

THE *NATIVITY PANEL OF ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE* AND ITS
RELATIONSHIP TO THE *SERMO ANGELICUS* OF ST. BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN

Jennifer Ann Ritchie

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTERS OF ART IN ART HISTORY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2000

APPROVED: Scott Montgomery, Ph.D., Major Professor
Larry Gleeson, Ph.D., Committee Member
Claire Sahlin, Ph.D., Committee Member
Jaqueline Chanda, Chair, Department of
Art History
D. Jack Davis, Dean, School of Visual Arts
C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Toulouse School
of Graduate Studies

Ritchie, Jennifer Ann, The Nativity Panel of Isenheim Altarpiece and its relationship to the *Sermo Angelicus* of St. Birgitta of Sweden, Master of Arts (Art History), December 2000, 98pp.

This thesis explores the relationship of the *Sermo Angelicus* of St. Birgitta of Sweden, written in the fourteenth century, with the *Nativity/Concert of Angels* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, painted by Matthias Grunewald in 1514 for a hospital and monastery run by the Antonite Order. Taking into consideration the context of the altarpiece, this thesis analyzes its iconography in relation to specific passages from the *Sermo Angelicus*, suggesting that the text was a possible source used by the Antonites in the *Nativity/Concert of Angels* panel. By doing so, parallel themes of salvation in both the text and the panel are discovered that in turn relate to the altarpiece in its entirety and present a message fashioned specifically for those patients at the hospital at Isenheim that viewed the altarpiece.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Statement of the Problem.....	11
Methodology.....	11
Review of the Literature.....	13
Chapter One: Analysis of the Previous Scholarship Concerning the <i>Isenheim Altarpiece</i> and its Relation to St. Birgitta's <i>Sermo Angelicus</i>	19
Chapter Two: The Life of St. Birgitta, the <i>Sermo Angelicus</i> , and St. Birgitta's Influence on Monastic Thought and Art.....	29
Chapter Three: The Purpose of the Antonites and Their Relationship to St. Birgitta of Sweden.....	42
Chapter Four: The <i>Concert of Angels</i> Panel and the Imagery and Doctrine of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception in St. Birgitta's <i>Sermo Angelicus</i>	52
Chapter Five: The Iconography of the <i>Nativity</i> and the Virgin's Sorrow as represented in the <i>Sermo Angelicus</i>	65
Chapter Six: The Presence of Evil and the Need for Salvation.....	76
Conclusion.....	85
Bibliography.....	88

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: The Crucifixion

Figure 2: The Life of St. Anthony

Figure 3: Detail of the Temptation of St. Anthony

Figure 4: The Central Panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece

Figure 5: Detail of the Concert of Angels

Figure 6: The Virgin Mary in the Tabernacle

Figure 7: Detail of the Nativity

All illustrations taken from: George Scheja, *Der Isenheim Altar des Matthias Grünewald*,

translated from Germany by Robert Erich Wolf (Cologne, 1969).

Click [here](#) to see the figures

INTRODUCTION

In 1508, Abbot Guido Guersi commissioned the German artist Mathis Gothart Neithart, known as Matthias Grünewald, to execute one of the most monumental commissions undertaken by any northern artist. This work, the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, was completed in 1516 for the high altar of the Antonite monastery and hospital at Isenheim, twenty miles from the city of Colmar. The hospital at Isenheim was devoted to the care of the sick, most specifically those suffering from an affliction known as ergotism, a disease of the skin similar to leprosy.¹ After the French Revolution, the altarpiece was taken down in pieces and transported to the Jesuit College at Colmar. In 1852, it was transferred to the Musée Unterlinden, a former Dominican convent.² The Isenheim Altarpiece can still be seen there today, in pieces, so that all sections can be viewed simultaneously.

In its original home at Isenheim, the three stages of the altarpiece were represented by successive transformations that corresponded to its function on weekdays, Sundays, and feast days. On weekdays, the altarpiece remained closed, revealing the gruesome *Crucifixion* {Figure 1} flanked by panels representing St. Anthony and St. Sebastian. These saints were not only patron saints of the Antonite Order and the hospital respectively, but saints who also symbolized the healing of sickness and disease. This view was seen on weekdays to create a sense of community in suffering among the

¹ Andrée Hayum, "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited," *Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 501-502.

² Alastair Smart, *The Renaissance and Mannerism in Northern Europe and Spain* (London, 1972), 153-159.

hospital inmates in relation to Christ's own suffering on the cross.³ In addition, the grief experienced by the patients while viewing the horrifying scene is shared by the image of the Virgin swooning in sorrow and the Magdalen falling painfully to her knees.

The middle section, revealed only on Sundays, consisted of three panels: the *Annunciation* on the left, the *Angelic Concert-Nativity* in the center, and the *Resurrection* on the right {Figure 4, for details, see Figures 5, 6 and 7}. These three illustrations begin and continue the narrative connected to the sacrifice of the crucified Savior on the front of the altarpiece. The mood, however, changes from one of tormented realism to idealized joyfulness represented by the deliverance and salvation brought by Christ's Incarnation and victory over death.⁴ The *Annunciation* reveals the announcement of the coming of salvation where the timid yet obedient Mary is told of her destiny as the bearer of salvation. The expression on the Virgin's face is one of mixed emotions. Sadness is sensed, as well as understanding, as the angel reveals the plan that God has laid out for her. The middle panel, representing the *Concert of Angels/Nativity*, depicts angels glorifying what appears to be an image of the Madonna on the tabernacle steps, looking towards the tender Nativity scene that illustrates the entry of salvation into the world. The final panel reveals the glorious *Resurrection* of Christ from the dead, surrounded by a radiant aureole. In this section, Christ is triumphant over sin and Satan, providing redemption for mankind and the promise of eternal life in heaven. Compared to the dark and horrifying *Crucifixion* on the front of the panel, the central panel with its bright color scheme and joyful content appears considerably more appealing to the viewer. This

³ Ibid., 153-159.

⁴ Ibid., 153-159.

panel, seen above the high altar during Sunday Mass, not only reminded the patients at Isenheim that they were redeemed by Christ through his Resurrection, but also provided encouragement and hope that they would receive eternal life in heaven, free from their earthly afflictions. During the distribution of the blood and body of Christ this promise would be intensified. The altarpiece functioned not only as a backdrop for the altar, but also thematically reflected what was taking place at the altar through its iconography. Both the Virgin and the priest serve as channels of salvation to the patients – the Virgin as the vessel for which Christ was brought into the world, and the priest as the representative of the church, offering Christ’s body and blood. Time and space are lost during this process as the content of the altarpiece and Mass become one. As the patients partake of Christ’s promise, they are reminded that their sins are washed away through Christ’s entrance into the world.

The final section, reserved for feast days, reveals scenes from the life of St. Anthony: the *Meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul the Hermit*, and the *Temptation of St. Anthony* {Figures 2 and 3}. These panels were associated with the cure of diseases such as the plague, syphilis, and of course, ergotism. The *Temptation* panel illustrates the torment that Anthony experienced, obvious in his facial expression, as hideous demons sent by Satan repeatedly attack and tear at his flesh. Significantly, in the left-hand corner of the panel, a man with skin afflictions, similar to those experienced by the patients, lies helplessly on his back. He is removed from the intense scene, observing the pain that Anthony endures. It is possible that the patients saw this man as themselves, also suffering helplessly from their disease. The *Meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul the Hermit* depicts the saint telling of his trials and tribulations, as Saint Paul the hermit

listens intently. Not only does it reflect Anthony's triumph over his pains, but also signifies the purpose of the Order of St. Anthony and the monastery and hospital at Isenheim. Seen on feast days honoring St. Anthony, the patients would understand the role of the Antonites as carrying out the saint's message as relayed to St. Paul the Hermit, justifying their cause of caring for the sick. Furthermore, St. Anthony is depicted as the *imitatio Christi*, suffering as Christ did and triumphing over evil. This is also seen in the sculpture between the two panels where Anthony is placed on a throne directly above the image of Christ, seen not only as an intercessor between Christ and the patients, but also as one who literally followed the path of Christ. The Antonites acting as a representative of the saint as intercessor, encouraged the patients in turn to imitate St. Anthony by enduring their own suffering.

These three views of the Isenheim Altarpiece did not reveal a narrative sequence similar to most other altarpieces, but emphasized the iconography associated with Christian salvation, important within a hospital context. The *Isenheim Altarpiece* reveals two important themes. The first is Christ's redemptive salvation through his birth, death and resurrection. The other is St. Anthony's exemplification of Christ's salvation doctrine, or his *imitatio Christi*.⁵ This thesis suggests yet another concept that Grünewald depicted within his altarpiece: the emphasis on the suffering of the Virgin and her role in the process of salvation as reflected in St. Birgitta of Sweden's *Sermo Angelicus*.

The *Isenheim Altarpiece* has been thoroughly discussed in recent times, specifically the image of the *Crucifixion* of Christ. However, one section has often been ignored or incorrectly identified. This section is the *Concert of Angels-Nativity* {Figures

⁵ Ibid., 153-159.

4, 5, 6 and 7} scene in the center section between the *Annunciation* and the *Resurrection* that from now on will be simply referred to as the *Nativity*. The panel is divided into two distinct parts separated by a dark curtain, one side being dark and mysterious, the other bright and joyous, perhaps signifying the transition from spiritual obscurity to the birth of the “Light of the World.” The darker panel includes a variety of angelic hosts playing instruments and celebrating the chosen Madonna. These angels are illustrated in several different ways. Some bear wings while others do not, and while most are clothed in robes, one angel sports colorful, blue feathers. While this unusual creature gazes upward, the other angels focus their praise on the figure of a woman surrounded in a brilliant aureole similar to the one surrounding Christ in the *Resurrection*. This woman has been identified as a variety of different people, including St. Anne, Ecclesia, and the Virgin herself.⁶ She kneels upon the stairs of a large, ornate tabernacle, decorated with figures from the Old Testament, and gestures towards the *Nativity* on the right. Most of the angelic hosts are compressed into this tabernacle space, except one larger angel who occupies the space in the foreground outside the temple.

The actual *Nativity* scene is on the right of the panel. The figures of the Mother and Child are much larger than those of the angels on the left, and thus are more emphasized. The *Nativity* includes a few iconographical attributes of the traditional Nativity scene, but overall, it is highly unconventional. The Mother and Child are set

⁶ George Scheja, *Der Isenheim Altar des Matthias Grünewald*, translated from German by Robert Erich Wolf (Cologne, 1969). Scheja identifies the woman as the Virgin during the Coronation. J. K. Huysmans, *The Paintings of Matthias Grünewald* (London: Phaidon Press, 1958). Huysmans views the woman as St. Anne to relate to his suggested theme of Motherhood. Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Devil at Isenheim: Reflections of Popular Belief in Grünewald's Altarpiece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Mellinkoff acknowledges the woman in the tabernacle as Ecclesia, the symbol of the church.

against a lush, green landscape, including a monastery high upon a hill in the background, a possible reference to Isenheim, although visually, the building does not resemble the actual monastery. Mary cradles the Christ Child in her arms as he holds a rosary towards her. God is above them, blanketing the two in glorious, divine light. This outdoor scene, although somewhat rare, is similar to Dürer's *Virgin with a Dragonfly* in the Albertina, with which Grünewald may have been familiar.⁷

Beside the similarities to Dürer's work, Grünewald's *Nativity* panel presents a new and highly unconventional illustration of the Nativity scene compared with other contemporary renditions of the same subject. Where, then, did the Antonites receive the inspiration to commission the *Nativity* panel in such a manner? This thesis explores this question, analyzing the altarpiece's iconographical program, its intention for audience interpretation within the hospital context, and the origin of ideas.

This thesis proposes that Grünewald's idealized version of the woman kneeling at the tabernacle steps is an allusion to the Madonna as the *expectatio partus*, or

the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception, awaiting her destiny on earth.⁸ This theory

⁷ Scheja, 49. I would like to note here that the lack of German sources with the exceptions of Scheja, Feurstein and Niemeyer are due to the irrelevant information in regard to this thesis. Most other German sources were analytical studies of style or they simply did not include any discussion of the Birgittine theory.

⁸ Even though the "Madonna of the Immaculate Conception" was a term created long after St. Birgitta, the "idea" was spawned long before St. Birgitta and was believed to have originated in the Bible

suggests that Mary's role in salvation did not begin with her conception, but existed in the mind of God since before time. This idea is supported not only by the altarpiece's iconographical program, but also through evidence of Lucifer present within the tabernacle among the choir of angels. If Lucifer is present within the panel, this implies that the scene takes place before the time of the world and before Lucifer was thrown down to earth along with his rebel angels.⁹ This assertion is based on the presumed knowledge that the Anronites had of the mystical visions and writings of St. Birgitta of Sweden from the fourteenth century. In her writings, she commented on the presence of the Virgin in the mind of God before time and of her vast suffering because of the pain she would bear at the loss of her son on the cross. In addition, this thesis attempts to relate the Antonite's decision to create an iconographical program based on the concepts presented above with the audience's perception of the work within the hospital context.

when describing the Madonna of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation. This woman from Revelations was recognized to be the Virgin by many saints including Bonaventure. NIV, Revelations 12: 1-6. "A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so he might devour the child as soon as it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days."

⁹ NIV, Revelation 12: 7-9. This is the passage in Revelation that immediately follows the description of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception, "And there was a war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to earth, and his angels with him."

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This thesis analyzes Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* within its hospital context to determine whether its iconography and message reflect the *Sermo Angelicus* of St. Birgitta of Sweden.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis thoroughly examines the *Nativity* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* primarily through thematic and iconographical approaches. First, I analyze the previous research and scholarship on the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Second, I explore the life of St. Birgitta, her *Sermo Angelicus* and its dissemination throughout Europe. I suggest that the altarpiece derived from the imagery presented in the *Sermo Angelicus*. My purpose is to understand the intention of the Antonites, how they conceived the idea to use Birgittine imagery in the piece, and how they intended their patients at the hospital to perceive it.

My approach is similar to George Scheja's iconographical analysis of the altarpiece in that he breaks down each panel of the altarpiece to discover meanings and connections that relate to the iconographical program of the altarpiece as a whole. I, however, go beyond to include a comparison to the visionary writings of St. Birgitta. By doing this, several methodologies are applied. These include the examination of the theological sources for their impact on the iconography, contextualization of the work, the exploration of how it was to function, and finally, the utilization of audience response theory. By combining these methodologies, I attempt to formulate an alternate account of the different circumstances that urged the Antonites to create the iconographical program of the *Nativity* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in such an unconventional

manner. I also search for a better understanding of how the audience read and understood this iconography. Finally, this thesis explores the possibility of St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* as one of the textual sources used within the altarpiece in relation to the message of the Antonites through discussion of the theme of salvation and the reason salvation is needed.

This examination requires the study of the writings of St. Birgitta, specifically those concerning the life of the Virgin Mary. St. Birgitta, living in the fourteenth century, produced her *Revelations* and the *Sermo Angelicus*. These accounts have been thoroughly researched so as to provide a basis upon which to analyze the altarpiece's iconography. It is necessary to review other paintings and altarpieces by Grünewald and his contemporaries to establish the influence of St. Birgitta on art and explain the reasoning behind the use of her accounts in the *Nativity* panel. In addition, the idea of Lucifer and evil in association with sickness was analyzed to explain the presence of evil within the panel. It is also necessary to examine the Antonites of Isenheim to define the relationship between this specific monastic order and St. Birgitta. Finally, I have researched the disease ergotism, also known as St. Anthony's Fire, and the role and attitudes of the hospital at Isenheim and other similar hospitals to understand the audience's perception of the altarpiece. This has aided me in developing an understanding of the strong connection between the unconventional iconography of the altarpiece and how it affected the patients' attitudes towards Christ and their disease.

It has not been necessary to view this piece in person considering that my analysis is based on iconography and writings that are readily available throughout many libraries and theological institutions. The altarpiece's image is commonly published, including

many close-up photographs, enabling me to analyze its details. Furthermore, my thesis does not consider stylistic traits present in the piece that would have made it necessary to view it in person.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The present scholarship concerning the *Nativity* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* is somewhat scarce. This is due to the unconventional iconography, more specifically, in the *Concert of Angels* panel. Most studies that discuss the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, with some exceptions, attempt to provide a complete overview, however, tend to neglect the hospital context. There have been a few intensive examinations of the panel, each entirely different, and none of which provides a convincing argument concerning the origin of its iconography in conjunction with its intended perception within the hospital context. Some investigations focus on one aspect, such as the iconography, or the hospital context alone. Secondly, many of the scholars focus on other panels of the altarpiece, then struggle to compare the *Nativity* panel with them. By doing so, this has led to incomplete and often incorrect interpretations. In this thesis, I discuss the *Nativity* panel as a significant part of the entire altarpiece. This is crucial, for some of the most important evidence of St. Birgitta's influence appears in the *Crucifixion* panel.

In the 1960's, George Scheja wrote the most comprehensive analysis of the altarpiece entitled *Der Isenheim Altar des Matthias Grünewald*. He interpreted the panel to be two scenes separated in time and place but presented simultaneously, condensed into a single pictorial unity. The woman descending the tabernacle steps, according to Scheja, is the Virgin who makes a two-fold appearance. On the left, she is the divine

Mary, exiting an Old Testament heaven, looking down upon the earthly Mary in the *Nativity* scene. Scheja explains her to be in a state of transfiguration, symbolizing her as the only human ever to obtain this corporeal transfiguration.¹⁰ Her son is honoring the Virgin of the *Nativity* as he holds the rosary out to her, symbolizing the promise of her Coronation and Transfiguration. In this interpretation, The Virgin of the *Nativity* is contemplating her glory that is to come when she reaches heaven. The divine Mary on the left is therefore a vision of herself fulfilling the promise granted to her by her child. Scheja presents a compelling thesis, but fails to identify other important iconographical aspects of the *Nativity*. One item Scheja overlooks is the winged, hybrid creature in the tabernacle. Furthermore, he fails to discuss the iconography's relationship with the hospital context. He does mention that there has been some speculation of the relation to St. Birgitta and Grünewald's iconography. However, he dismisses the idea, believing that not enough evidence is present to make the connection. This thesis attempts to discover further evidence to support that the relation between the altarpiece and St. Birgitta is a highly acceptable argument.

