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Rome and Women’s Response to Crisis: from Early Christianity to the Present Day

Abstract

This article presents a research project conducted by nine scholars that culminated in a publication. As Project Leader, I had the privilege of coordinating this interdisciplinary, bilingual, and inter-university group entitled Rome and Women’s Response to Crisis: from Early Christianity to the Present Day, which critically examines - from a spiritual, socio-political, and cultural perspective - the stories of heroic Roman women who bravely confronted the crises of their time, from the earliest days of Christianity to the present. In addition to exploring the historical, socio-political, cultural, and spiritual contexts in which these heroic female protagonists lived and worked, the authors of the essays also emphasise – in explicit or implicit ways - the critical role which the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity played in their lives and cardinal virtues of fortitude, prudence, justice, and temperance. There is also a captivating reading on Saint Catherine of Siena’s virtue of patience. Nevertheless, it is not only through the lens of moral excellence that we learn about ordinary women living extraordinary lives as sisters, spouses, virgins, and mothers - both natural and spiritual. Towards the end of the article, there are passages drawn from Andrea Donati’s contribution about Vittoria Colonna, one of the early modern protagonists to whom the Symposium was dedicated.

I have developed the idea for the interdisciplinary research project conducted by nine scholars from different disciplines as a response to a competition launched in 2020 by the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas entitled: “CRISIS: Christian Responses, in Solidarity, to Crisis.” The group’s initial proposal, Women’s Response to Crisis: Re-Examination of Roman Cultural Records and Historical Documents from Early Christianity to the Present Day, won second place in the competition among eleven submitted proposals, receiving a score of 27.0 points out of 30. As Project Leader, I had the privilege of coordinating this bilingual and inter-university group. Together, we critically examine - from a spiritual, socio-political, and cultural perspective - the stories of heroic Roman women who bravely confronted the crises of their time, from the earliest days of Christianity to the present. They were either born in Rome or moved there at some point in their life, and their legacy is still visible in the history of many places in the Eternal City.

The extraordinary lives of Saint Praxedes and Saint Pudentiana (1st-2nd centuries), Saint Catherine of Siena (14th century), Saint Frances of Rome (14th-15th centuries) or Vittoria Colonna (15th-16th centuries) have already been featured in significant monographs and have received numerous scholarly publications. Yet, our authors shed some new light on just how these remarkable women responded to crisis situations. We also add some lesser-known but very noteworthy experiences to the diverse emergency situations encountered by significant figures such as Saint Marcella (in the 4th-5th centuries), Blessed Elisabetta Canori Mora, and Blessed Anna Maria Taigi (the 17th-18th centuries), Blessed Celine Borzecka and Blessed Colomba Gabriel (19th-20th centuries), as well as the twenty-one women elected as members of the Constituent Assembly for the first time in Italian history (in the 20th century). We then conclude with contemporary stories of self-sacrificing migrant wives, mothers, and sisters (in the 21st century). Members from each of the four faculties of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas participated in the project, along with external contributors from the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development - Migrant and Refugee Section, the Salesian Pontifical University, and other Rome-based
independent scholars. The book is a joint effort; it resembles a choir of nine voices, four females and five males; we all have different areas of expertise and come from a wide range of academic disciplines, including Social Sciences, Classical and Christian Literature, Theology, Medieval History, Art History, History and Cultural Heritage of the Church, and Canon Law. The contributors, all of whom have a special relationship with the city of Rome, come from Italy, Poland, Canada, the United States, Hungary, and Slovenia.

Despite unquestionable contributions and challenges propelled by the feminist movement to further women’s emancipation, it seems that much work remains to be done to bring to light both certain aspects of the female experience and the strength and courage that women in recent decades, there are still certain female figures whose work has not received adequate recognition. The essays contained in this collection attempt to bridge this gap by examining the lives and experiences of a number of outstanding women informed by Christian values and, in so doing, to add a new perspective to what has gone before. In addition to exploring the historical, socio-political, cultural, and spiritual contexts in which these heroic female protagonists lived and worked, the authors also shed light on the defining role in their lives of the theological virtues of faith, hope. The contributions describe faith-filled lives fortified by the cardinal virtues of fortitude, prudence, and temperance and include a captivating account of Saint Catherine of Siena’s virtue of patience.

Nevertheless, it is not only through the lens of moral excellence that we learn about ordinary women living extraordinary lives. The essays reveal the variety of courageous ways in which these women lived their vocations as sisters, spouses, virgins, and mothers—both natural and spiritual.

The passion and dedication which they poured into the call to holiness is well described by what John Paul II once termed “the feminine genius.” In his 1988 Apostolic Letter, Mulieris Dignitatem, and in 1995 Letter to Women, the Holy Father emphasizes women’s special vocation to motherhood, not only in their capacity to bear children but also in a wider Christian sense of being able to nurture others and to act as spiritual mothers to people and communities both within and outside the Church. John Paul II reminds us that God created human beings in His own image, conceiving man, and woman as a relational unity of the two since “to be human means to be called to interpersonal communion”. Referring to earlier Church documents, the Pope argues that the total fulfilment of a human being can only occur through their sincere gift of the self. For a woman, it is precisely this vocation to natural or spiritual motherhood from which giving oneself and being ready to make sacrifices for the good of others is drawn, thereby embodying “feminine originality” to the fullest. The Pope calls this elevated female ethos the “genius of woman”.

No better example of this genius may be cited than in the Virgin Mary, the handmade of the Lord, the most Perfect Mother of God and all Humankind. In God’s salvific plan, the mysterious nature of a “woman” as a virgin-mother-spouse that can manifest itself in many kinds of vocations, both religious and not. The essays of the volume illustrate the unfolding vocations of female members of both consecrated and lay communities who were exemplary wives, mothers, widows, and sisters. Despite living through political upheaval, social turmoil, and all kinds of crises, in their generous gift of the self, they become true role models for us.

