the *Protreptikos*, for example, Clement of Alexandria uses the Greco-Roman musical fable of Eunomos and the grasshopper in order to convey his testimony of Jesus Christ, or the “Levitical song,” saying,

. . . What my Eunomos sings is not the measure of Terpander, nor that of Capito, nor the Phrygian, nor Lydian, nor Dorian, but the immortal measure of the new harmony which bears God’s name—the new, Levitical song: ‘Soother of pain, calmer of wrath, producing forgetfulness of all ills’ [Odyssey 4.220]. Sweet and true is the charm of persuasion which blends with this strain.\(^{151}\)

Clement asserts that his song, the Christian song, is greater than the poetic songs of Greco-Roman culture because his song contains the healing power of Christ. Moreover, he calls the Christian gospel a “new harmony.” In fact, Jesus himself is the New Song

\(^{151}\) Quoted in Holsinger, *Music*, 32.
and his music is one of healing and salvation. As in Psalms 118:14, “The Lord is my strength and Song.” Or, in the words of Isaiah, “the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he has also become my salvation” (Isa 12:2). Thus, the song becomes a useful metaphor in the Christian tradition for describing the Savior.

Clement of Alexandria suggests that, as the Word made flesh, Christ is at once a “New Song” and a “breathing instrument.” Referring to Jesus as the “Word,” he says, “The celestial Word, is the all-harmonious, melodious, holy instrument of God.” With this imagery in mind, the dominance of music in Grünewald’s panels begins to take a new meaning. The angels in the Concert are not simply celebratory angels, but are part of the allegory of birth. For the subject of the scene is not so much the angel, but rather, the Instrument, or the Song.

The Concert of Angels is linked to the Nativity as a celebration of Christ’s birth. However, Grünewald’s Concert is unique in creating a symbolic scene of birth within the Concert of Angels panel through the usage of the metaphor of Jesus as the Song. The panel portrays the creation of the Song, coming to save and testify as the Instrument of God. Thus, the viol in the forefront of the panel is so large as to dominate the scene, even dwarfing the angels. Placed outside of the enclosure, the angel kneels on the ground playing the viola da gamba and gazes towards the monumental image of Mary, compositionally linking the panel to the Nativity in which the Madonna holds the Christ Child, or God’s Instrument. Clement of Alexandria explained that Christ came to the world to make mankind whole again. He said, “What, then, does this instrument—the Word of God, the Lord, the New Song—desire? To open the eyes of the blind . . . to

152 Holsinger, Music, 33-34.
conquer death, to reconcile disobedient children. . .”153

Within the *Concert of Angels* we not only see a celebration of the birth of Christ, but the symbolism of the New Song, the Instrument of God coming to the world to restore life and conquer death.

### 3.3 Foreshadowing Death in the *Concert of Angels* Panel

While the *Concert* is clearly a celebration of birth, it simultaneously foreshadows the completion of Christ’s mission on earth which is his sacrificial death for the salvation of the souls of mankind. For it is through this death that Christianity is provided with a means of redemption from the corruption inherent to mortality. In the section entitled “Birth of Redemption at the Crucifixion,” in chapter five, we will touch on the point that the Crucifixion was often foreshadowed in scenes of the Nativity. In the *Nativity* fresco by Giotto at Padua, for example, Christ is placed, not in a traditional manger, but on an altar, foreshadowing his sacrifice at the Crucifixion. The imagery of the Crucifixion is also foreshadowed in the *Concert of Angels* by the musical instruments themselves.

The three angels in the forefront of the *Concert* panel play stringed viols, in which the bow is perfectly perpendicular to the instrument, making a cross. Mary Rasmussen notes that there are several strange things about Grünewald’s portrayal of the musical instruments in his *Concert*. She points out that Grünewald’s viol is carefully detailed, saying “the instrument must have been closely observed, for Grünewald has even depicted an interior brace behind the C-holes.”154 And yet, the lower body of the instruments are much too large, the waist much too narrow almost to the point of dividing the body of the instrument in two, and finally, there is the “really odd detail” of the

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extremely long fingerboard. After hypothesizing different reasons that a viol might have been built with ill proportioned bouts and a long fingerboard, Rasmussen concludes that we can “rationalize” the odd proportion of the instruments and peculiar bowing position, but the fact of the matter is that Grünewald’s painstaking care of detailed representation was not for the purpose of documenting the contemporary viol, but rather to present a deeper and more symbolic meaning for the instrument. Thus, the lack of “trustworthy representation” and the “suspiciously unworkable” bowing method are not meant to depict the reality of the instrument, but more in keeping with Grünewald’s style, the reality of the instrument has been twisted to fit their more important use, which is as metaphors for the Instrument of God.

The fact that Grünewald is able to show accurate details of the viol, exemplified by his presentation of the braces behind the C-holes, demonstrates Grünewald’s ability to accurately portray delicate musical instruments. However, Grünewald uses his skill to direct attention to the symbolic meaning behind his instruments. After our exploration into the symbolism of music in Christian thought, Grünewald’s oversized viol seems a reference to Jesus on the Cross. His emaciated body is thinned to the point of revealing muscle and bone as it is stretched across the wood of the Cross. His waist is marked with exaggerated cuts into his side to reveal his sunken abdomen and ribs, much like Grünewald’s forefront viol, “grotesque in appearance, with waists so deeply cut into the body that they all but meet behind the fingerboard,” as described by music historian Ian Woodfield. This also explains the striking depiction of the angels’ fingers stretching

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across the strings of the viol, eerily echoing the tortured fingers of Christ on the Cross (fig. 20). Thus, the Angelic Concert becomes, not just the singing of angels at Christ’s birth, but the symbol of Christ himself, coming like a song into the world with the Atonement foreshadowed as the crescendo of his song of salvation.

It is interesting to note that Grünewald repeats the image of the viol crossed perfectly perpendicular with the bow three times in the foreground of the panel, a very meaningful number in Christianity. Three separate angels bow three distinctive viols with wands perfectly perpendicular to the strings, perhaps even representing Jesus’ cross in the forefront, bowed by the lightest angel who signals Christ’s birth by the backward reference of the bow to the womb, and the two robbers who would be crucified to the right and left. The cross to the left of the forefront angel, then, would represent the wicked thief whose cross is often tilted downward to differentiate it from the crosses of Christ and the penitent thief. Perhaps this is why Grünewald portrays this cross sideways. Moreover, the viol in this image is a viola da braccio (literally meaning "viol of the arm") rather than a viola da gamba ("viol of the leg") which was seen as an inferior instrument during the Renaissance. With this reading, an explanation is provided for the angel to the right of the forefront angel, which has often been commented upon for its dark appearance. It has been noted that the crest on this angel resembles the peacock’s crest which was sometimes a symbol for pride, as in Dürer’s representation of the serpent deceiving Adam and Eve. Dürer is not enigmatic in revealing the meaning behind this representation; the peacock crest is obviously being

158 One robber, according to Luke would accompany Jesus in heaven, thus the artistic tradition of portraying one cross at a downward angle. Perhaps this is why one bow is bowed vertically while the other two are horizontal.
160 For this discussion, see Melinkoff, Isenheim.
used as a symbol for Lucifer’s pride because it is placed upon a serpent and because the scene is obviously depicting the Fall.

However, the peacock had double meanings in Christian iconography. It was sometimes used to signify pride and it was sometimes used to symbolize the Resurrection. With this in mind, Grünewald’s use of the symbol is not as clear to modern audiences. The use of the peacock as a symbol for pride or of the image of the fallen angel, Lucifer, is not a familiar motif in either angelic concert or Nativity scenes. The peacock was, however, often used as a symbol of immortality in scenes of Christ’s birth. For example, Fra Angelico’s *Adoration of the Magi* presents a very dominate and oversized peacock perched above the stable to symbolize the Resurrection (fig. 21). Both Botticelli’s and Fra Filippo Lippi’s Adoration scenes use the same iconographic device. Tintoretto portrays the peacock among the animals in the barn at the Nativity, this time in *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Peacocks also surround Madonna and Child in Steffano da Zevio’s *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1410 (fig. 22). The peacock is seen as a symbol for Christ’s power over death in Domencio Ghirlandaio’s *Last Supper*, 1486 (fig. 23) and Hans Memling’s *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* (1470-1). The peacock feather is used as a crown in Benozzo Gozzoli’s *Procession of the Middle King*, 1459-60, in which Emperor John VII Paleologus represents the king. Thus, the reference to the peacock by use of the cock as a sort of crown, could also be interpreted as the hope of eternal life since the peacock must have been a well known symbol for eternal life and the hope of the Resurrection—particularly when placed within a scene which celebrates the Nativity. The green decaying flesh of this angel, which has been compared to Christ’s own gangrene flesh on the cross, may actually be suffering from disease called ergotism as
well. This reading would be particularly meaningful when seeing the fingers upon the wood as reflections of the fingers stretched in torment to the wood of the cross as further encouragement for the sick at Isenheim to see their own suffering as a type of “cross” to be born. The angel, then, suffers sickness and is clearly not without sin; however, he celebrates the birth of Christ, his Savior and Redeemer.

