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The Prince and the Prostitute: Competing Sovereignities in 14th Century Milan

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On the morning of November 27, 1401, a brief confrontation took place at a countryside road just outside Milan. A small but intent group of delegates from the *Fabbrica del Duomo*, the institution in charge of the building and maintenance of the Cathedral of Milan, met Prince Gian Galeazzo Visconti right outside his castle, as he was riding toward the city.¹ The angry ambassadors complained to the prince about his latest interference in the governance of the *Fabbrica*: a letter ordering it to re-hire Jean Mignot, the French architect whom the Council of the Cathedral had fired a month before. Mignot was a favorite of the prince and had been appointed to the position of director of the works thanks to the prince's pressures on the counselors. In turn, Mignot had tried to manipulate the Council's decisions in the direction of the prince's project: transforming the Cathedral of Milan in his dynastic mausoleum. But something had not gone according to plan and as a result of Mignot's attempt to exert control over the building project, he had lost his job.

Perhaps unwilling to acknowledge openly his defeat, Prince Gian Galeazzo told the three delegates that the re-hire letter was a forgery and that he did not intend to pursue the issue further. Then, without even getting off his horse, he exclaimed angrily that from that moment

This essay draws upon extensive research I undertook in 2002-2004 and again in 2006-2007 that is reflected in Martina Saltamacchia, *Milano: Un popolo e il suo Duomo* (Milano: Marietti, 2007). I wish to thank Rudolph M. Bell for comments on earlier drafts of the work. I also have benefitted from suggestions received from Phyllis Mack, Samantha Kelly, James Masschaele, Maurizio Capuzzo, several fellow students at Rutgers, and an anonymous reader. I appreciate the encouragement and advice I received from Corine Schleif and Robert Sturges at the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Conference in February, 2008.

¹ For the definition of *fabbrica*, see Leopeold Genicot, *Rural communities in the Medieval West* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 101, and Soldi Rondinini, Gigliola. "In Fabrica artis: il Duomo di Milano, partecipazione di popolo (e favore di principi?)," *Nuova Rivista Storica*, LXXXV, no. 3 (2001): 585-598, p. 586.

forward he would leave the cathedral project entirely in the hands of the Milanese people, so that its construction would be done “*ad libitum et dispositionem suorum civium et hominum Mediolani*”. [According to the will and disposition of the citizens of Milan.]²

The statement is extraordinary and demands our attention. How did the prince define who were the citizens of Milan and how did he think the *Fabbrica* expressed their “will and disposition”? Power, identity and authority undoubtedly came into play on many occasions during the fourteenth-century construction of Milan’s new cathedral, but seldom more clearly than in the business of firing architect Mignot. We have in this confrontation a contest over sovereignty, a term I use carefully but forcefully to invoke fully the Oxford Dictionary definition of sovereignty as “the supreme controlling power in communities not under monarchical government.”³

There were two actors competing for control over the cathedral, Prince Gian Galeazzo Visconti and the *Fabbrica del Duomo*. I shall argue that the *Fabbrica* was a concrete expression of the Milanese people, through the voice of its council formed by the citizens of the city. I shall further argue that the prince accepted that the cathedral would be built and owned by the people, not by him and his heirs. Given the long history of Milan’s domination by sword-wielding *signori*, this hypothesis challenges traditional assessments of the exercise of political power in Milan. More recently, in the revisionist work of Patrick Boucheron, we have the suggestion that control over building of the cathedral shifted from the prince to merchant elites, but in this essay I shall present evidence of widely based popular involvement in how the *Fabbrica* shaped the

² *Annali della Fabbrica del Duomo dall’origine fino al presente, pubblicati a cura dell’Amministrazione della Fabbrica*, 9 vols. (Milano: Brigola, 1877-1895) [from now on: ANNALI], t. 1, November 27, 1401, p. 240-241.