It is worth mentioning that since John Paul II lost his mother in his early childhood, to the last days of his pontificate, he frequently sought women’s counsel. He forged a special friendship with Wanda Półtawska (1921-2023), a Raversbruck concentration camp survivor, psychiatrist, Catholic activist, and herself as wife and mother. Półtawska had a great influence on the Pope’s thought and writings, as seen in the Theology of the Body, which has become a major source for understanding the Pope’s thinking about a woman’s identity in her own right as well as in her relation to God and to man. This eminent Polish doctor and scholar lectured on the subject of marriage and family at the Theological Institute on Marriage and Family for decades and was also a long-standing member of the Papal Council for the Family

1 John Paul II 1988.
2 John Paul II 1995.
3 John Paul II 1995.
and Pontifical Academy of Life.4

Before John Paull II’s pontificate, only two women had been given the title “Doctor of the Church”, as in 1970 Pope Paul VI proclaimed Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila by Saint. Soon after, Saint Teresa of Lisieux and Hildegard of Bingen were honoured with the same distinguished title, bringing the total number of female doctors to four, alongside the thirty-three males in the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.5

Since his election in 2013, Pope Francis has been working consistently and proactively to enhance women’s position and increase their visibility within the hierarchy of the Church. Addressing the members of the Pontifical Council for Culture in 2015 dedicated to women’s cultures, he encouraged the examination of “new criteria and new methods so that women would not feel like guests, but full participants in various spheres of society and Church life.” To this end, the Women’s Consultation Group was founded in 2016; this organ of the Pontifical Council, which meets four times a year, is composed of members of different religions, consecrated and non-believers from a variety of cultural backgrounds and nationalities. They offer a women’s perspective on the Dicastery’s activities and participate by offering advice and opinions. During its second triennial mandate (2019-2022), twenty female members have acted as an advisory board to the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, and focus on women’s participation in science, sports, cultural activities, and heritage of the Church.

In line with the Pope’s wish to see greater gender balance in decision-making positions in the Church, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith called a special convention to examine the female status quo in the Church and organized a Symposium, Role of Women in the Church, was organized in Rome in 2016. Representatives from all over the world were invited, including prominent women theologians, historians, and canonists, in addition to other lay and religious participants. The Proceedings of the Symposium were published the following year, featuring a wide range of topics covering, just to mention some, a historical overview of the role and contributions of women to the Church’s life, ecclesiastical themes, and people’s sharing life stories from all the continents.7 Moreover, in 2016, Donne Chiesa Mondo (“Women Church World”) - once a monthly insert that was part of the Vatican’s official newspaper, the Osservatore Romano - became an independent magazine dedicated to women. The magazine, managed by an international and interdisciplinary committee and coordinated since 2019 by the Italian journalist Rita Pinci, draws attention to the work of religious and lay women around the world. The February 2022 issue contains an inspiring article by Elisa Calessi which explores evangelisation through art in the Vatican Museums’ tour dell’anima.8 The article is an informal and engaging chat between Calessi and Barbara Jatta, director of the Vatican Museums, in which the latter shares her favourite works of art from the Vatican collection that showcase female beauty. She also emphasises a significant trend which is the increase in the number of women employees in the Vatican State over the last twenty years. Calessi portrays Jatta as a committed art historian who balances her professional work with her family responsibilities as a mother of three sons. The crucial role of art, Jatta argues, is evangelization through beauty which gives hope, especially in difficult times. Female figures, and especially the Virgin Mary, contribute in unique ways to accomplishing this goal.

Through teaching documents and public pronouncements, Pope Francis has made important executive decisions on behalf of women, overturning longstanding precedents. Salient among these is his constant effort to secure equal opportunities for engagement and participation in leadership, as exemplified by his decisions of appointments, such as the nomination of Barbara Jatta to Director of the Vatican Museums and the appointment of Linda Ghisoni to Undersecretary for the Lay Faithful, both in 2017. Moreover, in 2020, he appointed Francesca Di Giovanni to serve as Undersecretary in the Section for Relations with States and Xaviera Sister Nathalie Becquart as Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, and in 2023,

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4 The accounts of this special, over 50-year-long friendship between Półtawska, her family and Pope John Paul II were written by Wanda Półtawska in the form of a personal diary, Półtawska 2009.
5 Saint Teresa of Lisieux was proclaimed Doctor of the Church by John Paull II in 1997 and Hildegard of Bingen by Benedict XVI in 2012, simultaneously with her canonization.
6 Francis Pope 2015.
7 Ruolo 2017.
Franciscan Sister Raffaella Petrini was nominated Secretary General of the Governorate, becoming the first woman ever to occupy this key position.

In what follows, I would like to mention some initiatives (publications, art exhibitions and conferences) dedicated to women which were held in Rome. In scholarly and popular publications, there has been a growing interest in the agency of Roman women, with an overwhelming emphasis on rebellious females, first ladies, models and actresses, wealthy lovers, and powerful yet scandalous courtesans. There has been a fascination with the *Roma al femminile* since the publication of the same title by Augusto Fraschetti (Laterza, Roma, 1994), translated into English under the title *Roman Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). Other publications on this very topic include those by the American Classicist Annelise Freisenbruch – *The First Ladies of Rome: the Women Behind the Caesars* (Vintage, London, 2011), *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016) by the Classical Historian Anise K. Strong, to the most recent *potpourris* featuring legendary as well as historical women. Some iconic female portraits from antiquity to the present day are discussed in Paola Staccioli’s *101 Donne che hanno fatto Grande Roma: madri, regine, artiste, eroine e altre figure indimenticabili della città eterna* (Rome, New Compton Editori, 2020) and Enza Plotino’s pocket book *Percorsi Femminili a Roma: sulle tracce delle protagoniste della storia dell’arte, della cultura, della società* (Noventa Padovana, Mediagraf, 2021).

In recent decades, especially in the realms of visual art and culture, women have become more widely recognized as creative protagonists, not powerless and submissive subjects, also thanks to feminist advocacy. In 2019, at the Roman Gallery of Modern Art, there was a mixed-media exhibition dedicated to the image of woman from the 19th century to the present entitled *Women: Body and Image between Symbol and Revolution.* The exhibition, curated by four female art historians, featuring over 100 artworks, critically examined women’s socio-political and cultural *status quo* from an exploited object to an empowered subject (January 2019 - October 2019). Two recent exhibitions organized in the conjoint Roman National Galleries of Art invite viewers to learn about creative female accomplishments in architecture and visual arts: *A Silent Revolution: Plautilla Bracci Painter and Architect* (November 2021-April 2022, curated by Yuri Primarosa), at the Trastevere Corsini Art Gallery, presents the first solo show of the Baroque female architect Plautilla Bracci, whereas at the Barberini Art Gallery the exhibition, *Caravaggio and Artemisia: the Challenge of Judith. Violence and Seduction in the 16th and 17th -century Painting* (November 2021-March 2022) at the Barberini Art Gallery and curated by Maria Cristina Terzaghi, reviews on the Biblical scene of Judith, who beheaded the Assyrian general Holofernes is in oil masterpieces executed by male and female artists.