J. K. Huysmans, in his essay accompanying *The Paintings of Matthias Grünewald*, presents another theory that also glorifies the Virgin Mary as the bearer of redemption, but in a much less convincing manner. Huysmans claims that the Virgin kneels before the Nativity scene, returning to earth to pay homage to her Motherhood that was her supreme glory. He does not relate the concept of motherhood to Mary's role as the Church, but refers to her as a mother in terms of contemporary motherhood.¹¹ The Motherhood theme is also less convincing because of the circumstances in which the

¹⁰ Scheja, 40-55.

altarpiece was commissioned. Why would an altarpiece in a hospital caring for patients afflicted with ergotism celebrate the institution of Motherhood?

Another important source for this thesis is Ruth Mellinkoff's *The Devil at Isenheim*. In Mellinkoff's book, she views the two halves of the panel as a whole instead of two separate scenes. She bases her theory on the story of Christ's Nativity in the *Golden Legend*, dwelling on the presence of evil in the form of Lucifer at the Nativity. Mellinkoff also believes that he is represented by the blue-feathered angel in the back of the tabernacle.¹² According to the *Golden Legend*, God only made known to chosen people and the angels the coming of Christ.¹³ This was done to confuse the demons, which, according to Mellinkoff, explains the bewildered expression on Lucifer's face and his questioning gaze towards God in heaven. Mellinkoff presents a convincing argument for the identification of the creature as Lucifer, but incorrectly identifies other aspects of the panel. For example, Mellinkoff identifies the woman kneeling at the stairs of the tabernacle as Ecclesia. Although the Virgin Mary is also at times known as Ecclesia, the symbol of the church, there are no other signifiers to prove that this was the intention of the Antonites who commissioned the piece. In addition, she incorrectly identifies the iconography surrounding the Virgin. For example, the crown of twelve stars, symbolism taken directly from the Book of Revelation, usually represents the Madonna of the

¹¹ Huysmans, 16-17.

¹² Mellinkoff, 20-21.

¹³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, Vol. II, translated by William Granger Ryan (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1993).

Immaculate Conception and not Ecclesia as Mellinkoff suggests.¹⁴ Mellinkoff also fails to mention the hospital, basing her essay on the assumption that the altarpiece was accessible to all Christians, and gives no thorough explanation of the iconography's origin and audience.

Heinrich Feurstein, in his book *Matthias Grünewald*, first suggested that Grünewald's piece may be related to the Revelations of St. Birgitta.¹⁵ It was necessary to examine this source thoroughly to recognize what the author's arguments lack. None other than George Scheja debunked his scholarship in more recent times.¹⁶ Scheja claimed that he was unable to provide sufficient evidence for his argument. In addition, Scheja claims that St. Bridget's writings never describe a scene where the Virgin is present two-fold. This assumption is based on the idea that the two halves of the panel are meant to be one complete scene, a point that this thesis disputes. Furthermore, this thesis attempts to support Feurstein's original argument by uncovering new evidence to support his initial theory.

Two important sources I utilized while researching the hospital context and the iconography are Andrée Hayum's book *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* and her article "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited," in *Art Bulletin* 59.¹⁷ In these two works,

¹⁴ See footnote #7, p. 9 for verse from Revelation. Traditional iconography of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception, including reference to the crown of twelve stars can be found in George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York, 1954), 95-96. Also explained in James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art* (New York, 1974), 326-327.

¹⁵ Heinrich Feurstein, *Grünewald* (Bonn, 1930). In his book, Feurstein believes that the *Nativity* scene is based on one literary source – *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*.

¹⁶ See Scheja, 74-76, end notes 74-75.

¹⁷ Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1989) and "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited," *Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 501-517.

Hayum provides an extensive insight into the iconography present in the *Nativity* panel, as well as the rest of the altarpiece that relates to the power of healing. These sources do not mention the origins of Grünewald's iconography beside those that represent healing; nor does he comment on Grünewald's intentions when representing an unconventional Nativity scene. His essays mainly focus on the scenes representing the life of St. Anthony.

My other secondary sources consist of books concerning the lives of St. Birgitta. These sources include *St. Birgitta of Sweden* by Bridget Morris and *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations* by Marguerite Tjader Harris.¹⁸ These books support the argument that Grünewald's iconography is based on the writings of the saint.

Finally, I refer to sources, for example, Mrs. Henry Jenner's *Our Lady in Art*, consisting of various images of the Virgin.¹⁹ Although the source is considerably old, she recollects several works of art that were in her time, still present in their original context. Other sources include works by Jeffrey Burton Russell and Gerald Messadie who have written extensively on Satan and Evil.²⁰ In addition, it is necessary to study literature based on the theological practices and beliefs of the Antonite order to understand better why the altarpiece's iconographical program was chosen.

My primary sources consist of the original writings by the St. Birgitta and other literature contemporary to the creation of the Altarpiece. *The Revelations of St. Birgitta*,

¹⁸ Bridget Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden* (Woodbridge, UK, 1999). Marguerite Tjader Harris, ed, *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations* (New York, 1990).

¹⁹ Mrs. Henry Jenner, *Our Lady in Art* (London, 1908).

²⁰ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1984) and *Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca, 1977). Gerald Messadie, *A History of the Devil*, translated from French by Marc Romano (New York, 1996).

the *Sermo Angelicus*, translated into English, *The Word of the Angel*, and the *Golden Legend* are among a few. The *Sermo Angelicus* is most important to this thesis because it reveals St. Birgitta's belief in the idea of Mary in the mind of God before the beginning of time accepting her role as the bearer of salvation, however sorrowful it may be, because of the joyful promise of eternity for all of mankind.

Despite the efforts to explain the complex iconography and its origin in Grünewald's altarpiece, no scholar has yet to provide enough strong evidence to support his or her argument. George Scheja presented the strongest interpretation of the altarpiece and the *Nativity* panel, but still left much pertinent information and iconography neglected. In addition, most scholars have focused on one aspect of the panel, for example, the hospital context or the iconography, and have failed to combine each concept in order to present a thorough investigation of the piece and its origin. In this thesis, I attempt to explain the relationship of the iconography with the context of the altarpiece as well as examine further evidence that opens new doors to the possibility that the *Sermo Angelicus* was one of the textual sources for the *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

CHAPTER ONE

ANALYSIS OF THE PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP CONCERNING THE ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE AND ITS RELATION TO ST. BIRGITTA'S *SERMO ANGELICUS*

For the purpose of this thesis, I believe it is necessary to explore further the previous literature and course of art historical scholarship throughout the twentieth century to determine the reasons for which the Birgittine connection was debunked. It is interesting to note that research devoted to the history of St. Birgitta alone recognizes the relationship between Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* and the saint's *Revelations*. For example, Marguerite Tjader Harris, in the preface to *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations* states, "Birgitta's vision of the passion, also in Book VII, influenced painters in many lands. The German master Matthias Grünewald followed Birgitta in the painting of his colossal altarpiece of the crucifixion for a church in Isenheim."²¹ She is incorrect to identify Grünewald as the source of the work's iconography; however, there is no doubt about this connection apparent in Harris' statement. It is evident that historians and experts on St. Birgitta recognize and accept the connection to Grünewald's altarpiece. Why, then, do art historians not? This chapter will explore that question.

²¹ Harris, 9. Harris does not refer to any specific source for this statement, presenting it to her readers as an accepted fact.

HEINRICH FEURSTEIN

As mentioned in the Introduction, Heinrich Feurstein first suggested in 1930 that the iconography of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was derived from St. Birgitta's Revelations, specifically the *Sermo Angelicus*. Feurstein went as far as to publish a section from Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* as the single literary source for the *Nativity*. Although perhaps he was incorrect in positing that the Antonites formulated their iconography ONLY from the *Sermo Angelicus*, his comparisons to the text are logical regarding the iconographical similarities in many of Birgitta's passages. Feurstein acknowledged the central point of his interpretation as the figure within the tabernacle. The mysterious woman, he claims, is "Mary as Idea," an interpretation that this thesis attempts to support. The entire middle section of the altarpiece is, according to Feurstein, "the ideal and real progress of Mary through all the millennia of the history of salvation."²² The "Mary as Idea" is a concept shared by both St. Birgitta in the *Sermo Angelicus* and Heinrich Feurstein in his book.

GEORGE SCHEJA

George Scheja, one of the most important scholars of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, however, finds Feurstein's interpretation improbable for several reasons. For one, he claims Feurstein is forced to do violence to the entire altarpiece because it does not follow exactly the sequence of Birgitta's meditations. Second, Scheja believes there is nothing in St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* that juxtaposes a Madonna in the Mind of God

²² Feurstein, 45 ?. In addition, he believes the mysterious woman within the temple is being elected in "the bosom of the Father, her salutation by the angels on the morning of the Creation...the joyous expectation of her on the part of the ancestors, patriarchs and prophets, her significance as Second Temple

before time with a Madonna within time. He states, “In plain fact, the *Sermo Angelicus* simply does not furnish any kind of theological intellectual armature which can explain the very special composition of this central picture, let alone the juxtaposition of the three pictures which make up this ensemble. In short, Bridget’s meditations do no more than follow the familiar conception of the process of salvation.”²³ In this argument, Scheja makes his first mistake. He claims that St. Birgitta’s *Sermo Angelicus* follows a common idea of the process of salvation understood throughout all of time, and that for some reason, Grünewald’s altarpiece does not. In fact, he believes that the complex iconography reflects a meaning much more complicated than what Birgitta envisions within her writings. This thesis will suggest that this is not the case. Instead, it will propose that the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, in its entirety, is a perfect illustration of the process of salvation as seen by the Antonites who commissioned the altarpiece and those patients who viewed it. Second, Scheja rejects any relationship between the *Sermo Angelicus* and the *Isenheim Altarpiece* based on time conflation. He believes that because there is an interruption in the salvation narrative through the inclusion on the *Concert of Angels* panel, the *Sermo Angelicus* as an iconographical source is impossible. Why must it be necessary to assume that the narrative should be continuous? He fails to take into consideration that the piece, commissioned by the Antonites at the hospital in Isenheim, was for a specialized and unique audience. Therefore, by conflating time, the Antonites aimed for a deeper understanding of salvation as seen within the hospital context. In

and most worthy portal. The larger Madonna on the right side of the panel reveals the Virgins “double fate as the heavily thorned Rose of Jericho, that is, the most joyous and sorrowful of all mothers.”

²³ Scheja, 75. These arguments against Feurstein’s interpretation are presented in his notes section, and not within the body of his work.

addition, its very arrangement denies the possibility of continuous narrative because it was viewed at different times. Although Scheja insists that “the picture cannot involve a mere sequence of events presented simultaneously for the reason that both ‘scenes’ are completely diverse as pictorial conceptions,” he seems to be looking for one source to account for the entire iconography of the altarpiece.²⁴ Scheja compares in detail phrases from sources such as Dante’s *Inferno* and the Gospels that might explain his theory that the *Concert of Angels* panel represents the Coronation of the Virgin, but to no avail. It is highly improbable, considering that the Antonites were aware of several illustrations and texts concerning salvation, that one source was used. It is more likely that several other sources including the Book of Revelation, the Gospels, the *Golden Legend* and Athanasius’ *Life of St. Anthony*, in addition to Birgitta’s *Sermo Angelicus*, were used to create the altarpiece’s complex iconographical program. These additional sources supported Birgitta’s message within the altarpiece to enhance the purpose of the piece for its viewers.

ERWIN PANOFSKY AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ICONOLOGY

It is odd, considering the comprehensive nature of Scheja’s scholarship, that he makes these simple mistakes in his interpretation. The art historical scholarship directly before and during the time of Scheja’s research may have had a serious impact on his conclusions. For example, art historians originating in the 1940’s were less multi-disciplinary than present-day scholars; everything had to fit into a strict set of rules and categories, for example, Heinrich Wölfflin’s principles of Renaissance and Baroque

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

Art.²⁵ Several scholars including the influential Erwin Panofsky followed this approach closely.²⁶ Although these scholars opened the door for art historical research as it is today, they abided by narrow, stylistic rules that did not include methodological approaches such as social response or audience response theory. Therefore, it is not surprising that the hospital context was ignored in Scheja's scholarship. Furthermore, it explains his belief that the altarpiece must have one literary source for its entire composition. Panofsky once used the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as an example when arguing in favor of his iconological approach, based on style, over formal description:

If I characterize that bright color complex there in the middle as a "person hovering in the air with perforated hands and feet," then, as we have said, I pass beyond a mere formal description but remain in an area of sense impression that is accessible and familiar for the beholder through his sense of sight, his perception by touch or of movement, in short, by direct experience. If, on the other hand, I characterize that bright color complex as an "ascendant Christ," then I am imposing a cultural fact; whereas someone, say, who had never heard the Gospel story, would get the impression that Leonardo's *Last Supper* depicts an animated dinner party broken up—because of the purse—by a dispute over money... Without literary background for it, we cannot in fact have a sense of the meaning of this painting. As a mere phenomenon, we can describe it crudely and obviously as a depiction of a person hovering in the midst of some sort of glow with arms outstretched, a casket beneath him, while others, armed for battle, either squat on the ground looking mortally injured or staggers about as though panic-stricken or blinded... So it is: To describe a work of art adequately, if only in a purely phenomenal way, we must—even if unconsciously and for a split second—already organize it by some stylistic criteria; for otherwise we can never know whether, in our "suspension in the void," we are to apply standards of modern naturalism or standards of medieval spiritualism to the work in question. And it is somewhat surprising that so seemingly simple a sentence as "a person rising out of a grave" can engender questions as difficult and general as the relation between surface and depth, body and space, the static and dynamic—in short: that we must already have been considering the work of art by those

"fundamental artistic principles" whose specific means of solution add up to what

²⁵ See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, translated by M.D. Hottinger (New York, 1932).

²⁶ See Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, Vols. I and II (Cambridge, 1958) and *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, 1st ed. (Garden City, New York, 1955).

we call “style.”²⁷

Panofsky is stating that a literary context, or a passage from the Gospels, must be identified to understand the altarpiece. Furthermore, he believes that if the exact passage cannot be found, one must search for other sources. He says, “A thorough investigation of other possible texts is in order; with the aid of typological history we discover that what we have been referring to as ‘the Resurrection of Christ by Grünewald’ is in fact a highly complex conflation of motifs: the rising from the grave, the ascension, and the so-called transfiguration.”²⁸

It is true that Panofsky began to retract from the previous Wölfflinian principles. However, in regard to the Isenheim Altarpiece, he created another problem with which later scholars have been left to grapple. This problem is the search for the “exact literary source.” In addition, Panofsky used the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as a simplified example of his argument. The altarpiece does not only reflect the passages from the Gospels. Not once do the Gospels describe an outdoor Nativity, nor do they explain the unconventional *Concert of Angels* to the left of the *Nativity*. This iconography, therefore, must be attributed to additional texts.

ZÜLCH

This “old-school” attitude is exemplified further in Scheja’s argument against another Grünewald scholar, Zülch, who executed a comprehensive study on Grünewald

²⁷ Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (New York, 1993), 218-19. Kultermann took these passages from an essay Panofsky wrote entitled *Das Problem des Stils in der blindenden Kunst* in 1915, printed in Gerf Schiff, ed. *German Essays on Art History* (New York, 1988) and Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 1939. The essay was a critique of Wölfflin’s lecture on the “problem of style” given in 1911. Wölfflin responded to Panofsky by saying that he had not presented any reasoning for his observations: “In other words, the fact that one era ‘sees’ in a linear way, another in a painterly way is but a phenomenon of style, not a basis and not a cause of style; it is something in need of explanation, not the explanation itself.”

entitled *Der historische Grünewald*.²⁹ Zülch excepted that there might be some Birgittine influence on Grünewald's altarpiece, but to Scheja's dismay, reverted back to previous schemes and "in consequence, bundled together both or, to tell the truth, all interpretations. By drawing on all of St. Birgitta's writings and not just the *Sermo Angelicus*, he tried to establish some broader basis for an explanation."³⁰ This enhances the argument that Scheja was searching for one single source, refusing to accept the possibility of several influences for the altarpiece's iconography.

Within Scheja's explanation of Zülch's thesis and throughout his entire book, he refers repeatedly to Grünewald as the creator of the iconographical program. For example, in response to Feurstein and Zülch's idea of the Madonna of divine providence (the idea of Mary in the mind of God before time), Scheja remarks, "but that idea contains nothing that even remotely can be said to provide the artist with a recognizable inspiration for a Madonna in a nimbus of Transfiguration."³¹

ERWIN RUHMER

Scheja is not the only scholar who assumes this position on the matter. In *Grünewald, The Paintings*, Ruhmer mentions the possible relationship of the altarpiece and St. Birgitta as well and states, "It is not possible to explain the whole of the Christmas panel by the Revelations of St. Bridget. Many other sources, unknown to us,

²⁸ Ibid., 219.