³ Simpson, J. A., and E. S. C. Weiner. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

meaning of its cathedral by its stunning decisions involving ritual and display accorded, yes, to a rich merchant, but as well to a poor woman and a prostitute.⁴

Gian Galeazzo Visconti, like so many of his predecessors and successors, obtained power over Milan by treacherous means. In 1385, when his uncle Bernabò was prince of the city, Gian Galeazzo arrived in Milan dressed as a wayfarer on pilgrimage. Upon learning of his arrival, Uncle Bernabò, together with his sons and daughters gathered to greet Gian Galeazzo. But when the Bernabò family reached the postern of St. Ambrose, and before they had time to realize what was happening, Gian Galeazzo sprang a trap that captured his uncle and cousins. He imprisoned them in the tower of the castle of Trezzo and abandoned them there to die of hunger and desperation.⁵ Having seized the title of Prince of Milan by this betrayal, Gian Galeazzo initiated an ambitious plan of expansion, financed through increasing taxation on the Milanese people, who were further exasperated by his continuous wars that seriously compromised their commercial activity in the region.⁶ Gian Galeazzo's numerous victories provided him with a firm grasp on the surrounding territories but he still had to find a way to gain acceptance from the Milanese, allowing them to set aside the memory of his initial deceit in attaining power. Nothing could have been more appropriate than the construction of the new, bigger cathedral that the archbishop and the citizenry had clamored for vigorously for many years. Santa Maria Maggiore, the basilica of Milan from the ninth century, had been devastated by fire in 1075, and a century later had been badly damaged by Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa as a punishment for the city's leading role in constituting the Lombard League against his despotic power. The church's gigantic bell tower, pulled down on that occasion, had been rebuilt at the beginning of

⁴ Boucheron, Patrick. *Le pouvoir de bâtir: urbanisme et politique édilitaire à Milan (XIVe-XVe siècles)* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1998), p. 183-189, 241-242.

⁵ Novati, Francesco. "Per la cattura di Bernabò Visconti," *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 1906, fasc. IX, p. 129-139.

⁶ *Storia di Milano*, 17 vols (Milano: Fondazione Treccani degli Alfieri per la storia di Milano, 1953-1966), t. VI, p. 539.

the fourteenth century by Azzone Visconti, but only twenty years later the new tower proved to be as weak in its foundation as it was powerful in appearance. It collapsed abruptly, killing two hundred people and carrying away a good section of the church walls in its fall.⁷ Moreover, the modest dimensions of the basilica did not rightly fit with the city's growing ambitions as a center of commerce and manufactures.

The works for construction of an immense new cathedral, generously supported by Gian Galeazzo, started in 1386, a year after Bernabò's capture. In addition to the prince's desire to efface popular memory about how he had gained power, he may also have been driven by some more spiritual sensibility, though there is little evidence in his well-documented life to sustain such speculation.⁸ Whatever his motives, Galeazzo sustained the project financially with a monthly donation of 250 *fiorini*, the equivalent of a skilled worker wages over eleven years.⁹ He also granted the *Fabbrica* a series of important privileges, including a tax exemption for the transportation of materials through the canals of the city and the free exploitation of a marble quarry.¹⁰ Additionally, he promulgated laws with the aim of facilitating the collection of popular donations for the cathedral.¹¹

⁷ Cattaneo, Enrico. *Il Duomo nella vita civile e religiosa di Milano* (Milano: NED, 1985), p. 10.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁹ For the fluctuations of *fiorino*'s value, see Zerbi, Tommaso. *Le origini della partita doppia. Gestione aziendale e situazioni di mercato nei secoli XIV e XV*. (Milano: Marzorati, 1952). For salaries and annual wages, see Archivio della Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano [hereafter AFD], *Oblazioni in denaro e in natura*, anno 1400, fondo Registri, n° 51. The actual equivalent (250 *fiorini* = 11 skilled worker annual wages) has been calculated in the following way: 250 *fiorini* = 8250 *soldi* = 11 * (work days in the cathedral yard annual value (sample year: 1387) = 252) * (skilled worker in the cathedral yard daily wage = 3 *soldi*).