Hildegard of Bingen writes of angels “with forms like human forms.” She compares the wings to the desire to do God’s will, which is spread like wings. She also compares the singing of angels to mankind who sings “the song of gladness” when “tread[ing] the flesh underfoot and lift[ing] up the spirit.” Here, mankind is likened to an angel who sings with the voice of salvation “in the tabernacles of the Just” as referenced in Psalms 118:15.161 Thus, Grünewald’s angel may be seen as representing the converted; much like the penitent thief who was crucified at the right hand of the Savior, singing the song of salvation at the moment of Christ’s birth within the tabernacle of a church. Represented at the right side of the forefront Angel, this creature has found the Savior and can now look forward to meeting God in Heaven. This explains the expectant upturned gaze of the angel towards the image of God the Father in the heavens. If this is so, then the Altarpiece truly embraces the doctrine of the Synod at Arras which advocates the use of images so that the audience might emulate the virtues portrayed in the image. The Synod recommends that the onlooker imagine himself as part of the one of the angels praising God, saying “While we see through outward images the Angles standing in attendance upon the Creator, by the glory which they receive from the God of splendor

we are inspired with zeal for abode among their number.”  Truly, the sick at Isenheim have reason to rejoice with the angels in heaven at the Nativity of Christ, for “the medicine of life,” even the “new, Levitical song: ‘Soother of pain, calmer of wrath, producing forgetfulness of all ills’” has been born. Grünewald’s Isenheim masterpiece thus becomes a personal message of the power of the Atonement in which the God-Man willingly suffered the sins and sicknesses of the world in order to offer redemption to the fallen. Mankind need only “look” to God and live (Numbers 21:8).

3.4 The Song of Conversion

The imagery of the birth of the song can be extended to all faithful followers of Christ. The church can sing the Song of salvation through conversion, whereby the faithful give birth to Christ in their hearts. Saints, and particularly, Mary, demonstrate by example how to be reborn in Christ and thereby sing the Song of redeeming love. As in Psalms 40:3, “And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD.” The Isenheim Altarpiece displays the Song, first birthed through the Incarnation and culminating with the Atonement and Crucifixion. Through these panels, the Concert of Angels joined to the Nativity and the Crucifixion, Grünewald opens up the meaning of the entire Altarpiece for modern viewers. For, in the remaining panels, Grünewald shows the birth of the Song first through Mary, then through the Saints, and finally, Grünewald encourages the audience at Isenheim, particularly the sick, to also bear their afflictions with faith. For by so doing, they might also bear a converted soul and give “birth” to the Song of salvation.

162 Forsyth, Throne, 93.
163 Quoted in Graef, Mary, 61. These are the words of Ephraem of Syria in De Nativitate, 13, 2.
164 Quoted in Holsinger, Music, 32.
In traditional representations of the life of Mary, we often see the Annunciation followed by the Visitation. It is after the angel Gabriel’s message of salvation that Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and declares, “Magnificat anima mea, Dominum,” which begins Mary’s Song, the Magnificat. The Magnificat marks the fulfillment of the Old Testament and ushers in the new. In this song, Mary praises God and gives thanks for showing favor to his humble handmaiden. Within the Isenheim Altarpiece, as the angels play the song, even the New Song, Ecclesia kneels humbly in prayer and reflects the bright light of the Savior (fig. 6 and fig. 7). Above her head are two angels, one carrying a crown and one carrying a scepter, announcing the birth of the Savior.\textsuperscript{165} Mary, as Ecclesia, represents the Church humbly receiving the Word of God, to be borne in the hearts of the faithful. This symbolism is also portrayed in religious devotion as Mary’s Song, the Magnificat, is echoed by the Church, which recites her song daily rather than weekly at either Lauds or Vespers.\textsuperscript{166} Freyburg preacher Hieronymus Weller explained that Mary’s Song is sung in order to praise God for the birth of Christ.\textsuperscript{167} In sum, the Magnificat is repeated as a sort of testimony of praise concerning the Incarnation.

Through her song, Mary gave birth to both the physical nature of Christ while also giving birth to Him in her heart through her obedience and faith. In the Symphonia, Hildegard of Bingen writes of Mary, “For your womb held joy, when all the celestial symphonia rang out from you . . . Now let all Ecclesia blush in joy and sound in


\textsuperscript{166} The Roman Catholic Church recites the Magnificat at Vespers, as it was assigned by William Durandus in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century. However, the Greek Church still recites it at Lauds as per the original liturgy as explained in the Rule by St. Caesarius of Arles in the sixth century. See H.T. Henry, New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia Volume IX 2005 K. Knight, Updated Oct. 6, 2005, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09534a.htm>

\textsuperscript{167} Kreitzer, Reforming, 56.
symphonia for the sweetest virgin and praiseworthy Mary.” The faithful must follow Mary’s example and share in her song of conversion, whereby they also can “birth” the Word of God. As in Psalms 150: 3-5, “Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.” Clement explains, “’Praise him on strings and the instrument’ refers to our body as an instrument and its sinews as strings from which it derives its harmonious tension, and when strummed by the Spirit it gives off human tones.”

An eleventh century legend concerning the meeting of Augustine and Ambrose recorded by Landulf portrays the role of the saints in spreading the song of conversion. According to the story, Ambrose converts Augustine and baptizes him. Following this, “they sang together the Te Deum laudamus, and so brought forth [ediderunt] what is now approved of by the whole church, and sung devoutly everywhere.” As Holsinger tells us, the verb edere used by Landulf means to bring forth and also “to give birth.” In this section, the liturgical song as well as the gospel of conversion is birthed by Ambrose and Augustine at baptism. In the City of God, Augustine also states, “Christ is now sung [cantatur] everywhere.” Augustine even writes of the human body, the “complex system of veins, sinews and internal organs” as a musical instrument. At the end of the City of God, Augustine comments on the great mystery of the human body in which each part functions together. He says that the body works together, every part inside and out.

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169 Holsinger, Music, 38.
171 Holsinger, Music, 63. Augustine, De civitate Dei 22.8, CCSL 48, 815.
He describes the body as working in a system of numbers, each part having adapted a role so that it produces harmony, or “harmonia.” This word, “harmonia,” Augustine tells us, comes from the Greeks who first drew attention to the body as a musical instrument “tamquam cuiusdam organi.” Thus, mankind, which was created “in the image of God,” has the opportunity to become instruments of God by spreading testimony of the Word of God.

Mary’s prominence in the Isenheim Altarpiece leads a discussion of the birth of the gospel on the earth and the building of Christ’s kingdom. Beginning in the middle position, Grünewald begins to explain the history of salvation starting at the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel’s salutation of “Ave” marks the beginning of the reversal of the curse of Eve through the Incarnation of the Lamb of God, made possible by the humble and obedient handmaiden of the Lord. Then, we see the Concert of Angels in which the Song comes forth into the world. The baby Jesus is shown on the lap of the Thronus Salomonus and gazes upward towards the loving Mother Mary as he fingers the rosary. Finally, we see the resurrected Lord who has overcome the pains and sickness of the world. He has fulfilled his mission; he has sung his song of redeeming love, even reaching the crescendo of his life on earth through his death in the Crucifixion panel, in which we see both his role as the beautiful instrument of salvation and the Virgin Mary’s role in the pain of labor as she gave birth to the Word at the foot of the Cross. The Word must now be carried by the faithful followers of Christ as the kingdom of God is built on Earth. Thus, we see in the open position of the Altarpiece, the saints and disciples. Saints Anthony, Jerome, and Augustine continue the work of spreading the

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172 Holsinger, Music, 82. Augustine, De civitate Dei 22.24, CCSL 48, 850.
173 See Chapter four for a further explanation of the iconography of labor in the Crucifixion panel.
Word and are represented in sculpture by Nicolas de Haguenau (fig. 3). Saint Anthony, patron saint of Isenheim, holds his scriptures and his staff while sitting upon his throne, raised upon a dais. The three figures stand in relief against the suggestion of a chapel of arches and pillars with the winding vines and symbols of the four Evangelists above their head, reminiscent of both the chapel of the Annunciation, and even more so, of the chamber in the Concert.