²⁹ Because of its rarity, I was unable to locate this particular source. The information in this thesis is taken from Scheja's interpretation of Zülch's research on pps. 75-76, endnote 75. I felt it necessary to include this information despite the fact that I did not analyze the book myself so that all sides of the argument for and against the Birgittine theory are presented.

³⁰ Scheja, 75. This argument is also presented within Scheja's notes section, number 75.

were certainly alive in Mathis's imagination and through the intensity of his artistic vision were assimilated to an indissoluble whole."³² It is detrimental to the scholar's arguments to assume that the artist had any say whatsoever in the make-up of the altarpiece's iconography. At the time the altarpiece was commissioned, the artist rarely had any say in what was depicted. Aside from a few stylistic decisions, Grünewald was merely an interpreter of the complex message created in the minds of the highly astute monks at Isenheim who possibly had access to several theological works of literature, including Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus*. There is not even any proof of whether Grünewald was literate. This incorrect assumption made by Scheja and Ruhmer also comes from the influence of Panofsky in the 1940's. Most scholars of this period, after Panofsky, based their knowledge of art on Italian Renaissance ideals. These ideals included the promotion of the artist as "genius" and "creator," although even the great Italian Renaissance masters did not have full reign on what themes they painted. Furthermore, during the Northern Renaissance, the time period in question, this artistic influence was much less, and most of the time, nil.

RUTH MELLINKOFF

Scheja's rejection of the relationship between St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* and the Isenheim altarpiece has become the accepted theory in most recent years. In her book *The Devil at Isenheim*, Ruth Mellinkoff introduces the hybrid blue-feathered creature in

³¹ Scheja, 76. This quote is referring to the unconventional light that surrounds the Virgin in the temple. In this context, however, I am referring to it as an example of Scheja's incorrect identification of the artist as the creator of the iconographical program.

³² Huysmans, J. K. *Grünewald, The Paintings: Complete Edition with Two Essays by J. K. Huysmans and a Catalogue by E. Ruhmer* (London, 1958), 120. Although written a few years before Scheja, Ruhmer's argument takes the same stance concerning the Birgittine influence. Ruhmer, similar to Scheja, approaches the subject with the same restrictions presented by the "old school" art historians that influenced Scheja.

the tabernacle as Lucifer, barely mentioning the Birgittine argument. She says, “The frequently cited writings of St. Bridget of Sweden provide only equivocal hints about the possible meaning of this scene [the *Nativity* panel] and amount to little more than commonly accepted ideas about salvation.”³³ It is not surprising that her footnote cites George Scheja’s argument concerning the subject. It is odd that Mellinkoff does not pursue the relationship of the saint’s writings and the altarpiece, for if she did, it would further support her thesis.³⁴ Furthermore, Mellinkoff also fails to consider the hospital context when drawing her conclusions. She argues that the presence of Lucifer allows for the need of salvation, but does not delve into the reasons why this would have been applicable to the patients at Isenheim. This thesis also explores the hybrid creature as Lucifer in Chapter Six, and focuses on the relationship of Lucifer within the salvation narrative present in the *Sermo Angelicus* and with the hospital at Isenheim.

JAMES SNYDER

James Snyder, in *Northern Renaissance Art*, a survey of the period, devotes a chapter to the art of Grünewald and most significant, the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. He presents passages from St. Birgitta’s *Sermo Angelicus* and claims that there is a direct relation between the literary source and the iconography of the altarpiece.³⁵ He presents

³³ Mellinkoff, 15. This is the only mention of St. Bridget throughout the entire body of her book. She footnotes this statement, however, on page 93, note 1, and briefly presents George Scheja’s argument, quoting from his note’s section on page 75, note 74.

³⁴ Mellinkoff’s main argument is that the blue feathered angel within the tabernacle is Lucifer himself before the fall in heaven in a state of transformation. If this were so, the tabernacle would be a representation of heaven before time. The Mary as Idea would fit perfectly within this context; however, Mellinkoff does not identify the woman on the steps as the Virgin *expectatio partus*, but as Ecclesia, the symbol of the Church.

³⁵ James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, The Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (New York, 1985), 351-52. After discussing other theories, he remarks, “Another, more

various theories, including Scheja's theory of the *Concert of Angels* panel as representative of the Coronation of the Virgin, and claims that the Idea of Mary in God's mind before time is the most convincing. Snyder does not, however, present any type of argument to support his belief. It would be interesting to know why Snyder believes that the Birgittine theory is the most palpable of all the theories presented on the altarpiece. Perhaps Snyder is considering all aspects of the creation of the altarpiece, most important of all, the audience's perception.

The following chapters of this thesis refer back to this chapter, presenting new evidence to support the Birgittine theory, while emphasizing the inability of previous scholarship to take into consideration all the facets that must be explored in order to present a sound argument. It is crucial that the environment for which the altarpiece was commissioned be intensively analyzed to understand the message that the Antonites strove to convey to their patients. It is possible through this approach that one may discover the critical associations between the Antonite Order and the *Sermo Angelicus*.

convincing, theory proposes that she is the 'idea of Mary' before time in the mind of God, who looks upon her fulfillment as the Madonna within historical time at the birth of Christ."

CHAPTER TWO

ST. BIRGITTA, THE *SERMO ANGELICUS*, AND HER CONTINUOUS INFLUENCE ON MONASTIC THOUGHT AND ART

Before this thesis attempts to relate the complex iconographical program of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* to St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus*, the literary piece must first be explained. St. Birgitta's life, beliefs, and circumstances surrounding the creation of the *Sermo Angelicus* are also important so that one may begin to identify the relationship of her work with the themes present in the altarpiece. In this chapter, all of the above are analyzed in addition to the extreme popularity of her works and their dissemination throughout Europe.

THE EARLY LIFE OF ST. BIRGITTA

Birgitta, born in late 1302 or early 1303 in the Swedish province of Uppland, was a member of a very influential and political family. Birgitta's father, Birger Persson, was a *lagman*, or lawman, and a member of the king's council. The family also had many ecclesiastical connections in Sweden. Birgitta's father's uncle was an archbishop of Uppsala, while several cousins were deans of the Uppsala cathedral, canons, and one became the bishop of Vasteros after being a Dominican prior in Sigtuna.³⁶

In 1316, Birgitta was married to Ulf Gudmarsson who also became a lawman in Närke and a member of the king's council, similar to her father. She bore eight children during her twenty-seven year marriage to Ulf, while frequently giving to the poor and

³⁶ Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (forthcoming Boydell & Brewer, 2001). This book has not yet been published; therefore, page numbers are unknown at this time.

caring for the sick. She served at the royal court and became an advisor to the queen, perhaps instructing her in the language and customs of Sweden.³⁷

In 1341, Birgitta and her husband embarked on a pilgrimage from Sweden to Santiago de Compostela and upon return received a vision from the martyred bishop St. Dionysius. He revealed to Birgitta that God wished to be made known to the world through her. After this vision, Birgitta and her husband vowed to remain sexually abstinent and enter a monastery; however, her husband died shortly thereafter. From that time on, Birgitta dedicated her life to recording and teaching her revelations from Christ and the Virgin throughout all of Europe.³⁸

In 1349, Birgitta journeyed to Rome to gain the many indulgences offered there, and to view the display of relics such as St. Veronica's veil. Birgitta also believed that there she would see the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor and encourage peace between France and England, as foretold to her in a vision. Her utmost concern, however, was to win approval from the Pope to form the Order of the Most Holy Savior in Vadstena, Sweden.³⁹ Years earlier, Birgitta had sent a letter to the Pope demanding that he return to Rome and make peace between France and England, so she was not unknown to the Papacy.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ St. Birgitta of Sweden, *Sermo Angelicus*, translated into English, with notes and preface by John Halborg (Toronto, Ontario, 1996), 5.

THE SERMO ANGELICUS

It was in Rome during the years of 1352-53, in a cardinalate house near the Church of Saint Lawrence in Damaso, that Birgitta was continuously visited by an angel after Christ had appeared to her saying, "I will send my angel to you who will reveal to you the lections in honour of my mother, the Virgin, which should be read by the nuns at Matins in your monastery. He will dictate them to you; you will write down exactly what he tells you."⁴⁰ Birgitta waited daily for the angel with tablets and ink, and he would stand close to her side and dictate the message that she was to write. After the angel completed his message for the day, Birgitta presented it to her confessor, Magister Petrus, who in turn translated it into Latin.⁴¹

The Word of the Angel, or the *Sermo Angelicus*, although written over a period of time, is best understood as one single revelation. It has several different functions, the most important being closely related to her hopes for the erection of her order of nuns and brothers in Vadstena, Sweden. The writings were to be divided into twenty-one lessons to be read at Matins each week of the year. The texts read on Sundays explained God's work in his creation of the Virgin as the most beautiful model for the Christian church, who was premeditated and existed in God's mind before time. Throughout the week, other texts were read. Monday was devoted to the angels and the story of their fall and Tuesday to the fall of Adam. Wednesday covered the birth of the Virgin and her childhood and why she was chosen above all other women to bear the Son of God. Thursday's text addressed the incarnation and Friday, the suffering of Christ. Finally,

⁴⁰ Harris, 31, 13.

⁴¹ Harris, 14. Saint Birgitta, *Opera Minora II: Sermo Angelicus*, ed. Sten Eklund (Uppsala, 1972), 19-20.

Saturday dealt with the Virgin's everlasting faith in God, despite her trials and sorrows, that Christ will prevail and that she will be assumed.

In addition to the texts' narratives, the *Sermo Angelicus* was meant to tell the story of the motherhood of the Virgin and of her role as an intercessor in salvation. Furthermore, it defines the community's purpose: the continuous praise and service of God, the confession of sins and the function of the altar in daily Mass. Most important is the emphasis that is placed on the Virgin in the *Sermo Angelicus*, which acts as a treatise on her role in the salvation process and its history.⁴² It is not only Mary's role as an intercessor in the Church that St. Birgitta actively promotes, but also her part in God's predestined plan for the salvation and protection of the individual. Other elements included in Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* are the detail of the Virgin's Assumption in which fifteen days, instead of three, occurred between her death and resurrection. Second, Birgitta emphasized the Virgin's Virginité and the teaching associated with the Immaculate Conception, a doctrine that claimed the Virgin as free from original sin at her conception.⁴³ Not speaking directly on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, but on the marriage of Mary's parents in Chapter X, Birgitta describes Joachim and Anna as "fruitful branches" worthy of bearing "those whom God wished to call his people;" therefore, "procreating children according to the precept of God and to his praise."⁴⁴ Birgitta often expounded upon this message in some of her other *Revelations*.⁴⁵ Although

⁴² Johannes Jørgensen, *Saint Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. II, translated from the Danish by Ingeborg Lund (London, 1954).

⁴³ Morris, 108.

⁴⁴ St. Birgitta of Sweden, *Sermo Angelicus*, translated into English, with notes and preface by John Halborg Chapter X, 38-39.

⁴⁵ Morris, 108-109. Morris quotes several references to the idea of the Virgin being conceived without original sin in Books I 9, V 13 and VI 55.

this idea was not revolutionary and had been suggested before, Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus*, along with her *Revelations*, laid the foundation for the expansion of this doctrine in the centuries to come.

These basic theological ideas in the *Sermo Angelicus* are reflected in the iconography of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, as this thesis attempts to demonstrate, and are similar to the messages that the Antonites wished to relay to their patients at the hospital at Isenheim. The image of the Virgin in the baldachin as the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin as an intercessor and a major figure in the process of salvation are the major underlying themes included in the iconography of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Furthermore, the seven texts coinciding with the seven days of the week are apparent in the *Nativity* panel, although not in a narrative sequence. These associations within the texts and the *Isenheim Altarpiece* will be discussed thoroughly in Chapters Four through Six.

THE DISSEMINATION OF THE SERMO ANGELICUS

Before approaching the possibilities of this theory, the question of whether St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* was read by the Antonites at Isenheim must be addressed. Although there is no definite evidence proving that the Antonites themselves had acquired or read the *Sermo Angelicus*, there is proof that it was translated into German and distributed throughout the country before and during the creation of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. While alive, Birgitta traveled to many different countries including Norway, Poland, France, Spain, Italy, and most importantly for this thesis, Germany. She was known as a woman of power by those who believed in her message, male and female

alike, and equally respected in a religious world dominated mostly by men. Her Order of the Holy Saviour was eventually approved by the Papacy and established as a branch of the Augustinians. The Order, soon after, spread to Estonia, Finland, Denmark, England, and even as far as Mexico.⁴⁶ The strongest monastic houses of the Order, with the exception of Sweden's, was in Italy; however, others continued to sprout up and become strongholds of the Birgittine empire. In the early fifteenth century, King Henry V established Syon in England, and in 1415, four nuns and priests left Vadstena in Sweden to instruct the Order in England. Syon then became an important monastic center and a major pilgrimage site. Around this same time, monasteries were erected in urban communities along the Baltic and into the Germanic regions.⁴⁷

The Birgittine message, including the *Sermo Angelicus*, reached far beyond the walls of the Birgittine Orders. It was in Lübeck, Germany that St. Birgitta's Revelations were printed for the first time in German around 1492. Additional editions were translated from Latin into German and printed in Antwerp and Nuremberg around 1500.⁴⁸ In addition, during the fifteenth century, an attack on St. Birgitta by a group called the "Moderni" spawned a counter-attack by John Torquemada, which he presented at the

⁴⁶ Birger Gregersson and Thomas Gascoigne, *The Life of Saint Birgitta*, translated by Julia Bolton Holloway (Toronto, 1991), 10.

⁴⁷ Morris, 172-173. Again, it is hard to prove which monastic communities had the *Sermo Angelicus* in their libraries, including the Antonite monastery at Isenheim. A record of this is unavailable. It is known, however, that the text was available in German and Latin at this time in the surrounding areas. Its popularity in Germany during the creation of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* is evident due to the fact that it was published several times within a few years of one another in the country's larger cities. Furthermore, because of this lack of proof, this thesis will attempt to argue that the Antonites did indeed have possession of the text and used its imagery for their altarpiece by identifying its consistencies with one another.

⁴⁸ Harris, 3-4.

Council of Basel in 1436. This defense allowed for popular and ecclesiastical reflection on St. Birgitta's *Revelations*, sparked an interest in its content throughout Europe.⁴⁹

ST. BIRGITTA'S INFLUENCE ON THE ARTS

The ideas expressed in Birgitta's *Revelations* and the *Sermo Angelicus* influenced the arts of her time and of future generations. From the time of her canonization in 1391 to the dawn of the Renaissance, several works of art illustrated Birgitta either writing her Revelations or present at the scene of the Nativity. Some of the earliest representations, from the end of the fourteenth century, are woodcuts portraying Birgitta at her desk writing with a dove above her. The dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, has become associated with Birgitta's divine inspiration.⁵⁰ In the hospital at the Church of Saint John in Florence, an illustration by Fra Bartolomeo of Birgitta giving the Order to her Nuns, still adorns a wall, as it did in past centuries, reminding patients and patrons alike of her dedication and sacrifice to her Savior and the Virgin.⁵¹

The most important works of art to analyze, for the support of this thesis, are those influenced by St. Birgitta's accounts of the life of Christ and the Virgin in her *Revelations* and the *Sermo Angelicus*. In 1993, Vida J. Hull wrote an extensive essay concerning the influence of St. Birgitta's *Revelations* on Renaissance paintings depicting

⁴⁹ St. Birgitta of Sweden, 9. This information is presented in the preface to the *Sermo Angelicus* by its translator, John Halbourg.

⁵⁰ Anna Brownell Murphy Jameson, *Legends of the Monastic Orders, as Represented in the Fine Arts* (London, 1863), 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 225. Jameson provides several examples of works of art that portray scenes from the life of St. Birgitta. They are presented as memories of works that she has seen throughout the course of her research. The dates of the works are rarely given. Although this thesis means to focus on works of art influenced and not representing St. Birgitta, this reference is of utmost importance because of the identification of Bartolomeo's work displayed in the hospital context in Florence.

the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Nativity. Hull argues that a specific passage from Birgitta's *Revelations* influenced Renaissance artists to depict the newborn Jesus nude in order to intensify the humanity of Christ.⁵² In her *Revelations*, Birgitta describes the circumstances of the determination of the sex of the Christ Child:

At the same place where the Virgin Mary and Joseph were adoring the boy in the cradle, I also saw the shepherds, who had been watching their flocks, coming so they could look at the child and adore it. When they saw the child, they first wanted to find out if it was a male or female, for the angels had announced to them that the savior of the world had been born, and they had not said that it was a savioress. Then the Virgin Mary showed to them the nature and the male sex of the child. At once they adored him with great awe and joy. Afterward, they returned, praising and glorifying God for all they had heard and seen.⁵³

This passage, according to Hull, had an early influence on representations of scenes of the Adoration, but soon made its way into depictions of the Nativity influenced by the description provided by Birgitta in her *Revelations*.⁵⁴ Hull supports her argument by using examples of Nativity/Adoration scenes by Hugo van der Goes, Martin Schöngauer, and even Albrecht Dürer, specifically his Nativity woodcuts from the *Life of the Virgin* and the *Small Passion*.⁵⁵ All three of these artists were relative contemporaries of Matthias Grünewald, often sharing similar characteristics. Hull concludes her essay by stating that in most of the contexts of the paintings in which the Christ Child appears nude those images “might well remind the faithful of the birth of the prophesied Savior, his initial sacrifice of the Incarnation, and his continued sacrifice on the altar.”⁵⁶

⁵² Vida J. Hull, “The Sex of the Savior in Renaissance Art: The Revelations of Saint Bridget and the Nude Christ Child in Renaissance Art,” *Studies in Iconography* 15, 1993, 78-79. Hull argues that paintings revealing the sex of the Savior are directly related to passages from Birgitta's Revelations. It was rare that Christ as a child was painted nude before this time.