¹⁰ ANNALI, t. 1, October 24, 1387, p. 13-14 (tax exemption for transportation of rocks from the areas surrounding Locarno); *Ibid.*, February 14, 1387, p. 174 (toll rights exemption for transportation of wood); Boucheron, Patrick. *op. cit.*, p. 473-480 (exclusive exploitation of a marble quarry in Candoglia).

¹¹ Archivio Storico Civico of Milano, *Litterarum ducalium*, Reg. 2, f. 153, Decree of May 10, 1387, confirmed on October 15, 1403; *Misure adottate contro i debitori della Fabbrica (1398)* (laws for protection of the *Fabbrica* from its debtors); ANNALI, t. 1, February 7, 1387, p. 1 (mandatory contributions to the cathedral required annually from city officials and city guilds); ANNALI, t. 1, May 18, 1395, p. 137-138 (mandatory contributions to the cathedral required annually from Communes under his control).

His assistance came with some strings. As noted above, his meddling aimed to transform the church into a giant mausoleum for his dynasty.¹² At first the *Fabbrica* seemed to consent to his project, having little choice until they developed independent sources of income. Then, little by little, as their finances improved, the councillors started to push away the prince, progressively gaining their independence and their sovereignty over the cathedral, culminating in the firing of court architect Mignot, against the prince's will.¹³

In 1400, a year before Mignot's dismissal, the *Fabbrica* already had expressed its defiance of the prince on an issue of artistic expression with heavy political overtones. For almost a decade Prince Gian Galeazzo had proposed to embellish the main focus of the church, the apsidal central window, with a Visconti dynasty emblem: an enormous grass snake sliding from the top to the bottom of the window. The *Fabbrica* initially agreed with the project and with his spokesman in the Council, architect Mignot. But then they slowly began to regain terrain in this dispute, first reducing the dimensions of the snake, then moving its position to a corner on the top. Even today, from the back of the Cathedral of Milan, one can see the final result in the controversy. The apsidal central window displays an Annunciation scene, a religious representation linked with the dedication of the church to the Virgin Mary. In the center of the window, between the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Gabriel, a sun stands out, its rays formed by ten little wavy snakes: it is the *raza*, another Visconti family emblem. Technically, the counselors finally approved the insertion of the Visconti symbol in the decoration of the window, perhaps to the joy of Mignot and the prince, but any pleasure must have been short-lived once

¹² Boucheron, Patrick. *op. cit.*, p. 189.

¹³ ANNALI, t. 1, December 14, 1399, p. 199; January 11, 1400, p. 202-210; May 15, 1401, p. 224-229; November, 27, 1401, p. 240-241; Mezzanotte, Paolo. "Il Duomo di Milano", in *Storia di Milano, op. cit.*, t. V, p. 859-896; Romanini, Angiola Maria. "La fabbrica del Duomo di Milano dalla fondazione agli albori del Quattrocento," *Idem, L'architettura gotica in Lombardia*, 2 vols. (Milano: Ceschina, 1964), vol. 1, p. 356; Frankl, Paul. *The Gothic. Literary sources and interpretations through Eight Centuries*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 63-86.

the result appeared. The *raza* was still there, but it was included in a vertical progression together with a bas-relief of God the Father and a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit. People would immediately recognize in that radiant sun the second person of the Trinity, Christ, in his iconic representation as *Sol Justitia*, the Sun of Justice, referring to the gospel description of the Incarnation as the triumphant moment in the victory of light over darkness; very few would be reminded of the Visconti dynasty (See Figure 1).¹⁴

What Gian Galeazzo had conceived as the place for celebrating his triumph became instead the commemoration of his rejection by the Milanese people, who had successfully gained control over their cathedral. The bas-relief of the Annunciation on the apsidal window included, certainly not by chance, a bishop devoutly keeling under the *Sol Justitia*: St. Galdinus, the eleventh-century bishop who had led the Milanese into rebellion against the despotic grip of the Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa.

