THE FAMILY AND THE HOLY FAMILY IN THE WORKS OF THE ITALIAN CINQUECENTO

Cleílton Chaga Bernardes[1]

ABSTRACT

The family is an ancient institution that has undergone several transformations. Within the scope of the Modern Age in a society in the pre-capitalist phase, the capital system appropriated this monogamous and patriarchal family institution as yet another way to assert its interests. In this way, this research will demonstrate how much the iconographies of the Sagrada Família of the Italian *Cinquecento* propose a model of female conduct in the face of the constitution of the family nucleus. The family model supported by these subjects, although it was not new since it had its counterpart in the ancient world, served the purposes of the new social order, in the nascent society of capital.

Keywords: Holy Family; patriarchy; Church; capital.

RESUMO

A família é uma instituição milenar que já passou por diversas transformações. No âmbito da Idade Moderna em uma sociedade em fase pré-capitalista, o sistema do capital apropriou-se desta instituição familiar monogâmica e patriarcal como mais uma forma para afirmar seus interesses. Deste modo, a presente pesquisa demonstrará o quanto as iconografias da Sagrada Família do *Cinquecento* italiano propõe um modelo de conduta feminina perante a constituição do núcleo familiar. O modelo de família sustentado por esses sujeitos, embora não fosse uma novidade uma vez que tinha correspondência no mundo antigo, servia aos propósitos da nova ordem social, na nascente sociedade do capital.

Palavras-chave: Sagrada Família; patriarcado; Igreja; capital.

[1] Master's student in Social History in the Postgraduate Program in History (PPGH/UEFS). Specialist in the History of Bahia in the Postgraduate Program in the History of Bahia (Lato Sensu) – EHB/UEFS. Bachelor's degree in History from the State University of Southwest Bahia (UESB). Member of the Working Group on Economic History of ANPUH-BA. Email: cleilton.bernardes@hotmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1862-4683. This article is the result of the monograph presented in the course TMO III as part of the requirements for the Bachelor's Degree in History at the State University of Southwest Bahia – UESB, completed under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Roberto Silva de Oliveira.

Introduction

Throughout history, the family structure has undergone multiple transformations, culminating in the configuration it assumes within capitalist society. Historiography indicates that the concepts, values, and practices that have shaped the family since the sixteenth century stem from a process of historical construction oriented by the interests of the nascent pre-capitalist order on the path to consolidation.

According to Engels, four forms of family stand out across the history of humankind: the consanguine, the punaluan, the pre-monogamous, and the monogamous, each with its own characteristics and adjusted to the prevailing social conditions and interests of its time. This process would have culminated in the fourth form—the monogamous—consolidated to meet the demands of a class society; such a model was reconfigured in the Modern Age within a still pre-capitalist context, in which economic and legal transformations favored its stabilization (Engels, [1884]). Within this horizon, the sixteenth-century bourgeois family, a driving force of the modern form and "of the sentiment of family and the sentiment of childhood, formerly separated" (Ariès, 2017, p. 232), distinguished itself from earlier monogamous arrangements by a set of specific features: the pedagogical centrality conferred upon children, domestic discipline, and above all the integration between the household unit and patrimonial strategy, aimed at maintaining and expanding private property. As observed, "the family was a moral and social reality more than a sentimental one […]. Among the wealthier classes, the family was indistinguishable from the prosperity of the patrimony, the honor of the name" (Ariès, 2017, p. 231). Monogamy, thus institutionalized, ensured the reproduction of elites through the affirmation and diffusion of their normative values and practices of distinction—after all, "a man's future depended solely on his 'reputation'" (Ariès, 2017, p. 238).

The bourgeoisie took on its earliest urban-mercantile contours in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, amid the economic mutations of the Late Middle Ages, when "the advance of commerce gave prominence to new classes of people, *gente nuova*, as they were called, who soon enriched themselves through trade in the cities and in the *contado* [rural hinterland]" (Skinner, 1996, p. 45). This process, grounded in the expansion of long-distance traffic, credit, and craft guilds, created the social conditions for the rise of urban mercantile groups. Their decisive influence on political and cultural order, however,

asserted itself chiefly between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when bourgeois practices and values gained institutional and symbolic prominence in European cities.

The word family originates in the Roman lexicon and initially did not designate what we now understand as a restricted conjugal nucleus. The term could refer to the group of dependents of the *pater familias* —slaves and servants — but also to the totality of the domus (the "house"), that is, the persons living under the same roof and the patrimony associated with it (Leandro, 2006, p. 52). Within this unit, a hierarchy prevailed that subjected all to the authority of the pater, traditionally described as *patria potestas*. In its ancient formulation, this authority encompassed severe prerogatives (such as the *ius vitae necisque*), though progressively limited in practice and in law over the centuries. Children and young adults (*filii familias*) who had not yet constituted their own household remained under this *potestas*. In this order, only those who became *pater familias* attained full political-legal capacity; before that, many were in fact treated as citizens of diminished status, recognized "in full right" only when they headed their own household (Leandro, 2006, p. 59).

The role of women of reproductive age was framed by a civic-patrimonial logic: they were expected to guarantee legitimate offspring, which is why the condition of mater within legitimate matrimony held an eminently political meaning. Hence the juridical maxim *pater est quem nuptiae demonstrant*: children born to a married woman were presumed to be the children of her husband, regardless of biological paternity, for filiation was defined primarily by the marital bond and by insertion into the *domus* (Leandro, 2006, p. 59).

In the Greek world, the semantics and practice of the terms "father" and "mother" had distinctive nuances. Although biological necessity and the child's primary connection with the mother were acknowledged, the child's access to a socially established place depended, to a considerable extent, on the mediation of the masculine universe: it was within the oikos and the polis, both structured under male authority, that the child's position was defined and the force of power concentrated—both in the private and in the public sphere (Souza, 2016).

The nuclear family—a form quite present and adaptable throughout modernity—does not originate in the Modern Age. Like other configurations still observable in

modern Europe, such as the stem family, its roots go back to the Middle Ages. Their common feature lay in the concern with preserving family patrimony through mechanisms of succession (Leandro, 2006, p. 61). To this was added the valorization of normative devices of conduct—for men, women, and children—communicated by Christian religion, whose cultural authority broadly shaped domestic patterns, gender roles, and educational expectations in modern Europe.

In this context, the patriarchal monogamous family offered a juridical-moral framework particularly functional to the affirmation of emerging bourgeois interests, especially regarding the intergenerational transmission of goods and the stabilization of "legitimate" filiation. Engels interprets the historical consolidation of monogamy as a social form linked to private property and class society, insofar as it organizes the household unit to guarantee inheritance and name, disciplining female sexuality and restricting filiation to matrimony, which reduces uncertainties concerning succession and strengthens patrimonial strategies (Engels, [1884] 2019). Engels writes:

> Monogamy arose from the concentration of great wealth in the same hands—those of a man—and from the desire to transmit this wealth, through inheritance, to that man's children […] for this, the monogamy of the woman was necessary, but not that of the man […] (Engels, 2017, p. 100).[2]

The historical consolidation of monogamy, in Engels's reading, functions as a device for the juridical and social affirmation of paternity: by stabilizing the conjugal bond and "legitimate" filiation, it becomes possible to ensure, with reduced uncertainty, the intergenerational transmission of patrimony to recognized descendants (Engels, [1884]). Within this horizon, intragroup marriage among gentes (Latin plural: *gentes*; sing.: *gens*), rather than among "*genes*," also served the purpose of keeping property circumscribed to that kinship unit and to its name. The accumulation of wealth, articulated with heredity, thus constitutes a decisive step in the emergence of hereditary nobilities of a "royal" cast, a process that proceeds *pari passu* with the formation of the State as an effective mechanism for regulating the interests of propertied strata (Engels, [1884]).

[2] Original version: A monogamia surgiu da concentração de grandes riquezas nas mesmas mãos – as de um homem – e do desejo de transmitir essas riquezas, por heranças, aos filhos desse homem [...] para isso erra necessária a monogamia da mulher, mas não a do homem [...] (Engels, 2017, p. 100).