⁵³ St. Birgitta, *Revelations* 7.23 translated in Harris, 205. Also translated by Barbara Obrist in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, Georgia, 1984), 254.. Hull, 78.

⁵⁴ Hull, 79.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 98. Hull does not use Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* as an example for her argument; however, her conclusion can be applied when considering the context for which the altarpiece was made.

In a thesis by Karen Wolf written in 1995, Birgittine Nativity iconography is analyzed in relation to familial roles in fifteenth century society.⁵⁷ Wolf's focus revolved around these roles established by Birgitta within representations of the Nativity and how actual families imitated them during that period. The *Nativity* in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was not made available to anyone but patients at the hospital and the Antonite Order established there; therefore, it was unlikely that familial roles were emphasized. Imitation would still be a factor, for patients would be encouraged to relate their sufferings to those of the Virgin, Christ, and St. Anthony. Furthermore, Wolf's research includes information significant to the argument presented within this thesis. Wolf introduces her thesis by stating "Birgitta's vision has repeatedly been interpreted as an attempt to dignify the Nativity of Christ and show it as a divine mystery; analyses of Birgittine Nativity paintings have been interpreted in the same vein."⁵⁸ Scholars of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* have analyzed the piece in this way as well. The iconography and content of the *Nativity* panel of the altarpiece remains undecipherable because of its unconventionality, and has been described as mystical, or mysterious, for this very reason. Analyzing the piece in relation to St. Birgitta's mystical vision as presented in the *Sermo Angelicus* may perhaps explain the unconventional iconography within the altarpiece.

Wolf's analysis of Birgitta's influence on Nativity scenes supports the argument presented in this thesis that patrons and painters alike during the period in which the

Emphasizing the humanity of Christ to those patients at the hospital at Isenheim would be an obvious objective to the Antonites, as this thesis will reiterate repeatedly.

⁵⁷ Karen A. Wolf, *Birgittine Iconography and the Ideal Family in Fifteenth Century Burgundy* (Master's thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1995).

Isenheim Altarpiece was commissioned were aware of Birgitta's *Revelations* and used her descriptions repeatedly. It was during the late Middle Ages that devotion to the Virgin Mary became most popular. This phenomenon may have been the reason why Birgitta's *Revelations* and more specifically, the *Sermo Angelicus*, were so popular, leading to the widespread use of the text's imagery in art. Wolf first cites Robert Campin's *Dijon Nativity* (ca. 1425), remarking on the emphasis on the Virgin and her purity. According to Wolf, the positioning of the Virgin and the vibrant colors of her robe, constantly grab the viewer's attention, instead of directing it toward the Christ Child. Furthermore, Wolf points out that the gaze of Mary upon Christ is significantly different than the adoring gazes of the shepherds and others at the scene. Wolf argues, "Mary's downcast eyes signal humility but unlike the shepherds, she is not a spectator witnessing a miraculous event. Mary plays an integral role in the incarnation. Her motherhood is of chief importance in the scene and her gaze is the loving gaze of a mother upon her child."⁵⁹ The emphasis on the Virgin in the painting and her role as an integral part of the Incarnation are also main points in Birgitta's *Revelations*, and more specifically, the *Sermo Angelicus* that outright glorifies the Virgin. Wolf also cites Schöngauer's *German Nativity* (ca. 1470-75), also mentioned by Hull in her article, stressing similar points as in the *Dijon Nativity*. Most examples provided by Wolf mention the gaze of the Virgin upon her child and the visual importance of the Virgin over the Christ Child.

Many scholars have noted the lack of the presence of Joseph within the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Joseph is present in most scenes showing Birgittine influence, however, in

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

Birgitta's vision, Joseph is not present at the actual birth of Christ, but afterwards, once Mary had clothed her Son.⁶⁰ Wolf points out that most Nativity scenes are not the actual birth and that this moment of Incarnation is the most important scene.⁶¹ In the *Nativity* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, the presence of the wash basin and other familiar items relating to a birth are visible, signifying that the birth has just occurred. In reference to St. Birgitta's vision, this would be the reason for the absence of Joseph. In addition, Joseph would not have fit into the message that the Antonites were attempting to illustrate to their patients.

Other altarpieces preceding Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* include iconography influenced by the visions of St. Birgitta. James Snyder refers to several in his comprehensive volume on Northern Renaissance Art. One example is the *Mérode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin (ca. 1425). Snyder suggests that the snuffed out flame iconography is from a passage in St. Birgitta's writings that speaks of the divine radiance of the child obliterating the natural lights of the world.⁶² Second, Snyder suggests that the scenes from the Virgin's life in Rogier van der Weyden's *Miraflores Altarpiece* (1440-44), more specifically the *Holy Family* panel, reflect the description of the Nativity in St. Birgitta's *Revelations* due to the image of the Virgin, how she is seated and in the garments she wears.⁶³ Like Wolf, Snyder also cites Campin's *Dijon Nativity* in relation

⁵⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰ St. Birgitta, *Revelations* 7:21. Harris, 203-204.

⁶¹ Ibid., 19-20. Wolf is arguing for the presence of Joseph in depictions of the Nativity, despite the fact that St. Birgitta does not put Joseph at the actual birth.

⁶² St. Birgitta, *Revelations* 7:21:8-9. Harris, 203. Snyder, 121. It is important to note here that James Snyder agrees that the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was influenced by the *Sermo Angelicus*. He does not give supporting evidence, but states that it is the most convincing argument.

⁶³ Ibid., 128.

to Rogier van der Weyden's *Nativity Altarpiece of Pieter Bladelin (1452-55)* that is actually a representation of the Adoration, taking place immediately following the moment of Christ's birth. Joseph holding a candle, the rays of light surrounding the Christ Child, the position of Mary and the illustration of her garments, and finally, the angels that surround the scene in praise, are all taken directly from passages of the Nativity in St. Birgitta's *Revelations*.⁶⁴

The painting of most importance, surprisingly, is not one contemporary to Grünewald, but one mentioned during depositions taken on behalf of the canonization of St. Birgitta. In the deposition given by Nicholas Orsini for Birgitta in 1380, he refers to a "painting, representing the birth of Christ in the manner in which the said lady related that it had been revealed to her."⁶⁵ This painting, that may be the first representing the saint's vision, then hung at the Church of St. Anthony in Naples. Grünewald never would have seen this painting since it was located in Italy; however, a possible connection to the Antonite order is evident.

In regard to the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, previous attempts have been made to relate the *Concert of Angels/Nativity* panel to the *Sermo Angelicus* as discussed in Chapter One, but have not succeeded in convincing the majority of scholars. The *Crucifixion* panel, however, has successfully been linked many times to Birgitta's other *Revelations* because of her gruesome descriptions of the Crucifixion. Anthony Butkovich, in his book *Saint Birgitta of Sweden* compares the gruesome *Crucifixion* to a specific passage:

Then His eyes looked as if they were dim, His cheeks were hollow, His mouth was open, His tongue bleeding, His stomach was flat against His back, His whole body white from the great loss of blood. His hands and feet were stretched out

⁶⁴ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁵ *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte*, ed. Isak Collijn (Uppsala, 1924-31), 96; Wolf, 20.

hard, and the nails had made them, as it were, cross-shaped. His beard and hair were full of blood.⁶⁶

As noted in this chapter, the *Sermo Angelicus*, written specifically for St. Birgitta's Order of the Holy Savior, reached far beyond the doors of the Birgittine monasteries, influencing art throughout Europe and into the Northern regions. It has been established that several works were influenced by specific passages, including the *Crucifixion* in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, and retain some iconography derived from Birgitta's *Revelations* and the *Sermo Angelicus*. The *Isenheim Altarpiece*, however, incorporates more than small iconographical references into its composition. Instead, it seems to embody some of the same messages present in Birgitta's text – the promise and process of salvation. The next question to ask, then, is who were the Antonites, and why would St. Birgitta's message be of such importance to their mission at the hospital at Isenheim? In Chapter Three, these questions will be explored, in an attempt to establish a basis for the relationship between the Antonites and St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus*.

⁶⁶ Anthony Butkovich, *St. Birgitta of Sweden* (Los Angeles, 1972), 72. St. Birgitta of Sweden, Revelation VI: 57. Birgitta's passage is included as a caption beneath the plate of Grünewald's *Crucifixion*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PURPOSE OF THE ANTONITES AT ISENHEIM AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO ST. BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN

This thesis has already established the wide dissemination of Birgitta's writings and her influence upon art in the northern regions leading up to and contemporary with the completion of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. What has yet to be discovered is the attraction of the Antonites to the *Sermo Angelicus*, if there was an attraction at all, and the reason for which the Antonites would choose St. Birgitta's visions to be a source of the theme of their masterpiece.

When Abbot Guido Guersi commissioned the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in 1508, he had a specific idea of what the altarpiece was to relay to those patients that viewed the piece. It is not surprising then that Grünewald was chosen by Guersi to paint the altarpiece. Grünewald's previous works, specifically his small-scale representations of the Crucifixion, depicted the image of Christ as grotesque and painfully agonizing. The paintings were horrifying sights to anyone who viewed them; however, the terrifying image of the decayed body of Christ on the front section of the altarpiece meant more to the patients. During the week, when it was displayed, the panel reminded them of their own affliction, a disease known as ergotism that caused unsightly, painful sores that often became gangrenous, requiring amputations. Oftentimes, convulsions and violent nervous spasms accompanied the sores.⁶⁷ There was no known cure for the disease, nor did anyone know what caused it. Later, it was known that it came from a poisonous fungus

⁶⁷ Stanley Meisler, "A Masterpiece Born of St. Anthony's Fire," *Smithsonian*, September 1999, 71. Mary Kilbourne Matossian, *Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics, and History* (New Haven, 1989).

that grew on rye used to make rye bread.⁶⁸ Those who came into contact with the bread became ill with the disease, requiring constant attention for the suffering lasted all their lives, if they did not die first due to its emaciating symptoms. The Antonite monks, therefore, through the *Crucifixion* on the front of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, were actively encouraging their patients to imitate Christ. Just as Christ faced his suffering on the cross, died, and ascended eternally into heaven, the patients were taught to face their sufferings in the same way in order to receive redemption for their sins and everlasting life in heaven. This was also the message sent by the third view of the altarpiece that depicted the life of St. Anthony, the Antonite's namesake. St. Anthony had faced sufferings brought on by his own decision to live as a hermit in the desert, removed from society, poverty-stricken and hungry. He was faced daily with temptations as depicted in the panel of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* in the altarpiece, where hideous beasts are depicted repeatedly attacking him.

How, then does the second view depicting the *Annunciation, Nativity/Concert of Angels* and the *Resurrection* fit into this message? Furthermore, why would the Antonites choose to use iconography relating to St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* to relay the message to their patients? Chapter Three will explore the possible answers to these questions by explaining the history of the Antonite Order, the saint for whom they are named, and analyzing the Antonites and their cause at the hospital at Isenheim.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 71.

THE HISTORY OF THE ANTONITE ORDER

The Antonites, or the Hospital Brothers of St. Anthony, were a congregation that was founded by Gaston of Dauphine and his son in 1095 in celebration of their relief from ergotism, then referred to as St. Anthony's Fire. The first hospital that they established was at the Church of St. Anthony at Saint-Didier de la Mothe that became the central hospital and house of the Order.⁶⁹ They were placed under the Rule of St. Augustine in 1297 by Pope Boniface VIII, and soon spread throughout France, Spain and Italy. They cared for those suffering from ergotism, but their finest privilege was the responsibility of the sick within the papal household.⁷⁰

The Church and Hospital of St. Anthony were extremely important because they housed the relics of St. Anthony of Egypt, their patron saint, who founded the Thebaid in the fourth century, a community of desert hermits.⁷¹ The branches of the Antonite Order strove to imitate the life of their patron saint by living in poverty and seclusion and most importantly, by caring for the sick who suffered from ergotism, or Saint Anthony's Fire, named for the saint on behalf of his trials and tribulations. The Order of St. Anthony in the west had no connection to the Orders in the East, except for the relics of St. Anthony that were housed in the monasteries of the East. Believed to hold mystical powers, they were widely venerated by the masses.⁷² *The Life of Saint Anthony* by Athanasius, the

⁶⁹ F. M. Rudge, transcribed by John Fobian, "Orders of Saint Anthony," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, online ed., 1999, 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁷¹ V. Advielle, *Histoire de l'ordre hospitalier de Saint-Antonie-de-Viennois* (Paris, 1883). Also cited in Scheja, 8.

⁷² Helen Waddell, *Vitae Patrum: The Desert Fathers* (original edition London, 1936; reprinted Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1957), 26. This book contains a full English translation of Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony*.

most important history of the saint, was written in the fourth century for the early Orders of St. Anthony in the West, which establishes the hermit's life as ideal. It is said to have made a great impression on the life of St. Augustine, whose rule for the Antonite Order followed.⁷³

THE LIFE OF ST. ANTHONY

Anthony, born in Egypt in the third century to noble parents, was brought up as a Christian. He did not try, however, to receive the same education as other young men in his circumstance, and often isolated himself from others. At an early age his parents died and he was left to take care of his young sister. Instead, he placed his sister among nuns, gave all of his possessions to the poor, and went out serving others and imitating the lives of the Apostles and the early Christians.⁷⁴ He resided in a hut in the outskirts of his native town of Coma and there practiced asceticism, and exercised himself in fasting, prayer, and works of extreme piety.⁷⁵

Anthony was in constant agony, as he was faced with strange conflicts with demons as wild beasts that repeatedly harmed him physically, often leaving him for dead. These records of St. Anthony's life are known as his temptations and are recorded in art as *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, one of which appears in the third view of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Furthermore, these physical afflictions caused by the demons were equated with the symptoms of ergotism and thus associated with the saint. These

⁷³ Charles Kingsley, *The Hermits* (London, 1905), 21.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-36.

⁷⁵ E.C. Butler, transcribed by Robert Gordon, "St. Anthony," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, online ed., 1999,1.

sufferings are explained in great detail in Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony* in the following passages:

But the sight of such amazing virtue and sanctity was naturally displeasing to the enemy of mankind, who had sagacity enough to foresee that the example of this admirable saint would lessen his own power in the world, and deprive him of many votaries; therefore he singled him out as an object of especial persecution, and gave him over to his demons to be tormented in every possible way. They began by whispering to him, in the silence of his cell, of all that he had sacrificed for this weary life of perpetual rigor and self-denial; they brought to mind his noble birth, his riches, and all that riches could obtain, -- delicate food, rich clothing, social delights. They pictured to him the fatigue of virtue, the fragility of his own frame, the brevity of human life and they sang to him in sweetest accounts, 'While thou livest, enjoy the good things which have been provided for thee.' The saint endeavored to drown these promptings of the Devil in the voice of prayer; -- he prayed till the drops stood on his brow, and at length the demon ceased to whisper to him, but only to have recourse to stronger weapons; for, seeing that wicked suggestions availed not, Satan raised up in his sight the sensible images of forbidden things. He clothed his demons in human forms; they spread before Anthony a table covered with delicious viands; they hovered round him in the shape of beautiful women, who, with the softest blandishments, allured him to sin. The saint strove against this temptation with all his might, and prayed, and conquered.⁷⁶

These temptations made Anthony withdraw further into solitude from mankind in order to resist them. He wandered through the desert until he found an old fort, and for twenty years lived there without seeing anyone. A handful of disciples sprung up around him who lived near his fort in caves and huts, who encouraged Anthony to come forth and teach them. Finally, Anthony acknowledged their pleas and came out where he devoted himself for the next few years to the organization and teaching of those who had lived around him.⁷⁷ During this time he cared for those that were sick, expelled demons, and taught his experience to those monks around him.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ See Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, translated by Helen Waddell in *Vitae Patrum*, 1957 as quoted in: Mrs. Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, Volume 2 (Boston and New York, 1901), 363-64.

⁷⁷ Butler, 2.

⁷⁸ Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, translated by Helen Waddell in *Vitae Patrum* and cited in Jameson, 365.

For the last forty-five years of his life, Anthony remained in seclusion in a desert between the Red Sea and the Nile River, though he freely saw those who came to him to learn of his experiences. One of these people was St. Paul the Hermit whose visit is illustrated in the left panel of the third view of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Again, Satan appeared to him to torment him as depicted in the following passage:

One night, as Anthony sat in his cell, he heard a knocking at the door, and, going to see who it was there, he beheld a man of a terrible aspect, and of gigantic stature; and he said, 'Who art thou?' The stranger answered, 'I am Satan, and I come to ask thee how it is that thou and all thy disciples, whenever ye stray into sin, or any evil befall ye, lay the blame and the shame on me, and load me with curses?' And Anthony said, 'Have we not cause? Dost thou not go about seeking whom thou mayst devour, and tempt us and torment us? And art thou not the occasion of fall to many?' And the demon replied, 'It is false! I do none of these things for which men accuse me; it is their own fault; they allure each other to sin; they torment and oppress each other: they are tempted of their own evil propensities; they go about seeking occasion to sin; and then they weakly lay the cause at my door: for, since God came upon earth, and was made man to redeem man, my power is at an end. Lo! I have no arms, I have no dwelling place, and, wanting everything, can perform nothing. Let men complain of themselves, not of me; not I, but they alone are guilty.' To which the saint, marvelling at so much sense and truth from the lips of the Devil, replied, 'Although thou art called the father of lies, in this thou has spoken the truth; and even for this, blessed be the name of Christ!' And when Satan heard the holy name of the Redeemer, he vanished into air with a loud cry; and Anthony, looking out, saw nothing but the desert and the darkness of the night.⁷⁹

The above passage supports the mission of the Antonites, for they imitated St. Anthony in every way, and cared for the sick. In doing so, they wished for their patients, to imitate St. Anthony as well and bear their sufferings just as he did. In Athanasius' words, "Therefore he chastised his body more and more, and brought it into slavery, lest, having conquered in one case, he should be tripped up in others. He determined,

⁷⁹ Ibid., Jameson, 366.

therefore, to accustom himself to a still more severe life; and many wondered at him: but the labor was to him easy to bear.”⁸⁰

Up until his death circa 356-57, St. Anthony remained strict in his faith in God and never strayed from it. He was regarded as the father of monasticism for many orders, most of which sprung up around him in the desert, established in his name. These orders, many of which established themselves in Egypt, remained hermits. Other Orders bearing the name of St. Anthony appeared in the West, like the Antonites at Isenheim, due to the relics of the saint in the Church of St. Anthony at Saint-Didier-la-Mothe.⁸¹ These orders also strove to live in the same way as St. Anthony. The Antonites at the hospital at Isenheim were no different.