Gian Galeazzo surely understood that the *Fabbrica* would no longer be pliable about supporting his project; his family's monumental sarcophagus would not find a place in the cathedral and the stained glass windows would not be decorated with his dynastic emblems.¹⁵ Confronted with such a humiliating defeat, Gian Galeazzo abandoned the cathedral and went to Pavia for a more receptive place to build his tomb. In a final indignity heaped upon the fierce prince's legacy, the *Fabbrica* authorized sculpting his resemblance only on the face of a small statue of St. George placed far away on the top of a spire.

I turn now to the question of whether and how the *Fabbrica* expressed the will of a broad spectrum of Milan's citizens. As I shall explain below, the prince retained some role in its decision-making process, but to what degree did the *Fabbrica* also reflect the voice of the

¹⁴ Mezzanotte, Paolo. *op. cit.*; p. 885-896.

¹⁵ P. Boucheron, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

people? The *Fabbrica* exercised authority primarily through its elected Council, which met weekly to deliberate on all matters regarding the construction, management and administration of the cathedral. Council members were enjoined to attend every meeting, under penalty of a fine amounting to their daily salaries.¹⁶ Resolutions on issues large and small, everything from petty hirings and firings to choices of suppliers, were preserved in the Council's written records. Often these decisions appear to reverse or contradict one another, suggesting that outcomes were the result of lively, even heated, debate.

The three main actors on the civic scene - the prince, the Church and the people - were all represented in the Council. The prince did not take part in person at Council meetings but the presence of the Vicar of Provisions and the Council of Provisions, composed of twelve members, reminded everyone of his authority. The Council of Provisions, the central legislative institution of the commune, initially had been created by the Archbishop of Milan, Ottone Visconti, in the second half of the thirteenth century with the declared aim of unifying management of the city. At that time it was the *podestà*, the chief magistrate of the commune, who named its twelve members.¹⁷ Over the course of the fourteenth century, however, the Visconti family succeeded in obtaining effective control over the appointment of these officials, thereby achieving direct power over administration of the city.¹⁸ Moreover, the practice of very frequent rotation of councillors, whose terms often lasted as little as two months, surely rendered the Council too lacking in knowledge and experience to provide an effective counterbalance to the princes' wishes.

¹⁶ ANNALI, t. 1, May 23, 1400, p. 214; on the fee amount, see *Ibid.*, August 29, 1402, p. 252; *Ibid.*, February 2, 1403, p. 255.

¹⁷ Franca Leverotti, "*Governare a modo e stillo de' signori...*": *Considerazioni sull'amministrazione della giustizia al tempo di Galeazzo Maria Sforza* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994), p. 79, 127-128.

¹⁸ Kleinhenz, Christopher; Barker, John W.; Geiger, Gail; Lansing, Richard H. *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 866.

In order to minimize yet further the effectiveness of any possible opposition coming from the Milanese people or from some powerful individual among them, in the year 1279 the Visconti had also changed procedures by instituting the position of Vicar of Provisions, an office that had to be held by someone who was not a citizen of Milan. Initially exercising little more than a titular role as neutral observer or moderator, the Vicar of Provisions gained growing authority in decades that followed, eventually exercising virtual veto power over decisions desired by the other twelve members.¹⁹

The Council of Provisions, including its Vicar, administered all sectors of interest to the commune, from safety to victualling, from public assistance to taxation, from regulation of the economy to judicial proceedings. It was the Council of Provisions that monitored usage of water, for instance, or decided whether and when to repair streets and canals, as well as how to manage incomes and expenditures of the commune. Also, through its direct involvement in the Council of the *Fabbrica*, the Council of Provisions coordinated and controlled the works for the cathedral's construction.

