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Cecelia Dorger
Mount St. Joseph University

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**MARIA LACTANS IN DEPICTIONS OF THE HOLY FAMILY**

*Cecelia Dorger, PhD*

Scholarly literature about Western Art is silent on the iconographic inclusion of the Virgin nursing the Christ Child in images of the Holy Family. This paper explores two interpretations of Mary nursing in Holy Family scenes and how the Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod on the Family (2015-16) elucidates God’s plan for the family as revealed in these depictions.

**Introduction**

Images of the Holy Family in Western Art have been discussed from many fascinating points of view. Yet, scholarly literature is silent on the iconographic inclusion of the Virgin nursing the Christ Child in these portrayals. The meaning and function of this aspect varies with the purpose of the commissioned painting. For example, a devotional painting’s function would differ from how an altarpiece was meant to be read. This paper will explore two interpretations of Mary nursing in Holy Family scenes and how the Instrumentum Laboris’s elucidation of God’s plan for the family is revealed in these depictions. The first will be the image’s most straightforward reading, which depicts Mary and Joseph fulfilling God’s plan for marriage and the family. God engaged a human mother to feed
his Incarnate Son, and Joseph was asked to be this Son’s earthly father and a godly husband to Mary. So engaged, they are certainly participating in God’s creative work, which is a teaching found in the Instrumentum Laboris. On the other hand, as a backdrop for the Mass, altarpiece Holy Family renditions with the Virgin nursing suggest Christ’s rebirth in the Eucharist and his sacrifice on Calvary. Eucharistic symbols are manifold in these altarpiece paintings. The Instrumentum Laboris encourages sacramental love between spouses as a means to participate in God’s creative work, and it calls for families to foster a “familial culture of prayer” by reading Scripture and partaking of the sacraments together. This study will explore these two aspects of the Maria lactans in Holy Family scenes, and we will discover how the image reflects the Instrumentum Laboris’s guidelines.

PART ONE

Scripture, during the medieval and early modern periods, was comprehended through images and sermons. Both were vital for disseminating the Gospel message. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were central characters in medieval and early modern religious art, and they were portrayed as exemplary family members to be imitated by Christians. In the same way that media images shape behaviors today, Christians were fed a lexicon of images that presented and tacitly sanctioned certain behaviors, emotions, and experience. The iconographic inclusion of Mary nursing the Christ Child in Holy Family scenes encouraged maternal feeding.

Since time immemorial mothers and wet nurses of every epoch and nation fed children at their breast many times a day. Breastmilk is often called nature’s perfect food. When a mother nurses her baby the act is inherently nourishing, nurturing, life sustaining, and perfectly matches the baby’s appetite. Furthermore, the benefit of the loving bond established thereby has been addressed in ancient writings up to the present day. To best understand a medieval or early modern image in which nursing is a prominent feature, it is wise to analyze how that activity was perceived and practiced during that period. An examination of what was available on the subject, as dispensed by moralists, philosophers, and saints’ biographers, will provide a sense of the period’s attitudes toward breastfeeding and attitudes about the alternatives to maternal feeding, such as the employment of wet nurses.

Early modern moralists and scholars were deeply influenced by their ancient predecessors’ writings. Such Roman philosophers as Pliny, Plutarch, and Favorinus were unequivocal in their support of maternal nursing. They advocated that mothers of all classes breastfeed their own infants, because they considered mothers’ milk to be the most natural option.² For example, in a speech made by Favorinus, a second-century Roman philosopher, we can conclude that the practice of maternal feeding must have needed encouragement. He wrote:

For what kind of unnatural, imperfect and half-motherhood is it to bear a child and at once send it away from her? To have nourished in her own womb with her own blood [a baby, and then] not to feed [him] with her own milk, [when he is] calling for a mother’s care?\(^5\)

The practice of sending one’s newborn off to a wet nurse immediately after it was born for a period of up to three years was well known to ancient societies, and it continued with increasing prevalence through the early modern period and beyond.\(^4\) Moralists believed that the maternal bond of love between infant and mother was fortified by maternal breastfeeding.

As with other writers of the period, Favorinus’s concern was for the critical bond of love and affection between mother and infant, the diminished quality of which surely resulted when a wet nurse was employed. For the philosopher, everything was riding on this initial bonding experience. He wrote:

> For when the child is given to another and removed from the mother’s sight the strength of maternal ardour is gradually … extinguished, … and a child which has been given over to another to nurse is almost as completely forgotten as if it had been lost by death. Moreover the child’s own feelings of affection, fondness and intimacy are centered wholly in the one by whom it is nursed, and therefore . . . it has no feeling[s] for the mother who bore it.\(^5\)

Here Favorinus makes it clear that affection and love are the fruit of nursing and it is mutually beneficial for the mother and her

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baby. Medieval writers followed their predecessors in both sentiment and emphasis.