The *First Annual International Women in Arts Conference* was held in October 2021 in *Palazzo Taverna.* Organized by the University of Arkansas’ Rome Program and curated by the art historian Consuelo Lollobrigida, it featured contributions from international scholars, *in situ* and online, on women’s achievements in the arts, architecture, and literature from the early Renaissance to the present. Along with acclaimed international scholars and artists, lesser-known female figures active in Rome were also discussed. On this occasion, Nicoletta Marconi, one of the speakers, presented “Women in Roman Construction Sites from the 16th to 18th centuries” (*La pratica dell’architettura al femminile; donne nei cantieri romani di XVI-XVIII secolo*). The Italian scholar examined the forgotten, highly skilled women who worked for the Vatican’s Fabric of Saint Peter’s Basilica between the 16th and 18th centuries. These hidden, unnoticed women not only transported building materials such as travertine, soil, and lime but were also engaged in hard stone and wood carving, as well as art conservation and restoration for the Basilica. Although they often completed their fathers and husbands’ work, they were also hired because of their remarkable skills. Marconi’s presentation prompted us to appreciate those female artists who mastered stone carving and other crafts and worked in the Vatican side by side with their male colleagues.

9 A seminal publication that forcefully questioned gendered spaces and representations in the arts was Linda Nochlin’s ground-breaking essay of feminist scholarship, *Nochlin 1971* (first published).


11 Terzaghi, Gennari 2021.

The book consists of nine essays. The first contribution, “Strong Sisters in Roman Antiquity: Saint Pudentiana and Praexedes”, by Inocent-Maria V. Szaniszlò, takes us for a walk in the Viminal and Esquiline hills to discuss the lives of two early Christian martyrs. The author, a Dominican Friar, introduces us to a fascinating debate regarding the historical accuracy of the saints’ biographies, whose family villa was at some point turned into a house of Christian worship. Second-century sisters Práxedes and Pudentiana lived out their faith with meekness, tenacity, and mercy. Their lives are of great devotion and reveal the resolve of those committed to the faith. History testifies to the legacy carried forward by these sisters. As the surviving hagiographic sources demonstrate, Práxedes and Pudentiana were widely venerated in the years following their deaths as remarkable women who assisted their persecuted brothers and sisters and were martyred in defence of the faith. In the Monti area, one finds the richly decorated basilicas dedicated to those saints, considered as among the oldest places of Christian worship in Rome: the Basilica of Saint Práxedes and the Basilica of Saint Pudentiana. By taking his cue from the history of these churches, Father Szaniszlò invites us to meditate on the relationship that has existed between the Jewish and Christian communities since late Antiquity. He argues that this spiritual dialogue, often overlooked, is still visible in the urban fabric of the Eternal City; on via Cesare Balbo, for example, the apse of Saint Pudentiana’s Basilica face is located nearby the imposing edifice of the Di Castro Synagogue.

In his essay, “Saint Marcella of the Aventine Hill and Her Response to Crisis in Fourth Century Rome,” the Salesian Father Miran Sajovic describes the exceptional role of some noble women who confronted crises during the decline of the Roman Empire. The author refers to the crucial influence that Saint Jerome had during his short sojourn in Rome (382-385 AD), which resulted in many Christian conversions and prayer groups organized by noble women. Among these women were Paola and her daughter Eustochio, Melania Senior, Albina, Asella, Lea, Marcellina, Sofronia, Principia, Felicita, and Feliciana. These women knew each other from spiritual meetings organized by the great Doctor of the Church. The author focuses on Saint Marcella, who is described by Jerome as an “incomparable gem of all the saints” (Hieronymus, ep. 127.1.). From the documents quoted by the author, we learn that Saint Marcella’s Christian leadership took place in her own domus which once stood on the Aventine Hill (today’s Ripa district). Moreover, she could be considered a kind of proto-monastic figure, as she was able to convert her luxurious house into a peaceful, quiet place (like a “desert”) for spiritual retreats. Not only did this noble woman embody the virtues of chastity, humility, and poverty, but she also practised penance and fasting while dedicating herself to the reading and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Her courageous response to a particularly humiliating and trying incident would eventually lead to her death. Her story can serve as an inspirational example to us as we are facing spiritual and physical suffering caused by the pandemic.

Drawing on the complex medieval crises between European and Papal States, a Dominican Sister, Catherine Drost’s essay, “Living through Crisis: The Patience of Catherine of Siena,” focuses on the virtue of patience taught by one of the greatest female figures, the Patron of Italy, Europe and Doctor of the Church, Saint Catherine of Siena. While this Mystic resided during her Roman sojourn in the house that belonged to the Lay Dominicans, where she would also die, her body was buried in the nearby Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva – both centrally located in the Pigna neighbourhood. From the examination of patience, which relates to other key Christian virtues, the author argues that Saint Catherine’s message still has a powerful resonance. Living in unprecedented times, it seems that we need to patiently endure in spite of – or rather because of – the crises we have been experiencing since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Catherine Drost, O.P. encourages us to learn from the invaluable Saints’ teachings because they are based – as the author emphatically demonstrates— not only on mere rhetoric but also on her personal experiences.

Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli’s contribution, “Santa Francesca Romana Advocata Urbis. Pilgrim Women and Mystics of Rome in Times of Crisis,” lays out the historical background in which the heroic actions of two pilgrims in Rome, Saint Brigit and Saint Catherine of Siena, are contextualized and related to the later arrival of the Roman-born Saint Francesca Ponziani, who was a compassionate spouse and mother and later became an oblate of the Virgin Mary; she also devoted herself to good works and performed many miracles during her life. As the author eloquently narrates, Saint Frances was also a great
mystic, and her condition of spouse and mother was not an obstacle but rather enriched her life of contemplation. Some of her experiences and miracles are exquisitely painted in fresco in the Chapel of the Tor de’ Specchi Monastery in the Campitelli neighbourhood at the foot of the Capitoline Hill.

An exceptional Renaissance woman, a great promoter of peace during a time of crisis in a world ruled by wars and men, is examined by Andrea Donati in Vittoria Colonna and the Challenge of a Woman at the Time of Michelangelo. A member of an important noble family, Vittoria defied the conventions of her time. The author describes this courageous, determined, and intelligent woman from several points of view, also relying on Vittoria’s poetry. Her main activities concerning political and religious matters are discussed by looking at Vittoria’s poetic skills and her close friendship with Michelangelo Buonarroti. The author leads the reader through Vittoria Colonna’s footsteps in and outside Rome, showing how she courageously faced all kinds of political, religious, and personal crises. Two key landmarks that document Colonna’s Roman sojourns are the Basilica of Saint Silvester in Capite (Colonna neighbourhood) and Saint Silvester al Quirinale (Trevi neighbourhood).