In a related vein, Lucena (1976) links the emergence of the State to proprietary Antiquity and to the social division of labor: under such conditions, the State appears as a regulating force of social order—and, concretely, as an institutional mediation that serves, primarily, the protection of wealth holders. As for the modern State, Strayer maintains that its historical roots lie in the administrative and fiscal machinery of medieval monarchies: it is within these royal bureaucracies that practices of government, instruments of taxation, juridical routines, and a language of political authority are forged, gradually conferring upon the State a distinct institutional personality—a process that, in each period, is reoriented by the dominant class to shape the state apparatus according to its interests (Strayer, 1970).

On the domestic and moral plane, Europe in the Modern Age consolidated the hegemony of a patriarchal and monogamous model as a structuring convention of social life. The Catholic Church reinforced this arrangement through a moral magisterium that took the Holy Family as paradigm, defining roles, virtues, and normative expectations. In sixteenth-century Italian contexts, in particular, this prescriptive discourse demanded of women premarital chastity, conjugal fidelity, and obedience to male authority, in addition to the procreative function that guaranteed legitimate descent; the ideal of mater thus carried an evident civic-patrimonial meaning. The male counterpart was domestic headship (*pater familias*) and responsibility for name, honor, and patrimony—and it is precisely the articulation among these spheres (domestic, juridical, and symbolic) that renders intelligible the historical functionality of monogamy for succession strategies and the reproduction of elites.

The Holy Family, the theme under consideration here, was composed of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and was widely represented in Cinquecento Italian painting by the great artists of the period, especially in churches and in the homes of the wealthy. Its purpose was undoubtedly one of faith and devotion, but at the same time it reinforced the prevailing family model deemed the most pious and just. From a theoretical standpoint, we understand that the transposition of this family model into the arts further strengthened the ideological conceptions of the period, marked by the rise of the middling strata that had enriched themselves through commerce, commonly termed the bourgeoisie. It is the ideals of these new historical subjects that appear to permeate the corpus of works

depicting the Holy Family. One perceives that the imposition of the cult of Jesus's family and its representations functioned to disseminate a specific kind of faith, devotion, and, therefore, morality (which we define as patriarchal), long diffused in the liturgies of the Church. Kruczeveski and Mariano argue that "Christian morality, above all that constructed by the Catholic Church, reinforces the role of the heterosexual conjugal family as a natural model, and this view is reinforced by the image and function of the Holy Family" (2014, 2).

The earliest representations of Mary date from the third century, in the fresco of the Catacombs. According to Isabella Anchieta (2020), the process of forming the representation of Mary sought inspiration in "images of goddesses of Antiquity, especially Cybele" (Anchieta, 2020, 33).

Superhumanity, virginity, maternity, the protective and assisting function, and sovereignty over nature and worldly dangers are some of the elements of the pagan goddess Cybele's imagery appropriated into the image of Mary. An image that emerges in Byzantine art, but is consecrated in Italian art of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The chaste mother, covered by a deep-blue mantle (a color indicating her celestial nature), with the child at her side, seated on a throne, now has a golden halo above her head or even a crown in some representations. These elements gradually stabilize a "Marian" *topos* (Anchieta, 2020, 36).

For Anchieta (2020), the representation of Mary responded to a longing for salvation. We can observe that, beginning in the fourteenth century, a profound change occurred in the representation of Mary's image, shifting from an institutional body to one appropriated with human face and gestures. "More familiar, intimate, and human scenes" begin to appear (Anchieta, 2020, 47).

This tendency can be more fully elucidated in relation to the image and the new forms of social interaction, especially those promoted by the guild organization of the rising Italian bourgeoisie, which sponsored the multiplication of a new image of Marian devotion beyond the direction intended by the clergy—who, from that point on, lose the monopoly over its shaping and commissioning. Each guild had its own chapel, which functioned not only as a place of devotion but also of gathering and exchange. The multiplication of images of Mary accompanied both the increase in these guilds and the desire for communication with this image. The relationship between Mary and the child—

formerly grounded in institutional proof of the supernatural power of the Immaculate Conception—is reorganized on the basis of a new intention: to emphasize the familial bonds between mother and child, which would underpin bourgeois values. A new structure of feeling repositions Mary and the Christ Child, now bound by filial love (Anchieta, 2020, 47).

The image of Mary tends increasingly toward humanization; according to Anchieta, representations tend to proliferate, consecrating "Mary's complicity with the Christ Child as she breastfeeds him […] breastfeeding creates a carnal bond with the child, bringing both Mary and the child closer to the human condition (even if their supernatural nature is preserved)" (Anchieta, 2020, 48). For Anchieta, "gradually, the cult of Mary is replaced by the cult of her tears. The Virgin Empress, distant and aloof upon her throne, gradually gives way to the image of the mother who suffers and weeps for her son" (Anchieta, 2020, 55). According to Anchieta, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries "Mary definitively descends from the throne and touches the ground for the first time. She bends toward her son in the hay-filled manger. She becomes human, embracing the ideal of humility, generosity, and kindness. She becomes less Virgin and more Mary" (Anchieta, 2020, 61).

We may conclude, then, that through the imposition of the cult and the representation of the figure of Mary, the Church played a role in reaffirming the model of the patriarchal monogamous family in capitalist society and of the role imposed upon women by a bourgeois conception of life, through the teaching and cult of the Holy Family. The worldview of these new subjects arose in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—those whom Skinner termed *gente nuova* — imbued with the values of that social order, endowing society with a new morality and drawing it into temporal matters. The family model upheld by these subjects, although not novel—given its correspondence in the ancient world—served the purposes of the new social order, of the nascent capitalist society instituted in the Late Middle Ages and which gradually asserted itself as private proprietor of the means of production. The Church and the State (albeit reemerging) are hegemonic apparatuses of power for these new social subjects.

Women, in pre-capitalist and capitalist society, are positioned as instruments for the reproduction of the labor force. Yet what enabled capitalist society to reinforce this

oppression of the female sex was monogamy, which allowed men to exercise extensive power over women. However, women have not always occupied this role in society. It is understood that monogamy is the offspring of class society, which exploits humans by means of other humans. Yet primitive society did not know this type of society, for:

> Exploiting another individual meant that the exploiter had to devote his time to watching over and controlling the one he exploited. If productivity is low, then at the end of the day the time the exploiter spent controlling the exploited yields so little that he will eat less than if he had sought his food himself. The very low productivity of labor in primitive societies made the exploitation of humans by humans a historical impossibility. For this reason, primitive societies knew neither social classes nor the State nor politics (the exercise of power that springs from private property), nor law, nor money (LESSA, 2012, p. 19).[3]

Thus, the general objective of this article is to analyze the content of representations of the Holy Family and their possible projections onto sixteenth-century Italian society. As specific objectives, it proposes to understand the relationship among family, patriarchy, and monogamy within the framework of primitive accumulation of capital, and to analyze the constituent elements of the works depicting the Holy Family and their temporal correlation. The methodology chosen for the analysis of sources was the method developed by Erwin Panofsky, who proposed a study protocol for works of art with the aim of establishing their meaning. The purpose of this study is to understand how an expected role for female conduct is created within the familial cell in a specific society. This brings us to the importance of developing critical awareness regarding the processes of exclusion and oppression of women in capitalist society. Through historical analysis, therefore, we seek in the context the construction/reaffirmation of the hierarchical ordering of male and female social roles; this leads us to reject such roles as natural and to recognize them as historical constructions. Deconstructing masculinity and

[3] Original version: Explorar outro indivíduo significava que o explorador deve dedicar seu tempo a vigiar e a controlar a quem explora. Se a produtividade é baixa, ao final do dia o tempo que o explorador gastou para controlar a quem explora rende tão pouco que ele irá comer menos do que se procurasse sua comida pessoalmente. A baixíssima produtividade do trabalho nas sociedades primitivas fazia da exploração do homem pelo homem uma impossibilidade histórica. Por causa disso, as sociedades primitivas não conheciam nem as classes sociais, nem o Estado, nem a política (o exercício do poder que brota da propriedade privada), nem o Direito, nem o dinheiro (LESSA, 2012, p. 19).

femininity therefore requires recovering the historical foundations that enabled the construction and naturalization of these roles.