In his widely read and influential work *On the Properties of Things*, composed in the mid thirteenth century, Bartholomew Anglicus wrote that breastfeeding was a sign of good mothering. His writings about infants and mothers were largely based upon Aristotle’s and Galen’s writings. He wrote: “She conceived him voluptuously, carried him in her womb where he was nourished by her blood, she bore him in pain, and she loves him and kisses him. Because of her love her nursing is best, and the nursing helps crystallize maternal love.” The wisdom was handed down from one age to the next.

The close bond between Mary and her Son became increasingly evident in the images from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards, when artists began to embrace a more humanistic approach to their compositions. Artists focused on the warm relationship, using affectionate gestures and eye-contact to convey the loving bond.

Federico Barocci’s *The Madonna with the Cat* is an example from 1575 (figure 1). Barocci painted a playful domestic scene in which the Christ Child has stopped nursing and has turned his

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attention to John the Baptist, who is teasing a cat. Mary’s embrace of little John is affectionate, but her attention is truly focused on her baby as she gazes at him with tender warmth. Joseph is engaged and supportive. He leans into the homey circle, and he smiles at his wife, the good mother. The artist uses vibrant primary colors, focusing the viewer’s attention on the cheerful familial group. Another example eliminates all distracting elements and attracts the viewer’s eye to the central activity.

Rembrandt, who is known for his dark backgrounds that contrast with the spot of light which accentuates the central subject, paints a much quieter scene than Barocci (figure 2). Mary’s gentle caress of the Christ Child’s foot after he has fallen asleep at her breast is such a natural, motherly gesture. We can be certain Rembrandt was not aware of the science behind maternal affection stimulated by breastfeeding, but we do know he was a keen observer of his models’ behaviors. In fact, research in the last fifteen years has revealed that the chemical oxytocin is released in mothers as they nurse.8 Oxytocin has a calming effect and is sometimes called the “bonding hormone” or the “cuddle chemical.”9 It is a marvelous bit of physiology


God built into breastfeeding. What a creative God. This image leaves no doubt that the affection-boosting chemical has been released. Rembrandt accentuates Mary’s delight in motherhood, and Joseph is every bit the involved husband and father. As a member of the Holy Family, Mary, in these two images, could not reflect more plainly the words of the Instrumentum Laboris. Here we see Mary and Joseph “as spouses living in the beauty of love and . . . participating in God’s creative work.”

The Holy Family, in these and other paintings we will explore, serves as an exemplary model for the beauty of human love mirroring God’s love.

Another early-modern source that positively exemplifies maternal nursing is the Acta Sanctorum, commonly known as The Lives of the Saints. These documents provide a view of existing cultural customs, and scholars credibly propose that habits and traditions across all social classes can be gleaned from them. Breastfeeding practices in this compendium of writings were colored with language associated with maternal love, Christian exempla, and God’s will. An examination of these biographies reveals that maternal nursing among the saints and their mothers was the norm. Non-maternal feeding was customarily embraced by the aristocracy. We shall look at two

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10 Instrumentum Laboris, Part I, Chap. I, item 3.

11 Acta Sanctorum (Antwerp and Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1643–1940); Shahar, “Infants, Infant Care, and Attitudes toward Infancy,” 281. Shulamith Shahar has scrutinized these documents to study infancy in the lives of medieval saints. She contends that the descriptions of childcare sometimes written by authors who relayed personal, first-hand anecdotal narratives reveal general customs (282). Shahar did not use lives written more than a few decades after the saints’ death for her study, so she examined only contemporary accounts. See Shahar, “Infants, Infant Care, and Attitudes toward Infancy,” 302, n. 4.
examples: one saint is a member of the nobility; the other is from a modest background.

Frances of Rome was born into a wealthy family in 1384 and was married to a young nobleman. She had three children. Her hagiographer wrote these lines about her, emphasizing her choice to feed her own babies: “She fed the sons that God had granted her . . . with her milk (. . . she ensured that they did not lack for [milk], feeding them with her own breasts, not with those of a stranger) . . . with the fear of God.” Her hagiographer implied that the act of breastfeeding one’s own infant was somehow in accordance with God’s will. The fear of God was and still is associated with one’s respect for God’s wishes and a desire to do his bidding. The saint was represented as going against the custom of hiring a wet nurse in order to please God. Nursing one’s own infant was more commonplace among women in lower echelons of society.