The following essay, “Elisabetta Canori Mora and Anna Maria Taigi: A Redemptive Charity”, presents two blessed women born five years apart in the late 17th century, whose unassuming domestic heroism and mystical experiences are still not known to the larger public. The author, Damiano Pomi, illustrates how these devoted wives and loving mothers, who later became the Secular Trinitarians of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Captives, stood by their family despite their spouses unbearable – from a human point of view – moral conducts. Those great women are buried respectively in the Basilica of Saint Chrysostom in the Trastevere district and in the Borromini’s Church of Saint Carlo alle Quattro Fontane on the Quirinal Hill (Monti district). The blessed Canori Mora and Taigi teach us how we could apply the notion of redemption to the numerous challenges of our lives, not only to “rescue” ourselves but also others. This belief was close to the heart of Saint John de Marha when he founded the Order of the Most Holy Trinity in the 12th century with the purpose of freeing Christians held captive and enslaved in Muslim countries.

Moving on towards the 19th and 20th centuries, the editor’s essay, “Blessed Celine Borzecka and Colomba Gabriel: Radical Charity as Response to Personal, Spiritual and Socio-Political Crisis”, presents the outstanding life experiences of two noble women. They travelled in different times and circumstances during the second half of the 19th century from the Polish Eastern borderlands to the Eternal City in search of their true vocations. These courageous women founded two religious orders: the female branch of the Sisters of Resurrection and the Benedictine Sisters of Charity. Their eventual life stories take us from the stateless nation of Poland to Rome, inspiring all those who are searching for their vocation in the midst of socio-political and spiritual crises. Blessed Borzecka’s commemorative museum is installed in the mother house that can be visited in the Prati neighborhood, while Blessed Gabriel’s Casa Famiglia is located in the Pigna district. Blessed Colomba Gabriel’s tomb is now kept in the Sister of Charity Church, next to their Mother House in the Centocelle neighbourhood.

The contribution of Maria Concetta La Morgia entitled “Feminine Genius” in Rome, for the Affirmation of Rights in 1946, as an “Opportunity” for a Post-Covid Rebirth” presents the stories of twenty-one women. They were the elected members of the Constitutional Assembly of 1946, who arrived from many regions of Italy to work, for the first time in Italian history, side by side with men to give shape to the new Italian Constitution in the Montecitorio Palace in the Colonna district. La Morgia quotes Honourable Maria Federici, Nadia Spano, Filomena Delli Castelli, Bianca Bianchi, Nilde Iotti, and Teresa Noce’s statements regarding the position of women in the post-war society and also refers to the recent leadership appointments of women in the Vatican City. The essay emphasizes the remarkable input of women in social, civil and ecclesiastical institutions for the affirmation of the fundamental rights of the person in both the State and the Church. The author invites us to learn from these great “Mothers of the Italian Republic”, especially during our time of crisis in which we should hold on to those special virtues of the female genius that promoted democratic values and supported the exchange of democratic ideas.

The last, ninth essay, written by the Scalabrinian Father Fabio Baggio, CS, “Migrant Women in Times of Crisis”, presents Syrian, Colombian, and Lebanese protagonists’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on his pastoral work that aims to ameliorate the refugee crisis, the author chooses three stories that he considers as outstanding examples of courage and the gift of the self. To protect the identity of the
migrant women, their names have been changed; however, their daily “invisible” struggles give wonderful testimonies to grassroots heroism that always starts within the heart of the family, and in these recounted stories, with the most vulnerable families on the move. The essay is illustrated with images that show some of the favourite places of our three protagonists, the photographs which they took themselves in the Trastevere, Prati, and Ottaviano neighbourhoods.

In terms of the context set by the Reception of Legacy of Female Saints in Early Modern Rome and Lazio Symposium that examines how authorial models shaped the experiences of women from 1500 to 1700, we have a contribution regarding a great Cinquecento figure - Vittoria Colonna. Though she had not been declared blessed or a saint, Colonna has become an inspiring example of an engaged religious model. I will refer to fragments of Andrea Donati’s essay – whose conversational and engaging style depicts Vittoria Colonna’s life during which she responded to many crises. Donati’s contribution entitled: Vittoria Colonna and the Challenge of a Woman at the Time of Michelangelo draws on his previously published book, Vittoria Colonna e l’eredità degli spirituali (Roma, Etraphiae, 2019).

Who was and how did Vittoria Colonna respond to the crisis of her time? First, we need to examine her life and times in order to attempt to understand what sort of woman she was, what crises she lived through and by what means she faced them.13 The future Marchioness of Pescara was born in Marino, on Colli Albani in the spring of 1492, to Fabrizio Colonna of the Paliano branch and Agnese of Montefeltro. Her father descended from one of the oldest Roman noble families and was one of the most valiant Italian captains. Her mother was the daughter of the Duke of Urbino, who had been the general captain of the Church under Pope Sixtus IV Della Rovere. A few months after her birth, the Spanish cardinal Alejandro Borgia took the name of Alexander VI and became one of the most controversial popes of the Renaissance. Pope Borgia provoked a drastic polarization of the Italian republics and other realms, forcing them to align with or against Spain and as a consequence, accelerated the incidence of foreign incursions into Italy. During this time, protests against the abuses of the clergy mounted and, with Martin Luther, became an open revolt against the Pope, the Reform, which gave rise to the Counter-Reformation of the Roman Church. These two great themes of politics and religion form the background of Vittoria Colonna’s life, and although she has mostly gone down in history as an aristocrat, a poet friend of Pietro Bembo and the muse of Michelangelo Buonarroti. But in reality, she is especially distinguished by her political and religious activism.

As a child, “not yet three years old”, she was betrothed to Ferdinand of Avalos, called Ferrante, who was “almost the very same age as her”.14 She remembers later on in one of her poems that when her husband died, he was “in the middle of the just course of his life”.15

The Avalos family originally hailed from Castille. The marriage served to seal a political agreement. In June 1495, Fabrizio Colonna shifted his alliance from the French party to the Spanish party of King Ferdinand II of Aragon, who in 1501 created him lieutenant general of the Kingdom of Naples. The Marquis of Pescara had lost his father as a child and was raised by his paternal aunt, Constance of Avalos, in the castle of the island of Ischia, one of the favourite places of the Neapolitan court. Soon, however, he passed under the tutelage of his future father-in-law Fabrizio Colonna, who directed him to a military career. In this way, Vittoria was educated as a princess under the supervision of her mother in the castle of the island of Ischia, one of the favourite places of the Neapolitan court.

When Ferdinand and Vittoria reached the right age for marriage, they exchanged vows in Marino on the 6th of June 1507. The act was recorded the day after at the senatorial palace on the Capitoline hill, in Rome.