Concepts and Definitions

Painting, as a work of art, is not a neutral object; it functions as an ideological record of its era. In each historical period, structural determinations—of behavior, sexuality, norms of social coexistence, social roles, among others—are modulated by the dominant ideology. In the visual arts, this orientation manifests itself in the modes of representation: every image presupposes an ideology, and every ideology involves a system of values and objectives for social action. According to Marx and Engels:

> The class that has at its disposal the means of material production thereby also has control over the means of spiritual production; for this reason, the ideas of those who lack the means of spiritual production are, on average, subordinated to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal [*ideell*] expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations conceived as ideas; therefore, of those relations that make a given class dominant, and thus the ideas of its domination. The individuals who constitute the ruling class also have, among other things, consciousness, and thus they think; insofar as they dominate as a ruling class, they also possess, among other things, consciousness and thus think; insofar as they dominate as a class and determine the entire content of a historical epoch, it is evident that they do so in its entirety and, therefore, among other things, also dominate as thinkers, as producers of ideas, regulating the production and distribution of the ideas of their time; thus, their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (MARX and ENGELS, 2009, p. 67).[4]

[4] Original version: A classe que tem à sua disposição os meios para a produção material dispõe assim, ao mesmo tempo, dos meios para a produção espiritual, pelo que lhe estão assim, ao mesmo tempo, submetidos em média as ideias daqueles a quem faltam os meios para a produção espiritual, pelo que lhe estão assim, ao mesmo tempo, submetidas em média as ideias daqueles a quem faltam os meios para a produção espiritual. As ideias dominantes não são mais do que a expressão ideal [*ideell*] das relações materiais dominantes, as relações materiais dominantes concebidas como ideias; portanto, das relações que precisamente tornam dominante uma classe, portanto as ideias do seu domínio. Os indivíduos que constituem a classe dominante também têm, entre outras coisas, consciência, e daí que pensem; na medida, portanto, em que dominam como classe dominante também tem, entre outras coisas, consciência, e daí que pensam; na medida, portanto, em que dominam como classe e determinam todo o conteúdo de uma época histórica, é evidente que o fazer em toda o conteúdo de uma época histórica, é evidente que o fazem em toda a sua extensão e, portanto, entre outras coisas, dominam também como pensadores, como produtores de ideais, regulam a produção e a distribuição de ideias do seu tempo; que, portanto, as suas ideias são as ideias dominantes da época (MARX e ENGELS, 2009, p. 67).

In light of this principle, sixteenth-century Italy offers an eloquent terrain: the restructuring of domestic life, with the reaffirmation of patriarchalism, finds in representations of the Holy Family a visual paradigm that mirrors—and simultaneously reinforces—the prevailing moral order. Thus, the iconographic motif not only illustrates an ideal of family but also acts as a vehicle for the naturalization of values, articulating devotion, gender discipline, and the symbolic legitimation of social hierarchies.

Panofsky's Method of Analysis

Historical research requires that the scholar follow methodological procedures appropriate to the object; among these, image analysis occupies a central place. Iconography, in this context, is decisive because it enables the apprehension of a work's meaning beyond mere formal description, articulating recognizable motifs, themes, and visual conventions (Panofsky, 1989, p. 31). Operationally, Panofsky distinguishes stages through which the art historian must proceed. First, there is the level of factual meaning and expressional meaning: on the basis of the observer's repertoire of experiences and "visual common sense," one identifies objects, figures, gestures, and situations (factual), and describes the manner in which these elements are disposed and act within the scene (expressional). Taken together, these two moments constitute the "primary" or "natural" meanings (Panofsky, 1989, p. 31).

When the work originates from historical and sociocultural universes different from that of the interpreter, a second step becomes necessary: the identification of secondary or conventional meanings. Here the scholar draws upon textual and visual repertoires of the period (writings, emblems, allegories, liturgical usages, customs) to recognize, for example, that a laurel wreath indicates victory, that a lily may allude to Marian purity, or that certain attributes establish the identity of a saint, a virtue, or a mythological figure (Panofsky, 1989, p. 31). This movement already demands historical and philological control, since it depends on knowledge of the conventions prevailing in the time and milieu that produced the image.

Finally, the investigation reaches the level of intrinsic meaning or content—that which unifies and explains both the visible event and its symbolic intelligibility, revealing the structural principles (worldviews, theological matrices, political codes, mental habits) that inform the work's form and composition. This level, less accessible to the conscious

volition of artist and public, constitutes the ultimate aim of interpretation, for it allows one to understand how the image embodies, organizes, and transmits the values and ideas of its historical horizon (Panofsky, 1989, p. 32).

The passage from the descriptive to the interpretative corresponds to the distinction between iconography and iconology. Iconography names the work of identifying and classifying themes and motifs; iconology, in turn, is iconography "made interpretative": it integrates the study of art with the study of its historical, social, and intellectual conditions of possibility, avoiding its reduction to a preliminary inventory of recurring elements (Panofsky, 1989, p. 34). In practical terms, this means: (1) describing with precision what is seen (factual and expressional levels); (2) recognizing historical conventions that give name and function to the elements (secondary or conventional level); and (3) explicating the unifying principles that structure the meaning of the work in its context (intrinsic level). Such a path protects the researcher from anachronisms, grounds inferences in documentation of the period, and transforms the study of images into a legitimate avenue of historical knowledge.

Italy: Cradle of the Renaissance

Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries stood out in its sociocultural development when compared to other European countries. Peter Burke notes that already in the thirteenth century some Italian cities played a significant role in the so-called "commercial revolution"; such dynamism, to a large extent, stemmed from geographical conditions: mountainous and rugged topography limited agricultural expansion but, on the other hand, "Italy's central location in Europe and easy access to the sea enabled its merchants to become intermediaries between East and West [...]" (Burke, 2010, p. 9).

The Renaissance became notable for innovations in painting, architecture, literature, music, sculpture, and poetry, without, however, abandoning systematic dialogue with Antiquity. Burke further underscores the socially localized character of the movement—"a cultural movement of the elite"—though receptive to exchanges with popular culture, "facilitated by the fact that most leading [painter] artists were trained as craftsmen" (Burke, 2010, p. 18).

Within this framework, in which elite culture acquires exemplary visibility in works of art, arises the specific problem of the influence of bourgeois ideology—especially regarding family representations—on depictions of the Holy Family. Although originating and curated within elevated circuits of patronage and consumption, this culture did not remain self-contained: direct and indirect interactions involved subordinate strata, whether as suppliers of raw materials and skilled labor, or as participants in productive and devotional chains that bestowed value and circulation upon objects esteemed by both the petty and the great Italian bourgeoisie.

Religious Painting and Its Social Role

Painters executed religious themes relying "on the observer's ability to recognize the subject [...] quite immediately, so that they could allow themselves to accentuate it, modify it, and adapt it quite freely" (Baxandall, 1991, p. 44). In other words, the artist could alter the disposition of the scene, the positioning of the figures, and the gestures, without, however, corrupting the typological traits and recognizable attributes of the characters, for this would break the intelligibility shared with the public.

The mind of the public was not a blank tablet to be simply imprinted by images, but an "active organ of inner visualizations," whose repertoire the painter knew and with which he dialogued. Thus, the experience of a painting in the Quattrocento did not reduce to what we see today; it resulted from the combination of the work and the processes of visualization already carried out by the observer concerning the same subject (Baxandall, 1991, pp. 53–54). In this context, devotional images within churches fulfilled pedagogical and moral functions in societies of widespread low literacy: they continued a medieval visual culture that, already in the Modern Age, still taught doctrines and behaviors through biblical, hagiographic, and allegorical scenes.