THE ANTONITE ORDER AT ISENHEIM

In one of the great many sermons delivered by St. Anthony he said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, if ye shall ask my father in my name, he shall give it you. Heal the sick, cast out devils; freely ye have received, freely give.”⁸² This phrase can be said of the Antonites at Isenheim and their everyday mission of the healing and salvation of the patients suffering from ergotism within their hospital.

The monastery at Isenheim, established sometime in the fourteenth century, was one of the most important houses of the Antonite Order.⁸³ Its benefices were

⁸⁰ See Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, translated by Helen Waddell in *Vitae Patrum*. Kingsley, 39.

⁸¹ Butler, 4-5.

⁸² Kingsley, 73. This was said to his followers who were perpetually discouraged by the plundering of churches and destruction of relics caused by the Arians.

⁸³ Pansika Beguerie and George Bischoff Casterman, *Grünwald, le maitre d'Issenheim* (Colmar, 1995), 75.

international and usually appointed directly by the Pope. In their veneration of Saint Anthony, the Antonites focused mainly upon Athanasius' description of his character in his biography, in which they imitated to an almost perfect degree: "by virtue of his cenobitic life Anthony is also the mighty prophetic miracle worker who pits himself against the power of the Demon, who protects man and beast against temptation and illness, who heals maladies but can also inflict them on men deserving of punishment."⁸⁴

In 1490, before the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was commissioned, the two main preceptors of the monastery, Savoyard Jean d'Orliac, also known as Orliaco, and the Sicilian Guido Guersi, decided to remodel the church because of a large endowment gained by Orliaco. Guersi continued Orliaco's work after the preceptor resigned, perhaps in a more modern approach, replacing the altarpiece originally meant for the high altar. The altarpiece, painted by Martin Schongauer in the 1470's, was predominantly Marian, as Orliaco desired it to be. Guersi imagined an altar of a more magnificent scale and fashion, one that would more directly reflect the hospital's mission. Schongauer's altarpiece was thereafter moved to a side chapel at the monastery to make way for Grünewald's grand masterpiece.⁸⁵

Because ergotism was incurable with no known methods of treatment or prevention, the Antonites relied solely on spiritual intervention in the hopes that their patients could be miraculously cured similar to the founders of the Antonite Order. The

⁸⁴ Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, translated by Helen Waddell, chaps. 56-59, 84-85, and 86. These items are also mentioned in Scheja, 8. He also cites Waddell in note 5.

⁸⁵ Scheja, 11. Scheja is the only major scholar of the Isenheim altarpiece in regard to its iconography that somewhat mentions, although briefly, general information concerning the Antonite Order at Isenheim and the actions of the preceptors leading up to the commission of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

Antonites commonly used amulets, relics, and other objects in lieu of medical treatment. Grünewald's work, therefore, functioned not only as an altarpiece, but also as a part of a program based on spiritual healing. The veneration of St. Anthony and the Virgin by the patients was part of this program believed by the Antonites to reduce their sufferings.⁸⁶ In addition, some of these objects of healing are represented in the imagery of the altarpiece along with medicinal herbs. Andrée Hayum wrote specifically on this subject that identifies and explains each object and their uses within the hospital.⁸⁷ Furthermore, on feast days, the imagery displayed in the altarpiece, along with the sculpture therein, justifies the role that the Antonites play in the salvation of their patients as they adopt the role of St. Anthony and carry on his teachings and good deeds in the name of Christ.

I have already discussed the possibility, although it cannot be entirely proven, that the Antonites had access to St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus*. As stated in Chapter Two, documentation of its availability, due to its publication in Nuremburg around 1500, establishes that it was widely disseminated among the monastic orders throughout Germany. In addition, strong arguments have been made in more recent years of the influence of Birgitta on several altarpieces and paintings commissioned by monks for their churches and monasteries.⁸⁸ No records exist concerning the composition of the monastic library at Isenheim; therefore, full knowledge of its use cannot be obtained. In spite of this conclusive lack of knowledge, this thesis will attempt to establish a connection between the Antonite Order at Isenheim and Birgitta's writings by analyzing the iconography of the altarpiece in relation to comparable passages in the *Sermo*

⁸⁶ Beguerie and Casterman, 77. In the statutes of the Order, adopted in 1478, the text stipulates that through the veneration of the saint and of the Virgin Mary "anything is possible".

⁸⁷ See Review of the Literature on page 12-13.

⁸⁸ See Chapter Two, *St. Birgitta's Influence on the Arts*, pages 35-41.

Angelicus, emphasizing the mission of the hospital at Isenheim and the message Guersi wished to convey to the patients housed there.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE *CONCERT OF ANGELS* PANEL AND THE IMAGERY AND DOCTRINE OF THE VIRGIN OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION IN ST. BIRGITTA'S *SERMO ANGELICUS*

As discussed in Chapter One, many scholars have attempted to read the altarpiece as a continuous narrative, ignoring its context and debunking the theory that the *Sermo Angelicus* could have influenced the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. This thesis attempts to demonstrate otherwise. I have already suggested that the central panel of the altarpiece was part of a theme – a specific message intended solely for the patients of the hospital at Isenheim. It has already been accepted and stated repeatedly by many scholars that the horrific imagery of Christ on the cross in the closed view, inflicted with skin wounds similar to the patients, was meant to be an example to them. The patients were able to relate with the grotesque figure and were encouraged to remember that even through the greatest of Christ's sufferings, he endured them, and defeated the Devil so that they may have everlasting life. In the same way, St. Anthony suffered many afflictions by devils and demons throughout his life, as illustrated in the third view of the altarpiece in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. St. Anthony imitated Christ and stood up against his demons, and remained steadfast in his faith in God. The imagery in the St. Anthony panels sets yet another example for the patients, in addition to the closed view displaying Christ on the cross, that they should also remain strong in their faith, despite their sufferings caused by their disease.

How, then, does the second view of the altarpiece, representing the *Annunciation*, *Nativity* and *Resurrection* play into this theme? One must analyze the unconventional Nativity iconography within the central panel to comprehend its meaning. More

importantly, a comparison must be made with the *Sermo Angelicus* to be understood fully. Investigating the imagery of the mystical Nativity in St. Birgitta's work and the Marian concepts relayed within are key to unlocking the highly complex Nativity iconography within the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Once this is fully understood, one can finally see how well Birgitta's account fits into the iconographical theme of the altarpiece as a whole and the message that the Antonites wished to relay to their patients.

Guersi chose to adorn the central panel with scenes from the life of the Virgin for she, as noted in Chapter Three, had always been a central figure in the medicinal program of the hospital. Furthermore, the previous altarpiece by Schöngauer was predominantly Marian, and although Guersi wished to put in its place a more modern, striking altarpiece in relation to the hospital's mission, he also desired to stay within the terms of Orciano's wishes. In order to comply with the overall theme of the altarpiece as a whole, Guersi would have to emphasize the suffering of the Virgin and her abilities to cope with this suffering, similar to the other important figures in the altarpiece. This is a concept that Saint Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* expounds upon in great detail that will be further investigated in Chapter Five.

As discussed in Chapter One, a problem encountered within the altarpiece is the juxtaposition of the two Virgins in the central panel. This has puzzled many scholars, leading some to believe that the woman kneeling at the tabernacle steps is not the Virgin, but a symbol of Ecclesia, or St. Anne, Mary's mother. Those who present these conclusions have not been successful with them in relation to the context of the altarpiece. I propose that through critical analysis of the *Sermo Angelicus*, a possible source for this figure and a reason for the juxtaposition of the Virgins might be realized.

MARY IN THE MIND OF GOD BEFORE TIME

In the first lesson of the *Sermo Angelicus* Birgitta prays to the Virgin stating:

O Mary, you are the most pure Virgin and fertile Mother. Eternally before your creation, you were present as such in the divine vision. Afterwards, you received the material of your blessed body from the matter of these four pure and shining elements. Before your creation, you were in God's presence, the same as afterwards you merited to be fashioned. From the beginning, to his great joy, you were seen by God as more excellent than anything else which could be created.⁸⁹

Birgitta's statement here suggests that Mary was created in the mind of God before time.

Furthermore, God had also chosen the destiny of the Virgin as the bearer of salvation to the world. Several statements similar to the one above are made throughout the entirety of the *Sermo Angelicus*. In Lesson Two, Chapter II Birgitta writes, "...before the ages, God knew that when He was born of your humanity, you, glorious Virgin and Mother, would not be left empty like the ark of Noah but would remain filled with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit."⁹⁰ Again in Lesson Three, Chapter III, "Almighty God loved you with a greater love, O sweetest Virgin Mary, before He had created anything."⁹¹ I suggest that the left section of the *Nativity* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* is the representation of Mary in the Mind of God before time. The Virgin and angels within the temple are surrounded by darkness, perhaps symbolizing an ancient heaven before the creation of the world.

⁸⁹ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus* Lesson 1, translated by John Halborg, 17.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁹¹ Ibid., 19.

THE ANGELS IN ADORATION

There are other additions to the iconography of the *Concert of Angels* panel that allude to a time before Creation. Against the wall of the temple to the left is a blue-feathered angel in a state of transformation, representing, as I will further discuss in Chapter Six, Lucifer before the fall of the rebel angels. This creature, however beautiful in the face, is in a state of transformation, alluding to his metamorphosis from Lucifer to Satan, and possibly, the transformation from defeat to triumph suggested in the altar. His hands are painted in the same greenish hue as Christ's body in the *Crucifixion* panel on the front view, and most importantly, a peacock crest appears upon his head.⁹² In Grünewald's time, the peacock's crest was a symbol of pride or vainglory, which is the reason Lucifer was thrown from heaven.⁹³ The most important support of this argument is that this angel, unlike any other of the angels who surround it, resembles one of the various demons in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. This demon, on the far right side of the panel, sports blue feathers along with a plume of peacock feathers below his left arm. The peacock feathers on the demon are also symbolic of pride and vainglory, for in the story of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, relayed in Chapter Three, one of Anthony's temptations was fame and glory and the benefits thereof.⁹⁴

Several other iconographical elements within the altarpiece are also described in great detail by St. Birgitta in the *Sermo Angelicus*, many of which are also present in the saint's vision of Mary's creation before time. The first is the concert of angels playing various instruments in glorification of the Virgin's destiny. Birgitta writes:

⁹² These observations were first made by Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Devil at Isenheim*, 25-27.

⁹³ Ferguson, 23.

⁹⁴ See Chapter Three, pgs. 41-42, note 70.

O Virgin Mary, the consolation of all, you are the one for whom the angels burn with love from the beginning of creation. They rejoice ineffably in your sweetness and light, as they have access to it in the vision of God. Yet they are most joyous because you will be nearer to God than they are, and they know that greater love and sweetness is reserved for you than they possessed...God with the angels and the angels with God intimately rejoice together over you, before you were created, O Virgin, most worthy of all creatures.⁹⁵

OTHER ICONOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE CONCERT OF ANGELS

Other iconographical elements featured in the *Concert of Angels* panel undoubtedly reflect passages from the *Sermo Angelicus*. The Virgin at the steps of the tabernacle looking forward to her destiny is surrounded by a majestic aureole, similar to the one that envelops Christ in the *Resurrection*. In addition, a radiant crown adorns her head, a vessel of crystal lies before her feet on the tabernacle steps, and a dark curtain separates the *Concert of Angels* from the actual *Nativity*. St. Birgitta, repeatedly and in great detail, references each of these objects in terms of the Virginity of Mary and her conquering destiny as the bearer, or Mother, of salvation.

Two passages stand out in regard to the Virgin's radiance of light. Birgitta states, "God rejoiced because your virginity was preserved bright until your death, as no contagion of sin was able to dim it."⁹⁶ In comparison to the aureole surrounding Christ, Birgitta writes, "God created two lights which, together with the stars, were necessary for the world," and goes on to describe the Virgin's light as her "divine obedience, which is like the sun before the angels in heaven and good men on earth, to whom God is the

⁹⁵ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, Lesson One, Chapter IV, translated by John Halbourg, 24-25.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Lesson Two, Chapter II, 18.

eternal day shining most brightly.”⁹⁷ This passage also implies the positioning of God at the top of the combined scenes, shining with radiance similar to the sun.

A crown of stars hovers above Mary’s head, signifying her as the Queen of Heaven and the Queen of the Angels, two terms repeatedly used by Birgitta throughout the *Sermo Angelicus*. Speaking of the Virgin’s virtue, Birgitta envisions the thoughts of Mary’s heart as stars.⁹⁸ In addition, Birgitta speaks of three crowns representing three virtues:

Especially three virtues adorn him (God), shining more gloriously than three crowns. The virtue which created the angels was the first crown, which some of the other angels, envious of God’s glory, unhappily lost. The virtue which created man was the second crown, which man also, consenting to the hostile Insinuator, quickly lost...The virtue which created you, O most desirable Virgin, to his eternal glory glorified him and the third crown. By it the angels knew that the damage to the first two crowns would be repaired. Whence, O Lady, our hope of salvation, you are rightly called the crown of God’s honor.⁹⁹

Not only does this passage explain the crown upon Mary’s head, but also reflects the content within the *Concert of Angels* panel. The fall of the rebel angels is symbolized by the presence of Lucifer in transformation while the Nativity scene is the entrance of salvation into the world to save mankind.

The vessel of clear liquid at the foot of the steps is a common symbol of the purity of the Virgin.¹⁰⁰ It appears directly in front of the Virgin on the bottom of the stairs of the baldachin. Birgitta frequently compares the Virgin to a vessel of liquid in the *Sermo Angelicus*. She writes, “The body of the Blessed Virgin may be likened fittingly to the purest vessel, her soul and her bright shining mind to a water course, bounding on high

⁹⁷ Ibid., Lesson Two, Chapter V, 26.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁹ Ibid., Lesson Three, Chapter VI, 28-29.

¹⁰⁰ Ferguson, 167, 175.

and then descending to the deep valley.”¹⁰¹ It is also interesting to note that the smaller Virgin stands upon the stairs “on high” that descend toward the *Nativity* scene on the right with the vessel in her path.

Finally, the dark curtain that separates the two scenes is thrown back as if to reveal the *Nativity* to those present in the *Concert of Angels* panel. The curtain divides the darkened heaven before creation from the lighted *Nativity*. Of this, Birgitta reveals:

When God intended to create the world with all its creatures, he said ‘Fiat!’ and at once all was perfectly accomplished, just as he had intended to create it. Then the world and all creation with the exception of man was perfectly and reverently present in its beauty to the divine sight. One lesser, uncreated world was also present before God in all its beauty. From this world was to come greater glory to God, greater joy to the angels, and greater usefulness to men who wished to enjoy her goodness than could possibly come from the larger world. O most sweet Lady, Virgin Mary, most lovable of all, most useful of all, it is not unfitting to compare you to a lesser world. It may be gathered from Scripture that it pleased God to divide the darkness from the light in the greater world.¹⁰²

In St. Birgitta’s Supplication to this Chapter immediately preceding the passage, she states, “In the Mother of God, Virgin pre-elect, show us the right way to the Fatherland. Amen.”¹⁰³ Birgitta is implying in this supplication and the passage that follows that before time and before the Virgin, there was darkness. Furthermore, because of her creation and her succeeding destiny, she brings light, along with her Child, into the world. In addition, she brings forth light into the darkness of heaven and allows man to experience this world after death. In a later passage, the imagery of the curtain is further explained in relation to the fall of man:

Adam grieved that, in the pride of her mind, Eve said that she wished to be co-equal with God. Because of this scandal she fell in the sight of God and the angels. He rejoiced, foreknowing the word which the handmaiden of God would humbly profess to you. It glowed brightly to your great honour. Adam grieved

¹⁰¹ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, Lesson One, Chapter XIII, translated by John Halbourg, 45.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Lesson Two, Chapter V, 25-26.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Supplication to Lesson Two, Chapter V, 25.

that the word of Eve provoked God to anger, damning himself and his posterity; he exulted as your word would draw the love of God to you and all whom the word of Eve had damned, giving them great consolation. Very sadly, the word of Eve excluded her with her man from glory and closed the gates of heaven to her and to her children. Your blessed word, O Mother of Wisdom, led you to great joy and opened the gates of heaven to all who wished to enter. O Mother of God, the angels in heaven rejoiced, foreknowing your birth before the foundation of earth. So also Adam had great joy and exultation in foreknowing your birth.¹⁰⁴

The curtain, therefore, thrown back and revealing the *Nativity* as salvation present on earth, is in a sense a symbol of forgiveness to the descendants of Adam and Eve and of all man, allowing them to enter the gates of heaven.