Vittoria and Ferdinand celebrated their union at Ischia on the 27th of December, 1509. The marriage consolidated Fabrizio’s position in the Kingdom of Naples, and on the 11th of July 1511, he received the title of Grand Constable, which from that moment onwards remained a prerogative of the Colonnas of Paliano. Later, on the 28th of October, Fabrizio obtained the title of Lieutenant General of the Spanish army in Italy. As a consequence, Ferdinand, too, had his military destiny marked out, which would bring

13 For a new biography see Donati 2019, with documents and a complete bibliography.
14 Giovio, Panigada 1931, 208.
him to the highest degrees of the imperial army. Once married, Ferdinand and Vittoria went to live in Naples in the now-lost Palazzo of Avalos near Santa Maria Maggiore, but they also had available to them the Villa Pietralba at the foot of the hills of Sant Elmo (today’s Palazzo of Avalos in Via dei Mille) and other castles. However, the worldly cultural life of Naples, especially among women, took place mostly in the safety of the court of Constance of Avalos at Ischia, which from 1511 became Victoria’s retreat as she awaited the return of her husband from war.

In the years of their marriage, the Marchioness of Pescara shone with intelligence and grace. She wore opulent clothing, rode in parades, attended banquets, wrote, and recited poetry, danced, and conversed with dames and knights; but to the contrary of what was said then and which some erroneously still think today, she was not at all a beautiful woman. The poets celebrated her as an ideal beauty out of respect for courtly etiquette. What truly made her unique in the society of her time was her poetry. She was able to improvise poetic verses, and though her first poems, which marked the fortune of her first poetic season, are lost, however, we know that her sweet style moved those who heard her. One poet said that she had converted Ischia into a new Parnassus and a new Athens. The “fame of her immortal and divine beauty” spread quickly, but the courtly poets were simply following the conventional rules of courtly love that hardened back to the myth of the beauty of Laura sung by Petrarch and the praise of virtues and ideal characteristics had nothing to do with the personality or objective physical traits of the Marchioness of Pescara, who – according to Paolo Giovio who had met her in Ischia – had black eyes and hair, erect and certain posture, long and slender hands and, in general, a very aristocratic appearance. Vittoria led a restrained life, abstaining from rich foods and wine, but received her guests with liberality and magnificence. The papal datary Gian Matteo Giberti, who became her friend, once said to Giovio that Vittoria was like a mosaic: beautiful from far away, ugly close up. Giovio, who retained the memory of the young spouse, could not imagine how, once widowed, Vittoria mistreated herself to such a degree with fasts, prayers, and hair shirts that not even her brother Ascanio recognized her when he saw her again in 1535. After ten years of widowhood, she appeared thin, unassuming, and pious like an old sister in the odour of sanctity.

While Vittoria lived at the Avalos’ court, she walked with a proud and lofty gait and behaved formally as a princess. Still, her sobriety rejected every passion, and her elegance did not warm the heart. Her marriage was unhappy. She herself declares in rhyme: “Sterile the body was, the soul fecund”.17 A Veneto humanist confirms it indirectly when he describes her as “a beautiful virgin, most modest, most wise, adorned with virtues natural and artificial.”18 The lack of children banished the Marquis of Pescara from the conjugal bed in search of gallant adventures. However, Vittoria did not bat an eye at the love affairs of her husband, and she behaved like a lady. She was able to endure his sexual infidelities and kept her modesty as a precious good which guaranteed her authority and autonomy. In public, she made it always known that she was loved and honoured by her husband. In this way, while Ferdinand chased after fleeting adventures in hunting, women, and war, also contracting syphilis, Vittoria remained in the Kingdom of Naples under the watchful eye of two old women. Instead of drowning herself in trivial amusements like other noblewomen, she immersed herself in deep reading, thus forging a virile temper; as a spouse, she carried out the role of her husband when he was in war, and as a widow, she held her own with the Pope and Emperor.

In effect, Vittoria completed the curriculum of an educational program within the walls of her home, the details of which we do not exactly know. There, she developed an early and spontaneous interest in history, poetry, politics, and religion. While married, she possessed a personal library, which she kept in the castle of Roccasecca, a feudal holding belonging centuries earlier to the family of St. Thomas Aquinas and passed down as an inheritance to the Avalos. She loved to retire in solitary meditation. Her passion for study was certainly fed by her father, who, in Florence, had attended the Orti Oricellari and had come to know various intellectuals, including Niccolò Machiavelli. The author of The Prince was so struck by Fabrizio Colonna that he made him one of the protagonists in the Seven Books of the Art of War. Much

16 Andrea of Asola’s Introduction to the Divina Commedia by Dante Alighieri printed by Aldo Manuzio in Venice, 1515: see Colonna, Visconti 1840, XLI-XLI.
18 Francesco Pescennio Negro, Cosmodysticha: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 3971, fol. 690r.
later, Vittoria met some of the men that her father had associated with in Florence, among them Gasparo Contarini, who became a determining personality in her spiritual life.19 Meritorious diplomat of the Serenissima (Republic of Venice) and a future reformer of the Church, Contarini met Vittoria Colonna in Rome when she was already a widow and he had just been nominated Cardinal. During her married life, the Marchioness of Pescara had aspired to the greatness of her ancestors no less than had her husband, who longed to cover himself with glory in battle, but she was forced to disguise her ambition by displaying in public that irreprehensible probity that suited a woman of her rank. Giovio, who knew her well, affirmed that, though “it seemed that with Christian piety she scorned glory”, it could be said that “she rather dissimulated than despised”.20 This ambition was not lessened even when Vittoria was left a widow.

1527 was a fateful year for Vittoria. She was forced to face a very difficult trial, which changed her destiny. On February 24, Ferdinand of Ávalos won the battle of Pavia, the most memorable of the century, because in a single day, the King of France was taken prisoner along with all his captains, but later, on the 3rd of December, Ferdinand would die after atrocious suffering because of septicemia caused by poor treatment of his wounds. During the long course of his illness, the Marquis of Pescara was implicated in the Milan plot. Disappointed at not having received a just reward from Charles V after his victory, the Marquis of Pescara allowed himself to be tempted by the promises of Girolamo Morone, chancellor of the Duke of Milan, who had come to an agreement with Pope Clement VII and the Republic of Venice, promising to him the Crown of Naples in exchange for the liberation of Italy from the imperial army. The hero of Pavia was basically being asked to betray Charles V and align himself with Francis I, whom he had just defeated on the field of battle. The marquis was on the point of betraying the emperor, but the old-fashioned knight feared staining himself with this indelible shame. Francesco Guicciardini, a witness to many events of the time, wrote that the Marquis of Pescara did not wish to “besmirch his honor and faith”.21 Therefore, he asked advice from his wife, whom he trusted, and she reacted with the greatest firmness, exhorting him to keep faith with the emperor. From this episode, we may measure the nobility and farsightedness of Vittoria Colonna, loyal to the Spanish party that her father had embraced thirty years before and coherent with the policy of the victor who, in effect, would continue to dominate the peninsula unopposed. The Milan plot ended with the arrest of Morone. However, even from his deathbed, the Marquis of Pescara, who had been Morone’s great friend, implored the emperor to release the plotter from prison.