Baxandall recalls that at the end of the thirteenth century, Giovanni of Genoa's Catholicon systematized three functions of religious painting, in a formulation that became commonplace: *ad instructionem rudium* (to instruct the simple), *ad recordationem rerum gestarum* (to recall deeds), and *ad excitationem affectuum* (to stir the emotions). This triad helps explain why the artist's compositional invention combined with the stability of types, attributes, and conventions: the image had to be recognizable to instruct,

memorable to fix contents, and affective to move the will—while simultaneously operating with the rhetorical freedom necessary for visual persuasion. He writes:

> First, for the instruction of simple people, for they are instructed by images as by books. Second, so that the mystery of the Incarnation and the examples of the saints might act more effectively upon our memory, being exposed daily before our eyes. Third, to arouse feelings of devotion, which are more effectively awakened through things seen than through things heard. [Furthermore,] in a sermon published in 1492, the Dominican Fra Michele da Carcano gives us an extensive explanation in accordance with quattrocento orthodoxy: ... images of the Virgin and the saints were introduced for three reasons. First, because of the ignorance of simple people, for those who are not able to read the Scriptures may nonetheless learn by observing images the sacraments of our salvation and our faith. It is written: "I have learned that, moved by inconsiderate zeal, you have been destroying the images of the saints on the pretext that we should not adore them. And we reproach you for having broken them... For one thing is to adore an image, and quite another is to learn, from a story narrated by an image, that which ought to be adored. What a book is for one who can read, an image is for the ignorant who contemplate it. For through the image even the illiterate may see what example they should follow; through an image, even those who do not know the alphabet may read." Saint Gregory the Great addressed these words to Serenus, bishop of Marseilles. Second, images were introduced on account of our emotional apathy; for those not moved to devotion when hearing the stories of the saints might at least be stirred when seeing them, as if they were effectively present in the images. For our feelings are stimulated more by things seen than by things heard. Third, they were introduced owing to the frailty of our memory... Images were introduced because many people cannot retain what they hear, but remember when they see (Baxandall, 1991, pp. 49–50).[5]

[5] Original version: Em primeiro lugar, para a instrução das pessoas simples, pois são instruídas por elas como livros. Em segundo lugar, para que o mistério da encarnação e os exemplos dos santos pudessem melhor agir em nossa memória, estando expostos diariamente aos nossos olhos. Em terceiro lugar, para suscitar sentimentos de devoção, que são mais eficazmente despertados por meio de coisas vistas que de coisas ouvidas. [além disto,] em um sermão publicado em 1492, o dominicano Fra Michele da Carcano nos dá uma ampla explicação conforme a ortodoxia quatrocentista: ... as imagens da Virgem e dos santos foram introduzidas por três razões. Primeiramente, por causa da ignorância das pessoas simples, pois aquelas que não são capazes de ler as escrituras podem, contudo, aprender observando as imagens, os sacramentos de nossa salvação e nossa fé. Está escrito: "Soube que, levados por um zelo inconsiderado, tendes destruindo as imagens dos santos sob pretexto de que não devemos adorá-las. E nós culpamos por tê-las quebrado... Pois uma coisa é adorar uma imagem, e bem outra é aprender, a partir de uma história narrada por imagem, aquilo que se deve adorar. O que um livro é para aquele que sabem ler, uma imagem o é para as pessoas ignorantes que a contemplam. Porque através da imagem mesmo os iletrados podem ver qual exemplo devem seguir; por meio de uma imagem, mesmo aqueles que não conhecem o alfabeto podem ler". São Gregório, o Grande, endereçou estas palavras à Serenus, bispo de Marselha. Segundo, as imagens eram introduzidas em virtude de nossa apatia emocional; pois aqueles que não são levado pela devoção quando ouvissem as histórias dos santos poderiam ao menos se comover quando as vissem, como se elas estivessem efetivamente presentes nas imagens. Pois nossos sentimentos são estimulados por coisas vistas mais do que

Among the paintings commissioned both by the Church and by private patrons, the representation of the Holy Family stands out, generally composed of Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child. The devotional tradition sustaining this iconographic repertoire receives strong impetus beginning in 431 CE, when the Council of Ephesus affirms for Mary the title *Theotokos*, thereby consolidating, on the doctrinal plane, the Christological and Marian centrality that would structure subsequent piety and imagery. Within this framework, Mary came to be regarded not only as "mother," but also—within the mystical-devotional vocabulary—as "spouse" of the incarnate God, a language that emphasizes the singular union between the Virgin and the Word made flesh.

At first, Marian devotion was surrounded by controversy: Mary was not a martyr, no attested cycle of miracles was attributed to her as to the more ancient saints, and, above all, no bodily relics had been preserved—something that, in medieval practice, constituted a central element of veneration. As Réau observes, the issue of martyrdom was resolved through a parallelism between Christ's Passion and the Virgin's compassion; regarding relics, the tradition of the Dormition/Assumption justified the absence of bodily remains, opening space for "indirect" or "extrinsic" relics, that is, objects said to have touched Mary's body. In the final instance, even reproductions of Mary's bodily measurements (height, waist circumference) were admitted as relics—an expedient also applied to Christ's own measurements—employed even in pious works and foundations (Réau, 2008, vol. 5, pp. 62–68).

In the Middle Ages, especially through the action of monastic orders, Marian devotion expanded widely. The Cistercians were among the first to consecrate their abbeys to Mary, an impulse associated with the figure of Bernard of Clairvaux and his Marian preaching. As a corollary, images of the Virgin multiplied at the entrances of churches, in altarpieces, and even on the corners of houses, in small oratories—thus configuring a devotional landscape that reinforced and diversified the Christian imaginary surrounding Mary. This expansion was followed by the diffusion of the cults of Saint Anne and Saint Joachim (the Virgin's parents) and of Saint Joseph (Mary's spouse), all

por coisas ouvidas. Terceiro, eram introduzidas devindo à precariedade de nossa memória... As imagens eram introduzidas porque muitas pessoas não com seguem reter o que ouve, mas se recordam quando as vêm (BAXANDALL, 1991, p. 49-50).

of which, by contiguity, nourished the iconographic fortune of the Holy Family and its compositional variations in the centuries that followed (Passos, 2015, p. 231).

The Family Between the Medieval and the Modern

What defines a medieval family, and to what extent does it resemble the modern one? The question requires distinguishing juridical-social (statuses and rights), economic (patrimony and dowry), symbolic (gender roles), and religious (the sacramentality of marriage) levels. In the Middle Ages, as later in the Early Modern period, the hegemonic domestic organization was shaped by monogamous regimes that, in social practice, produced gender hierarchies: the juridical and symbolic subordination of women to the husband, male tutelage over property and decisions, and reduced opportunities for public representation. This is not a matter of continuity without change—the modern period introduced normative and civic transformations—but it is correct to affirm that, from the standpoint of the structural position of the feminine vis-à-vis the masculine, no abrupt rupture occurred between the medieval period and the early centuries of modernity.

In the eleventh century, the tripartite scheme that organized Christian society (*oratores, bellatores, laboratores*) did not assign an autonomous status to the feminine. It hierarchized "categories" or "conditions"—clergy, knights, peasants—without envisaging a distinct "female condition" (Le Goff, 1989, p. 193). As Le Goff notes, "while for medieval men there exists a category 'woman,' for a long time woman is not defined by professional distinctions, but by her body, her sex, her relations to a certain group" (Le Goff, 1989, pp. 21–22); hence the identifying triad: "wife, widow, or virgin" (1989, p. 22). Even in the upper strata, any female "command" in society tended to be confined to the domestic sphere, mediated by kinship, marriage, and motherhood.

Marriage functioned as a social technology of alliances and mobility for men and as a device of patrimonial transfer for women. The wife frequently served as a vector of "double displacement": a translation into the husband's household and a vertical transposition (upward or downward) on the social scale. Common matrimonial strategies—among the knightly class of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and in aristocratic and urban bourgeois circles of the fourteenth and fifteenth—led fathers to choose daughters-in-law of higher origin, which paradoxically often resulted in the social

downgrading of women and in their subjection to husbands of inferior birth or position, to whom they owed obedience (Le Goff, 1989, pp. 195–196). The dowry mechanism intensified this scenario: "the physical and wealth transfer effected through [the woman]" entailed her dispossession; the inflationary spiral of dowries devalued her social "worth" over the course of the Middle Ages (Le Goff, 1989, p. 22).

Age and reproductive factors reinforced the patrimonial logic. It was customary to make betrothals and contracts at very early ages, with ecclesiastical authorization for marriage beginning at seven and consummation at puberty. Age disparities were marked (men around thirty; women between twelve and thirteen), a situation that persisted widely into the Early Modern period. The strategic goal was to extend the fertile period in a context of high infant mortality, which translated into intense rhythms of pregnancies and childbirth. Le Goff mentions, for example, a bourgeois woman of Arras who, at age twenty-nine, was widowed after having borne twelve children in thirteen years of marriage (Le Goff, 1989, p. 201).

