

The Sixteenth-century Altar Painting of the Cattaran (Kotor) Fraternity of Leather-makers

Abstract: The altar painting that the Cattaran Fraternity of Leather-makers commissioned from the Venetian painter Girolamo da Santa Croce in the first half of the sixteenth century contains the images of Sts Bartholomew, George and Antoninus. The presence of the first two saints is looked at from the perspective of a long-established religious tradition, while the reasons for depicting the archbishop Antoninus giving alms to the poor appear to reside in the then prevailing religious policy and the local social situation.

Keywords: altar painting, Fraternity of Leather-makers, Kotor (Cattaro), St Bartholomew, *caritas*, Fraternity of Shoemakers, Observant Dominicans

During the late medieval period, altar paintings, statues and polypychs became an integral part of the everyday religious practices of the Catholic Church in Cattaro (Kotor).¹ For the most part commissioned by fraternities, altar paintings were nonetheless increasingly commissioned by lay persons from various socioeconomic strata. Information about the presence and importance of altar paintings in the spiritual life of medieval Cattaro can be gleaned from written sources, especially fraternity statutes and citizens' wills.

A distinctive type of lay associations, fraternities strongly combined occupational and daily-life concerns with typically late medieval religious requirements. The focus of their religious practice was on celebrating the patron saint, on whose feast day annual festivities were organized. Solemn oaths, associated with significant events, and daily prayers were offered to a fraternity's patron saint depicted in altar paintings or statues. The Cattaran fraternities usually had their altars set up at town churches, but rarely had the right of patronage (*ius patronatus*) of a church. An especially large number of altars could be found in the churches of the mendicant orders, which is not at all surprising given that Franciscan and Dominican teaching was designed to have a wide appeal and that their religious practice led to the multiplication of side altars in churches.

¹ Cattaro, modern Kotor in the Gulf of Kotor, Montenegro, was part of medieval Serbia between 1185 and 1371 and under Venetian suzerainty from 1420 to 1797.

After the extramural Dominican church of St Nicholas on the Škudra river was torn down for security reasons, in 1545 a new one was built within the town walls near the monastery of St Clara.² One of the craft fraternities that had their altar set up in the new Dominican church was the Fraternity of Leather-makers.³ The altar dedicated to the patron saint of their trade, St Bartholomew, was decorated with a painting (today in Kotor Cathedral Treasury) showing St Bartholomew, the mounted figure of St George slaying the dragon and St Antoninus of Florence, and signed *Heironymo da Santa Croce – P.* The painting has been drawing scholarly attention mostly for its unusual style. The style has been described as conservative, the composition as awkward, and the figures of saints as erratically arranged.⁴ Stylistic conservatism was typical of the Venetian painters Girolamo da Santa Croce (1480–1556) and his son Francesco, both followers of Giovanni Bellini. It was exactly Girolamo's adherence to the medieval tradition in a predominantly Renaissance setting that prompted churches and fraternities in Venetian Dalmatia to commission his paintings.⁵ Rather than result-

² For more about the Dominican monastery, see I. Stjepčević, *Katedrala sv. Tripuna u Kotoru* (Split 1938), 62–63; on the original church of St Nicholas on the river and the history of the Dominican order in Kotor, cf. S. Krasić, "Nekadašnji dominikanski samostan sv. Nikole u Kotoru (1266–1807), *PPUD* 28 (1989), 129–141.

³ The information about the decoration of the main and side altars of the Dominican church comes from the chronicle written in 1716 by Fra Vincentije Mario Babić. The intramural church of St Nicholas had eight altars, one each dedicated to Sts Nicholas, Dominic, Catherine of Siena, Vincent Ferrer, Bartholomew, Hyacinth, Barbara and Mary Magdalene, and each with a painting. The chronicle, "Sulle Boche di cattaro concernenti il culto", is now kept in the Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb (III, 88). Its sections containing information about the altar paintings have been published in N. Luković, *Blažena Ozana Kotorka* (Kotor 1965), 38–39, and Krasić, "Dominikanski samostan", 133, 140.