Both panels flanking Nicolas de Haguenau’s statues show the work of the faithful in building the kingdom. These good Saints, portrayed in both painting and sculpture, carry Jesus’ message of conversion and redemption. In other words, they carry the New Song of salvation. Grünewald’s inclusion of Saints Anthony and Paul in the desert are particularly poignant examples of singing the Lord’s song in a strange land, as stated in Psalms 137:4. While it is not the duty of those few religious who have chosen the contemplative path to help in the physical continuation of the human race, as discussed in chapter two, these individuals do take part in building the kingdom of God by giving birth to the Song, by testifying of Christ and assisting in the birth of conversion. Clement says, “A beautiful, breathing instrument of music the Lord made man, after his own image.”\textsuperscript{174} In the image of God, these Saints carry the music of redeeming love. They are to be “God’s harp.”\textsuperscript{175}

The metaphor of the Instrument or Song works to bring the nine Altarpiece panels together in the dialogue of rebirth through sacrifice. The musical analogy joins Christ’s birth in Concert of Angels/Nativity with His death in Crucifixion. While the dominating theme of the Concert is the birth of Christ, his death is foreshadowed in the metaphor of

\textsuperscript{174} Holsinger, Music, 33.
\textsuperscript{175} Qtd in Holsinger, Music, 33. From Clement of Alexandria.
music which links His martyrdom with song, turning Christ himself into the Instrument of God. Likewise, the *Crucifixion* emphasizes the life that comes from Jesus’ sacrifice. Thus, His life cannot be referenced without mention of the life purpose, which was sacrifice. And, mention of His death is not complete without referring to the life which was born from His death. Likewise, mother and son are linked together—the one referring to the other. The message of rebirth reverberates throughout the remaining panels of the Altarpiece which show images of the followers of Christ who spread the Word, or Song. The sick at Isenheim are encouraged to look upon the example of the Saints and remain faithful in their afflictions. Those individuals who remain faithful in their suffering are numbered among the angels who sing in the *Concert* and look forward with hope in Christ. The theme is brought full circle as we look back to the crucified Christ, who bears the sins and sicknesses of the world and dies that mankind might be reborn.
4 Redemption through the Birth of Sacrifice: Bearing the Word of God

One of the unifying themes of the Isenheim Altarpiece is that of birth and renewal through the divine love of the Savior who, through the sacrificial Atonement, provides a way for mankind to be redeemed. Birth and death are thus linked throughout the Altarpiece as the opportunity for rebirth comes, first, by means of the death of the Savior and, second, through the death of the carnal man by conversion. The themes of birth and death are interwoven throughout the Altarpiece, unifying the seemingly disparate panels. In order to understand the iconography of rebirth, we will first look to the Concert of Angels and the Crucifixion panels as entryways for a modern audience to a deeper understanding of the way in which the panels work together to portray the message of conversion to their audience at the Isenheim hospital. Although Grünewald’s Crucifixion is noteworthy for its depiction of sacrifice and his Concert of Angels portrays the celebration of birth, upon closer observation of these panels, we find that within the scene of death is also a striking message of birth and redemption, and likewise, within the scene of celebration we find a foreshadowing of the Crucifixion, linking death with birth and the opportunity for renewal through sacrifice which is celebrated throughout all of the Isenheim panels.

4.1 The Birth of Redemption at the Crucifixion

In both Medieval and Renaissance periods, Mary’s compassion and sacrifice is emphasized in artistic compositions of the Crucifixion by portraying Mary fainting at the foot of the cross. As we discussed in chapter one, it is because of her motherhood that
Mary takes part in the Passion. Bernardino of Busti emphasizes Mary’s pain at Christ’s
death explaining that as mother of Christ’s flesh, she shares his sorrows. He writes,
“because the body of Christ was taken from the substance of the Virgin, she was
therefore closest to him in grief.” In sermon literature, Jean Gerson expresses Mary’s
words at the Cross as echoing Jesus’ words in Gethsemane. She says, “My God, My
God, why have you forsaken the flesh which was taken from me. . .” Yet she continues,
merging her will to God’s will in the attitude of Jesus, “. . . I am willing to suffer, since
this pleases God. . .” The depth of Mary’s suffering at the foot of the Cross is unique
because of her motherhood and it allows her to take part in the Passion as Jesus’ own
mother. In artistic renditions of the Crucifixion, Mary is often shown imitating Christ in
his pain and death, as in Rogier van der Weyden’s Descent from the Cross (fig. 24). Van
der Weyden’s rendition exaggeratedly parallels the position of Christ’s body with Mary’s
body, emphasizing the interconnectedness between mother and Son and reminding the
audience of the Virgin’s sorrow at the Crucifixion.

As early as the eleventh century, artistic compositions of the Crucifixion began to
show Mary’s suffering at the foot of the Cross by showing her swoon. In many
instances, this swoon recalls images of the faint of childbirth. The tradition which
ascribes, not only spiritual pain, but also physical pain to the Virgin under the Cross by
means of labor pain goes back as early as John Damascene (c. 675-749). Fifteenth
century Franciscan preacher Bernardino of Busti references the words of John

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[176] Qtd in Donna Spivey Ellington, From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul (Washington D.C.: Catholic
University of America, 2001), 77. Bernardino of Busti, Mariale “On the Passion,” Sermon 1 (Milan:
Leonardus Pachel, 1493), pt. 2.
[177] Quoted in Ellington, Sacred, 78-79.
[178] Neff, “Pain,” 254. The images of the swoon begin to take precedence over the image of the stoic and
unmoved Mary around the 13th century.
Damascene in his sermon, “On the Sorrows of Mary,” saying that “the griefs which the Virgin avoided in giving birth she sustained in the Passion of Christ.”

Amy Neff notes that the idea of Mary suffering the pain of childbirth at the Crucifixion was “well established” by the thirteenth century.

In accordance with medieval theology, Mary did not need to suffer the pain of labor at Christ’s birth because the pain of childbirth was the curse of Eve in consequence to disobedience. Mary, however, was the “New Eve,” the obedient and humble mother of salvation. As discussed in chapter one, the angel’s greeting of “Ave” at the Annunciation signified the reversal of the curse of “Eva.” However, since Mary shared in the pain of the Passion, she took part in suffering for the wickedness of mankind. Therefore, she was allowed to suffer the pain of childbirth at the death of her Son. This is all the more appropriate since this death actually begot life and allowed Mary to become mother of the Church. The idea of Mary suffering the actual physical pain of childbirth seems to gain popularity around the time of Rupert of Deutz, twelfth century Benedictine abbot of the Rhineland monastery. He states that Mary “is truly a woman and truly a mother and at this hour [the Crucifixion], she truly suffers the pain of childbirth.” Neff points to a number of images made in this region which show Mary swooning in the pain of labor at the foot of the Cross, thus showing that the tradition was well established by the early sixteenth century when Grünewald painted the Isenheim Altarpiece.

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179 Qtd in Ellington, *Sacred*, 93. For more on this, see chapter 1 in this thesis.
180 Neff, “Pain,” 255.
181 Translated by Neff, “Pain,” 256.
182 Neff, “Pain,” 256.
Many artistic renditions of famous births portray mother and child after labor. Fortunately, however, enough examples of laboring women exist to allow a brief comparison of visual images of labor with Mary at the foot of the cross. The representational tradition for labor goes back at least to ancient Greece. Birth scenes seem to have been a popular topic for engravings and many have survived from antiquity. The *Stele for Plangon and Tolmides* (fig. 25) is one example. It shows a laboring woman draped in a loose robe with two female attendants supporting her elbow and wrist while the only male figure wears a worried expression. She awkwardly reclines on a stool or bed which is on a raised platform. Another example is the Lekythos of Killaron on which a similar scene is engraved (fig. 26). The *Birth of John the Baptist* from the dome of the Parma Baptistry, portrayed beneath Amos and Mark as a lion, also shows Elizabeth in a similar pose, supported under the wrist. This same positioning can be seen again in J.J.F. Le Barbier’s *Birth of Heracles* as late as the eighteenth century (fig. 27), showing the persistence of iconographic traditions in representing labor and childbirth over time. In these examples we find the foundations for the iconographic tradition of representing laboring women beginning with Greece. Recognizable similarities in iconography can be seen throughout art history, such as the swooning woman in a half sitting pose with loose clothing. She is often supported at each side, sometimes under the arms with hands also supporting the wrists. However, traditions also showed variation

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183 For more information, see Nancy H. Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece* (Johns Hopkins UP: Baltimore, 1994), 121-140. In fact, the labor of childbirth might have been respected in Greek culture. Some scholars propose that death in childbirth was equated with the same honor as death in battle. There are a few texts that indicate that labor was seen as heroic. Euripides, for example, writes in *Medea*, “I would rather stand three times in the front of battle than bear one child.” Furthermore, many funerary monuments have been found depicting women in labor. It is thought that these monuments were made to commemorate women who died in the act of childbirth (121-22). However, the evidence to the contrary may be even greater since the Hippocrates saw women’s role in labor as passive. Indeed, the funerary monuments are not always made to commemorate the woman in labor, but sometimes memorialize the attendant in labor, the woman of active service (128).
over the years, for example, the number of attendants changes, as does the fashion of
dress.

The iconography of labor is readily seen in Crucifixion images, beginning as early
as the eleventh century, but becomes more popular beginning in the thirteenth century. In
Giotto’s *Crucifixion* (fig. 28), Mary rests on the ground, the thickening of her abdomen
made obvious by the horizontal folds of her drapery. Konrad van Soest, a Germanic
artist from the fifteenth century, shows Mary in a laboring pose on the ground with an
attendant at each side (fig. 29). Van Soest emphasizes Mary’s pregnant stomach with
drapery, which is made even more explicit by both Mary’s arm which cradles her
stomach and the hand of the attendant which also gently touches it. The same gestures
are used to emphasize the pregnant stomach in Gaudenzio Ferrari’s *Crucifixion* (fig. 30)
in which one attendant seems to press on the stomach from the rear as recommended in
Soranus’ *Gynecology*.