THE MADONNA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

To the patients who viewed the altarpiece, all of the above would be considered reminders of the salvation that they would receive through Christ and also through the Virgin as the bearer of that salvation. This combined iconography is reminiscent of a deeper message within the *Isenheim Altarpiece* also derived from the *Sermo Angelicus*. The idea of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception is apparent within the text, although the actual doctrine had not yet become dogma of the Church.

Images of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception did not appear in great number until the seventeenth century; however, representations of the “Predestination of Mary,” also known as the “Litanies of the Virgin,” were abundant, leading to the popularization of paintings of the Immaculate Conception.¹⁰⁵ The “Predestination of Mary” refers to the attempt by an artist to make visible the idea or promise of the salvation of humanity, as existing in the mind of God before time. According to Anna

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., Lesson One, Chapter VII, 32.

Brownell Jameson in her book *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts*, these representations “do not personify this idea under the image of Christ, -- for they conceived that, as the second person of the Trinity, he could not be his own instrument.”¹⁰⁶ The Virgin, instead, stands alone surrounded by attributes that would in the future identify her as the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception. Paintings that portray Mary as the second Eve with her foot on the head of a serpent were the most common, signifying the Virgin’s victory over sin as the bearer of salvation, as the second Eve, providing man entrance into heaven and victory over their sins. Actual representations of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception during this time were often not called by that name because the Catholic Church did not yet accept it as full doctrine.¹⁰⁷

The basis for the doctrine of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception is that at the first instance of her conception, the Virgin was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin through a special privilege granted through the grace of God on behalf of the merits of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁸ In addition to this idea, the doctrine proclaimed that Mary surpassed the beatitude of Adam and Eve, for they were capable of sinning where she was not. This did not mean that she did not have free will, but that she resisted sin.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Anna Brownell Murphy Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts* (Boston, 1876), 151. Examples of early “Presdestination of the Virgin” and Madonna of the Immaculate Conception paintings can be found in manuscripts from the Middle Ages.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 140. Actual representations of the Conception were not able to enter into ecclesiastical decoration until the dogma had been clearly ratified. Jameson does remark that representations of the glorification of the Virgin and the coronation existed in its place, alluding to the Conception doctrine.

¹⁰⁸ Frederick G. Holweck, “The Immaculate Conception,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VII, online at www.newadvent.org. (New York, 1999), 1.

¹⁰⁹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976), 236-237.

The following points were also included in the doctrine of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception: Mary's absolute opposition to evil and her fullness of grace.¹¹⁰

Although, not officially accepted as dogma until the Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of December 8, 1854 proclaimed by Pope Pius IX, its roots began as early as the times of Ambrose of Milan and St. Augustine, from which the Birgittine and Antonite Orders both stem.¹¹¹ Ambrose, who became the mentor of St. Augustine, made the association between original sin and the Virgin's birth by stating, "Even though he assumed the natural substance of this very flesh, he was not conceived in iniquity nor born in sin – he who was not born of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of the Holy Spirit from a virgin."¹¹² In addition to this, St. Augustine commented on the possibility of the Virgin birth remarking that one "must make an exception of the holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sins, out of honor to the Lord. For from him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular [*ad vincendum omni ex parte peccatum*] was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear him who undoubtedly had no sin."¹¹³ Augustine, who also believed that actual sin resulted from the original sin of Adam and Eve, which carried on from generation to generation, acclaimed the Virgin Mary as an exception.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Geoffrey Ashe, *The Virgin* (London and Henley, 1976), 208-209.

¹¹¹ Warner, 236.

¹¹² St. Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary on Psalm 37:5*. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London, 1996), 190-191.

¹¹³ St. Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, xxxvi, 42. Pelikan, 191. Pelikan used the exact Latin phrase, "overcoming sin in every particular," in addition to the English translation for emphasis.

¹¹⁴ Warner 238-239.

During the time of St. Birgitta, the idea of the Immaculate Conception was still being argued. The Franciscans supported it, while the Dominicans took a strong stance against it. The actual title “The Madonna of the Immaculate Conception” and its conventional iconography, as firmly established in seventeenth century Spanish art, were neither used nor identified as such, though its beginnings were definitely blossoming. In an intensive study of the iconography of the Immaculate Conception in Art of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, Mirella Levi D’Ancona states that in most of her findings, the iconography associated with the Immaculate Conception deals with the “visual representation of a concept, not with a narrative scene.”¹¹⁵ D’Ancona also recognizes instability within the iconography associated with the representation of the Immaculate Conception during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She found that artists tended to establish their images in relation to contexts other than previous paintings of the subject, for example, text.¹¹⁶ D’Ancona believes this to be the reason art historians have had such difficulty explaining early iconography of the Immaculate Conception. Perhaps, then, we can attribute the unconventional iconography present within the *Isenheim Altarpiece* to D’Ancona’s theory. Instead of looking to previous works of art for material, the Antonites derived their iconography from text, one possibly being the *Sermo Angelicus*, a text that had already influenced several other works of art as discussed in Chapter Two. Furthermore, D’Ancona’s findings also explain the lack of a continuous narrative in the altarpiece. When analyzing Immaculate Conception iconography one should not look for narrative, but for hidden concepts and ideas as found in texts such as the *Sermo Angelicus*.

¹¹⁵ Mirella Levi D’Ancona, *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and*

The iconographical elements discussed above -- the aureole surrounding the Virgin, the crown upon her head, the vessel on the stairs, and the curtain separating the two scenes – all have a relationship to the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception based on its definition and doctrine. They each symbolize the purity of the Virgin and her destiny as the bearer of salvation, responsible for the redemption of the sins of man. All of these iconographical elements are mentioned, or at least implied in St. Birgitta’s *Sermo Angelicus*, but what of the encompassing idea of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin?

Birgitta’s entire notion of the predestination of the Virgin, chosen and born without sin, is the basis for the Immaculate Conception. All of the previous excerpts presented in this thesis from the *Sermo Angelicus* reflect this idea. Although Birgitta does not use the term “Madonna of the Immaculate Conception,” she does state, “Whence it is credible that the Divinity showed beforehand to Abraham that one of the children of his root, the immaculate Virgin, would bear the Son of God.”¹¹⁷ Furthermore, later in the text she reveals, “The first flame of Mary radiated before God brightly when she firmly promised to the honour of God to keep her virginity immaculate late until death.”¹¹⁸ This supports the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity.

This chapter has analyzed specific iconographical elements in Grünewald’s *Concert of Angels* panel in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as compared to the imagery of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception as realized by St. Birgitta of Sweden in the *Sermo Angelicus*. By doing so, a basis for the legitimacy of the argument that the panel

Early Renaissance (New York, 1957), 15.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁷ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, Lesson Two, Chapter VIII, translated by John Halborg, 33.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., Lesson Three, Chapter XII, 43-44.

represents Mary in the Mind of God before time has been established. Why, however, would this imagery be so important in an altarpiece designed for a monastic hospital caring for those suffering from a deadly skin affliction? In addition, how does this imagery relate to the message of the altarpiece in its entirety? A thorough examination of the panel illustrating the actual *Nativity* scene, in relation to the entire altarpiece, may provide answers to these questions, establishing a correlation between the *Sermo Angelicus* and the theme of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE VIRGIN'S SORROW AS REPRESENTED IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE *NATIVITY* PANEL AND THE *SERMO ANGELICUS*

The right half of the *Concert of Angels/Nativity* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* represents the actual Nativity, where Mary cradles her newborn Child. This *Nativity* is similar to many created during Grünewald's time, including Albrecht Dürer's *Madonna and the Dragonfly* in the Albertina with which Grünewald may have been familiar. Outdoor Nativity scenes were common, as were specific Nativity iconography that will be identified in detail in this chapter.

Behind the earthly Madonna is a rosebush bearing roses without thorns, a universal depiction of the purity and sinless being of the Virgin. A legend once mentioned by St. Ambrose, recalled by both George Ferguson and James Hall in their iconographical analyses of the rose without thorns, tells that rosebushes grew in a similar fashion before the fall of man, implicating the Virgin as the bearer of salvation for which sin may be erased once again.¹¹⁹ The basin and towel, also traditionally present in paintings of the Nativity, are symbols of the Virgin's spotless purity, as well as common objects used in giving birth.¹²⁰ The church or monastery, as seen in the background of the *Nativity*, commonly represents the new Zion, or heaven, possible because of the salvation brought with the birth of Christ. Oftentimes, the building is a representation of the church or monastery that commissioned the altarpiece; however, this particular representation does not appear similar to the monastery at Isenheim. Its identification remains a mystery. The tree that projects from behind the dark curtain, also serving as a

¹¹⁹ Hall, 268. Also told in Ferguson, 37. Neither author cites the specific source for the legend. Although I have been unable to locate the primary source of the legend, I have recited the legend in this thesis due to its important bearing on the meaning of the altarpiece.

divider between the heavenly and earthly worlds, may symbolize the tree of Jesse, a genealogical tree from the family of Jesse, King David's son, from which came Mary and Christ's lineage. It is representative of the prophecy that the Messiah would spring up from the family of Jesse; therefore acting as a device that links the "predestined" Mary through the Old Testament, to the New Light.¹²¹ In addition, it leads the viewer from one side of the panel to the other, emphasizing the purpose of the Virgin in the tabernacle as she faces her destiny on earth as the bearer of salvation.

The tree may also stand for the tree of life, compared to the Virgin by St. Birgitta in the *Sermo Angelicus*:

From the fruit of this tree, that is, Christ, men long to be refreshed, striving with all their might to bend down the little branches of the tree, that is, his Mother, whom the angel messenger greeted as full of grace, to avoid sin and to strengthen their wills and to order reasonably all their words and works to the honour of God. Then the Virgin willingly inclines them, offering her aid to help them to the fruit of the tree of life, which is the most worthy body of Christ. Then you may take what is consecrated by the hands of men, what for you sinners and for the angels in heaven is life and nourishment.¹²²

THE VIRGIN OF SORROWS

The cup at the Virgin's feet is usually symbolic of Christ's Agony in the Garden at Gethsemane, foreshadowing the pain that awaits Christ at his supreme sacrifice on the cross.¹²³ In a prayer to God in the Garden, Christ says, "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done,"¹²⁴ accepting the burden that God has laid out to him. This iconographical image is not usually present in representations of

¹²⁰ Ferguson, 182.

¹²¹ Hall, 169.

¹²² St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, Lesson Three, Chapter XXI, translated by John Halborg, 69.

¹²³ Ferguson, 167.

the Nativity, although here, in keeping with the message of the entire altarpiece, its appearance is twofold. Not only does it foreshadow Christ's future suffering, but also symbolizes the Virgin's sorrow that she is to witness as her son agonizes on the Cross.

In the *Crucifixion* on the front of the altarpiece, already understood as a direct influence of St. Birgitta's *Revelations*, the Virgin's pain is obvious, as she faints from the frightening sight of her Son dying above her. Her twisted face and clasped hands add to this dramatic effect. In the *Nativity*, none of these emotions is displayed; however, the Virgin's face is bent towards her son, the expression one of deep anguish. A similar expression appears on the Virgin's face in the *Annunciation* panel. What is the meaning of this expression? It is somewhat loving, yet also extremely sad. In the *Sermo Angelicus*, St. Birgitta sheds light on the possible significance of the Virgin's gaze and the impact it may have had on those who viewed it.

According to the *Sermo Angelicus*, and reflected in the *Concert of Angels* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, the Virgin was created in the mind of God before time and predestined to become the bearer of salvation through the birth of Christ. Along with this came the knowledge of what the future held for her on earth and the promise of her reward after her death. As she rejoiced that all sins would be washed away by his birth, she also grieved, knowing that her son would suffer many trials and tribulations, and finally be crucified on the Cross. Birgitta says of this:

Whence truly it is believed that after the Virgin bore the Son of God, as she first fondled him with her hands, suddenly it occurred to her mind that the writings of the prophets would be fulfilled. When she wrapped him in cloths, she considered in her heart that all his body would be wounded with sharp blows so that he would look leprous. The Virgin, gently binding the hands and feet of her son in swaddling clothes, remembered that they would be harshly pierced by iron nails

¹²⁴

NIV, Matthew 26: 42.

on the cross. Looking at the face of her son, more beautiful of form than the sons of men, she meditated how irreverently the lips of the impious would foul him with spit. The Mother ever turned in her mind how the blows would fall on his cheeks and how much opprobrium and insolence would fill his ears. Sometimes she considered how his eyes would mist over by the flow of his own blood; his nerves and veins and all his bodily frame would be extended mercilessly on the cross; his heart would contract in death, and all his glorious body, inward and outward, would suffer with all bitterness and anguish until death. The Virgin knew in her spirit that after her son was raised on the cross, his side would be pierced with a sharp lance and his heart pierced through the middle. Whence, as the Mother rejoiced when she saw the Son of God who was born from her, who she knew to be true God and man, mortal in his humanity but in his deity eternally immortal, the Mother was most sad, prescient of his bitter suffering.¹²⁵

Birgitta continues, describing the immense amount of pain that the Virgin would endure up until the time of Christ's death as a sword that pierced her heart from that day forth. In essence, Birgitta is suggesting that the Virgin was aware of the pain that she would endure because of the knowledge of her son's death prior to the beginning of time. Nevertheless, Birgitta reveals that the Virgin went forth, despite this knowledge, as depicted in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, knowing that salvation would be granted, not only for herself, but also for all mankind. This passage also provides an explanation of the expression on the Virgin's face in the *Annunciation* panel. As the angel announces to the Virgin that the time has come for her to bear the Son of God, her reaction reveals sadness and understanding. She acknowledges her destiny, full knowing that her son will be horribly crucified, but also accepts God's plan, aware that Christ will rise from the grave to triumph over evil and save mankind, as depicted in the *Resurrection*.

This Sorrow of Mary has been widely portrayed throughout art, separate from that of her Son. The most prominent illustrations are of the Pietà, where Mary cradles her Son after his death. The Northern countries especially followed this devotion in writing

¹²⁵ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, Lesson Two, Chapter XVII, translated by John Halborg, 56-57.

and in art. In addition to St. Birgitta, two German contemporaries, Henry Tauler and Henry Suso, also mystics, created a Passion of the Virgin similar to that of Christ's. Their emphasis was on passages from the Gospels that reflected the sadness within Mary of the death of her Son.¹²⁶

Vincent Cronin, in his fascinating book on Mary portrayed in the arts, cites Birgitta's *Revelations* to describe most accurately the suffering Mary. He quotes, "Of all mothers Mary was most afflicted, by reason of her foreknowledge of Christ's most bitter passion."¹²⁷ He goes on to use the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as an example of this suffering, focusing not on the *Nativity*, but on the *Crucifixion* saying:

It was Grünewald who brought the latter theme (suffering of Mary) into fulfilment. His Isenheim Crucifixion shows an agonising Christ, scourged body ravaged and bleeding, hands on the cross twisted like crowns of thorns. As for Mary, she has swooned in the arms of St. John. Her shroud-like white dress, the hands raised in a gesture of wailing, the twisted mouth, the stiff helpless posture – Mary's suffering, we feel, is commensurate here with Christ's... We know that the convent of Isenheim for which Grünewald painted this retable was a hospital where the religious looked after sick persons stricken with ergotic poisoning. While painting the retable Grünewald doubtless saw patients suffering from this dreadful disease, characterised by tumors, ulcers and high fever, and he seems to have put some of his own horror at physical suffering into the swooning Mary.¹²⁸

Cronin, taking into consideration the context of the altarpiece, recognizes that the patients at Isenheim would relate to the suffering Virgin. Furthermore, he identifies Grünewald's work through the suffering of Mary as influenced by St. Birgitta, as other scholars have done before. This idea of the *compassio* of the Virgin, exemplified in Cronin's passage, is best seen in Rogier van der Weyden's *Deposition*, created a century prior to the

¹²⁶ Vincent Cronin, *Mary Portrayed* (London, 1968), 76. This book identifies and describes several works of art that depict the Virgin Mary in all aspects of her life.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 76.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 81.

Isenheim Altarpiece. The Virgin swoons as the twisted body of her Son is removed from the Cross. The sadness of the Virgin is emphasized by the compassion and sorrow on the faces of the additional figures included at the scene. Similarly, Grünewald's *Crucifixion* employs the image of the swooning Virgin surrounded by horrified onlookers. In addition, the predella of the altarpiece depicts a version of the Pietà, emphasizing the immense sorrow of the Virgin, intensified by the painful expressions on the faces of the two onlookers. Portions of Birgitta's other *Revelations* also reflect the Virgin as sorrowful, knowing of what she must endure as the bearer of salvation. The Virgin, sharing her thoughts on the Incarnation spoke to Birgitta:

I did not need purification, like other women, because my Son who was born of me made me clean. Nor did I contract the least stain. Nevertheless, that the Law and the prophecies might be fulfilled, I chose to live according to the Law. Nor did I live like worldly parents, nor did I wish to show anything extraordinary in me, but loved whatever was humble. On that day my pain, as today, was increased. For though, by divine inspiration, I knew that my Son was to suffer, this grief pierced my heart more keenly at Simeon's words, when he said that the sword would pierce my soul, and that my Son should be prepared for a sign to be contradicted. And until I was assumed in body and soul to heaven, this grief never left my heart, although it was tempered by the consolation of the spirit of God.¹²⁹

The description of Mary's suffering at the birth of her son in the *Sermo Angelicus*, taking into consideration Birgitta's impact on the *Crucifixion*, the context of the altarpiece, and its overall message of suffering preceding salvation, is highly acceptable as an influence on the *Nativity*. The patients were encouraged to view Christ's sufferings, the Virgin's, and also St. Anthony's, in relation to their own. Each figure, however, had his/her rewards, and faced sufferings although he/she had foreknowledge of

¹²⁹ St. Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations VI: 57* translated in Butkovich, 31.

what those would be. Birgitta emphasizes this further in reference to the Virgin in the following passage:

He (Christ) showed himself patiently in everything. So also did his Mother patiently tolerate her tribulations. As the sheep follows its mother wherever she leads it, so the Virgin Mother followed her son as he was led to the place of torment... Therefore in this, clearly, God worked not a small miracle: the Virgin Mary, wounded with such and so great sorrows within, did not give up her spirits as she saw her son, nude and bleeding, living and dead, transfixed with the spear, hanging between the thieves.¹³⁰

Mary is sorrowful in her Motherhood. However, she understands that this is her role in salvation, a role that was accepted fully knowing of its consequences before time, as depicted in Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* and in the *Concert of Angels* panel.