⁴ The style of the painting has been discussed by D. Westphal, "Malo poznata slikarska djela XIV do XVIII stoljeća u Dalmaciji", *Rad JAZU* 258 (1937), 33; K. Prijatelj, "Nekoliko slika Girolama i Francesca da Santacroce" *Radovi Instituta JAZU u Zadru* III (1957), 191; V. J. Djurić, *Dubrovačka slikarska škola* (Belgrade 1963), 220; Luković, *Ozana Kotorka*, 15; K. Prijatelj, "Marginalije uz neke umjetnine relikvijara Katorske katedrale", *Starine Crne Gore* III–IV (1965–66), 25–30; N. Luković, "Freske i slike katedrale sv. Tripuna", in *800 godina katedrale sv. Tripuna u Kotoru* (Kotor 1966), 67; J. Grgurević, "Oltari, slike i umjetnički predmeti katorskih bratovština", *GPMK* XLI–XLII (1963–64), 89–90.

⁵ A list of the churches containing paintings by Girolamo and his son Francesco can be found in Prijatelj, "Marginalije", 27–29. On the work of the Santa Croce family, see G. Fiocco, "I Pittori da Santacroce", *L'Arte* (1916), 179; K. Prijatelj, "Starigradski triptih Francesca da Santacroce", *Bilten Arhiva komune hrvatske* II/2 (1960), 8–22; idem, *Studije o umjetninama u Dalmaciji* (Zagreb 1963), vol. I, 44–46; C. Fisković, "Neobjavljena



Girolamo da Santa Croce, Altar painting of the Fraternity of Leather-makers

ing from the painter's lack of skill, the obviously conservative style of the Leather-makers Fraternity's altar painting should be seen as reflecting the patrons' taste. It seems likely that the Fraternity recognized in the classical three-figure composition the medieval form of polyptych which they were familiar with because it was in front of such altar paintings that they prayed

djela Girolama i Francesca da Santacroce na Visu, Lopudu i Korčuli", *Peristil* VI–VII (1963–64), 57–66; K. Prijatelj, "Le opera di Girolamo e Francesco da Santacroce in Dalmazia", *Arte lombarda* XII/1 (1967), 55–66.

in the town churches. The painting was commissioned by a group of Kotor citizens and for their local community, and therefore should not be looked at from the perspective of the Venetian environment, where its style would have certainly been considered old-fashioned. As we shall see below, the style of the painting, if looked at in the context of the community for which it was intended, goes hand in hand with its somewhat unusual iconography. Both have their origin in the medieval taste, outlook and religious practice of the townspeople in the first half of the sixteenth century.

The exact date of the painting is not known. It has been assumed to have been commissioned in 1545, when the intramural Dominican monastery was built, and its style does correspond to that date.⁶ A surviving document of 1540 makes mention of a *pala* of the Leather-makers Fraternity in the making of which the woodcarver Francisci took part.⁷ Yet, in dating the painting based on its style one should take into account that a conservative-style painting could have been produced at any point during a quite long period of time. In the absence of a documentary source, the only secure *terminus post quem* seems to be 1523, the year Antoninus, archbishop of Florence, was canonized. The other limit would be 1556, the year of Girolamo da Santa Croce's death.

In the centre of the painting is St Bartholomew, patron saint of leatheworkers. On his right side is the mounted figure of St George, on his left St Antoninus. The patron saint is raised, like a statue, on a Renaissance pedestal decorated with relief carvings of dolphins. With a cloak over his shoulders, he holds his own flayed skin in the left hand, and a long knife in his right. St Antoninus (1389–1459), a Dominican friar and archbishop of Florence, holds a book and a crucifix in his left hand, while giving alms to the poor kneeling behind the pedestal with the other. Sts Bartholomew and Antoninus are standing in the foreground, which is clearly set off by a stone slab, against a Renaissance landscape with a walled city in the distance. The part of the landscape closer to the viewer contains the figure of St George slaying the dragon, while the princess praying on a hill is shown in the distance. Next to the dragon is a skull and bones.

That the cult of St Bartholomew had a tradition in Kotor can be seen from the reference to a church dedicated to him which was made as early as 1288 in a document which shows that services in the church were celebrated by Dominicans with permission of its many hereditary owners (patrician families of Bisanti/Bizanti, Drago, Grubogna/Grubonja, Pasquali/

⁶ The dating was proposed by Prijatelj, "Marginalije", 30.