The second of the *Fabbrica*'s three institutional actors, the Church, was less powerfully represented than the prince. Surprisingly enough, only the vicar to the archbishop and three monsignors served by right of their official positions, a total of four among approximately three hundred members. Clearly, the *Fabbrica* possessed very marked lay traits: before being the church of the priests and the clerics, the *Duomo* was the cathedral of the people, and surely this characteristic contributed to the affection and pride the edifice held among the Milanese people.

¹⁹ Franca Leverotti, *op. cit.*, p. 124-128.

Among the nearly three hundred citizens who took part in the *Fabbrica*, roughly fifty officials came from each of Milan's six *Porte*.²⁰ These gates identified the city's six districts and reflected the physical distribution of the population, as becomes apparent by looking at a map of medieval Milan (See Map 1).

A circular line of walls safely delineated ordered clusters of brick roofs. Exchange with the external world passed through six gates that opened into the same walls, which controlled movement in and out of the city and its *contado*. The gates divided the circular city into six sectors, each named after its principal gate: *Porta Orientale*, *Porta Romana*, *Porta Vercellina*, *Porta Ticinese*, *Porta Comasina* and *Porta Nuova*. The six sectors, set apart by stone streets carved amid the red expanse of roofs, all pointed at the geometrical center of the circumference, a white square. It is there that a teeming mass of workers built the city's *Duomo*. The topographical structure of the city situated the cathedral in a preeminent position, adjacent to the Palazzo del Broletto and the Corte Ducale, city government headquarters as well as residence of the Visconti family.

The practice of electing the same number of officials from each district was not an invention by the *Fabbrica*, but rather a well-established usage effectively implemented from time to time throughout the centuries in Milan. When in 1251 the continuous struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines in the Italian peninsula brought the Lombard commune in danger of collapse and provoked a troubling increase in the public debt, the city's *podestà* summoned a General Council formed by fifty citizens per district with the goal of electing twenty-four Wise Men charged with resolving the crisis. Similarly, twenty citizens per district were gathered six years later, in 1257, with the delicate task of collecting taxes from religious houses, monasteries

²⁰ Mezzanotte, Paolo. *op. cit.*, p. 872; Soldi Rondinini, Gigliola. "La Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano nei primi anni della sua costituzione," in *Idem, Istituzioni e attività finanziarie milanesi dal XIV al XVI secolo* (Milano: Banca Commerciale Italiana, 1979), p. 29.

and churches that had found a way to evade payments by invoking the protection of local captains. What is especially interesting and innovative in the case of the Council of the *Fabbrica* is that the fifty citizens per district convened not to solve an emergency situation, but to hold regular weekly meetings over a span of decades to monitor an ongoing long-term project. This consistency of purpose provides evidence about the will of the Milanese population to exercise sovereignty and to insist on adequate representation in the building of an institution that held a central place in their lives.

Engineers, masters, blacksmiths and dealers working in the building yard of the church or providing technical advice to the constructors of the cathedral partook in the Council as well; their opinions were particularly valued in decisions of an architectural nature. We should remember that, as was often the case in cathedral building in the Middle Ages, there was no detailed architectural design project for the actual builders to follow; works for the construction followed a plan in the mind of the master architect, and workers proceeded more through trial and error than by applying an exact science implemented with specific drawings and instruments. Therefore, council meetings often involved lengthy and sometimes disputed discussions about the state of art of the building and the best ways to move forward. These discussions could last for years and years until some proposed solution found agreement or else work on the ground made the issue mute. An example that comes to mind here is the controversy over the erection of the vault of the *tiburio* (central tower) in the fifteenth-sixteenth century. The Council took almost six decades to reach a decision, after pondering the advice of many illustrious architects of the time, including Leonardo Da Vinci and Donato Bramante.²¹

²¹ Schofield, Richard. "Amadeo, Bramante and Leonardo and the tiburio of Milan Cathedral," *Achademia Leonardi Vinci: Journal of Leonardo Studies and Bibliography of Vinciana* 2. (1989), p. 68–100; Leonardo da Vinci; Richter, Jean Paul, ed.; Bell, R. C., tr. *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 1970), p. 60.