THE VIRGIN'S PROMISE FOR HER SORROWS

The Virgin in the tabernacle, foreknowing that she would suffer many tribulations on earth still went forth, accepting her destiny as the bearer of salvation. She knew that even though she would hurt for the loss of her son, she would also be rewarded for her deed and that man would be redeemed for his sins. Thus, the Virgin in the *Concert of Angels* panel, along with the angelic host, rejoice in what is to come. Her sorrows are evident as she looks sadly, yet lovingly, at her son cradled in her arms in the *Nativity* panel, an expression similar to the one on the Virgin's face in the *Annunciation*, yet the promise and triumph of Christ as represented in the *Resurrection* shines forth as her reward. Not only is this the reward for Mary's sorrows, but also for St. Anthony's, as well as the patients suffering at Isenheim.

¹³⁰ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, Lesson Three, Chapter XVIII, translated by John Halborg, 58-59.

Birgitta writes of Mary's understanding of this promise near the end of the *Sermo Angelicus*:

Truth, which is the Son of God and the Virgin, counsels all to return good for evil. With how much good, then, should we believe that God will repay the doer of good deeds? Through his Gospel he promised that he would repay a good deed a hundredfold. Then who can conceive how he will enrich his most reverend Mother with the gifts of the highest rewards, she who never committed even the least sin, and whose gracious deeds done for God are without number? As the will of the Virgin's soul was the origin of all her good deeds, so her honourable body was a most apt and ready instrument for the carrying out of these deeds.¹³¹

The patients were encouraged to behave as Mary did toward her pain and bear their sufferings so that they would receive the same promise as the Virgin. This promise, realized in the *Resurrection* panel, reminded the patients that their sins were redeemed as long as they trusted in God and remained steadfast in their faith regardless of their disease and the sufferings that continuously plagued them.

THE ROSARY

Yet another iconographical element exists as evidence to support the Virgin in the *Nativity* as sorrowful. Christ, in her arms, lifts a rosary to her face. The rosary, popularized in the fifteenth century by Franciscan and Dominican friars, is an object of devotion, each bead representing a specific prayer said to the Virgin, known as the Mysteries.¹³² The friars encouraged the laity to recite the Mysteries of the rosary, or what they called "The Psalter of Our Lady," repeatedly to themselves to substitute for more difficult prayers. Those who fervently believed in the powers of the rosary recited the prayers wishing for the Virgin's mercy and protection.¹³³

¹³¹ Ibid., Lesson Three, Chapter XXI, 66-67.

¹³² Warner, 306.

¹³³ Ibid., 306.

In the most common rosary, there were fifteen Mysteries divided into three categories – the joyful, the sorrowful and the glorious. The joyful include the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Presentation, and the Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple. Each of these represents an event of the coming of salvation into the world. The sorrowful Mysteries of the Virgin include the Prayer of the Lord in the Garden, the Scourging at the Pillar, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, and the Crucifixion. These Mysteries are those events leading up to the death of Christ. Lastly, the glorious Mysteries are the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Descent of the Holy Ghost, the Assumption of the Virgin into Heaven, and the Coronation of the Virgin and the glory of all the Saints in Heaven.¹³⁴ These five Mysteries of the rosary symbolize the events encompassing the completion of salvation and the rewards that were bestowed upon the Virgin for her role as the bearer of that salvation.

During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, however, in Colmar, only twenty miles from the Isenheim monastery, the Mysteries of the rosary were quite different. Instead of symbolizing the joyful, sorrowful and glorious Mysteries, there were only five joyful Mysteries and five sorrowful. These joys represented heavenly joys, for example, the Assumption, rather than those that were earthly such as the Annunciation or Nativity.¹³⁵ If the Antonites utilized the rosary in this way, popular in their area, the iconography of the rosary in the *Nativity* panel can be easily analyzed. The Christ Child is holding two of the beads from the rosary up toward the Virgin. Although we cannot know for sure, if the Virgin in the *Nativity* is indeed the Virgin of Sorrows, would it be

¹³⁴ Jenner, 20-21.

safe to assume that Christ is holding up one of the Virgin's sorrowful Mysteries, and also one symbolizing the joyful, reminding her of the promise of her reward in heaven for her tribulations on earth?

Previous scholars of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* have also mentioned the significance of the Christ Child holding up the rosary. Scheja in particular believes that the two beads held within Christ dainty hands represent the Assumption and the Coronation of the Virgin, which in turn is alluded to in the *Concert of Angels* panel. He suggests that the Virgin is sorrowful, but does not relate that emotion to the significance of the rosary. Secondly, he does not state the purpose of the rosary within the context of the altarpiece. Instead he says the following:

The large Madonna is rapt in deep contemplation of her Child, as if in a silent dialogue of souls communing. The child holds up to her two large beads of a golden rosary with a gesture clearly meant to be significant. This motif, obviously of paramount importance for the meaning of the picture, has heretofore scarcely been considered in attempts at interpretation. Yet it belongs to the language of signs so frequently used by Grünewald. It tells us that the Child is revealing something to the Mother: two Mysteries of the glorious rosary whose beads were thought of as golden roses because it celebrated the glorification of Jesus and Mary. In itself the gesture is not enough to tell us which Mysteries of the rosary these would be, but one can presume with considerable sureness that they are the Assumption and the Coronation of the Virgin. The heart of the dramatic conception of the central picture is, therefore, the Madonna's contemplation of the divine Infant. In Him she beholds already the Redeemer's humiliation and suffering, as indicated by the torn and ragged swaddling clothes, while He in turn shows her the consequences of His Incarnation as man, namely, her own elevation, and this is expressed in the symbolic gesture of holding up two Mysteries of the glorious rosary.¹³⁶

Scheja recognizes the significance of the rosary, as well as the sorrowful expression of the Virgin as she gazes down at her child. He does not, however, consider the audience and its relevance to the underlying theme of the altarpiece. Considering

¹³⁵ Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages*

what this thesis has discussed in the previous chapters, is it possible that one bead represented the sorrowful, while the other symbolized the joyful? Christ reminds the Virgin of her suffering, but promises that if she remains steadfast in her faith, she will have a greater reward in heaven. Scheja suggests in the above passage that the two beads represent the glorious Mysteries of the rosary, signifying the Coronation and Assumption of the Virgin; however, if the Antonites practiced the Mysteries of the rosary, as was done in Colmar and the surrounding areas, the glorious Mysteries would not have been used. Because it was not popularized until after her death, St. Birgitta does not directly mention the rosary in the *Sermo Angelicus*, but recognizes the sorrowful and joyful events in the Virgin's life and accentuates her everlasting reward for withstanding her pain and remaining true to God. It is arguable that the Antonites merely used the rosary iconography as a way of fleshing out this idea revealed in St. Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus*.

(University Park, Pennsylvania: 1997), 68-69.

¹³⁶ Scheja, 46.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PRESENCE OF EVIL AND THE NEED FOR SALVATION

In Chapter Four, the presence of Lucifer in the *Concert of Angels* panel was identified by the iconographical elements surrounding him, for example, the peacock crest on his head symbolizing pride and vainglory, as well as the state of transformation and appearance as compared to the demon present in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. The identification of the feathered angel as Lucifer is not new to this thesis, but was first suggested by Ruth Mellinkoff in her book *The Devil at Isenheim*.¹³⁷ Mellinkoff failed to relate the element of Satan and the presence of evil to the hospital context and its possible interpretation as perceived by the patients. In relation to the purpose of this thesis, however, the appearance is justified, not only within the pages of the *Sermo Angelicus*, but also through contemporary beliefs in Satan and his relationship with disease. Of great importance is the recognition of Satan by the patients as a reminder of the presence of evil in the world and why salvation was and is needed.

LUCIFER IN THOUGHT AND ART IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

In the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Lucifer appears in the *Concert of Angels* panel as a member of the heavenly chorus, glorifying the Virgin Mary in God's mind before time. The fact that Lucifer is present before he has been thrown down to earth as a result of his pride supports the theory of the panel representing heaven before the creation of man. This assumption is based on the Book of Revelation in the Bible that describes the fall of

¹³⁷ See the Introduction to this thesis, p. 15-16, or more specifically, Chapter One, p. 27, where Mellinkoff's interpretation is discussed in full detail.

Lucifer and the war in heaven before creation and the Fall of the Rebel Angels as presented in the Introduction to this thesis. In addition, the hybrid creature is the only angel that does not look toward the *Nativity* scene. Instead, his gaze is at God in heaven and is one of great confusion. This is yet another element that identifies the angel as Lucifer. As described in the *Golden Legend*, Satan was present at the scene of the Nativity; however, he was confused by the events that were taking place. Satan may have known that Christ would be born of a Virgin, but did not know the circumstances surrounding the birth. Satan did not know when or where the Incarnation would occur for he only understood what God would allow him to. Furthermore, the *Golden Legend* states that those that knew of the Nativity claimed that it came to pass for several reasons, the primary being “for the confusion of the demons.”¹³⁸

This theory, also known as the deception-of-Satan theory as described by the *Golden Legend* can be identified in other works of art contemporary to the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. As Meyer Schapiro pointed out in Robert Campin’s *Mérode Altarpiece*, the mousetrap that Joseph is building in the right panel signifies the trap that Christ laid out for Satan.¹³⁹ According to Schapiro, Christ’s triumph, therefore, is personified by an object that symbolizes the need for salvation due to evil in the world. Another example of the presence of Satan in an altarpiece is Hugo van der Goes’ *Portinari Altarpiece*. In the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, one can barely see a claw, fanged mouth and glittering

¹³⁸ *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, translated into English and adapted by William Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (1941; reprint, New York, 1969), 50. The *Golden Legend* was also cited by Ruth Mellinkoff in *The Devil at Isenheim*, 29.

¹³⁹ Meyer Schapiro, “*Muscipula Diaboli*, The Symbolism of the Merode Altarpiece,” *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945), 182-187.

eye near the ox, set back in the darkness. Many scholars have compared this directly to the passage from the *Golden Legend* concerning the confusion of the demons.¹⁴⁰

Lucifer has also been personified as a serpent in northern art contemporary to Grunewald, most often in representations of the Fall of Man. In previous works of art, as in art of the Middle Ages, the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden was never identified as Lucifer. What is important to point out regarding these works of art is the use of the peacock crest to identify the serpent as Satan. Dürer uses this iconography in his engraving *The Fall of Man* from 1504 and in a later woodcut for the *Small Passion*. In both works, the serpent sports a peacock's crest as an allusion to the pride of Satan. Independent of these works, Hans Baldung Grien's *Fall of Man*, executed around the same time as Dürer's prints, uses a peacock's crest on the head of a serpent. In another contemporary Netherlandish work attributed to Michael Coxie also entitled the *Fall of Man*, the artist provides the serpent not only with a peacock's crest, but also a beak.¹⁴¹ Considering the widespread use of the peacock's crest as a symbol of Lucifer and his pride, one can suggest that it was a commonly used element within art, recognized by anyone who viewed it.

In addition to the above comparisons, Jeffrey Russell Burton describes the characteristics of Lucifer as commonly used in fifteenth and sixteenth century art. After the eleventh century, one of the most common characteristics was wings, appropriate to an angel, but divided equally between more sinister wings, such as a bat. This signifies the process of transformation. In addition, hairiness was another characteristic, an

¹⁴⁰ Mellinkoff, 30. Mellinkoff cites Robert M. Walker, "The Demon of the *Portinari Altarpiece*," *Art Bulletin* 42 (1960), 218-219.

attribute that distinguishes the creature from the other angels in the tabernacle.¹⁴² All of these characteristics, commonly used during the period of Grünewald, were more than likely understood as characteristics of Satan by those who viewed them.

LUCIFER AND DISEASE

The patients at Isenheim would identify the figure as Satan, but would be affected by his presence in a more profound way in relationship with their disease. It was common at that time to associate pain and suffering from illness and disease with Satan, for ultimately it was he who inflicted it. The first instance in Christian history of the association between the devil and illness in the Bible is from the Book of Mark. A man from Capernaum, possessed by a demon that made him foam at the mouth and mutilate himself, cast himself at Jesus' feet and begged him to heal him of an "unclean spirit." Additional stories of Christ healing lepers and those inflicted with disease from paralysis to blindness would seek Christ to be healed. Each story ends with Jesus saying "Your sins are forgiven you" or "You are clean".¹⁴³ These statements reflect the belief that diseases were caused by demons and the Devil. This belief most definitely carried on into the time of the Antonite hospital at Isenheim. The patients, therefore, believed that Satan caused their disease as a result of their sins; thus, the image of Satan constantly reminded them of their transgressions and encouraged them to stay steadfast in their faith in God, just as St. Anthony, the Virgin and ultimately, Christ also did.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 27. The comparisons of the works of Dürer, Hans Baldung Grien and Michael Coxie in relation to the peacock's crest used by Grünewald were all recognized by Ruth Mellinkoff. I am reiterating for the sake of this thesis her theory to support my own.

¹⁴² Russell, 211-212.

¹⁴³ Messadie, 253-254.

Other iconographical elements in response to disease and healing are included in the altarpiece to ward off evil caused by Satan. These objects are thoroughly analyzed by Andrée Hayum in her book *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision*. Hayum identifies the presence of evil throughout the altarpiece, concentrating mostly on the scenes from the life of St. Anthony. Hayum states:

In the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, the *Temptation of St. Anthony* scene graphically projects a worldly echo of Christ's arduous trial. The period before baptism is marked by a parallel struggle, when the catechumen is perceived to be morally imperiled. Considering the hospital context of the Isenheim monastery, it is important to note that this moral condition was frequently envisaged as ethical illness, disease, or even as a state of possession.¹⁴⁴

Hayum is suggesting in this passage, and in ones that follow, that baptism is one of the most important rituals to ward off the presence of Satan through their disease – a disease that was thought to indicate the presence of sin and frequently paralleled with the fires of hell.¹⁴⁵ Hence, the presence of the basin and towel in the *Nativity* panel. Not only was it associated with birth, but with the washing away of sins by baptism. Hayum identifies several other iconographical elements linked to disease within the *Nativity* panel associated with the presence of Satan. For example, the earthenware pot with Hebrew letters inscribed on it, according to Hayum, was believed to ward off sickness and evil. The Shin, which is the first letter on the pot, was used as a good luck or protective charm, usually seen on the front of houses. The Ayin was the first letter of the first word meaning the evil eye; therefore, the pot was made to ward off or protect from the evil eye. The rings on the fingers of the angels also served a dual purpose. Not only did they signify the hierarchy of the angels, but also red stones on rings were said to ward against

¹⁴⁴ Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision*, 97.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 97. Hayum cites R. Andree, *Arnold Bocklin* (Basel, 1977), 31.

sickness, poisons and evil spirits. Furthermore, the amulet and coral of the rosary were also known to ward off the evil eye and evil spirits.¹⁴⁶

The patients at Isenheim would identify these symbols for use in warding of the presence of the evil brought on by the Devil as personified in the *Concert of Angels* panel. The altarpiece, however, contains many more associations with the defeat of Satan beside simple iconographical associations. The presence of Satan is also tied to the theme of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin of Sorrows and the reason for salvation as reflected in the *Sermo Angelicus*.

LUCIFER AND THE MADONNA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

One of the elements of the doctrine of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, as stated in Chapter Four, is her triumph over Satan for bearing the root of all salvation that is Christ. In this, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception is associated with the Virgin of the Apocalypse, from which her attributes derive. The verse states that a pregnant woman, clothed with the sun and the moon at her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head, appeared in heaven. Then a red dragon stood in front of her as she was about to give birth, so that he could devour the child as soon as it was born. She then gave birth to a son, who was then snatched up to God's throne. The woman then fled into the desert to take refuge and be taken care of by God.¹⁴⁷ This event happens immediately after the fall of the Rebel angels and the war in heaven, alluding to events that occurred

¹⁴⁶ Hayum, Chapter I, 13-52.

before time, as well as those that will happen at the end of time. The Madonna of the Immaculate Conception, therefore, is also the Madonna of the Apocalypse, both existing triumphant over Satan. Her triumph is a result of the stainless birth of her Son for the salvation of man. In essence, then, the *Concert of Angels* panel represents the predestination of the Virgin before the beginning of time, but also alludes to her triumph over Satan. The Madonna goes forth towards her destiny on earth, fully knowing what her duties entail, sorrowful, but joyful in the death and Resurrection of Christ, her son. In the same way, the patients at Isenheim are encouraged to imitate the Virgin by accepting their trials and tribulations that they will endure because of their disease, which is associated with Satan, and remain true to God. By doing so, they too will triumph over Satan.