From a ritual and juridical perspective, medieval matrimony oscillated between private practices and progressive liturgical publicization. For much of the Middle Ages, it was celebrated in the domestic sphere; between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, the public form with nuptial blessing in the church became generalized. This shift is explained by magisterial and canonical doctrine. The Augustinian tradition (*De bono coniugali*) supplied the lexicon and values; in the eleventh century, Burchard of Worms compiled in the *Decretum* a vast body of normative material, converting it into a practical manual that condensed roughly eight centuries of ecclesial tradition (Silva, 2008, p. 42). Subsequently, in the *Concordia discordantium canonum*, Gratian elaborated a canonical architecture that, drawing on Augustine and the Gospel of Matthew, affirmed the sacramental character of marriage and its indissolubility. In both cases, definition focused on constitutive elements: who might legitimately marry (female virginity treated as a central moral-juridical requirement), who participated in the act (parents, husband, sponsors), the manner of delivery (publicly), and the role of the blessing (Silva, 2008, p. 44). The consistency of the bond resulted from a bundle of acts: consent, familial and dowry delivery, nuptial blessing, and consummation; the union endured "until the death of one of the spouses" (Silva, 2008, p. 41).

It is worth noting, however, that ecclesial publicization did not impose itself uniformly. Significant exceptions persisted—for example, in sixteenth-century Italy, elites continued to celebrate marriages within domestic settings—revealing tensions between ecclesiastical normativity and the conventions of dominant groups, as well as the practical limits of the Church's institutional influence (Silva, 2008). On the other hand, the papal magisterium refined criteria of validity: for Alexander III, in addition to formal conditions, the mutual consent of the spouses was an essential element for legitimating the bond—the celebrated consensual principle that would later sustain the notion of "marriage by love" within the canonical grammar (Silva, 2008).

Given this, the similarities with the "modern" family (in the post-medieval sense) emerge primarily on three fronts: (1) the centrality of monogamous marriage as the juridical and moral axis of domestic organization; (2) the patrimonial function (dowry, inheritance, name), still decisive from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries; and (3) the persistence of gender hierarchies. The differences, in turn, lie in the gradual transformation of legal tutelage, the expansion of margins for female consent in certain urban contexts, the slow separation between domestic and civic spheres, and the reconfiguration of kinship under new economies and state regimes. In sum: medieval and modern families share structural mechanisms of controlling sexuality, filiation, and the transmission of goods, but diverge in their normative texture, in degrees of publicity, and in the margins of agency granted to women—differences consolidated over the course of modernity without effacing the longue-durée continuity that Le Goff and the canonical tradition help illuminate.

The Importance of the Family, the Patriarchal System, and Monogamy for the Organization of Primitive Accumulation

Before anything else, it is necessary to understand how the emergence of the family, patriarchy, and monogamy took shape—structures that enabled forms of organization for pre-capitalist social relations. These arrangements have prehistoric roots. In the stages preceding the so-called Neolithic Revolution, labor had a predominantly collective character, with low internal differentiation and no stable hierarchies, ensuring group survival through gathering, hunting, and sharing. With the Neolithic transition,

roughly ten thousand years ago, the domestication of plants and animals made possible the regular production of food, storage, and, in certain regions, the formation of surpluses. From that point on, material reproduction no longer depended solely on the immediate and full effort of all for daily subsistence; space was opened for the so-called "surplus labor," that is, for a portion of productive activity appropriable beyond what was necessary for the producer's direct survival (Lessa, 2012). As Lessa summarizes, "if, in primitive societies, the time spent on monitoring and controlling workers resulted in less than the individual would produce directly, now the activity of control and surveillance necessary to carry out the exploitation of people yields more wealth than that obtained directly by the individual's labor. This is what makes possible the exploitation of man by man" (Lessa, 2012, pp. 21–22).

In Lessa's reading, the decisive mechanism through which ruling classes secure the private appropriation of surplus is socially organized violence. Coercion not only disciplines the producer but structures the systematic conversion of surplus into private property; and "the special instrument created by the ruling classes to organize and apply violence on an everyday basis is the State" (Lessa, 2012, p. 25). For this control to be effective, it was necessary to shift the axis of survival from the collective plane to the individual/domestic one, reducing the common sphere and expanding the private sphere. At this juncture, the family—especially the patriarchal monogamous form—begins to fulfill a strategic function: it consolidates itself *pari passu* with class society, operating as a device for stabilizing "legitimate" filiation, controlling female sexuality, and securing the intergenerational transmission of goods. In practical terms, what had previously been organized communally becomes domesticated and privatized tasks, which facilitates the extraction of labor and income from the producer (Lessa, 2012).

Engels's classic interpretation converges with this line of force, emphasizing that, with the agricultural revolution, women played a central role in the domestic nucleus—particularly in horticultural economies—yet, over time, the predominance of patrimonial forms anchored in paternal right reconfigured hierarchies and disqualified the juridical-political relevance of the maternal principle. The result is the reduction of the woman to the condition of reproductive instrument and object of male pleasure within the household (Engels, [1884] 2017). The passage from pre-monogamous forms to institutionalized monogamy corresponds, in the Engelsian schema, to the need to "ensure the fidelity of

the woman and, consequently, the paternity of the children"; for this reason, "the woman is delivered unconditionally into the power of the man. Even if he kills her, he does nothing but exercise his right" (Engels, [1884] 2017, p. 80). The harshness of this formulation is not praise but critique: monogamy, as it historically consolidated itself, appears as a social form adjusted to private property and class reproduction.

Once paternal right is stabilized, inheritance becomes the organizing axis of family and kinship: male heirs come to concentrate the priority right over the father's goods, whereas women are juridically framed as means for ensuring legitimate descendants and as responsible for domestic activities that, by definition, do not generate private property in their favor nor insert them into competitive circuits. "Economy, Law, politics, religion, war, commerce, the arts, philosophy, science, the exploitation and conquest of new territories arise already as male activities" (Lessa, 2012, p. 27); to women of the dominant classes fall gestation and the care of children destined to perpetuate domination, and to others, the daily reproduction of life in conditions of subordination. Thus, "the ancient consensual and egalitarian relation is replaced by a relation of power. To male individuals belongs the power of private property; they will be the husbands. To women belong the activities that do not generate private wealth: they will be wives or prostitutes [...]" (Lessa, 2012, p. 28).

This material reordering has as its counterpart a sexual division of labor that rigidly separates spheres: to the man, the domain of social visibility, politics, and war; to the woman, the domestic space, the denial of "collective life" by means of seclusion in the home. The repression of female sexuality forms part of the same complex of devices: the wife is denied the right to pleasure; "women, says patriarchal ideology, can live without sex; men, never." The marital function is reduced to the production of heirs. Hence the codification of virginity as a guarantee of paternity and, by extension, of property: "sexual intercourse came to occur between husbands and wives or between masters and prostitutes. In the first case, the purpose is an heir capable of perpetuating the family's accumulation of wealth. [...] The guarantee that the child will indeed be the husband's is the wife's virginity—hence the male firstborn receives the inheritance. Virginity becomes indispensable for the woman destined to be a wife, whereby the development of her sexuality is compromised by repression" (Lessa, 2012, p. 31).

In sum, the monogamous family, as historicized by this interpretive tradition, decisively reorganizes relations between men and women by articulating: (1) the privatization of reproductive and care activities; (2) the disciplining of female sexuality and the stabilization of the conjugal bond; (3) patrimonial transmission under the sign of paternal right; and (4) the state's legitimation of a regime of violence that ensures the appropriation of surplus. It is, therefore, a social device that contributes to reproducing class exploitation while naturalizing the sexual division of labor and the gender hierarchy (Engels, [1884] 2017; Lessa, 2012).

The Structuring of the Family and the Condition of Women Throughout History

In the Early Modern period, the patriarchal monogamous family is reaffirmed, whose normative model restricts the domestic unit to a man, a woman, and their children, with explicit condemnation of infidelity according to Christian dogmas. In practice, however, sexual discipline operated unevenly: male transgression was often tolerated or socially excused, whereas female transgression could entail severe moral and juridical sanction—including, in certain contexts, harsh penalties—, a logic also reflected in the acceptance of a father's extramarital children, but not the mother's, notwithstanding regional and juridical variations.