Both in the style of its decision making and in the ways its representatives were chosen, the *Fabbrica* clearly exercised sovereignty over Milan's new cathedral. In so doing, it stands as an illuminating counter to the general political history of Milan. Cathedrals mattered. In Italian cities at this time they were not merely churches and places of worship. In an important recent collection of essays edited by Christian Jacq, several contributors highlight the symbolic and functional significance of cathedrals in the medieval period. Their privileged positioning at the centers of urban space commingled the sacred and the profane. On the one hand, centering the cathedral, around which everything revolved, reminded the citizenry of the foundation of the city's collective life, a life that transcended and gave meaning to individual lives. Cathedrals were holy places of contact between the divine and the human, places built in stone where the eternal melded with the temporal. The opulence of the rituals celebrated there, the stateliness of their pillars, the play of light and shadow in the ample naves, the miracles happening before the relics venerated in the crypt, all contributed to induce a sense of awe among the devout faithful. On the other hand, cathedrals constituted the center of social life, in good times and bad. There, life and death were celebrated in the presence of the whole community – babes were baptized, couples united in marriage, the deceased honored on their last day. There, people sought refuge from aggression or discussed important business matters in a chapel's darkness. No individual could lay claim to the city's cathedral as his personal space; the house of God would reflect His supernatural glory, not the temporal power of a mortal prince who might have wished his name and image preserved in stone.²²

Building a cathedral served simultaneously to include and to exclude. The work itself was done almost entirely by male hands. I will consider below the singular case of a woman who

²² Jacq, Christian, ed. *Il messaggio iniziatico delle cattedrali* (Milano: Mondadori, 2000). Especially pertinent to the discussion are the following essays: Jumeau, Olivier. "La tradizione delle cattedrali," p. 135-143; Figeac, Françoise. "I costruttori e l'organizzazione dei cantieri," p. 161-175.

helped with portage at the construction site but she had no legion of sisters.²³ Women also appear on the lists of donors but in nowhere near the number of men.²⁴ Exclusion by religious affiliation was even more extreme. Any presence of Muslims in the city was insufficient to leave a mark on the historical record and Milan's Jews, already severely restricted by prohibitions against residence beyond three days within the city walls, cannot have taken any satisfaction from the enormous effort that had no part in their lives.²⁵ Finally, while participation in the actual building work and in financial support for the cathedral reached far down into the socio-economic hierarchy, management was generally reserved for the well-to-do.²⁶

Granted that some were excluded, the cathedral was the work of Milan's people, of the city's Christian community, formed by members chosen to edify the abode of God on earth. The construction yard offered no space for eccentric geniuses or individualistic leaders: the cathedral was an act of communitarian construction, where workers took part in the glorification of God, the eternal worker. Building the cathedral allowed the Milanese people, apart from those the community itself excluded, to build and fortify itself as a body greater than the individuals who composed it.²⁷ United in this work, the community discovered its identity and deepened its unity. And day after day, stone after stone, the cathedral became in turn a symbol of civic identity forged by the people in defense of their sovereignty.

²³ Soldi Rondinini, Gigliola. "In Fabrica artis: il Duomo di Milano, partecipazione di popolo (e favore di principi?)," *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²⁴ See *Elenco Benefattori* for the year 1400, ANNALI, *Appendici*, t. 2, p. 262-264.

²⁵ Antoniazzi Villa, Anna. "Gli Ebrei nel Milanese dal Medioevo all'espulsione," Della Peruta, Franco. *Storia Illustrata di Milano*. (Milano: Sellino, 1997), p. 941-959. *Idem. Un processo contro gli Ebrei nella Milano del 1488: crescita e declino della comunità ebraica lombarda alla fine del Medioevo*. (Bologna: Cappelli, 1986).