In Duccio di Buoninsegna’s *Crucifixion* (fig. 31), attendants support Mary’s
elbows in a manner reminiscent of the *Stele*. John is included in the group, looking on
compassionately. While the crowd in the left background and right foreground points up
towards the subject of the painting, the small group surrounding Mary focuses on the
Virgin Mother as she swoons in the pain of labor, emphasizing the birth of salvation
which takes place through the sacrifice of the flesh born from Mary. Indeed, the
connection between the crucified body of Jesus is often explicitly connected to Mary’s
labor in order to draw attention to the redeeming power of Jesus’ body which, as we
discussed in chapter one, is made from Mary’s womb and nourished from her milk.
Thus, the saving flesh of Jesus is directly associated with the flesh and blood of the
Virgin, the only mortal parent of the “God-Man.” These associations would be all the more powerful within the atmosphere of the chapel, particularly in front of the Eucharistic altar.

Dietrich Bouts replaces the two female attendants who traditionally assist Mary in her labor with St. John (fig. 32), as does Rogier van der Weyden in the *Seven Sacraments* and the *Abegg Triptych*. Like Van der Weyden, Grünewald has also replaced the female birth attendants with St. John. John is shown wearing priestly red robes, reminiscent of the red robe worn by Christ, which signifies the priest’s dedication to putting on the robes of righteousness. St. John also wears the red robe in both of the Van der Weydens. In Bouts’ *Passion Altarpiece*, John’s cape in the left wing is even directly matched to that worn by the risen Christ in the right wing. St. John’s position in supporting the swooning Mary seems particularly appropriate in light of the dramas performed for the Nativity at which priests were instructed to play the midwives, as discussed in chapter two. In these ceremonies, it was the midwife/priest that pointed the way to Christ. Likewise, in Grünewald’s rendition, John wears priestly attire and replaces the birth attendant in supporting Mary as she participates in the Passion where she finally feels the pain of labor—or, the pain of the Fall—at the Crucifixion of her son. At the foot of the Cross, Mary becomes the mother of the Church. She is first the mother of the Savior and, therefore, mother of all faithful who wish to be reborn through the Savior.

In Buoninsegna’s *Crucifixion*, the red of Mary’s robe is linked with John’s robe which is knotted at the belly. These two figures, Mary and John, stand at the foot of the cross, their red robes matched in color with both Christ’s blood running down the cross into the rocks and with Mary Magdalene’s drapery. The Magdalene’s arms reach up,
leading back up to the body of Christ. Grünewald’s *Crucifixion* is composed in a similar manner (fig. 1). The Madonna faints at the foot of the cross; her white robe expands at the stomach alluding to pregnancy. John’s extraordinarily long arm wraps around the Virgin, his fingers—also particularly long—guide the eye to the stomach (fig. 33). The Magdalene is the smallest figure, but she draws attention by the movement created in the otherwise still scene through the diagonal line of her arms reaching upward, which sweep the eye back up to the Crucified Christ. Here, in this gruesome scene of death and mourning, we find a powerful sermon on spiritual rebirth and redemption. Through the birth of the Word of God, who came through Mary, we can find forgiveness for our sins and, like Mary Magdalene, we can find our way back to God through the redeeming blood of Christ. Through true penitence, mortal man can follow Mary in giving birth to life instead of death. This is a spiritual birth, the birth of conversion. First, however, one must give birth to the death of the carnal man—the sinful man—in order to have new life. The compassionate priest stands ready to assist in the birth of confession. Thus, in confession, the penitent first gives birth to the “old man,” the “serpent,” whereby he is able to bear the second birth, which is the birth of the newly converted man. The priest, like a midwife, assists in the bearing of confession and welcomes the newly converted soul safely into the fold of the church.

This complex relationship between the Madonna, the Savior, and his disciples is neatly expressed in the iconography of the swoon. John’s role is important as he is a disciple of Christ and the only faithful follower directly appointed to be the son of Mary by Christ on the Cross. Thus, he can be seen as an entry point for the religious at Isenheim who aid in the birth of the Church by spreading the gospel and assisting in
conversion. In this way, they do as the midwife/priest in pointing the way to Christ. We also know that the placement of John supporting Mary’s swoon in the Isenheim Crucifixion was important enough to merit a re-working of the panel. F notes faint traces detected in the Isenheim Crucifixion which suggest that the Virgin was originally standing erect with open eyes. Indeed, in the Karlsruhe Crucifixion (fig. 34), which shares many of the same elements as the Isenheim, Mary and St. John are displayed on opposite sides of the Cross. This indicates a deliberate placement of John supporting Mary in the Isenheim Altarpiece that is different from his other compositions. Through the birthing symbolism of the swoon, Grünwald portrays the church, or Ecclesia, being entrusted to the apostles. It is at the foot of the Cross that Mary receives her “messianic motherhood,” becoming mother of John, and thus, of the disciples and of the Church as Ecclesia. She, therefore, feels the pain of labor—not at the moment of the baby Jesus’ birth—but at his death when she takes part in the birth of redemption. As mother of Jesus in the flesh, Mary also becomes mother of His disciples, and thus, mother of His Church. Thus, she partakes in the painful labor of the Passion through which Christ’s church is given life.

With the Crucifixion, Christ completed his mission of atonement. It is through His death that Christianity finds new life as Jesus suffered sickness and affliction in order that mankind might be reborn. As previously discussed in chapters two and three, death was linked to birth leading up to the sixteenth century. The passing from mortal life was often considered a new birth for the soul and the imagery of pregnancy and labor were used to discuss the passing of the physical body from life on earth. Birgitta of Sweden,

for example, writes of her dream in which Mary promises that she guided the soul of Birgitta’s son into the afterlife in the same way that she helped him transition into mortal life during labor. In the dream Mary says,

I did as a woman [does] who stands near another woman when she gives birth, to help the child so it does not die of the flow of blood nor be slain in the narrow place where it comes out . . . I stood near [your] son a little before he gave up the spirit . . . I helped him also in that narrow place that is the going-out of the soul from the body. . . .

The journey of the spirit from out of the body is often described in quite literal birthing language. For example, the spirit must travel through the “narrow place” and it is described as difficult and even painful. This language is used in the *Life of St. Basil the Younger*, in which Theodora speaks of her near death experience. She describes “the toil of death,” saying, “what misery I experienced, what real force, how much sting from the boundless pain and baneful narrowness, until my soul might leave my body?”

The idea of death resulting in a spiritual birth is even more clearly portrayed in iconography since the baby is a traditional symbol for the soul. This is most strikingly portrayed in images of the Koimesis of the Virgin (fig. 35). In these images, the Virgin lies in death’s slumber upon a bier and Christ stands among the crowd of mourners, holding her spirit in the form of a swaddled child. In this strange reversal of the role of Mother and Child, Christ is clearly portrayed as the mother of Mary’s soul. The transition from life to death is like a new birth from which the soul emerges cleansed from the body. Images of the Koimesis are particularly moving because they portray the relationship between God

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185 Qtd in Atkinson, *Vocation*, 178.
and humanity as parent and offspring. While Mary was the mother of Jesus’ body in the flesh, the Kiomesis makes it clear that Jesus is the Lord of the spirit, even a type of “mother” of the soul. The cradling of Mary’s spirit by Jesus reflects the way in which he cares for her soul in death in the same way she nurtured his body in life.

A touching example of this portrayal of the love between Mother and Son in order to convey divine love and sacrifice can be found in a high relief sculpture of the Nativity at Chartres (fig. 36). Mary is portrayed in the stable moments after having birthed the Son of God. Still lying on her birth pillow, she tilts her head to tenderly caress the newborn babe in a gesture of blessing. Animals nuzzle the manger tenderly, but his humble bed already resembles an altar, foreshadowing his sacrificial death and reminding the audience of the saving power of Christ’s body which came from the mother Mary and subsists in the taking of the Eucharist.\footnote{188} Nativity scenes often foreshadow Christ’s sacrifice while linking his body with Mary. From Mary, Jesus received his mortality. It was as Son of Man that he was allowed to die for man’s sins.

In an early example coupling Jesus’ body in the Nativity with the Eucharist, Giotto strategically places his Nativity above the Last Supper, connecting the two scenes.\footnote{189} Mary knowingly places the Son into the manger—or, upon the altar. Mother and Son are locked in an intensely concentrated gaze as if they both understand Christ’s divine mission (fig. 37). Moreover, Jesus’ swaddling resembles the wrapped body of Lazarus in Giotto’s \textit{Raising of Lazarus}, directly revealing his intention to foreshadow the embalmment in the swaddling (fig. 38). Just beneath Giotto’s Nativity lies the \textit{Last Supper}, coupling the body given by Mary and freely sacrificed by the Son. Here, the

\footnote{188} Timothy Verdon, \textit{Mary in Western Art} (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 115.\footnote{189} Verdon, \textit{Western}, 115.
Living Bread is shown at the Last Supper with his disciples, holding John the Beloved to his breast, as though nourishing him in the same manner that Mary nourished him as a babe (fig. 39). As Catherine of Siena wrote, “We must attach ourselves to that breast of Christ crucified, which is the source of charity, and by means of that flesh we draw milk.” This coupling of Mary and Jesus is a prominent iconographic device. It shows the body of Jesus coming from Mary and then shows the sacrifice of Christ’s body in order to link the sacrifice with Mary’s own body. Giotto’s numerous frescos at Padua are convenient examples because the scenes are all displayed in a planned sequence within the chapel. However, we could point to numerous references in which Jesus’ sacrificial flesh is linked to Mary as birth mother.