⁷ M. Milošević, "Prilozi za istoriju zanata u Kotoru", in *Pomorski trgovci, ratnici i mecene* (Podgorica–Belgrade 2003), 142, note 20 (after Historical Archives, Kotor, Court-Notarial Documents [IAK SN] XLVI, 662).

Paskvali, Buchia/Buča, Zaguri and Basili/Bazili).⁸ It was in the first half of the sixteenth century, when the leather-makers' painting was done, that the church of St Bartholomew rose to prominence. Blessed Osanna, a highly revered local Dominican tertiary and hermitess, chose for her first hermitage a small cell at the corner of the church of St Bartholomew between the town walls in the northwest part of the town. She lived there for seven years to the astonishment of the townspeople at learning that there was such a thing as a town anchorite.⁹ Also from the first half of the sixteenth century dates a reference to the relic of St Bartholomew deposited in the Cathedral. The bishop of Cattaro, Triffon Bisanti/Tripo Bizanti, ordered in 1515 that the saint's finger be put on display on the main altar on his feast day (*In sancti Bartholomei apostolic eius digitus*).¹⁰

The reasons for the presence of Sts George and Antoninus on the altar painting of the Leather-makers Fraternity should be looked for as much in the local tradition as in the then prevailing religious practices. St George, the previous patron saint of the city and patron of armourers and sword makers, enjoyed profound reverence in Kotor throughout the medieval period. Even after St Tryphon became Kotor's new patron saint, the old custom of electing town officials on St George's Day continued to be observed. A connection between the two cults can also be seen from a legend according to which the relics of St Tryphon during their translation were first brought to the abbot of the monastery of St George near Perast in the Gulf of Kotor. In memory of that event, the abbot of the monastery of St George was to celebrate Mass in the cathedral on St Tryphon's Day.¹¹ By commissioning the image of the city's old patron saint, the leather-makers of Kotor, described in a local dispute as incomers, probably wished to highlight the tradition as an evidence of their being well-adjusted to their environment.

⁸ On the document describing how Domnius, bishop of Cattaro, harshly offended the Dominicans by physically assaulting abbot Urban in the church of St Bartholomew in 1288, and on the errors made in a translation of the document, see L. Blehova Čelebić, *Hrišćanstvo u Boki 1200–1500. Koterski distrikt* (Podgorica 2006), 45–46.

⁹ Osanna's ascetic endeavour was supported by honourable Slavuš, Toma Grubogna/Grubonja of the Ordine di San Francesco Osservante and the Dominican theologian Fra Vicko Buchia/Buča. Another Dominican, Serafino Razzi (1531–1611), penned her vita following his 1589 stay in Kotor and printed it in Florence in 1592. His *Vita della reverenda serva di Dio la madre Osanna da Cattaro, dell'ordine di San Domenico* was included in the third part of Timoteo Cisilla's *Bove d'oro* in the section "Dodaci" [Appendices] of *Analisti, Hroničari. Biografi*, ed. M. Milošević (Cetinje 1996), 102–129.

¹⁰ Stjepčević, *Katedrala*, 37, note 211.

¹¹ P. Butorac, *Opatija sv. Jurja kod Perasta* (Perast 1999), 18–19.

The most intriguing element of the altar painting is certainly the presence of St Antoninus of Florence. His presence on the altar painting commissioned by a Cattaran craft fraternity sheds light on many aspects of religiosity. Firstly, the leather-makers' altar was set up in a Dominican church, and St Antoninus was a prominent vicar general of the reformed Dominican order pursuing rigorous discipline. The fact that in Cattaro St Bartholomew was especially revered by the Dominicans favours the presumed connection between the iconography of the altar painting and Dominican teaching. As head of the Archbishopric of Florence in 1445–59, Antoninus put much effort into upholding the moral and spiritual strength of the faithful in order to encourage, but also to channel, lay religiosity, which by then had developed forms of expression in Italian towns; hence his particular commitment to organizing charity work on the city level. Pope Nicholas V supported Antoninus' charitable pursuits, which became particularly visible during a plague outbreak and in the wake of a strong earthquake. It should be noted that the pope proclaimed him as worthy of being venerated as St Bernardino of Siena.¹² The introduction of the cult of St Antoninus in Cattaro, where the saintly cult of the Observant Franciscan Bernardino of Siena was particularly strong, may be understood as the Reformed or Observant Dominicans' response.