St. Peter Damian, for example, was from a family of modest means and became one of the most notable spiritual reformers of his age. He was born in Ravenna in the early eleventh century

12 Frances of Rome (1384–1440) nursed her own children, refusing outside help. Devoted to serving the poor, she turned her home into a hospital. Upon the death of her husband, she went to live among the association of oblates she founded and from then on dedicated her life fully to the underprivileged. She was canonized in 1608. Butler’s Lives of the Saints, 2nd ed., Vol. I., eds. Herbert J. Thurston, SJ, and Donald Attwater (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1926–1938), 529–30.

into a large, poor family. According to his story, Peter’s mother probably suffered from postpartum depression. She refused to nurse or care for her newborn. Peter’s biographer, John of Lodi, wrote, “In her despair, his mother wholly rejected her baby, weaning him before he had hardly begun to nurse, and refusing to hold him . . .” Just as Peter was about to die from maternal neglect a compassionate servant intervened. The servant reproached Peter’s mother asking, “How could a Christian mother behave as no lioness or tigress would do? … [T]hese mothers faithfully nurse their cubs … how could human mothers reject children formed in the image of God and shaped in their wombs?” According to John of Lodi, Peter’s mother recovered after the scolding, and she resumed nursing the future saint, who flourished under her care. What is of interest to this study is the servant’s use of the term “Christian mother,” as if nursing one’s own infant had to do with one’s practice of Christianity. The connection was made between Christian behavior and maternal nursing in both saints’ biographies.

In the Holy Family images we witness Mary and Joseph living as “spouses in the beauty of love, in God’s creative work,” as stated in the Instrumentum Laboris. Francisco de Zurbarán painted a straightforward Baroque rendition of the Holy Family.

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15 John of Lodi, in PL 144-145:115b; See also Acta Sanctorum, Februarii III, 416: “Cum eius nempex mater iam filiorum pertesa, domo videlicet haeredibus referta, hunc genuisset extremum.”

16 Quoted in McLaughlin, “Survivors and Surrogates,” 104.
Joseph’s proximity to his wife feeding their child demonstrates his encouragement. Notice mother and child’s eyes are locked on each other. Their eye-contact invigorates their loving relationship. The plain dignity of the figures reflects the dignity of marriage and the family. Both parents’ gaze leads our attention to the Christ Child, which is the crucial mission Mary and Joseph were called to undertake. That is, to lead the faithful to Jesus. Let us examine the idea that the artists intentionally sent these messages.

We can find images of Mary nursing in which the artist does not convey these notions. In an early marble relief by Michelangelo there is no indication of the artist’s intention to express Mary’s mission to bring us to Christ (figure 4). Michelangelo’s first piece of sculpture, carved in 1490 when he was only about fourteen years old, portrays a disengaged mother. She nurses her baby, distracted. We see no loving bond in this example. If there is a temptation to perceive this as the work of an adolescent who has yet to consider the Virgin’s role, let us study another Michelangelo representation of the same subject. His drawing of the nursing Virgin dates from about 1525, done when the artist was in his early fifties (figure 5). In it we perceive a dramatic absence of intimacy between mother and child. In fact this absence was deliberate. Originally the Virgin’s face was drawn in profile with her eyes lowered to look at her nursing baby.\(^1\) Michelangelo changed the orientation of Mary’s head, and instead of rendering Mary and Jesus looking at each other, as in the Francisco de Zurbarán painting (figure 3), the artist drew a gulping, hungry child, and a distracted mother, eliminating any hint of the loving connection. We do

not know why he changed the composition; we do know this arrangement was deliberate, and it appears that the artist did not intend for it to be exemplary in any way. It is fair to say that the loving bond we have witnessed in previous examples of Mary nursing in Holy Family paintings was also deliberate. The Holy Family in the paintings we have studied provided an example then and as they do now. How does Mary’s mission as the model for actively initiating the loving familial bond have resonance today?

Ironically, in the chapel Michelangelo made famous, Pope Francis recently encouraged mothers to breastfeed their babies at a Baptism ceremony in the Sistine Chapel. On Sunday, January 11, 2015, departing from his prepared text, Pope Francis said, “You mothers give your children milk . . . even now, if they cry because they are hungry, breastfeed them, don’t worry.”