The link between mother and Son and the saving body of Christ is also portrayed in Grünewald’s panels. Mary’s role in the history of salvation is clearly portrayed in the middle sequence of the Altarpiece. In the Nativity, mother and Son are enthroned together (fig. 6). The babe looks lovingly at the mother of his flesh and fingers the rosary. In this image, Christ is not placed upon an altar, however, in a similar iconographic device, Grünewald portrays the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloth that has been strangely tattered and torn—it must foreshadow the future treatment of not only Jesus’ clothes, but the flesh born from Mary that would be so abused at the Crucifixion. Indeed, the white garment, abused and torn, is shown wrapped about his loins in the Crucifixion (fig. 4). However, it is made whole again as it falls from his feet in the Resurrection (fig. 40). And, finally, Mary herself swoons at the foot of the Cross.

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190 Bynum, Fragmentation, 97.
191 For a later example, see Pesillino’s Adoration of the Magi with Christ Crucified from the fifteenth century. This panel actually places the Crucified Christ prominently within the Adoration scene.
192 It is not until the Resurrection that we see Jesus wrapped in a new garment. However, interestingly, the white cloth does look quite whole in the Lamentation.
suffering from the pains of labor as she participates in the pain of the Crucifixion of her Son as both the Mother of Jesus and the mother of the Church.

4.2 The Birth of the Song in the Angelic Concert Panel

In the *Concert of Angels*, Angels play celebratory music as the “New Song” comes into the world through the miraculous Incarnation. We have already discussed the importance of the musical instruments and the symbolism of the “Song.” We now understand the dominant role played by these musical angels. However, we have not yet addressed the setting of the angels inside a chapel-like chamber instead of hovering in the sky like traditional angelic concerts, as in Giovanni Battista Bertucci the Younger’s *The Birth of the Virgin* (fig. 41). In Bertucci the Younger’s *Birth*, winged cherubim play a variety of both string and wind instruments while watching over the birth from the clouds. In Grünewald’s *Concert*, however, most of the angels are firmly standing on the ground—unlike his rendition of the Angel Gabriel in the *Annunciation* scene—and occupy space inside the chamber.

The architectural space of the chamber resembles an altar, like Bernini’s famous *Baldacchino* at St. Peter’s Basilica (fig. 42). The Eucharistic Altar is traditionally supported by four pillars and has a covering, or baldachin, like the curtain seen in the *Baldacchino* and similar to the one inside the architectural space of the *Concert of Angels*. Baldachins are also used in the Jewish marriage ceremony to represent the presence of God’s authority over the marriage. The tradition began with the story of Adam and Eve in Jewish scripture. As in Gen. R. xviii, angels danced and played music, watching over the bridal chamber, which was covered by ten baldachins. And, finally, baldachins are also seen in bed chambers. The most famous being the state bedchamber
of Louis XIV where special guests were allowed to meet with him; a tradition taken from the medieval tradition of receiving guests in the bedroom. In fact, artistic depictions of birthing rooms from the medieval and early modern periods typically show drapery around the bedding, particularly for important religious births. In sixteenth century Europe, it was customary for the new mother to be put in a confinement room separate from the bedroom so that she might recuperate without disrupting the regular quotidian of her husband.  

Thus, it is the tradition of birth scenes to show the mother receiving guests in her room, which is often little more than a bed with curtains. See, for example, a Florentine childbirth tray from the 1400’s which shows the mother entertaining guests from her bed shortly after delivery (fig. 43).

While Grünewald does not show a bed, he does suggest a special chamber like the bedchambers of many birth images. In Bertucci the Younger’s *The Birth of the Virgin*, Anne sits up in her bed to receive her visitors. Her bed is raised on a dais and covered by an overhanging curtain much like the one in Grünewald’s *Concert*. Ugolino di Prete Ilario’s *The Birth of the Virgin* (fig. 44) also shows an architecturally rich confinement chamber defined by arches and pillars in the style of Grünewald’s chamber. Again, we see the curtained bed, the bathtub in the foreground and a towel spread across the attendant’s lap. In fact, it is not unusual to see the bed on an elevated platform separated by pillars and curtains with the bathtub placed prominently in the foreground. This childbirth maiolica from Urbino (fig. 45) and Salomon’s *The Birth of Joseph* (fig. 46) are

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193 Vasari is among the resources from which this information is known. In outlining the architectural space for private dwellings, he notes that there should be a separate room “to ensure that the husband be not disturbed by his wife, when she is about to give birth or is ill.” This was a well documented practice in Renaissance Italy as explained in Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 46. I am indebted to Musacchio for her monumental work and for the publication of images of household items associated with childbirth.
two such images that utilize these popular features to designate their images as birth scenes. In the Urbino childbirth, we see that only two articles of furniture designate it as a birth scene: the chambered bed area and the bathtub in the right foreground. These are the two dominant features of many birth scenes, much like in the *Concert of Angels* panel. Saloman’s *Birth* is particularly interesting in that it shows a division of space much like the *Concert of Angels—Nativity* division between the indoor bedchamber and the outdoor space. A similar indoor/outdoor scene is portrayed in Savonarola’s woodcut *Pratica major* (fig. 47), which shows the woman laboring to the right of the canopied bed, again with the bathtub in the right foreground and the outside space to the right of the illustration, which shows trees and shrubs around an open gate, perhaps in contrast to the “closed gate.” The “narrow passageway” leads to a courtyard and an empty birthing stool. The images show two separate scenes, an indoor and an outdoor scene, at two different times, one in which the woman is laboring while in the other the birth stool is unused, conjoined together. This can be compared to Grünewald’s *Concert of Angels—Nativity* in which two scenes of separate times are conjoined together. At left, the angels play in an enclosed space with the figure, probably symbolizing Mary as *Ecclesia*, still pregnant. At right, the birth has finished and Mary holds the infant in an outdoor setting. Rather than the “open gate,” however, we now have a “closed gate.” The narrow path leading behind the Virgin ends at a closed door, barred by a cross.

In her book, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, Jaqueline Marie Musacchio notes that several items were tied into childbirth traditions. Given the danger that childbirth held for Renaissance families, it should not be surprising that an array of traditions surrounded such an occasion. Specific items in material culture were
considered necessary for successful childbirth, even for lower class families. These items are often displayed in artistic renderings of childbirth scenes in order to add an extra dimension of reality for the viewer. Among those items that we see over and over again are curtains, which were sometimes specifically designated as *da parto* in existing household inventories, clean white towels, bathtubs, and vases or other containers for oil, wine, or medicines.\(^{194}\) We can see all of these items in the *Angelic Concert* scene. The enclosed chamber with the curtains draped inside, reminiscent of a private bedchamber or “confinement room,” the clear cruse of oil at the foot of the Madonna figure, and the washbasin and towel placed prominently in the right foreground, almost larger than life. We can compare this scene to a variety of birth scenes, like that from Domenico Ghirlandaio’s *The Birth of John the Baptist* (c. 1486-7), in which we see the maid bringing glass bottles, probably containing white and red wine (fig. 48). The bright scene of Elizabeth’s bed, raised on an elevated platform, is set off by the green floral curtain in the background. The tub basin lies half concealed in the left foreground as the attendant reaches for the baby from the nursemaid. These items which occupied the birthing chamber are portrayed in the *Concert* to represent the Incarnation, in which Jesus came to the earth as a child, uniting his divinity with humanity. In this case, the elements of birth not only signify birth of the mortal flesh, but also the birth of salvation that comes by Christ. The chamber is at once a birth chamber and a chapel, the tub is at once a bath and a symbol of baptism, the cruse of oil is for both physical and spiritual anointment.

Moreover, the angel in the foreground of Grünewald’s *Concert* awkwardly bows the viol (Fig. 49), which makes the bow point directly to the bottom of the stomach,

\(^{194}\) See Musacchio, *Art*, 46.
suggesting the coming forth, the physical birth of the Song.\textsuperscript{195} As a scholar of music, Mary Rasmussen used her specialty to investigate this scene. While she found many interesting traditional Germanic poses for bowing a viol, she came to the conclusion that Grünewald has probably positioned this foremost angel in a contrived fashion. She even suggests that it has a sexual connotation,\textsuperscript{196} she says, “its principal function here is probably to direct the bow—and the viewer’s attention—to a point between the player’s legs.”\textsuperscript{197} At this point, the modern audience must remember that Mary’s womb was also the “house of God” for medieval Christians. John Gerson notes that with the Annunciation, Jesus came to “the sacred temple of the womb of Our Lady.”\textsuperscript{198} St. Lawrence of Brindisi, one of the most popular preachers of his day,\textsuperscript{199} called Mary’s womb not only the “house of God,” but also the “temple of sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{200} The medieval period was accustomed to using Old Testament metaphors to refer to Mary’s womb. It was the “City of God,” the “temple of the Holy Spirit,” even the “Ark of the Covenant,” and the “Holy of Holies.”\textsuperscript{201}

While another angel in the \textit{Concert} plays an arm viola, Grünewald has chosen a bass viol, played between the legs, for the forefront angel. The bathtub, draped chamber, and cruse of oil\textsuperscript{202} signal the viewer that this is a birth scene. Moreover, the pregnant woman filled with light to the right of the chamber and the placement of the scene