LUCIFER AND THE SERMO ANGELICUS

How, then, does the *Sermo Angelicus* approach the topic of Satan? It was a common belief held by mystics that the Devil never ceases in constantly tormenting and distracting them from their faith in God. The devil strives to make evil seem good, so that it is an endless fight to remain on the correct path. Furthermore, the mystics believed that the devil repeatedly attempts to make one see the sorry state of the world and of his/her own souls, encouraging one to believe that God has abandoned him/her, in turn driving him/her to despair.¹⁴⁸ This is reflected throughout the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in the *Temptation of St. Anthony*, the sorrow of the Virgin, and in Christ himself as he hung on

¹⁴⁷ Warner, 256. Taken from Revelation 12:1.

¹⁴⁸ Russell, 291-292.

the cross and cried out to his father “Why hast thou forsaken me?” Inevitably, it is expected from the patients at Isenheim as well.

St. Birgitta, as a mystic, reflects the same thoughts in the *Sermo Angelicus*. The Virgin, as the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception and bearer of salvation to the world, triumphed over Satan. In this, Birgitta writes:

They rejoiced because you, O Mary, most worthy gate, knowing that God, the most powerful giant, would take arms in you which would conquer the Devil and all their enemies. Thus the Prophets and Patriarchs were most greatly consoled because of you.¹⁴⁹

In the *Sermo Angelicus*, the Virgin revealed to St Birgitta that she would protect them from this evil as long as they are faithful. Birgitta says of this:

People should pray humbly to Mary, that she take them under her protection. Otherwise they will rush into the snares of the Devil and he will entrap them. When God came forth from the Virgin into the world he revealed the gate of the heavenly country to mankind, so that, to those who make their supplication to her, she deigns to be present, aiding them from their exit from this evil world, procuring for them entrance into the eternal kingdom of her blessed son.¹⁵⁰

Mary faced her sorrow and led the life that she was predestined to live, going forth to become the bearer of salvation, although Satan was constantly by her side reminding her of the trials that she would have to face. The Virgin ignored these distractions and triumphed over Satan. The Virgin, therefore understands the plight of mankind, and promises that she will protect those who remain faithful and aid them to obtain their own reward awaiting them in heaven. This would be the message that the Antonites wished to portray to their patients. According to the *Sermo Angelicus*, evil has no control over

¹⁴⁹ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, translated by John Halborg, Lesson Three, Chapter IX, 37.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., Lesson Three, Chapter XV.

them, despite their disease if they remain faithful to God and call upon the Virgin to protect them. Birgitta reveals:

God gave her (Mary) power over the evil spirits. For instance, when they attack a person and that person lovingly implores the help of the Virgin, the evil spirits fly away at the command of the Virgin. Fearful, they would rather have pains and miseries multiplied on them than be dominated by the Virgin's power.¹⁵¹

At Isenheim, these "evil spirits" described by Birgitta would have been associated with demons and the devil. Not only then did the Virgin act as an example as how the patients should approach their life, but also as a protector, similar to the many iconographical elements present within the altarpiece. On Sundays, when this section was viewed, this concept of protection was emphasized during Mass. As the priest presented the body and blood, similar to the Virgin bringing salvation into world that was Christ, the patients felt protected by the Virgin and by the priest. Once again, the purpose of the Antonites would be recognized through the function of the altarpiece. Furthermore, this idea relates to the altarpiece as a whole. When Christ was crucified, he triumphed over Satan, protecting mankind from hell by providing a place for the faithful in heaven. In the same way, St. Anthony in the third section, seen during feast days, acted as intercessor and patron saint, watching over the patients through the care of the Antonites.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., Lesson Two, Chapter XX, 64.

CONCLUSION

George Scheja, in his seemingly comprehensive book *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, discussed the relationship of the *Sermo Angelicus* and the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in a mere footnote, concluding that the text could not have been the inspiration for the *Concert of Angels/Nativity* panel in Grünewald's masterpiece. He argued, "In plain fact, the *Sermo Angelicus* simply does not furnish any kind of theologically intellectual armature which can explain the very composition of this central picture, let alone the juxtaposition of the three pictures which make up this ensemble. In short, Bridget's meditations do no more than follow the familiar conception of the process of salvation."¹⁵² I strongly disagree with this statement. Instead, I believe the familiar concept of the process of salvation within the *Sermo Angelicus* coincides with what the Antonites desired for their patients. One who suffers from a disease as grotesque and debilitating as ergotism, in the midst of pain and hallucinations, would constantly need to be reminded that his/her sins have been redeemed. In addition, the patients would need an example to provide them the inspiration and encouragement to remain steadfast in their faith so that they may obtain their reward of everlasting life. What better way to do so than with the image of the joyful Madonna as she goes forth toward her destiny, aware of her suffering and sorrow that would result from it? Furthermore, how more comforting is it to realize that the same example they are encouraged to follow in order to triumph over their disease is their protector from the "evil spirits" that constantly threaten to throw them into despair? Other sources, for example, the Book of Revelation, may have been used for the

¹⁵² Scheja, 75, End note # 74.

altarpiece; however, I have found that St. Birgitta's text is the most convincing source for the imagery present in the *Concert of Angels/Nativity* panel of the altarpiece.

Perhaps the representation of the *Nativity* in the Isenheim Altarpiece does not follow the narrative or sequence of events as presented in the *Sermo Angelicus*. Nor does the text mention a juxtaposition of two Virgins. The Antonites, through the artistic genius of Matthias Grünewald, merely had to find a method to flesh out the message found within the text to their patients – a text to which, it is now safe to say, the Antonites most likely had access. Furthermore, it is erroneous to even assume that an altarpiece of any kind must be sequential. The absence of time barriers alone in regard to the function and purpose of an altarpiece on weekdays, Sundays and feast days makes it impossible. Furthermore, it is true that there are several iconographical elements present in the altarpiece that are also mentioned by St. Birgitta in the *Sermo Angelicus*, however, they are not of main importance. Instead, the emphasis lies in the parallel themes of both works.

The *Sermo Angelicus* is the story of the process of salvation through the Virgin not only as the bearer of salvation to the world, but also as one who endured her own pain and sorrow, similar to her son. The Virgin, therefore, defeated Satan and in turn became the protector of man from evil spirits to aid them in their own salvation. This would be the same message that the Antonites desired and encouraged their patients to be aware of when viewing the altarpiece.

Not only does this make perfect sense for the well being of the patients at Isenheim, but also it coincides with the meaning of the altarpiece in its entirety. The *Crucifixion* on the front of the altarpiece illustrates the horrific and agonizing death of

Christ, and even goes as far to depict wounds and sores on the body of Christ similar to those received when suffering from ergotism. In the same way, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* depicts terrible demons, inflicting severe pain upon St. Anthony. In each situation, Christ, St. Anthony, and the Virgin endured these tribulations, accepting them as tests of their faith in God. Each went forth, knowing that it would be difficult, but they succeeded and gained their place in heaven that God had prepared for them. In the same way, if the patients, suffering from extreme pain and sorrow, imitate the ways of Christ, St. Anthony and the Virgin, they will be rewarded with their own promise of eternal life in heaven as represented in the *Resurrection*.

Perhaps it is best to conclude with the words of St. Birgitta herself in the *Sermo Angelicus*:

From these ornaments in her crowned soul (the virtues given to her by God), the Virgin appeared beautiful above all creation, so that it pleased the Creator to accomplish all that he had promised by her mediation. For she was strong in the virtue of love, unwearied in good works, nor did the enemy prevail over her at all. Truly it is to be believed that her soul was beautiful before God and the angels; so too her body was most gracious in the sight of every eye. And as God and the angels in heaven rejoiced over her most fair soul, so also the graceful beauty of her body profited and consoled all who desired to see her. When the devout saw how fervently she served God, they became more fervent to the glory of God. Upon seeing her, because of her honourable words and deeds, at once the fervour of sin was extinguished in those inclined to wrongdoing.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ St. Birgitta, *Sermo Angelicus*, translated by John Halborg, Lesson One, Chapter XIII, 47.

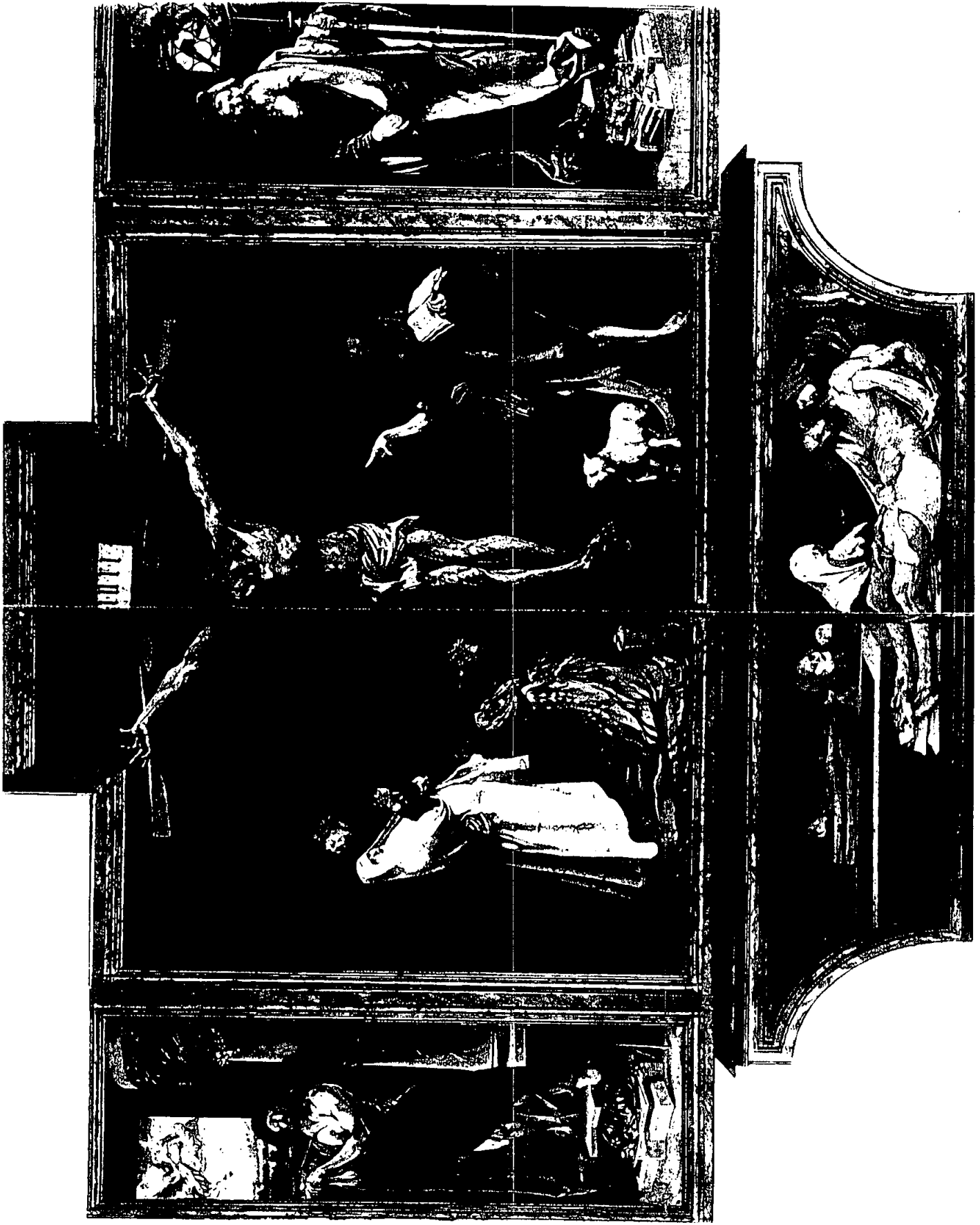


Figure 1, The *Crucifixion*



Figure 2, *Life of St. Anthony*



Figure 3, Detail of the *Temptation of St. Anthony*



Figure 4, The Central Panel c



Figure 5, Detail of the *Concert of Angels*



Figure 6, The Virgin Mary in the Tabernacle



Figure 7, Detail of the *Nativity*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte, Isak Collijn, ed. Uppsala, 1924-31.

Saint Birgitta of Sweden. *Opera Minor II: Sermo Angelicus*, ed. Sten Eklund. Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksells Boktryckeri AB, 1972.

_____. *Revelations of St. Bridget: On the Life and Passion of Our Lord and the Life of His Blessed Mother*. Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1984.

_____. *Sermo Angelicus (The Word of the Angel)*. Translated by John Halbourg. Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Company, 1996.

Harris, Marguerite Tjader., ed. *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Translations*. Translated by Albert Tyle Kezel. New York: Paulist Press, 1990.

Voragine, Jacobus de. *The Golden Legend*. Translated into English and adapted by William Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger. 1941. Reprint. New York, 1969.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Advielle, V. *Histoire de l'ordre hospitalier de Saint-Antoine-de-Viennois*. Paris: Unknown Publisher, 1883.

Ashe, Geoffrey. *The Virgin*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.

Beguerie, Pansika and George Bischoff Casterman. *Grunewald, le maitre d'Issenheim*. Colmar, France: Courtesy of the Musee d'Unterlinden, 1996.

Butkovich, Anthony. *Revelations: Saint Birgitta of Sweden*. Los Angeles: Ecumenical Foundation of America, 1972.

Butler, E.C., transcribed by Robert Gordon. "St. Anthony," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, online ed. at www.newadvent.org. Kevin Knight, 1999.

Cronin, Vincent. *Mary Portrayed*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1968.

Cumming, William Patterson, ed. *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*. London: Oxford University Press, 1929.

D'Ancona, Mirella Levi. *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle*

- Ages and Early Renaissance*. New York: The College Art Association of America in Conjunction with the Art Bulletin, 1957.
- Ferguson, George. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- Feurstein, Heinrich. *Matthias Grünewald*. Bonn: Verlag der Buchgemeinde, 1930.
- Fraenger, Wilhelm. *Matthias Grünewald in seinen Werken: Ein physiognomischer Versuch*. Berlin: Rembrandt-Verlag, G.m.b.H, 1936.
- Gregersson, Birger and Thomas Gascoigne. *The Life of Saint Birgitta*, translated by Julia Bolton Holloway. Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co. , 1991.
- Hall, James. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974.
- Hayum, Andrée. *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- _____. "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited," *Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 501-517.
- Holweck, Frederick G. "Immaculate Conception," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VII, online ed. at www.newadvent.org. Kevin Knight, 1999.
- Hull, Vida J. "The Sex of the Savior in Renaissance Art: The Revelations of Saint Bridget and the Nude Christ Child in Renaissance Art," *Studies in Iconography* 15 (1993): 77-112.
- Hurll, Estelle M. *The Madonna in Art*. Boston: L. C. Page and Company, 1897.
- Huysmans, J. K. *Grünewald, The Paintings: Complete Edition with Two Essays by J. K. Huysmans and a Catalogue by E. Ruhmer*. London: The Phaidon Press, 1958.
- _____. *Le Retable D' Issenheim*. Paris: Braun and Cie, 1951.
- Jameson, Anna Brownell Murphy. *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts*. Boston: Osgood, 1877.
- _____. *Legends of the Monastic Orders as Represented in the Fine Arts: Forming the Second Series of Sacred and Legendary Art*. London: Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1863.
- Jenner, Mrs. Henry. *Our Lady in Art*. London: Methuen, 1908.

- Jørgensen, Johannes. *Saint Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. II, translated from Danish by Ingebord Lund. London: Longman, Green , 1954.
- Kingsley, Charles. *The Hermits*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1905.
- Kultermann, Udo. *The History of Art History*. New York: Arabis Books, 1993.
- Matossian, Mary Kilbourne. *Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics, and History*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1989.
- Meisler, Stanley. "A Masterpiece Born of Saint Anthony's Fire," *Smithsonian* (September, 1999): 70-79.
- Mellinkoff, Ruth. *The Devil at Isenheim: Reflections of Popular Belief in Grünewald's Altarpiece*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Messadie, Gerald. *A History of the Devil*. Translated from French by Marc Romano. New York: Kodansha International, 1996.
- Monick, Eugene. *Evil, Sexuality, and Disease in Grünewald's Body of Christ*. Spring Publications, 1993.
- Morris, Bridget. *St. Birgitta of Sweden*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999.
- Niemeyer, W., *Matthias Grunewald*. Berlin, 1921.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Petrisor, Marcel. *Grunewald*. Translated into English by Florin Ionescu. Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1985.
- Richter, Gottfried. *The Isenheim Altar: Suffering and Salvation in the Art Of Grünewald*. Translated by Donald Maclean. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1998.
- Rudge, F. M., transcribed by John Fobian "Orders of St. Anthony," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, online ed. Kevin Knight, 1999.
- Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- _____. *Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

- Sahlin, Claire. *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Schapiro, Meyer. "Muscipula Diaboli, The Symbolism of the Merode Altarpiece," *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945): 182-187.
- Scheja, George. *Der Isenheim Altar des Matthias Grünewald*. Translated from German by Robert Erich Wolf. Cologne: Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1969.
- Smart, Alastair. *The Renaissance and Mannerism in Northern Europe and Spain*. London, 1972.
- Snyder, James. *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985.
- Stieglitz, Ann. "Exorcizing the Devil: A Recontextualization of Grünewald's Isenheim Altar," *Art History* 16 (March, 1993): 173-178.
- Waddell, Helen. *Vitae Patrum: The Desert Fathers*. Original ed., London: Constable Co., Ltd., 1936, reprint, 1957.
- Warner, Marina. *Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Knopf: distributed by Randon House, 1976.
- Wilson, Katharina M., ed. *Medieval Women Writers*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984.
- Winston-Allen, Anne. *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.
- Wolf, Karen A. "Birgittine Iconography and the Ideal Family in Fifteenth Century Burgundy," Master's thesis. Binghamton, State University of New York, 1995.
- Woods, William. *A History of the Devil*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973.