Another motive for the introduction of the Florentine Dominican saint's cult in Cattaro should be looked for in Antoninus' ecclesiastical and political activity. His energetic pursuit of discipline, both within fraternities and in the city's communal policies, fitted into the widely accepted social and charitable ideology of the Catholic Church. With the view to exercising stricter control over the religious practices of the laity, Antoninus demanded that the Florentine fraternities observe their own statutes and comply with them in their devotional practices. His interest in fraternities and their religio-political activity may be explained by the fact that he belonged to a mendicant order. Both Dominicans and Franciscans strongly upheld the establishment and diffusion of various forms of religious lay associations. Of the latter, fraternities, with their combined pious and occupational goals, were certainly the most numerous in urban environments. The increasingly important role of penitence in religious practices was inspired by the new Observant movement, which swept over the mendicant orders in the fifteenth century. In Antoninus' Florence it resulted, among other things, in the founding of several flagellant fraternities. What distinguished the newly-founded lay associations inspired by the Observant movement was

¹² St Antoninus established the well-known Dominican monastery of St Mark in 1436 and took part in the 1439 Council of Florence. Cf. D. Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford 1992), 24–25.

their increased concern with pursuing the fundamental principles of charity. It was this marked concern for the poor outside their own fraternities that distinguished the flagellant associations founded under the auspices of the archbishop Antoninus. His commitment to *caritas*, which became obvious during the plague outbreak of 1448, was embraced by the *Buonomini di St Martino*, a fraternity founded in 1442 whose focus was on charitable work, especially for the benefit of the neediest categories of society.¹³

The leather-makers' altar painting depicts St Antoninus in a way that reflects the archbishop's religious ideas: he is giving alms to the poor. In that way, the saint sets the example of charitable activity that was expected from all craft and religious fraternities. The issue of Observant commitment to charitable work should nonetheless be looked at with caution and interpreted from the perspective of the period in which it originated. In towns with a tradition of self-government charitable activity usually had an organized form and was supported by the commune, the Church and the laity. The virtue of *caritas* was a bond connecting all strata of society and constituted the moral strength of any *Buon Comune*, because love of the neighbour was identified with peace maintenance. The underlying principle of the medieval *Buon Comune* was the interest of the community above self-interest. Charitable work, which was soon to be codified, rested on the idea of interconnection between poverty and wellbeing as a key to the development and functioning of an urban commune. In medieval society, *caritas*, although a central idea of Christian teaching, was interpreted in very diverse contexts and exercised accordingly. The Observant Dominicans and Franciscans particularly addressed the problem of endemic poverty. Two Observant friars, a Franciscan, Bernardino of Siena, and a Dominican, Antoninus of Florence, elevated *caritas* to a symbol of the *Buon Comune*, thereby producing harsh social and political criticism of how the Italian cities were governed. They were particularly harsh in describing usury as unnatural cruelty contrary to God's laws and to the basic principles of *caritas*. For them, delivering the poor from sin was a distinctly Christian imperative, and they devoted their preaching and their political work to it. Yet, it should be noted that Antoninus' understanding of the problem of poverty reflected an understanding that was not entirely new to Florence. The pursuit of *caritas* in daily life had already been discussed by Leone Battista Alberti in his *L'Architettura*. He believed that the responsibility for providing charity and especially for the poor lay on the Church, State and hospices. Like Alberti, the archbishop of Florence differentiated among the poor, dividing them into two catego-

¹³ The Florentine archbishop's role in the founding and activity of flagellant fraternities has been discussed by J. Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Medieval Florence* (Chicago & London 1997), 41–46 and 58.

ries: worthy and worthless. Contempt (*disprezzo*) inherent in this division is typical of the Florentine society of the time. Thus the concept underlying the *Buonomini di S. Martino* was, under the influence of Antoninus, to provide relief for a very limited number of *poveri vergognosi*, those ashamed to beg. Antoninus considered beggars and vagrants as worthless, continuing Alberti's idea that such poor should be expelled from the city after three days without labour. The "worthy" poor, according to Antoninus, were mostly the sick and the disabled, and it was up to hospices to provide care for them.¹⁴