\textsuperscript{195} Rasmussen, “Viols,” 68-69. In this article, Rasmussen discusses the traditional bow position of stringed instruments played in Germany. She concludes that although the bow position in Grunewald’s image may not have been completely out of place, the gesture does seem to be overtly sexual.
\textsuperscript{196} Rasmussen, “Viols,” 68-69.
\textsuperscript{197} Rasmussen, “Viols,” 61.
\textsuperscript{198} Ellington, \textit{Sacred}, 49.
\textsuperscript{199} So called by Ellington, \textit{Sacred}, 163.
\textsuperscript{200} Ellington, \textit{Sacred}, 159-60.
\textsuperscript{201} Ellington, \textit{Sacred}, 158.
\textsuperscript{202} There has been much debate concerning what this vessel contains. Melinkoff proposes that it is oil and the consistency of the liquid does indeed seem to be oil rather than wine. See Melinkoff, \textit{Isenheim}, 80.
between the Annunciation and Nativity—even sharing a panel with Nativity—suggests the portrayal of the birth of the Savior (fig. 50). The pregnant woman to the right of the panel has been called Ecclesia and even Mary representing Ecclesia. Here, Grünewald depicts her as a vessel of light. Hildegard of Bingen wrote, “God set a great splendor of light in the place where He would bring forth His Word.”203 She not only reflects the light of the Savior, but contains the Light of the world. Her womb, or the “temple of the Spirit” is bright with the life given through the Incarnation. The Incarnation is also symbolized by the clear vessel at her feet, a reminder of the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost symbolized by the dove in the Annunciation. As Jean Gerson said, “the first sacrifice or offering for our salvation was made within the sacred temple of the womb of Our Lady . . . In this sacred temple, in this worthy and honored chamber of Our Lady, the wedding feast of the divine with our humanity was celebrated.”204 In this quote we are reminded that the birth of Christ came from Mary and that this birth was also the birth of sacrifice.

The emphasis on stringed instruments is a reference to Christ’s salvific body, which is partaken in the Eucharist, as well as the sacrifice on the Cross. Jesus’ future sacrifice is also foreshadowed in the setting of the angels inside the chamber whose architecture and baldachin reference the Eucharistic Altar. The bathtub and oil probably also reference ordinances of baptism and healing, power given through the atonement of the Savior. However, the arrangement of these symbols inside a chamber that resembles the bed chamber of so many birth scenes also lends the objects to childbirth imagery. Perhaps most significantly, the pregnant Ecclesia adds to the suggestion of birth. Thus,

203 Saint Hildegard, Selections, 58.
204 Ellington, Sacred, 49.
while heralding the birth of the Savior, the panel also simultaneously foreshadows his death and sacrifice on behalf of the spiritual well-being of all mankind, as was the fashion in medieval and early modern nativity scenes.

The Incarnation is made possible through the handmaiden of the Lord. It is through the purity of Mary, the second Eve, that mankind is able to find redemption. As Ephraem of Syria stated, “Mary gave us the living Bread.” It is Christ’s body made from Mary through which he is able to offer the atonement. The redeeming body of Christ is, after all, “flesh from the Virgin,” as Ambrose said, “he [Jesus] took the physical disposition from his mother so that he might adopt our infirmities . . . she [Mary] conferred on him her own from her own flesh.”

Thus, we see the importance of the birth of Jesus from Mary. For it is only through Mary’s motherhood that the Church can be born. Accordingly, as mother of Jesus and thus mother of the Church, Mary often takes the place of the female symbol for Ecclesia, becoming both mother of the Savior and mother of the Church, as discussed in chapter one. The middle panels of the Altarpiece now begin to fall into place. The history of redemption begins with the Annunciation, where Mary reverses the curse of Eve by accepting the will of the Lord, giving birth to Life where Eve gave birth to death. Next, we see the birth of the Song in the Concert of Angels with the pregnant Ecclesia shrouded in light bordering the Nativity panel. The Nativity shows the bond between mother and infant Child as Jesus plays with a rosary as he sits upon the lap of his mother as the Church, or Ecclesia. Finally, we see

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205 Eve offered the fruit of corruption to mankind, which led to the birth of Cain who slew his brother. Mary offered the purity of her milk to nourish a son that would save his brother. So, as all fell because of Eve, so are all saved because of Mary. The angel’s salutation to Mary, “Ave,” is often noted as being “Eve” in reverse. Thus, Mary reversed the curse of Eve. See Beth Williamson, “The Virgin Lactans as Second Eve” in Studies in Iconography 19 (1998): 105-38.

206 Graef, Mary, 62.

207 Graef, Mary, 78.
the risen Christ as a reminder of the resurrection and the redeeming power that comes through the sacrifice of the flesh.

4.3 The Birth of Conversion

The Altarpiece transitions from images of Mary and Jesus in the middle position to images of the Saints in the open position. When the panels are fully open, Grünewald’s panels and de Haguenau’s sculptures portray the spreading of the gospel to faithful saints and disciples. The Word, first born by Mary, is shown to be born by the saints, particularly by Saint Anthony who is the patron saint of the Antonite Monastery at Isenheim.

Saint Anthony is portrayed in the wings of the Altarpiece by Grünewald as an example of faithfulness. He sustains the faith through temptations in the wilderness, thereby “bearing” the gospel. The left panel shows Saint Anthony receiving monastic authority from his predecessor, Saint Paul, during their visit in the desert. The Golden Legend tells of Saint Anthony learning that another man had chosen the life of the ascetic, withdrawing himself from society, one who was “better than himself.” Thus, Anthony searches out Saint Paul. Anthony is surprised to find that a crow brings Paul his daily bread in the wilderness. After the visit, Anthony continues on his journey, however, as he is leaving he passes angels bearing Paul’s soul. He returns to find that Paul’s spirit has indeed parted from his body which was still in the attitude of prayer. Anthony then picks up Paul’s mantel, which Anthony takes and wears in his honor during feast days.208 This “mantel” is, of course, also symbolic of the mantel of authority and a symbol of the holiness of Anthony’s chosen path of asceticism.

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The story of Anthony and Paul gains importance as it is related to the Old Testament story of the prophet Elijah. In 1 Kings 17, the Lord tells Elijah to go to the wilderness. Elijah is faithful and obedient and goes to the brook Cherith where the Lord provides for him by sending ravens to bring him bread in the morning and evening. This story is displayed in Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo’s *Elijah Fed by the Raven*, c. 1510 (Fig. 51). There is a distinct similarity in Savoldo’s *Elijah* and Grünewald’s *Anthony and Paul*. Both scenes show the saints in contemplative posture, Elijah looking up at the raven while Anthony looks to Paul. The landscapes are desert-like, with prominent rocks and some scraggly plants in the foreground. The bird, of course, plays a dominant role in both scenes. Because of Elijah’s seclusion in the wilderness, he is often considered to be the first ascetic. The story of Paul’s mantel is also reminiscent of the story of Elijah handing down his cloak to Elisha. In Savoldo’s portrayal, the scene behind Elijah’s right elbow shows the transfer of power from Elijah to Elisha symbolized in the handing down of his cloak (fig. 52). Grünewald and de Haguenau display the authority of Isenheim in a similar manner. Grünewald’s juxtaposition of the story of Saint Paul and Anthony in the desert with de Haguenau’s sculptures of Saints Augustine, Anthony, Jerome, and Jesus with his disciples below, insinuate a continuation of the gospel that began with Christ. Moreover, the scene of the *Visitation of Anthony and Paul* also shows a continuation of the monastic ideal and the authority that Saint Anthony receives from Saint Paul as symbolized in the story of the mantel. In both the stories of Elijah and Anthony, faithful men of God show obedience to the Lord by living a life of asceticism in the wilderness. Thus, by linking the story of Anthony and Paul to Elisha and Elijah, the patron saint of the Isenheim is shown continuing the faithful tradition begun by the great Old Testament
prophets, thereby providing a history for monastic authority to the Isenheim Monastery. In fact, Savoldo’s *Elijah* has a companion piece, also commissioned for a monastery, which shows Saint Anthony and Saint Paul—explicitly linking the two stories.

On the occasion of Anthony’s visit to Paul, the crow brought two shares of bread, anticipating Paul’s visitor,\(^{209}\) which also seems to establish a sort of divine approval for St. Anthony’s journey into the wilderness. In both the stories of Elijah and Anthony, the physical needs of obedient men are provided for by God himself who sends bodily nourishment in the form of bread from him who is called the Bread of Life. This must also reference the bread of the Eucharist in which Jesus’ healing body is thought to subsist. Bread played a very interesting role in the lives of the sick at Isenheim. Interestingly, Burkhard notes that the original design for Saint Anthony showed him looking up at the Raven, drawing attention to this important story and further linking the iconography to portrayals of Elijah like Savoldos’ *Elijah Fed by the Raven* (fig. 53). This can be seen in a surviving sketch for St. Anthony, now part of the Ehlers Collection in Göttingen. The position of Anthony is later changed, perhaps in order to emphasize the fraternization of Anthony and Paul in the desert, who are actively engaged in conversation, perhaps even in the manner of great theologians teaching one another.