In the biographies of the saints that we examined earlier, maternal feeding was associated with Christian behavior and even God’s will. Pope Francis, too, made the link more than a half century later. To the Christian mothers gathered in the Sistine Chapel, he followed his invitation for them to nurse with a reminder to think of poor mothers around the world. “[There are] too many, unfortunately, who can’t give food to their children,” he said. And, in a 2013 interview, given soon after

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being elected the new Holy Father, Pope Francis made his first remarks about breastfeeding, again relating the subject to world hunger. After telling the interviewer about a time that he encouraged a mother in St. Peter’s Square to nurse her crying baby, he concluded, “I would like to repeat to humanity what I said to that mother: give food to those who are hungry! That woman had milk to give to her child; we have enough food in the world to feed everyone.”20 Thus, the Holy Father associates the nourishment a nursing mother gives to her child with a wider plea for feeding the hungry members of humanity. The nursing Madonna as a member of the Holy Family is the living icon and exemplary model of familial love, and her example teaches us to feed each other. The Instrumentum Laboris specifies that spouses and parents should co-operate in the Creator’s work, and “their responsibility also involves the stewardship of creation and the propagation of the human family.”21

20 Andrea Tornielli, “Never Be Afraid of Tenderness,” Vatican Insider, La Stampa, December 14, 2013, accessed, May 6, 2015, http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/30620/. Pope Francis answered the interviewer’s question about hunger: “I was struck by one statistic, which says ten thousand children die of hunger each day across the world. There are so many children that cry because they are hungry. At the Wednesday General Audience the other day there was a young mother behind one of the barriers with a baby that was just a few months old. The child was crying its eyes out as I came past. The mother was caressing it. I said to her: madam, I think the child’s hungry. ‘Yes, it’s probably time,’ she replied. ‘Please give it something to eat!’ I said. She was shy and didn’t want to breastfeed in public, while the Pope was passing. I wish to say the same to humanity: give people something to eat! That woman had milk to give to her child; we have enough food in the world to feed everyone. If we work with humanitarian organisations and are able to agree all together not to waste food, sending it instead to those who need it, we could do so much to help solve the problem of hunger in the world.”

21 Instrumentum Laboris, Part I, Chap. I, item 1.
breastfeeding seems to trigger the Pope’s urging of stewardship and charity to the larger human family. The images we have seen thus far, taken with the widely disseminated words of Pope Francis, certainly reflect the *Instrumentum Laboris*’s words. But there is more to comprehend in the image. The next several examples are full of symbols of the Mass.

PART TWO

The Madonna *Lactans* in Holy Family Painted Altarpieces

When situated behind an altar, the image of Mary nursing in these Holy Family compositions communicates the importance of families’ participation in sacramental life, especially the Eucharist. The painted altarpiece was originally introduced as a result of some fundamental changes underlying the liturgy. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that Christ was physically present in the Eucharist as flesh and blood. Christ’s “real presence” under the appearance of bread and wine was affirmed. As a result Mass became increasingly theatrical and took a more visual turn. New liturgical rituals, like the Elevation of the Host and the ringing of bells during the consecration, were initiated. When the priest consecrated the Host he raised it up,

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engaging the congregants’ spiritual senses. They beheld their salvation. The painted altarpiece was used as a backdrop for the Mass, and the Mother of God was a motif befitting the momentous ritual.

The Madonna and the Holy Family became favored altarpiece subjects from the late medieval period onwards, because the image of the Virgin and Child suggested Christ’s rebirth in the Eucharist; inherent, too, was the emphasis on Christ’s Incarnation. An analogous relationship can be drawn between Mary becoming a virgin mother and the miracle of transubstantiation: both encompass miraculous transformations. In one, the power of the Holy Spirit enables a young woman to become the mother of God without losing her virginity. In the other, the power of the Holy Spirit transforms bread into Christ’s body without changing its physical shape or appearance. The image of Mary nursing her son enjoyed a surge in popularity in the fourteenth century and was laden with Eucharistic meaning. Let us examine what medieval people would have

24 The obvious difficulty of “seeing” the Precious Blood through the elevated chalice deemphasized the second elevation ritual. It was not until the second half of the sixteenth century that Pope Pius V decreed that the elevation of the chalice should follow the Host’s elevation. See Jungmann, Mass of the Roman Rite, 2:206–207.