It is worth, at this point, recalling the historical typology Engels proposed for forms of family anterior to monogamy. He outlines, in broad strokes, four stages: the consanguine family; the punaluan family; the pairing family (often called "pre-monogamous"); and monogamy (Engels, [1884] 2017). In the consanguine family, unions occur among groups of the same generation, with broad sexual relations among members of the *fratria*; hence the observation—now recognized as a nineteenth-century evolutionist hypothesis—that "all men and women were brothers or cousins and also husbands and wives to one another," in the sense of a system of collective alliances internal to the generation. In the punaluan family, sexual union between bilateral siblings is eliminated: groups of "brothers" (in the broad sense) unite with groups of "sisters," but not with their own sisters; this rearrangement prepares the emergence of the *gentes* (kinship units) defined, originally, by the maternal line. In such group-family arrangements, "one cannot know with certainty who the father of a child is, but one knows

who the mother is"—which makes matrilineal filiation the secure form for recognizing the consanguine bond (Engels, [1884] 2017, p. 60).

The next stage, which Engels calls the pairing family (or "pre-monogamous"), narrows the conjugal bond without eliminating it as an asymmetrical relation: the woman's relative exclusivity is expected, but de facto polygyny and male infidelity are admitted; female infidelity is reproved and punished. "Proper" monogamy, in turn, crystallizes the demand for female fidelity as a guarantee of paternity and, by extension, patrimonial transmission; hence Engels's incisive formulation regarding the woman's delivery into the man's power, as critique of a social device serving property (Engels, [1884] 2017, p. 80). In contrast to group forms, monogamous family life narrows and privatizes kinship, defines the legitimacy of heirs with clarity, and couples sexuality, filiation, and property—a triptych reinforced in the Early Modern period through the juridical and religious apparatus of sacramental marriage and succession law.

That said, two caveats must be underscored: (1) even in the Early Modern period, the application of monogamous norms varied across jurisdictions, estates, and cities, with gradients of tolerance and punishment; (2) Engels's typology, though classically influential, reflects nineteenth-century ethnographic-historical debates and must be read as an interpretative model rather than a rigid universal chronology. Even so, for purposes of historical analysis of family representations and practices (including those found in the arts and in Western Christian morality of the sixteenth century), the sequence consanguine → punaluan → pairing → monogamous helps elucidate why modernity reorganizes the family around female fidelity, juridical certainty of paternity, and inheritance—elements central to the bourgeois imaginary and to property regimes.

The Representation of the Family and of the Holy Family in the Italian Cinquecento

The iconography of the Holy Family in the Italian Cinquecento rests upon a repertoire of signs and narratives already sedimented in the visual memory of the public, shaped by centuries of catechesis and devotional practices that fixed the attributes, gestures, and relations among the sacred figures. This grammar, taught and reiterated by the Church, orients both the immediate recognition of themes and the horizon of permissible variations in the artists' compositional invention. It is therefore unsurprising

that the great workshops and masters of the Renaissance worked predominantly on commission, with programs defined by patrons and institutions, often detailed in contracts specifying dimensions, materials, deadlines, and essential iconographic elements, while leaving the painter rhetorical freedom in arrangement, gesture, and expressivity—freedom that, nonetheless, could not break the intelligibility of the theme for the faithful viewer (cf. Baxandall, 1991, pp. 44, 53–54).

This section considers selected paintings of the Holy Family executed in Italy throughout the Cinquecento (approx. 1490–1600), a period spanning the High Renaissance and Mannerism, with the aim of examining their procedures of meaning in light of the method proposed by Panofsky. The analytical trajectory begins at the level of the "primary" or "natural" meanings, factual and expressional—the identification of objects, figures, and visible actions, as well as the description of their disposition and dynamics within the scene—moves on to the recognition of "conventional" meanings (attributes, allegories, emblems, hagiographic and Marian typologies that inform the historical reading of the motifs), and culminates in the determination of the "intrinsic" meaning or "content," that is, the unifying principle that articulates form, devotional program, and worldview underlying the work (Panofsky, 1989, pp. 31–34). By integrating these three strata—from the immediately visible to the intellectual and spiritual horizon that organizes it—the aim is to show how Cinquecento variations on the Holy Family negotiate, simultaneously, doctrinal fidelity, devotional efficacy, and pictorial invention.

Raphael's Holy Family (1518)

Organizes its visual narrative through a pyramidal composition: the symbolic apex coincides with the affective axis Mary–Child, while the other figures are subordinated to this focal point. The upward movement of the Child—arms raised, torso projected—meets the receptive curve of the maternal gesture, which, by supporting him under the arms, converts action into an image of care. Mary's face, slightly inclined and composed, intensifies the devotional reading and establishes a field of forces in which the exchange of gazes structures the internal hierarchy of the scene. Relational centrality, tactile proximity, and gestural economy thus reinforce the prominence of the maternal–filial

bond and explain why this nucleus visually asserts itself over the remaining presences in the painting. [6]

Figure 01: SANZIO, Raphael. The Holy Family, 1518.
Oil on canvas transferred from wood, 207 × 140 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In the scene, the representation of Mary communicates to the viewer a normative maternal role—caring, protecting, instructing—organized by a devotional grammar that, in the Cinquecento, associates tactile proximity, the axis of gazes, and the compositional centrality of the Mary–Child pair. In a sociohistorical key, one may recognize, within the sixteenth-century bourgeois reading, the expectation that the woman should assume responsibility for daily child-rearing and moral education, freeing the head of household for business affairs and patrimonial administration; such an expectation does not arise automatically from the image, yet the image pedagogically reinforces it when read within a Christian cultural regime that values feminine domesticity (cf. Baxandall, 1991, pp. 44, 53–54).

[6] This allows us to affirm that the scene of Mary with her child was, for the painter, the focal point upon which the viewer's gaze should be concentrated.

Joseph's position, on a slightly elevated plane, visually articulates tutelary authority and the guarantee of legitimate descent, without breaking the Mary–Child affective focus. To the left, somewhat set back, the boy John the Baptist prays in an attitude of veneration before his cousin, bearing the reed cross; as Monteiro observes, the cross simultaneously recapitulates Passion, salvation, and triumph (Monteiro, 2017, p. 49). Behind John, Saint Elizabeth supports his arms beneath the elbows, a gesture readable as presentation and instruction. The presence of Elizabeth and John—kin beyond the conjugal nucleus—recalls the pattern of "extended family" common in aristocratic and bourgeois contexts of early modern Italy, in which "several generations often cohabit under the same roof, under the authority of the patriarch, sole lord of the entirety of the family's goods" (Larivaille, 1988, p. 223).

In the background, two angels theologically qualify the scene. Symbolically, angels are messengers and signs of spiritual order (Chevalier, 1986; Ferguson, 1961, p. 97). In documented compositional variants, "*el ángel de la izquierda sujeta un ramillete de flores sobre la cabeza de la Virgen, que alude a sus virtudes y a la Pasión*" (Martínez; Gorospe; Almela; Santos, 2007, p. 9). The flowers, according to prevalent symbolic reading, function as indices of earthly beauty and grace and of receptivity to the divine gift—chalice-like forms opened to the action of heaven (Monteiro, 2017, p. 49). Such stabilized attributes allow the painter to vary position and gesture without compromising the intelligibility of the subject for a catechized audience.

On the interpretative plane (intrinsic meaning), the articulation between the economy of grace (Incarnation and prefigured Passion) and the domestic economy (motherhood, paternal tutelage, kinship) clarifies why this iconography operates as a matrix of affective and social normativity. Devotional images function as devices of symbolic power: "they provoked devotion, fear, respect, love, supplication—a diversity of feelings capable of moving subjects according to the Church's desires" (Silva, 2018, p. 36). Thus, without reducing the work to a mere social reflection, one recognizes that its pedagogical and affective efficacy also participates in the naturalization of gender roles within the framework of the patriarchal monogamous family—a long-duration process that links doctrinal orthodoxy, domestic practices, and regimes of sensibility.

Correggio's Madonna della Cesta (1524)

Correggio's Madonna della Cesta (1524) presents the Holy Family in a domestic and intimate key. In the foreground, Mary dresses the Child in a small jacket; the gesture, restrained and attentive, organizes the affective axis of the scene. In the background, Joseph works with the carpenter's plane—a traditional attribute that fixes his identity and the industrious economy of the household. In the lower left corner, a sewing basket with tools and textile materials anchors the scene in the universe of domestic labor.