The visit to St. Paul and the appearance of the crow would have been deeply significant to the monastery at Isenheim, for as we discussed, it is through this story that the patron saint of the Antonites receives monastic authority. In commemoration of the bread sent to Paul and Anthony in the desert, the Antonites were known for distributing bread on the feast day of Saint Anthony which was celebrated annually on January 17\(^{th}\).

\(^{209}\) Voragine, *Golden*, 89.
From a prayer recorded in the eighteenth century, we find that the bread was thought to have healing powers. The prayer read

> In supplication and prayer, we ask that Thou bless and sanctify this bread, so that those who eat it will be preserved of every injury and infirmity of both the body and of the spirit, and that by the merit of the intercession of Thy saint confessors Paul and Anthony, he will receive full and whole health.

We know that this tradition was steadily kept from the latter half of the eighteenth century and maintained in Isenheim until World War II; however, it is unclear as to when the tradition was started. We also know that bread played an important role in the Antonite ritual of treating the sick. On the day of their arrival, the sick were to receive bread.²¹⁰ The following day, they were to receive the “saint-vinage,” a wine based drink thought to have healing powers gained from soaking the beverage with saintly relics.²¹¹ The treatment echoes sacramental rites of partaking of the bread and wine during the Eucharist. It is thought that these rites may have indeed aided in healing. The disease treated at the monastery hospital, called Saint Anthony’s Fire, or ergotism, is modernly understood to have been caused by the ingestion of fungus infected rye, usually in the form of bread. Through the custom of serving bread to the sick upon immediate arrival, the Antonites may have assisted in the restoration of health by supplanting the regular diet of contaminated bread with good quality bread.²¹² Thus, the bread which played such a key role in the physical healing rituals at Isenheim was also reflected in the St. Anthony panel, directly reminding those at the hospital of the healing tradition that came from the Bread of Life.

²¹⁰ Clementz, Antonins, 73.
²¹¹ Clementz, Antonins, 75.
²¹² Clementz, Antonins, 73. See also page 45.
The temptation scene flanking the right side of the Altarpiece shows Anthony’s own struggle to remain faithful in “singing” Jesus’ song, or “bearing” the Church of Christ. The Golden Legend tells of Anthony selling his belongings and going into the desert where he underwent “innumerable temptations by the demons.”

The Golden Legend describes the demons as “divers savage beasts” who tore at him with their “teeth, their horns, and their claws.” After this torture went on for quite some time, the Legend tells that a light drove the beasts away and healed Anthony. The Legend reads,

Then, understanding that Jesus Himself had come to his aid, the saint said to Him:

“Where wert thou a while ago, good Jesus? Why didst Thou not come to me then, to succour me and heal my wounds?” And the Lord answered: “Anthony I was here, but I waited to see thee fight; and now that thou hast fought the good fight, I shall spread thy glory throughout the whole world!”

Grünewald has captured two moments simultaneously. First, he shows the struggle of St. Anthony as demons come to torture and tempt him. The note attached to the tree stump (fig. 54) reminds the audience of Anthony’s pleading question to Jesus, “Ubi eras ihesu boni, ui eras? Quare not affuisti ut sanares vulnera mea?” However, Grünewald also captures the saving moment by showing God the Father, coming like the light, and watching in the heavens with angels that appear to be coming to his rescue. Grünewald thus captures both the agonizing experiences of the mortal pilgrimage while also presenting the promise of salvation to those who endure. The image must have been striking for those working to carry on the legacy of Saint Anthony at the monastery,

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however, perhaps even more meaningful to those suffering the pains of ergotism at the
hospital.

The journey of the saints in their removal from society, as shown in *Paul and Anthony in the Desert*, is an important element of monasticism and a symbolic journey of confession and rebirth. As we discussed in chapter two, church leaders were instructed to give birth to Jesus through their own work of conversion. Saint Anthony of Padua applies John 16:21 to the pilgrimage of the saints. The scripture reads, “A woman when she is in labor has sorrow.” Anthony explains, “The word for sorrow (*tristis*) is close to the word trite (*tritus*) to be worn out. The saints in their pilgrimage in this exile are worn out, afflicted, distressed, and the world is not worthy of them.”

The woman represents the saint and the pain of labor represents the pain of the saints who “lament and weep over all the abominations that happen throughout the world.”

The saint laments over the sinfulness of mankind, thereby taking part in the sorrow brought about by sin. He also instructs the audience at Isenheim to look to Mary, by holding onto the rosary, in order to sustain the labor of conversion. Thus, Saint Anthony becomes an example of looking to the Virgin in order to remain faithful through the “pain of labor.”

The analogy of labor, of course, must also apply to the sick in the Isenheim infirmary. The same process of sorrow and labor used for the saint is applied to the convert. One of the Twelve Minor Prophets, Micheas, instructs us to labor for conversion saying, “Writhe in pain, go into labor, O daughter of Zion, like a woman giving birth, for now you must leave the city. You must go dwell in the open country, go

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even to Babylon. But there you will be delivered.

In this case, labor is contrition. The pilgrimage to the open country, Babylon, is man’s sojourn on earth. For, as Anthony reminds, we are all pilgrims because we have journeyed outside our “native land,” which is “the joy of paradise.” Peter addresses his first epistle to “visitors and pilgrims,” and urges the church to be “free from carnal desires, that attack the soul,” (1P 2:11) imagery repeated in the demons attacking St. Anthony in the wilderness.219

Margaret Ebner (d. 1351) was a Dominican nun who also used the pain of childbirth to signify her conversion. She says that after partaking of the Eucharist one day, she was

then given the greatest anguish I had ever suffered in all my life and I was drawn by strong love into the Holy Passion of my Lord . . . I was enwrapped in it with much mysterious suffering . . . strong thrusts hitting against my heart so violently that three sisters had to hold me up using all their strength, one under my heart on the left side and another against her behind me on the other side . . . and a third sister held up my head. Sometimes I could not endure it when the strong thrusts came against me for they harmed my insides so that I became greatly swollen like a woman great with child . . . .220

Amy Neff speculates that “even an unschooled medieval audience” may have understood the iconography of the suffering female body as a simile for conversion because of the widespread usage of the imagery of Mary’s swoon of labor in Crucifixion images.221

219 Anthony, Sermones, 145.
221 Neff, “Pain,” 268.
imagery of birthing the Church of Christ was often used, not just to refer to Mary, but to emphasize the responsibility of Christians to look to Mary and also bring forth work that would reverse the consequences of Eve’s fall. St. Anthony of Padua instructs the penitent soul to labor in confession. It is only through bitter sorrow that conversion can come. Psalms 6:6 instructs us to labor in our grief. Anthony says, “The hour of birth for a woman is the hour of confession for the penitent soul in which the soul must be sorrowful, expressing bitter groans.”

If the labor is not hard, the penitence is not strong enough and shows an incomplete conversion. Isaiah says, “Children are ready to be born, but there is not the strength to bring them forth” (Isa 37:3). Anthony says, “If the soul would endure the pain and labor, beyond a doubt, it would rejoice at the birth.”

By looking to the Temptation of Saint Anthony panel, those suffering at Isenheim were invited to see their pain as a kind of participation in the Passion and a path to salvation. These sick at Isenheim were in the midst of a battle, akin to St. Anthony’s in the Temptation. They too were struggling to keep the faith and remain strong and valiant despite their physical pains. The sick, in particular, are invited to identify with St. Anthony’s struggle through the human-like creature at the bottom left of the panel who suffers from the symptoms of ergotism (Fig. 56). The sick are thus urged to view their own physical pain akin to the temptations faced by Saint Anthony. It is proposed that with the height of the altar, the creature would have met eye level, providing entrance into the panel. His left hand is but a dried stump, however, his right hand is intact, looking somewhat healthier as it grasps desperately to books of scripture, possible taken

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222 Anthony, Sermones, 157.
223 Anthony, Sermones, 158.
from Anthony.\textsuperscript{224} Compare this scene to an illustration from the 1517 edition of \textit{Feldtbuch} written by Hans von Gersdorff, surgeon to the Antonites in Strasbourg in which an image of St. Anthony is represented standing next to an individual suffering from St. Anthony’s Fire (Fig. 57). The text accompanying the image, read “O great saint Anthony / Do not cease in obtaining grace for us / Remission of our sins / Grace and Divine Favor / And protect us from your terrible fire.”\textsuperscript{225} In the image, the sick individual also suffers the Fire in his left hand, however, the Saint seems much more aloof. Grünewald’s rendition of St. Anthony does not show a saint who is oblivious to the pains of the world, but a St. Anthony whose suffering must cause compassion for those suffering the disease that takes his name. Moreover, Grünewald’s creature echoes the position of St. Anthony, suggesting that the viewer can be like St. Anthony and remain strong in trials (see Fig. 56). Indeed, according to Andrée Hayum, Anthony’s struggle with the demons was often used to illustrate the dying man’s struggle to keep the faith.\textsuperscript{226} The sick at Isenheim were invited to look to St. Anthony as an example of one who remained faithful. This depiction becomes increasingly meaningful when we realize that the \textit{Temptation} panel also echoes the \textit{Nativity} panel. Like baby Jesus in \textit{Nativity}, St. Anthony holds onto the rosary; this time, the rosary seems to give him strength. It is a sign that he is holding onto the faith, even while demons pull at his hair and robe. This is also the only other scene that shows God in the heavens, watching over the scene. By

\textsuperscript{224} Clementz, \textit{Antonins}, 283.
\textsuperscript{225} Clementz, \textit{Antonins}, 116-17. My translation from the French, « O grand saint Antoine / Ne cesse pas de nous obtenir grace / Rémission de nos péchés / Grâce et faveur divines / Et protège nous de ton terrible feu. » Interestingly, however, Clementz notes that in the second edition of 1551, the prayer was replaced by the protest, « O saint homme Antoine / Pourquoi te mêles-tu de médecine / Alors que c’est Dieu seul que revient l’honneur / Et sinon à nul homme ? » The influence of the Reformation is thus evident by 1551. The « grand saint » is merely the « saint homme » and rather than pleading to him for intercession, there is simply the statement that God receives the honor of making mankind whole again.
\textsuperscript{226} Hayum, \textit{Medicine}, 30.
placing God in the heavens and St. Anthony on the ground, Grünewald suggests the

going forth of the church that began with his Son.