Later, Vittoria Colonna, in order to remove any suspicion from her husband, dedicated to him a series of lyrical poems celebrating the dead hero as a shining sun. Within ten years, she built a literary monument to eliminate any stain on his honour and win the favour of the public. Aware that the name of the Marquis of Pescara had been muddied by Morone’s plot, she highlighted the virtues of the victor of the battle of Pavia by expressing an inconsolable sorrow in her lovingly composed romantic poems, first because of his long absence and later because of his tragic end. In this way, she transfigured the Marquis of Pescara into the ideal unconquered hero and sealed a devotion to his memory forever in poetry. In the same way, modulated in the verses of a love story that could have been written in prose like a sentimental novel and remaining within the elegiac tone of Petrarch’s tradition, she reserved for herself a place in the ranks of the elite of women. It was an exceptional encomiastic operation that brought together courtiers and literati in the name of courteously and Petrarchan style. The myth of the “divine” Marchioness of Pescara was already fixed as early as 1531 in the knightly poem Orlando Innamorato by Francesco Berni, who knew her personally. Once she secured the friendship of Bembo, who in poetic matters was an absolute authority in Italy, Vittoria ensured for herself forever the fame of “divine” poet.

As evidence of just how much, though at a distance, she had intensely experienced the political affairs of her husband and of how scrupulous her sense of honor and her nobility were, it must be said that she never forgot the wrong that Morone suffered because of her husband. The Milanese chancellor had been sent to prison by the Marquis of Pescara to erase any doubt regarding his involvement in the plot. Years later, when the son of Morone took up an ecclesiastical career, Vittoria Colonna followed his career from afar and assured him of her unconditional support. Cardinal Giovanni Morone became an outstanding

20 Giovio, Panigada 1931, 199.
21 Guicciardini, Panigada 1929, IV, 311-312.
diplomatic figure of ecclesiastical reform during the time of the Council of Trent. He was a friend of Vittoria Colonna, and though he remembered that the Marquis of Pescara “had been the ruin of my father in Milan”, he demonstrated that friendship with great care during the sensational inquisitorial trial held against him. At the time of Cardinal Morone’s trial, Vittoria Colonna was dead ten years before, but he distanced her memory from the target of the Inquisition by saying: “I visited her no less than a few times here in the church of Santa Anna” in Rome and “from her conversation I know that she had been friends with friar Bernardino of Siena [B. Ochino], and I doubt that she would also have had his opinions. While, with me, she did not reveal anything and the greater part of her talk concerned affairs of State, in which she had great expertise, or regarding the most Reverend Polo, [Reginald Pole], thanks to whom, once she told me that her health was restored because she stopped her and removed her from many vain fantasies. Occasionally, she also spent time with the most reverend [Jacopo] Sadoletto and Bembo, but her soul was all with the most Reverend Polo, as shown by the fact that in her will she left him a part of her inheritance.”

When she was suddenly left a widow, the Marchioness of Pescara enclosed herself within the walls of San Silvestro in Capite of Rome. She chose that convent of Augustinian nuns because the Colonna family held the patronage of a chapel in that church. However, the pope did not allow her to take vows. For this reason, she returned to Naples and took refuge in the castle of Ischia, where she lived an almost monastic life. The pope had granted her the privilege of a private altar and a priest at her service. In addition, he had given her permission to enter monasteries at her discretion, provided she did not remain in any of them permanently. Ten years of widowhood passed, at the end of which, having respected the clauses of her husband’s will, she would be able to retrieve her dowry and consider beginning a new life. At 43 years she found herself single and wealthy. She had no other worldly obligations nor a feudal court. She could choose to live freely and meet with whomever she wished. In her heart, there was no dream of a new spouse, even less the friendship of a woman, but only the desire to save her own soul by walking in the path of true faith. Frivolity was not part of her character. Her life was surrounded more by men than women. She decided to flee all worldliness, live with thrift and frugality, give many alms, do charity, and meditate daily on the word of God.

In 1535, she returned to Rome with the excuse of meeting with her brother Ascanio Colonna and her new-born nephew Marcantonio (the future hero of Lepanto). Still, her true aim was to ask the new Pope Paul III Farnese for permission to take vows. It was denied her for a second time, but later, she remained incognito for a while in the convent of San Silvestro in Capite, involving herself more directly in ecclesiastical affairs. The new pope had encouraged great hopes in the Romans, who were still suffering from the damage inflicted on the city by the Sack of the Lansquenets in 1527. The faithful demanded a change of direction in the Church. Everyone spoke of reform. The Marchioness of Pescara lived intensely through the years that led to the opening of a synod, the Council of Trent, which would change the course of European religious history. She continuously received visits from persons who asked for her help, wanting to know her opinion or engage her in discussions and, although she never shirked her obligations, derived from her rank, which constrained her to courtesy with her neighbour, to bring help to the needy and to lend an ear to whoever came to her for any reason, she fled from court’s plotting and timewasters. She only loved the company of cultivated and religious people. For many years she supported the rigorist Franciscan friars. Her favourite became the Capuchin friar Bernardino Ochino, whom she helped in any way possible until he fell into disgrace.

Cardinal Gasparo Contarini was a Venetian patrician of irreprehensible morality, solid culture, forthright character, and famous for being the future “Angelick” Pope. From 1535 to 1542, the year of his death, he became a spiritual referent for Vittoria Colonna, who, like him, intended to remedy the evils of the Church by eliminating abuses and privileges and by returning peace to the Christian world. The Marchioness of Pescara was very active in promoting the cause of the Capuchins, which at the time represented an absolute example of charity and rigour. In order to help those poor friars, who had many enemies among the ecclesiastical hierarchies, she appealed to the pope with the help of Contarini. Soon after, she requested an explanation of the subject of free will from Contarini through the Venetian patrician

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Alvise Priuli, who was a close friend of Reginald Pole. She wished to know exactly where the free will of man began and ended in the sight of God because she knew that Martin Luther was against catholic doctrine on this point. Contarini responded by sending her a small treatise accompanied by a letter. At the same time, he sent a similar pamphlet to the Sienese patrician Lattanzio Tolomei, another common friend, who later encouraged the friendship of Vittoria with Michelangelo.

In this same period, Vittoria Colonna met Reginald Pole, who was created Cardinal on the 22nd of December 1536. When she met him in Rome, she was enchanted. The young English aristocrat spoke with admirable eloquence and candour and showed a deep literary culture and a singular modesty in life. According to Ludovico Beccadelli, a common friend, Pole was then of a “pleasant appearance and jocund conversation”, not to mention “very aware of the things of the world” and for “having read much, with good manners he was able to entertain everyone and he did so”. A nephew of Henry VIII, Pole, however, was persecuted by his king for the lack of support for the English schism. For this reason, he lived in exile for a long time, finding protection in Rome and Venice. The life of the young Cardinal of England soon ended up intertwined with that of the Marchioness of Pescara.