²⁶ See *Composizione del Consiglio di Fabbrica* for the year 1400, ANNALI, t. 1, p. 201.

²⁷ Gigliola Soldi Rondinini, "La fabbrica del Duomo come espressione dello spirito religioso e civile della società milanese (fine sec. XIV - sec. XV), in Centre interdisciplinaire de recherches sur l'Italie, *Religion et culture dans la cité italienne de l'antiquité à nos jours: Actes du Colloque du Centre interdisciplinaire de recherches sur l'Italie, des 8-9-10 novembre 1979*. (Strasbourg: Université de Strasbourg, 1981), p. 101-115. Milan's town hall, unlike Florence's, where the Palazzo Vecchio served as the city's preeminent symbol of pride in community even when the Medici ruled as first among equals, never served as a focal point for civic identity, hardly surprising since the core of political power rested under the despotic regimes of the Visconti and then the Sforza, not in city government.

Late medieval Italian communes competed against each other in the erection of massive cathedrals. In the race for primacy in majesty and stateliness, almost at the same time were built Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, St. Petronius in Bologna, the Church of St. Anthony in Padua, St. Laurence in Genoa, the Cathedral of Orvieto, and Santa Maria dei Frari in Venice.²⁸ In the context of the fusion of religious and civic spirit, it was paramount for the Italian citizens of these communes to possess a cathedral that would dazzle visitors with its spectacular dimensions and decoration. Milan's citizens could not satisfy themselves with simply being spectators in that competition. By building the cathedral, the Milanese showed their power, their wealth, their passion for beauty and, above all, their independent spirit.²⁹

For the people of Milan and its countryside, extending to the present-day region of Italian-speaking Switzerland, constructing a cathedral was not a job as any other. For medieval Christians, building a cathedral was work that sacralized, labor in which the material aspect was inseparable from the spiritual. Saying "I am a Milanese" went hand in hand with saying "I am a Christian," and constituted not a dualism but the expression of a double-sided identity. Interpreting these identities as a division between the earthly and the heavenly would be to trivialize their relationship. Rather, one face completed the traits of the other. Building a cathedral to glorify the Lord had the same meaning as building it to glorify the people the Lord had chosen, the people of Milan. This interplay of material and spiritual was apparent in the reward Pope Boniface IX solemnly promised the Milanese with the bull he issued in 1399, a time when control of the cathedral was still contested between the prince and the people.³⁰ It promised

²⁸ Gigliola Soldi Rondinini, "La fabbrica del Duomo come espressione dello spirito religioso e civile della società milanese (fine sec. XIV - sec. XV)," *op. cit.*, p. 103.

²⁹ Anselmi, Gaspare. *Rivendicazione al popolo milanese della vera origine del Duomo di Milano finora attribuita a Gian Galeazzo Visconti*, Milano: La Vita Felice, 1881, p. 18.

³⁰ *Bolla d'indulgenza papale pegli oblatori in servizio della costruzione del Duomo*, ANNALI, t. 1, November 13, 1399, p. 249.

that whoever contributed to the cathedral's construction, animated by feelings of real penance, with a contrite heart and recently confessed, would gain a full indulgence and remission of sins. Workers regularly employed and paid by the *Fabbrica* were not the only laborers in the yard. Especially in the first decades, when much effort was needed for the excavation of the foundations, the chronicles of the *Fabbrica* often noted "*labor pro nihilo*," work for nothing, literally. Citizens of any craft - tailors, millers, butchers, carpenters, fishermen, goldsmiths, jurists, doctors, pharmacists, bakers and procurators - went to the cathedral on their day off to offer their hands generously and with no monetary remuneration.³¹ It also happened not infrequently that workers, sculptors and architects employed by the *Fabbrica* donated their salary for the same cause.