Previously, we reviewed the familiarity of laboring positions in artistic
representations of Mary at the foot of the Cross and in chapter two we discussed the
childbirth metaphor for conversion. While Mary was the only mother of Jesus’ flesh, the
faithful were urged to “bear” Christ in their hearts, thereby following Mary in becoming
“mothers.” As St. Peter Canisius stated,

The Lord desired nothing more than that he have for himself many spiritual
mothers . . . For if there may be only one mother of Christ according to the flesh . .
. Still Christ has, I might say, enlarged this title of maternity to others who are
obedient, who receive the word of God with faith.227

Countless examples show Mary swooning in the pain of labor at the foot of the cross. It
is particularly striking to view the similarity of the laboring Mary in Albrecht Aldorfer’s
Christ on the Cross (Fig. 58) from the early sixteenth century in relation to the
Temptation panel. Both the positions of St. Anthony and the creature in the left
foreground struggle on the ground with open knees, upper body thrown back, in positions
reminiscent of childbirth scenes. The creature at lower left clearly suffers from the same
pain as Altdorfer’s Mary. Wearing only a cowl, he sits with his legs apart and head back
as if he is in labor (see Fig. 59). His distended stomach and bent knees allude to the pain
of childbirth. This allusion reminds us that Mary birthed the Church by bringing forth
Jesus from her womb and suckling him with her own body. As suggested by the rosary,
it is Mary that we can call upon in times of need as the mother of the Savior and possibly
as co-redemptress. By placing the creature at eye level and depicting him with the same

227 Ellington, Sacred, 142.
physical afflictions as the sick at Isenheim, Grünwald urges the audience to see their own suffering as a kind of labor that will bring forth a new man, in the same vein that Anthony’s Temptation was a labor.

The creature, however, has several odd characteristics. His deeply lined and wrinkled face looks old and worn, almost shrunken with either age or pain. J. K. Huysmans calls him “a decomposing, suffering human being,” the “song of triumph of decay.” And, what of his webbed feet? Are these also a sign of the plague of ergotism or is he relegated to the status of the demons who possess characteristics of several creatures united into one monstrous body? We will probably never be sure of Grünwald’s intention. Yet, perhaps the words of Anthony of Padua provide a provoking explanation. Since the figure does indeed match the iconography of labor, let’s look to Anthony’s description of the labor of conversion. He says that in order for the obstetrician, or priest, to bring forth the newly converted man, he must first bring forth confession. “The hand of the Lord is the priest through whom the serpent, the old man, must be brought forth from the sinner, so that afterwards the new man might be born.” As Job 26:13 states, “His obstetric hand brought forth the coiling serpent.” Anthony then repeats a tale that he says is popular “in a certain country” which says that before a woman can birth a real child, she must “first bring forth a toad.” The toad clearly was a symbol of sinfulness. Hieronymous Bosch, for instance, used it repeatedly. It appears on the shield of wicked soldiers in both Christ Carrying the Cross and Ecce Homo. His demons also often take the form of toads, as can be seen in the Last Judgement. If Grünewald or Guy Guers were aware of this traditional comparison, then the panel can be

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read as a message of conversion to the sick at Isenheim, encouraging them to view their illness as part of the natural conversion process. Their battle with ergotism was the first step in putting off the corrupted mortal body in order to put on immortality. Like Anthony, they might be tempted to feel abandoned, even asking, “Where were you good Jesus, where were you? Why were you not there to heal my wounds?” But, through Saint Anthony’s example, they were to learn that the Lord was there, watching over in the heavens. He merely waited and allowed them to learn faith and obedience so that they might know true conversion.

The Isenheim Altarpiece is a sermon on redemption that can only come, first, through the holy sacrifice of the Word made flesh, and second, through the labor of contrition on behalf of those “pilgrims” of mortality. The glorious Resurrection panel holds the hope of rebirth, of life after death, of sickness and death made live and whole. The Isenheim monastery works to bring rebirth to mankind, and particularly, to those sick who suffered the torments of St. Anthony’s Fire. These sick are invited to follow the examples of the Saints, and particularly of Mary, who gave birth to life, even to the Song of Salvation. They too must find the faith and obedience to follow the Word and bear their own confession, forsaking their sins and putting on the new man, the converted man of God.

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“Ubi eras ihesu boni, ubi eras? Quare not affuisti ut sanares vulnera mea?” Translated in Hayum, Medicine, 79.
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Van der Weyden, Rogier, *Descent from the Cross.* Oil on panel, c. 1432-1435 (Museo del Prado, Madrid). <http://cgfa.sunsite.dk/>.


Appendix A


Figure 3. *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Open Position. Oil on wood, c. 1515. Musée d'Unterlinden Colmar, France <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>.

Figure 5. Unknown Artist, Initial F: The Tree of Jesse, detail. German, Hildesheim, c. 1170s. J. Paul Getty Museum, California <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=112629>. 


Fig. 11, Quirizio of Murano, *The Savior*. Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 110, pl. 3.10.
Figure 12. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece. Lamentation*, predella. Oil on wood, c. 1515. Musée d'Unterlinden Colmar, France. 
<http://vr.theatre.ntu.edu.tw/fineart/painter-wt/grunewald/grunewald-1515bx.jpg>

Figure 13. Lutenist and Viol Player from H. Judenkünig: *Ain schone kunstliche underweisung*, Vienna. Woodcut, 1523. Notice the concave shape of the Renaissance viol bow held across the body of the instrument. 
Woodfield, p. 105, plate 62.

Figure 15. Hieronymous Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, detail. Oil on panel, c. 1500. Museo del Prado, Madrid. <http://www.wga.hu/>

Figure 17. Jubal and Tubalcaín / Raising of the Cross, from Speculum humanae salvatoris, ch 23, German, 14c Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 146. fol 25v. Holsinger, p. 204-207.
Figure 18. Jubal and Tubalcaín / Raising of the Cross, from *Speculum humanae salvationis* ch 23. Darmstadt, Landesbibliothek MS 2505, fol. 42v. Holsinger p. 204-207.


Figure 20. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Middle Position *Concert of Angels*, detail of fingerboard. Oil on wood, c. 1515. Musée d'Unterlinden Colmar, France.


Figure 25. *Stele for Plangon and Tolmides*, detail, c. 320’s Athens, Athens National Archaeological Museum, NM 749. <www1.hollins.edu>.

Figure 26. Lekythos of Killaron, detail. Paris, Musée du Louvre; MND 726. Demand, Nancy p. 159, pl. 4.


Figure 33. Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece. *Crucifixion*, detail. Oil on wood, c. 1515. Musée d'Unterlinden Colmar, France.
Figure 35. *Dormition of the Virgin*. Cyprus, Lagoudera, church of the Virgin Arakiotissa, south wall. *Images of the Mother of God*, plate 6

Figure 36. *Mary turning on her bed to caress the newborn Christ child*. High relief sculpture, late 12th century. Cathedral, Chartres. Verdon 115.


Figure 41. Giovanni Battista Bertucci the Younger, *The Birth of the Virgin*. 1586. Pinacoteca Comunal, Faenza. Musacchio, p 100, plate 84.
Figure 43. Florentine childbirth tray. Mid-fifteenth century. Ca’ d’Oro, Venice. Mussacchio, p. 28-29, PL 18.
Figure 44. Ugolino di Prete Ilario, *The Birth of the Virgin*. Fresco, late 14th century. Orvieto Cathedral (Scala/ Art Resource, New York). Mussachio page 82, plate 64.
Figure 45. Urbino, Tagliere.
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg.
Mussachio p. 99, plate 82.
Figure 46. Bernard Salomon, *The Birth of Joseph*, woodcut from Damiano Maraffi’s *Figure del Vecchio Testamento* (Lyon, 1544).
Photo by Mussacchio, p. 99, plate 83.

Figure 50. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Middle Position. *Concert of Angels*, detail. Oil on wood, c. 1515. Musée d'Unterlinden Colmar, France.
Figure 51. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, *Elijah Fed by the Raven*. Oil on panel transferred to canvas, c. 1510. National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C. http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo/Object=45851+0+none

Figure 52. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, *Elijah Fed by the Raven*, detail. Oil on panel transferred to canvas, c. 1510. National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C. http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo/Object=45851+0+none


http://www.wga.hu/index1.html