From 1525 on, the marchioness alternated her time in the convent of San Silvestro in Capite with travel. She travelled out of interest, not for amusement. In 1537 she let it be known that she intended to set sail for Venice in order to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. However, in the end, she remained for nearly a year in the court of Ferrara, where she was able to familiarize herself better with French politics (since the Duke of Ferrara was linked to the French court) and thus to be able financially and politically to support the Jesuits, who had just reached Italy. At the same time, she continued to support Bernardino Ochino and followed him to many of the cities where he was asked to preach. It was not only faith that moved her to do this but also the ambition to count as something in history and to compete with the great men of her time in the spiritual reform of the Church.

We do not know when Vittoria Colonna met Michelangelo for the first time, but it is certain that she struck up a true friendship with him (“in a Christian knot”, as she herself wrote to him on the 20th of July 1545) only when the pope had made the first steps on the way of the Council of Trent. Once Michelangelo was charged to paint the Last Judgement (1535) he had a daily reason to be involved in the religious debate on the reform. His conscience as a man and artist could not remain indifferent to the hopes and disappointments which arose due to the series of events that ensued: the calling of the council on ecclesiastic reform in the middle of November 1536 (which concluded without result on the 9th of March 1537), the Peace of Nice between Charles V and Francis I (1538), the project of a universal synod which was immediately suspended (1538), the talks with the Protestants which foundered immediately after Contarini had reached a historical accord with Philip Melanchthon at Regensburg (1541), and the first failed meeting of the Council of Trent (1542). It was in that moment when the Catholic Church seemed headed towards reform and dialogue with the Protestants that Michelangelo recognized in the Marchioness of Pescara the voice of God: “A man in a woman, rather a god, / who speaks by her mouth”.

Vittoria Colonna’s meetings at San Silvestro in Quirinale in the first months of 1539 were decisive for the beginning of her friendship with Michelangelo. According to Francisco de Hollanda, it was in this convent that the Dominican friar Ambrogio Catarino held spiritual exercises in preparation for Easter. His spiritual talks greatly impacted the chosen few who participated. Vittoria manifested an extraordinary interest in those preachers who were able to grasp the demands of the true faith and the necessity for a return to the Gospel spirit. In order to inform her doctrinal thinking more deeply and always with respect for the ecclesiastic authorities and catholic orthodoxy, she consulted several figures who had a reputation for wisdom and rectitude.

In 1541, the life of the Marchioness of Pescara became more difficult and austere. The “War of Salt”

24 Beccadelli 1744-1757, 385.
25 V. Colonna to M. Buonarotti, Convent of Saint Catherine of Viterbo, 20 July [1545]: Florence, Archive of Casa Buonarroti, IX, fol. 510; see Colonna 1892, 268, n. CLVII. For the dating of this and the other letters exchanged by Buonarroti and Colonna see Donati 2019, 121-174.
26 Vat. Lat. 3211, fol. LXVIIIr; see Buonarroti 2016, 219-220, n. 68 (Rime liriche e amorose).
27 For the location and dating of the meetings in San Silvestro at Quirinale see: Donati 2019, 125-131 (particularly 127, n. 535).
28 Hollanda F. de 1914-1915, I, 10 passim.
broke out between Paul III and Ascanio Colonna, and she was forced to escape to Orvieto, where she took refuge in the convent of the Dominican nuns of Saint Paul. The pope conquered all feudal holdings of the Colonna family in Lazio. At the fall of the last fortress of Paliano, the marchioness demonstrated her noble temper by pronouncing a memorable phrase: “things come and go, provided the persons are safe.” From her cloister in Orvieto, she never ceased to appeal to the piety of the pope by composing some of her best sonnets on pastoral and political issues but viewed in a spiritual and evangelical light:

(E22) I see only the shine of the armed brigades
(E23) I pray to the divine father who has so much of flame
(S1:156) If earthly command, with an armed hand

She also appealed several times to the emperor, working in vain to restore peace between the pope and her brother. Soon after, she moved to Viterbo, to the court of the Cardinal of England, who had recently been named pontifical legate. At that time, Reginald Pole had lost his mother, who had been sentenced to death by Henry VIII. For this reason, Vittoria Colonna took it upon herself to protect him like a son. After Contarini’s death, she hoped that one day, Pole would become the new “Angelical” Pope.

At Viterbo, in the summer of 1542, she became familiar with the Benefit of Christ, a literary work by the monk Benedetto Fontanini of Mantua, but she read it in the revised and supplemented version by Marcantonio Flaminio. Between the end of 1541 and the first half of 1542, in order to revise the Benefit of Christ, Flaminio had worked intensely on a series of commentaries to the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans and the Gospels of Matthew and John. Vittoria Colonna played a role in that feverish exegetic, catechetical, and editorial activity. Flaminio envisaged that God’s mercy and forgiveness were bestowed on anyone who possessed faith in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. During Flaminio’s stay in Viterbo, Vittoria developed the idea of involving Michelangelo in the creation of new Christological images capable of interpreting the evangelical spirit preached by Flaminio. Thus, between the spring of 1543 and the summer of 1545, Michelangelo was inspired to create the Crucifixion, the Pietà, the Christ, and the Woman of Samaria. The drawings, or cartonetti, were translated into devotional paintings by Michelangelo with the help of his young pupil, the Valtelline painter Marcello Venusti. These images were later promulgated in a multitude of copies and variations. Between Vittoria Colonna’s spiritual poems, which marked the most important phase of her long lyrical career, and Michelangelo’s Christological images exist an intense exchange of meaning. Vittoria’s poems and Michelangelo’s images complement each other in a lyrical and visual discourse of faith that was shared and promoted by Cardinal Pole in his court. This artistic promotion is a further proof of the religious activism of the Marchioness of Pescara, which characterized the direction of her life in a salient and ever more exclusive way from the time she was left a widow until her death. Vittoria Colonna had learned to discipline the body and sight, according to a Franciscan devotional practice which reached its zenith in Viterbo, where she lived in communion with Cardinal Pole and his circle. In that period, Vittoria’s faith was substantially the same as Flaminio’s, who had approached and developed the teaching of Juan de Valdes in an autonomous and original way, enriching the reading of Canonical, Lutheran and Calvinist texts. The Spanish layman Valdes had taught Christian doctrine to an exclusive noble circle in Naples, saying that the Grace of God alone was sufficient for eternal salvation. Immediately after the death of Valdes, who would later be considered a heresiarch, the exegetical activity of Flaminio gave rise to the so-called “Church of Viterbo” or “Circle of Spirituals”. Flaminio’s doctrine was the fruit of an eclectic and aristocratic thought, strongly critical of any formalism or dogma. However, his religious dissent, with