25 Os, Sienese Altarpieces, 1:14.

26 The Eucharistic Prayer said before the consecration of the Host contains the Epiclesis, which is an “invocation” of the Holy Spirit. This example is from the Eucharistic Prayer III: “And so, Father, we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit, that they may become the body and blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ . . .” Felix Just, SJ, Basic Texts for the Roman Catholic Eucharist, Eucharistic Prayers I–IV, from the Eng. trans. of The Roman Missal, © 1973, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc., accessed November 3, 2011, http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/EP1-4.htm.
comprehended in the image by considering some period texts about the subject.

The source of mother’s milk was misunderstood in the Middle Ages. Bartholomew Anglicus, as mentioned earlier, explained that after a baby was born, blood reached the breasts through veins and arteries and there it is turned into milk, and that the purification of menstrual blood was a function of the breast.27 Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215) wrote an involved discourse about how this took place. He finished by equating breastmilk with Christ’s blood:

After childbirth, … the blood is forced up into the breasts. As the blood accumulates, the breasts begin to distend and the blood begins to turn into milk. . . . Milk retains its underlying substance of blood. … It suffers change in its qualities, but not in its substance. … But heavenly food is similar to milk in every way: by its nature it is palatable through grace; nourishing, for it is life; and dazzling white, for it is the light of Christ. Therefore it is more than evident that the Blood of Christ is milk.28

While it may have been more than evident to medieval churchgoers, because these texts were well-known and their content passed down from generation to generation, is it a connection modern people make? The Instrumentum Laboris stresses the importance of nourishing a familial culture of prayer with an emphasis on teaching the faith to children, especially through reading Scripture together, and it stresses families’


participation in the Sunday Eucharist.²⁹ When people gaze at the Maria lactans in a Holy Family altarpiece, does the image demonstrate these ideas?

Although the nursing attribute is the most prominent feature, in the following altarpiece paintings there are other Eucharistic symbols that, when seen together, may help with the connotation. The iconographic inclusion of the book has a dual role. In the central panel of an altarpiece by the so-called Master of Frankfurt, dated to about 1515, we notice two books: one in Joseph’s hand and one open on the ground (figure 6). The book in religious paintings traditionally is meant to be the Bible, the Word of God, which can have two inferences. It signifies Scripture, and it represents the Incarnate Son of God—as we read in John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The first chapter and verse of John’s Gospel is explicit: “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” In the context of a backdrop for the celebration of the Eucharist, the book—that is the Word—communicates the Eucharistic, incarnational meaning of the ritual performed before it. St. Bonaventure’s description of the Mass comes to mind: “God, when he descends upon the altar, does no less than He did when He became man the first time in the womb of the Virgin Mary.”³⁰ Pope Francis again gives voice to a modern-day understanding of this altarpiece composition and its elucidation of points contained in the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

²⁹ *Instrumentum Laboris*, Part I, Chap. III, item 42.

In the same Baptism ceremony in which he encouraged mothers of the assembly to nurse their hungry children, Pope Francis likened the word of God to “substantial food” that would help children grow well.\textsuperscript{31} News reports tell us that he broke from the prepared text, and urged parents and godparents to make a good example by reading the Gospel on a daily basis. He said, “Keep it in a pocket or a purse. This will be an example to a child to read the word of God.” An altarpiece by Jan Gossaert, painted in 1507, depicts Mary demonstrating what the Holy Father recommends (figure 7). She is nursing and she holds the book.

As a devout Jew, Mary would have recited “the oldest fixed daily prayer”—the \textit{Shema}. She would have read, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” And we see in the paintings that she heeds these next lines: “And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children.”\textsuperscript{32} Chapter III of the \textit{Insturmentum Laboris} also recommends the family recitation of the rosary. In another altarpiece by Jan Gossaert we find Joseph, head of the Holy Family, reciting the rosary (figures 8 and 9).

We turn now to a final Holy Family painting still located in its original location. As we shall see, its symbols of the Mass are overt. A grotto niched into the slopes of the Italian Sabine Mountains is home to a Franciscan Sanctuary, the heart of which houses the modest Chapel of the Nativity, where a primitive


painting of the Holy Family adorns a humble altar (figure 10). Beginning in the year 1223, this grotto in Greccio, Italy as become the destination of countless pilgrims each year, especially at Christmas, because it is where St. Francis of Assisi established the tradition of the Christmas Crib and the Nativity reenactment. And he did so because he was in love with the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation—Christ’s sacrificial love of becoming a human. Francis sought to shift the focus from adoration to the Incarnation.