At the iconographic level, the elements function as conventional signs. The basket, "a symbol of the maternal body […] containing wool or fruit, symbolizes domestic work as well as fertility" (Chevalier, 1986, pp. 277–278).[7] The layette in preparation (the jacket) reinforces the semantics of care and provision; Joseph's labor, in turn, situates the house of Nazareth under the sign of the dignity of manual work, a topic well established in the Western iconography of the saintly carpenter (cf. Ferguson, 1961, p. 97, on the identifying function of attributes).

Figure 02: CORREGGIO. Madonna della Cesta, c. 1524.
Oil on panel, 33 × 25 cm, National Gallery, London.

[7]"Symbol of the maternal body. Moses, Oedipus, etc., were found at the edge of the waters in baskets. When containing wool or fruits, it symbolizes the gynaeceum and domestic tasks, as well as fertility." (CHEVALIER, 1986, pp. 277–278).

On the interpretative plane (intrinsic meaning), the painting dramatizes the articulation between the economy of grace and the domestic economy: the Incarnation is framed within the everyday life of a household that sews, clothes, and works. The compositional device—the tactile proximity of mother and child, the laborious presence of the father in the background, the tools and basket in the foreground—translates theological virtues into domestic virtues (care, diligence, humility), producing a visual pedagogy that brings together devotion and social norm: motherhood as service, fatherhood as craft, the family as a workshop of virtues. In this sense, the work partakes of the same Cinquecento devotional grammar that relies "on the observer's ability to recognize the subject […] quite immediately," allowing the painter to accentuate and freely adapt certain motifs without breaking the intelligibility of the theme (Baxandall, 1991, pp. 44, 53–54).

As in the other paintings analyzed in this study, the representation of the Holy Family emphasizes the centrality of the maternal figure within the domestic nucleus. In Correggio's Madonna della Cesta, this emphasis is visually articulated with the sexual division of labor: to her, domestic labor within the home—sewing, dressing, the direct care of the Child; to him, the manual craft situated in a distinct yet contiguous spatial plane—Joseph in the background, in his carpentry. At the descriptive level, the disposition in hierarchical planes already codifies functions: Joseph appears in the third plane, concentrated on handling the plane; Mary, in the second, performs the act of dressing the Child, a gesture that condenses care, provision, and affective discipline. This arrangement corresponds to what Carr-Gomm synthesizes when examining the theme in the Renaissance: "during the Renaissance, paintings of the Holy Family […] developed from maternal images of the Virgin and Child […] the theme emphasizes the human aspect of the Incarnation, insofar as the Holy Family is shown performing domestic tasks" (Carr-Gomm, 2004, p. 196). Correggio's work confirms precisely this displacement of miracle into quotidian life, inserting the economy of grace into the economy of the home.

At the iconographic level, the objects and attributes reinforce the conventional reading: the sewing basket and textile implements index the universe of feminine labor and the semantics of fertility/provision; the carpenter's plane identifies Joseph as an artisan and secures the intelligibility of the theme for a catechized observer. The contrast

between the areas of activity of Mary and Joseph is not reducible to an illustration of roles: it composes a visual pedagogy that distributes responsibilities, times, and spaces—to the feminine, tactile proximity, dressing, nurturing; to the masculine, fabrication, and protection mediated by craft.

On the interpretative plane (intrinsic meaning), the painting transforms theological virtues into domestic virtues and, in doing so, naturalizes gender hierarchies. Visuality shapes expectations: to the woman, the governance of proximity and care; to the man, productive authority and tutelage. This codification dialogues with social practices observable in the bourgeois and aristocratic horizons of early modern Italy. Larivaille notes that, when social and economic conditions permitted, "several generations often cohabit under the same roof, under the authority of the patriarch, sole lord of the entirety of the family's goods and of their destiny after his death" (Larivaille, 1988, p. 223). In this context, daughters of the elites, upon leaving the convent around age 11–12, returned home for training directed by the mother "for their role as perfect wives," in an explicit education for domesticity and obedience (Larivaille, 1988). The iconography, therefore, does not merely reflect this regime; it renders it emotionally plausible.

The same horizon explains the asymmetries of value attributed to the birth of boys and girls in the bourgeois household. Images of the Holy Family with the Christ Child celebrate, theologically and socially, the arrival of the son: hope of continuity of name, honor, and business. By contrast, the birth of a daughter appears, in many testimonies, as burden and patrimonial risk: "not only in the dream of every father to have sons who perpetuate his name and ensure succession in business and civic life, but also in the old ideas […] of the weight that they [daughters] represent in a family," for it is necessary to educate them "sheltered from temptations" and "arrange a marriage for them," which "always costs dearly to the family patrimony." "If the birth of a boy allows one to dream of enrichment and social ascent, that of a girl allows only the expectation of worry and unproductive expenses" (Larivaille, 1988, p. 227). Devotional painting thus functions as a device of affections and norms: it transforms motherhood, fatherhood, and filiation into a persuasive visual lexicon that legitimizes the sexual division of labor and the patriarchal regime of the household.

Holy Family (Barberini) by Andrea del Sarto

Andrea del Sarto's Holy Family (1528) organizes the devotional nucleus in the foreground: Mary, seated, holds the Child in her lap in a gesture of welcome and care; the scene explicitly depicts breastfeeding, with one breast exposed, signaling maternal nourishment as the semantic axis of the composition. Iconographically, the motif of the lactating Virgin is recurrent in the Latin tradition: "the breasts of women are the symbol of maternity and of its attributes of love, nourishment, and protection. The Virgin, as mother, gives the breast to the child" (Ferguson, 1961, p. 46). From a historical-normative standpoint, multiple sixteenth-century cycles explored this typology until its containment in the post-Tridentine period: "there exist many early paintings of the Virgin giving the breast to the Infant Jesus, but this image ceased to be produced after the Council of Trent (1545–1563) declared its disapproval of unnecessary nudity" (Carr-Gomm, 2004, p. 200).

At the descriptive level, the economy of gazes and hands condenses the narrative: Jesus, with his right hand near his mother's right breast, momentarily diverts his attention from nursing and looks downward to the left; Mary follows this diversion with her gaze, without relinquishing the supportive embrace of her arm; Joseph, on the left and in the middle ground, observes the Child with an attentive expression, forming—through his slight spatial elevation and distance—a vector of tutelage. The hierarchical distribution of planes—Mary and the Child within tactile reach; Joseph set back—is conventional in the Cinquecento, for it preserves the affective centrality of the maternal–filial pair and simultaneously marks Joseph's domestic authority without breaking the devotional intelligibility of the theme.

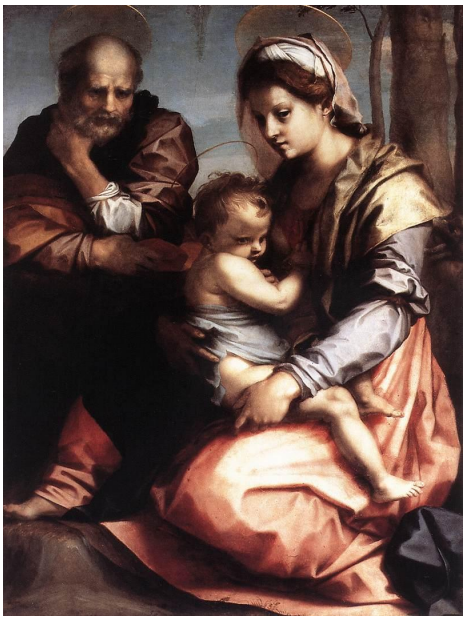

Figure 03: SARTO, Andrea del. Holy Family (Barberini), c. 1528.
Oil on panel, 140 × 104 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

Iconographically, lactation inscribes on Mary's body the grammar of care: she nourishes, protects, educates. The gesture is not merely biological; it is sacramentalized as a figure of gift and grace. In parallel, Joseph's position signals legal tutelage and "rightful" paternity, stabilizing filiation and the order of the household. In a social key, the scene reflects contemporary expectations: to the woman, the governance of proximity (dressing, nourishing, watching over); to the man, authority and patrimonial responsibility. Such distribution is widely documented for early modern Italian contexts, in which "several generations often cohabit under the same roof, under the authority of the patriarch, sole lord of the entirety of the family's goods and of their destiny after his death" (Larivaille, 1988, p. 223).