29 Colonna’s words are referred by Brunamonte de Rossi to Cardinal Farnese, Orvieto, 14 May 1541: see Tordi 1895, I 473-533, pp. 498 e 528, n. XI.
30 The mark is from the Colonna Bullock 1982.
31 Benedetto da Mantova 1972.
33 Donati 2021, 323-335; Donati 2022, 199-221.
34 Donati, forthcoming.
respect to the most rigid and orthodox positions, never reached the point of rupture or abandonment of the Catholic camp. Similarly, the Cardinal of England, like the Marchioness of Pescara, remained faithful to the very end to the unity of Christians in the bosom of the Church of Rome. Pole was amiable and charismatic, but he did not at all want to become the head of a religious sect. Like Vittoria Colonna, he pursued, more than anything else, a political agenda which aimed at the pacification of the Church and Empire. Pole was able to convince those with whom he came into contact to seek their own good. For this reason, after the death of Contarini, he became the Marchioness of Pescara’s chief spiritual reference point, who, at her deathbed, was consoled by Priuli and Flaminio, the two men closest to Pole. Later, destiny would put Cardinal Pole tragically to the test when he was called by the Catholic Queen Mary Stuart, his cousin, to govern England with her. His moderate ideas would then clash with realpolitik, leading to the persecution of the protestants and a general bloodbath.  

In the summer of 1543, Vittoria fell gravely ill. Her health continued to worsen, even if, at times, it seemed to improve. Finally, she returned to Rome and retired to the convent of the Benedictine nuns of Sant’Anna de’ Funari. At the beginning of 1547, her health worsened for the last time, and she was moved to the house of her cousin Giulia Colonna, the wife of Giuliano Cesarini, Gonfaloniere of Rome. She died on the morning of 25 February in full communion with the Catholic Church. Her passing was described by friends, who were around her bed, as the death of a saint. Later, the Roman Inquisition investigated some old friends of Vittoria Colonna, but this investigation, which risks discrediting her reputation by accusations of heresy, was never brought to a posthumous trial on her. Nevertheless, more recently, these Inquisition’s papers have been used as justification to insinuate certain false opinions, which have become the object of a sterile historical debate.

In truth, the Marchioness of Pescara cultivated rather different ambitions in her life than to become the idol of poets and courts. She never thought to deviate from orthodoxy. She wanted only to pursue the good of her own family and the society in which she lived, according to Christian morality and the ideals of the nobility of the sword to which her lineage belonged. She looked for the sense of true faith through adherence to the evangelical spirit and by nourishing herself with the thoughts of the Fathers of the Church. The fact that she could not take vows did not prevent her from aspiring to the contemplation of divine mysteries. Through involvement with the Reform, she discovered a new religious dimension that entrusted everything to the salvific vision of the faith. Prayer and reading fortified her spirit as much as the physical rigours to which she subjected herself, weakening her body. For many years, she enjoyed health sufficient to continue her spiritual path until tuberculosis ended her life. Taking advantage of a monastic regime unencumbered by vows, as a widow, she gave herself to an ever-greater mobility and tireless proselytism. If, on the one hand, she continued to concern herself with administrative tasks inherent to her duties and family interests, on the other hand, she involved herself directly in the politics of the Church and Empire, feeling her individual destiny deeply connected to the universal one. She was able to gain the sympathy of Charles V and Paul III, who often summoned her to audiences in the Vatican to hear her opinions. Thanks to her literary and political initiative, she became the idol of a vast public, predominantly male, who acclaimed her as “divine”. She dispensed charity with careful discretion and extraordinary liberality. Therefore, she was able to benefit many people who were sincerely grateful to her. Her will designated her brother Ascanio as heir, but she left all her money to Cardinal Pole.

Vittoria had legions of admirers, many of whom had known her only by fame, but those who also enjoyed her company always sought her out with pleasure. No one escaped the myth that she had built, a woman full of good judgment, rectitude, devotion, and compassion. At any one moment in the “divine” Marchioness of Pescara, one could see coexisting the cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, and temperance, together with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, but also one like Pietro Aretino could look on her with repugnance, sarcasm, and suspicion, and see the seeds of conspiracy, fanaticism and heresy.

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36 De Frede 1971.
39 For Aretino's negative judgments of Colonna, see Donati 2019, 88-94. For Aretino’s ambiguity towards Michelangelo, see Procaccioli 2022, 145-154.
Many women of the 16th century were celebrated for their beauty, culture, faith, power, wealth, seductiveness, and temperament. We might evoke the names of Isabella D’Este, Caterina Cibo, Giulia Gonzaga, Renee of France, and Margaret of Navarre, each of whom had a more or less important place in the life of Vittoria Colonna, but they share very little with her on the existential level. Perhaps only Margaret of Navarre presents something in common, in the highest sense of the term, only because of her political activism concealed by an intensely religious profile. The Marchioness of Pescara was able to fight for the principles of her life, a life spent especially for the good of others. For this reason, her profile stands out from most other women of her time, and today, she still strikes us with her courage, determination, and intelligence. She fought her entire life in the name of her family, the unity of the Church, and the Empire, both key ideals of the Renaissance.

In line with all these efforts to demonstrate how women have been active and valuable agents of change and in order to address the debate sparked by the COVID-19 health crisis, the Women’s Response to Crisis project proposes some Christian figures to look up to for inspiration to navigate these challenging times. Saints, martyrs, mothers, sisters, widows, consecrated, and anonymous heroes who responded to crisis situations in different ways and different periods, yet their experiences are connected by their strong dedication and commitment. We could conclude that following the examples of Saint Praxedes, Saint Pudenziana, Saint Marcella, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Frances of Rome, Vittoria Colonna, Blessed Elisabetta Canori Mora, Blessed Anna Maria Taigi, Blessed Celine Borzecka, Blessed Colomba Gabriel, the twenty-one women of the 1946 Constituent Assembly, along with the Syrian, Colombian and Lebanese female migrants, we are called not only to reflect and pray but also to act, right here and now. Let us not forget that our fearless women responded to similar crises, often putting their lives on the line. I am convinced that under the protection of these women who lived their feminine genius in the most extraordinary ways, we too will be able to respond ethically to the personal, medical, economic, political, and spiritual crises of our time. The heroic but too often forgotten or overlooked gestures of these women had a great impact across space and time and are a constant reminder. Our volume is a tribute to their silent yet powerful.

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