An aspect of Antoninus' political activity is very important for understanding the circumstances under which the altar painting of St Bartholomew was commissioned by the Fraternity of Leather-makers. Namely, aware of the potential threat that lay associations posed to the preservation of Catholic dogma and to communal and social peace, the archbishop sought to place fraternities under strict control.¹⁵ Fraternities offered a markedly propitious setting for lay persons to cultivate their love of God and to act charitably towards their neighbours and the needy. Thus the fraternities in Cattaro were instrumental in shaping and cementing religious, economic and social relations. The aspirations and activities of the members of the fraternities had effect on the entire commune. The preservation of social peace became a hot issue in Cattaro in the first half of the sixteenth century, the actors of which were the artisans working with leather: leather-makers and shoemakers. The shoemakers maintained an altar to St Crispin in the Church of St Benedict, later transferred to the Church of St Jerome. The two fraternities entered a dispute in the early sixteenth century, when the leather-makers grew strong and able to commission an altar painting from an Italian painter. The dispute over the right to pursue leather craft, a craft which lay at the core of both trades, often led to litigation and was a starting point for social intolerance. The distinction between the shoemakers as natives and leather-makers as incomers surfaced in the first recorded dispute in 1509. The Gastald and the representatives of the Fraternity of Shoemakers described the shoemaking trade as having once been flourishing in the

¹⁴ Alberti's and Antoninus' concept of *caritas* and their distinction between the "worthy" and "worthless" poor is considerably different from the fourteenth-century all-encompassing concept of the Poor of Christ; cf. Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 357–358 and 373.

¹⁵ While encouraging the founding of new fraternities and their charitable pursuits, Antoninus remained contemptuous of the Renaissance taste for material things and forbade members of such associations from taking part in the procession of the clergy on the feast day of the patron saint of Florence because of their earlier *cose di vanità e cose mundane*. Instead, they were to have a separate ceremony on the previous day, cf. Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 418–419.

town and blamed its decline on the incoming leather-makers. They saw it as a gross injustice, because they had been citizens of Cattaro since the days of yore. What the situation was before the dispute is not quite clear. There is virtually no reference to leather-makers in the surviving documents of an earlier date, which suggests that the shoemakers had used to make leather themselves. With the development of crafts and the increasing inflow of leather-makers, the shoemakers' monopoly was naturally challenged. The reason for their effort to preserve their monopoly must have been the fact that leather was a much sought-for export commodity and hide processing a lucrative craft.¹⁶ This first recorded dispute ended in the shoemakers' victory. The leather-makers were permitted to process skins (goat and sheep), but not (cow) hides, which remained the privilege of the shoemakers who had their workshops in the city. The leather-makers were not allowed to process cow hides unless they opened shoemaking workshops, a condition they were hardly able to satisfy. That such a state of affairs was untenable in the long run is obvious from the continuous growth of the craft of leather-making in the city. The leather-makers are known to have had their statute in 1536 (a 1717 copy has survived and is kept in the Kotor Historical Archives). In 1575 they were exempted from paying the cow hide processing tax, which means that by then they had already been permitted to pursue the craft for some time.¹⁷

The sources analyzed above allow the conclusion that the leather-making craft developed at a fast pace, and the altar painting commissioned from Girolamo da Santa Croce for the Fraternity's altar of St Bartholomew seems to be an unquestionable proof that they were growing stronger and wealthier. It was an expression of piety carefully cultivated by all craft fraternities. On the other hand, the fact that this Fraternity was permitted to set up its altar reflects a certain degree of social acceptance on the part of the Cattaran community.

*UDC 75.051.034:2-526.62(497.16 Kotor)
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¹⁶ Sixteenth-century Kotor mostly exported commodities coming from the hinterland of Montenegro and Herzegovina, above all goat leather (cordovan), and as many as 1,600 sheets a year, cf. M. Milošević, "Neki aspekti pomorske privrede Boke Kotorske", *Pomorski trgovci, ratnici i mecene*, 41.

¹⁷ For the dispute, see Milošević, "Prilozi", 140, 143-144 (after IAK SN XXVI, 592; LXI, 841).

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