At the interpretative level (intrinsic meaning), the work translates theological virtues into domestic virtues and naturalizes gender hierarchies: motherhood is the privileged locus of service and self-abnegation; fatherhood, that of tutelage and command. The iconography thus participates in a long-duration visual pedagogy that renders certain behaviors plausible and desirable within the patriarchal monogamous family. Juridical-customary dispositifs reinforce this background: "the laws no longer recognize for the Renaissance head of household the right of life or death over his dependents, but his prerogatives remain very extensive […] public opinion [still] permits the killing of an

adulterous wife, while the husband himself […] keeps concubines under his roof […] and raises his bastards alongside his legitimate children […] apart from the extreme case of adultery, the husband retains in absolute form the right to beat his wife as well as his children" (Larivaille, 1988, pp. 223–224). Without reducing the painting to a mere reflection, one sees how its devotional efficacy—its capacity to move affections, teach dogmas, and order sensibilities—converges with practices and values that sustain masculine hegemony within the household.

In sum: Andrea del Sarto's Holy Family articulates, through the resources of Renaissance idealism (narrative clarity, gestural economy, hierarchical planes), an iconography of motherhood (the lactating Virgin) and a semantics of paternal tutelage (Joseph in watch). This conjunction operates simultaneously as visible theology of the Incarnation (the Son nourished in the mother's body) and as domestic politics (the sexed distribution of roles), offering the sixteenth-century viewer a matrix of recognition that instructs, moves, and normativizes.

Final Considerations

The historical and iconological analysis developed here allows us to articulate three mutually reinforcing axes: (1) the long duration of family forms and their functionality for regimes of property; (2) the social and juridical grammar that, from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, stabilizes patriarchal monogamy as a technology of "legitimate" filiation, intergenerational transmission, and governance of bodies; (3) the pedagogical efficacy of images—particularly the iconography of the Holy Family in the Italian Cinquecento—as a dispositif for naturalizing sensibilities and gender roles. At the first level, reading the family as a historical construction, already suggested by Engels in his typological ordering of the consanguine, punaluan, pairing, and monogamous stages, indicates that the modern form is not a datum of "nature" but a social arrangement advantageous to the succession logics of class society (Engels, [1884] 2017, p. 80; 2019). Alongside this matrix, explanations of the emergence of the State as an instance for regulating proprietary interests—from proprietary Antiquity and the social division of labor (Lucena, 1976) to the fiscal and administrative mechanisms of the medieval monarchies that prefigure the modern State (Strayer, 1970)—show the convergence of political economy, juridical order, and domestic morality.

At the second level, the arc running from the Roman domus—where familia comprised persons and property under *patria potestas* (Leandro, 2006, pp. 52, 59)—to the medieval canonical marriage and the sixteenth-century bourgeois family makes explicit the persistence of three structuring aims: stabilizing filiations (and consequently inheritances), disciplining sexuality (with asymmetric emphasis on female fidelity), and articulating honor, name, and patrimony. The medieval transition from private celebration to liturgical publicization of marriage—founded on Augustinian grammar, on Burchard of Worms's compilations, and on Gratian's canonical architecture, with consent as constitutive element according to Alexander III—translated into a public rite the social need for visibility and validity of the bond (Silva, 2008, pp. 41–44). In social practice, especially among urban elites and aristocracies of early modern Italy, patriarchy organized the household as a compact unit under the authority of the *pater familias*, with intergenerational cohabitation and explicit training of daughters for domesticity and marriage (Larivaille, 1988, pp. 223, 227). It is unsurprising, in this context, that expectations diverged sharply between the birth of boys (continuity of name and business) and girls (dowry burdens and management of honor), well attested by normative treatises and social practice (Larivaille, 1988, p. 227). Ariès's reading of the "invention" of the modern sentiment of childhood and the redefinition of the family as a moral and social—rather than merely sentimental—reality helps explain why the domestic unit becomes simultaneously a school of discipline and a patrimonial strategy (Ariès, 2017, pp. 231–232, 238).

At the third level—decisive for this article—the image operates as social writing. As Panofsky observes, the passage from the factual/expressional level to the conventional and the intrinsic allows us to see how stabilized attributes, gestures, and compositions convert theology into social norm (Panofsky, 1989, pp. 31–34). Baxandall reminds us that sixteenth-century devotional painting presupposed a catechized observer capable of recognizing the subject immediately, which authorized the painter to vary elements without destroying intelligibility (Baxandall, 1991, pp. 44, 53–54). It is precisely in this encounter between shared repertoire and rhetorical invention that the Holy Family becomes a laboratory of sensibilities: in Raphael, the affective pyramid Mary–Child dominates the scene and organizes discrete hierarchies (Joseph, John, Elizabeth, angels),

articulating the economy of grace and the economy of the household; in Correggio, the Madonna della Cesta restages domesticity as virtue—sewing, layette, the carpenter's craft—and translates care into a visible lexicon (Chevalier, 1986, pp. 277–278; Ferguson, 1961, p. 97; Carr-Gomm, 2004, p. 196); in Andrea del Sarto, the motif of the lactating Virgin condenses love, nourishment, and protection in the maternal body, while Joseph's vigilance codifies tutelage and rightful paternity—a scheme that post-Tridentine morality would discipline by repressing "unnecessary nudity" (Ferguson, 1961, p. 46; Carr-Gomm, 2004, p. 200). In all cases, the iconographic dispositif transforms theological virtues (charity, humility, obedience) into domestic virtues (care, diligence, governance of proximity), while simultaneously naturalizing the sexual division of labor: to the woman, nurturing, clothing, watching; to the man, productive authority and guardianship of the name.

This pictorial mechanism does not operate in a vacuum: it intersects with the material and juridical structures described by Engels and by Lessa—privatization of care activities, discipline of female sexuality, patrimonial transmission under the sign of paternal right, state legitimation of surplus appropriation—producing a visual culture that renders the patriarchal household regime plausible (Engels, [1884] 2017, p. 80; Lessa, 2012, pp. 21–31). If, as Marx and Engels note, the dominant ideas of an epoch are the ideal expression of its dominant material relations, then the dominant images—especially widely circulating devotional ones—function as privileged vehicles of that expression, regulating affections, memories, and conduct (Marx; Engels, 2009, p. 67). In this key, it is not a matter of reducing art to an epiphenomenon: the image actively participates in the construction of the social world, instructing the simple (*ad instructionem rudium*), fixing memories (*ad recordationem*), exciting affections (*ad excitationem affectuum*), as already systematized in the late-medieval tradition revived by Baxandall (1991, pp. 49–50). What the sixteenth-century works analyzed here show is the finesse with which this pedagogy of the senses converts the Incarnation, Passion, and domestic sanctity into matrices of recognition for bourgeois everyday life—the "economy of grace" embodied in the "economy of the household."

At the same time, it is necessary to register tensions and limits: ecclesial normativity did not always impose itself uniformly (Silva, 2008, pp. 41–44); iconographies such as the lactating Virgin experienced phases of wide circulation and of

disciplinary containment (Carr-Gomm, 2004, p. 200); marriage practices among Italian elites maintained domestic celebrations in conflict with the canonical public form (Silva, 2008). These frictions caution against determinism: images codify ideals but also negotiate with patrons, workshops, and heterogeneous publics; they can reinforce roles but also open fissures for agency, empathy, and consolation—as suggested by the slow "humanization" of Mary, from the Byzantine throne to the intimate and tender scenes of the Quattrocento and Cinquecento, a process Anchieta describes as the passage "from the Empress Virgin" to the mother who nurses, weeps, and bends toward her Child (Anchieta, 2020, pp. 47–48, 55, 61).

In conclusion, the trajectory proposed here—from concept to image, from iconography to iconology—supports three results: first, the modern family is a historically situated form, forged by patrimonial exigencies and stabilized by a juridical and moral grammar; second, the Cinquecento Holy Family operates as mediator between theology and domestic life, translating virtues and naturalizing gender hierarchies under the sign of patriarchal monogamy; third, careful reading of the works, with method (Panofsky) and with the social history of art (Baxandall), illuminates how visuality participates in the reproduction of class and gender structures—and, precisely for that reason, how historical critique can denaturalize such roles, restoring them to the field of the disputable. If "dominant ideas" are, after all, social products (Marx; Engels, 2009, p. 67), so too are the images that convey them: recognizing this is a condition for seeing in the history of art not a neutral mirror but an active archive of powers, affections, and possibilities.

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