The Greccio fresco is by an anonymous painter called the Master of Narni, and is dated to around the turn of the fifteenth century. Eucharistic symbolism abounds in it. In the right-hand scene the Christ Child is tightly wrapped in the swaddling clothes mentioned in Apocrypha and Scripture, but there is no mistaking that the bands of cloth are a foretaste of the shroud Christ would wear, and his bed is a stone sarcophagus (figure 11). A troubled Joseph sits in the far right corner staring at his son’s stone resting place. To the left is a second scene in which St. Francis is depicted kneeling in front of the Christ Child. Painted in the background on the right, a priest celebrates Mass on an altar where a chalice is in evidence (figure 12). It is the cup of Christ’s Precious Blood poured out for the salvation of humankind. It also serves as a reference to the Virgin, who carried Christ in her womb and was thus a vessel for his body and blood as well. The sacrifice taking place on the altar during Mass is the re-presenting of the sacrifice Christ made for humankind.33 The altar and the tomb are parallel signifiers. Located in the center of the painting, the nursing Virgin is a

dominant presence (figure 13). Mass-goers are reminded that the Incarnate God depended on human milk for sustenance.

Along with the fresco’s nursing motif, the symbols of Christ’s Passion and death are inextricably linked to the Eucharist. Christ’s death was simultaneously the nadir and zenith of salvation history. It marked the end of his ministry on earth as the Incarnate God and the beginning of his promise for salvation.

In the Greccio painting, St. Francis adores the Incarnate God in the guise of a baby; congregants should look and adore God Incarnate in the Host. The crude quality of the painting reflects both the grotto as a place and the sense of humility desired by St. Francis. Christ’s humility of the Incarnation and the Cross was the monk’s constant preoccupation, and both are emphasized in this Holy Family painting. Here Bethlehem meets Calvary. Additionally, the nursing motif highlights Francis’s delight in the fact that when God became human he needed his mother’s milk. Thomas of Celano, Francis’s biographer and friend, wrote: “The birthday of the Child Jesus Francis observed with inexpressible eagerness over all other feasts, saying that it was the feast of feasts, on which God, having become a tiny infant, clung to human breasts.” Thomas of Celano, St. Francis of Assisi: First and Second Life of St. Francis, with Selections from Treatise on the Miracles of Blessed Francis, trans. Placid Hermann, OFM (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1963), 296.


inferences: “Look deeper than this pleasant scene. See your God become food for eternity in a feeding place for animals.”

As modern-day media experts know, images are powerful transmitters of messages. Holy Family paintings with the nursing Virgin as a focal point encourage a loving bond among family members in accordance with God’s creative design. On a deeper level, the image reminds mothers and fathers of the importance of fostering a familial culture of prayer by attending Mass, where the liturgy of the Word is united with the liturgy of the Eucharist.

**Author Biography**

Cecelia Dorger, PhD, has extensive background in art history, with a specialty in Marian art. She is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Art, Fine Art, Art Education and Art History at Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati, Ohio, and teaches the history of Sacred Art courses at the Athenaeum of Ohio.

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Figure 1. Federico Barocci, La Madonna del Gatto, c. 1575, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London, photo © The National Gallery, London.
Figure 2. Rembrandt, The Holy Family, c. 1634, oil on canvas, The Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
Figure 3. Francisco de Zurbarán, The Holy Family, 1659, oil on canvas, Szépművészeti Múzeum/The Museum of Fine Arts Budapest. Accessed 2015.
Figure 4. Michelangelo, Madonna of the Stairs, c. 1490, marble relief, Casa Buonarroti, Florence.
Figure 5. Michelangelo, Madonna and Child, c. 1525, pencil and ink drawing, Casa Buonarroti, Florence.
Figure 6. Master of Frankfurt, The Holy Family with Music Making Angels, c. 1515, central panel of an altarpiece, © National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.
Figure 7. Jan Gossaert, The Holy Family, c.1507, oil on panel, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.
Figure 9. Jan Gossaert, detail of The Holy Family with St. Catherine and St. Barbara.
Figure 10. Anonymous painter, Franciscan Crib with the Madonna del Latte, late fourteenth century or early fifteenth century, fresco, Greccio, Italy.

Figure 11. Anonymous painter, detail of Franciscan Crib with the Madonna del Latte.
Figure 12. Anonymous painter, detail of Franciscan Crib with the Madonna del Latte.
Figure 13. Anonymous painter, detail of Franciscan Crib with the Madonna del Latte.