Work was not the only way one could take part in building the cathedral; the most immediate and simple way was through donations. The victory of the Milanese in their battles with Gian Galeazzo Visconti and his delegates to the *Fabbrica* had gained them sovereignty over the project, but at the cost of losing the prince's donations. *Fabbrica* officials had to make sure that the system for channeling donations, already efficient since the initial years of the construction, worked properly, assuring an enhanced inflow of offerings able to cover the conspicuous Visconti's grants that the Milanese had bartered away to gain their independence. Enhancing modalities for collecting donations became, therefore, a top priority. Already in the first decades of its constitution, the *Fabbrica* had implemented an effective network of fundraising, employing an organized system of multiple instruments, often complementary and synergic, with the goal of filling the cathedral treasury with monetary donations and finding goods that could help the activity in the building yard, even in its most immediate necessities – food for the workers, tools and construction materiel. Each modality of fundraising met precise

³¹ ANNALI, *Appendici*, t. 1, September 29, 1387, p. 36; March 15, 1389, p. 59; April 2, 1389, p. 60.

criteria, aiming to identify potential sources of donation in a targeted way and avoiding useless expenditures of energy or waste of resources.³² The complex bureaucracy connected with recording donations demonstrates the effort put into creating a system that would assure the proper use of offerings, while at the same time building an invaluable trust with the donor, who could verify at any moment where his or her contribution ended up.³³

The main place for the collection of donations was the altar in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, the old basilica upon which the new cathedral was being erected.³⁴ Four deputies from the *Fabbrica* welcomed donors at the altar, received offerings and recorded them in their registers.³⁵ The *Registers of Donations*, a valuable source that exists only in manuscript form, kept meticulous track, day by day, of all offerings to the *Fabbrica*.³⁶ The records are divided into five chapters by genre of donation: money, clothes, wax, wine and miscellaneous. Each entry contains the date, the donor's name, his or her occupation if the donor agreed to reveal this information, and the reason for the donation – information that could take as little space as one line or that might go on for half a page, depending on the different cases: the rich baron who insisted on being recorded with all his or her honorific titles or the generous anonymous donor who desired only God to know his identity.³⁷ After the donor's information came facts regarding the donation itself. For each offering, the officials reported the effective or estimated value in *lire* and an account variable according to its genre: material of coinage and provenience for donations in cash; weight for waxes and volume for wines; and detailed descriptions of color, style, and number of buttons for clothes. For any donation in goods the destination was also specified:

³² *Regolamento generale di amministrazione*, ANNALI, t. 1, October 16, 1387, p. 7.

³³ Saltamacchia, Martina; Bof, Francesco. "Le procedure amministrative di valutazione e vendita delle donazioni in natura per il finanziamento del Duomo di Milano nel XIV secolo", *Contabilità e cultura aziendale*, 2005 (I): 83-94.

³⁴ Saltamacchia, Martina. *Milano: Un popolo e il suo Duomo* (Milano: Marietti, 2007), p. 24-26.

³⁵ *Regolamento Generale di amministrazione*, ANNALI, t. 1, October 16, 1387, p. 5-6.

³⁶ AFD, *Oblazioni in denaro e in natura*, *op. cit.*

³⁷ See, for instance, the anonymous donation of 1500 lire on November 7, 1400, in AFD, *Oblazioni in denaro e in natura*, *op. cit.*

direct use in the *Fabbrica* or in the yard – for instance, a papyrus register for the officials or a toolkit for a sculptor – or instead sold at public auction and in this way transformed into cash.³⁸

Moreover, the information concerning each offering was recorded also in other registers, compiled in parallel with the *Registers of Donations*, with an accurate coincidence of data that is most reassuring to the modern scholar poring over these records. In the *Benefactors' List*, compiled year by year, alphabetically sorted names of the main donors were listed, together with their donation.³⁹ More often than not the people in this list made property donations, a house or piece of land. The *Books of Auctions* recorded the goods received as offerings and sold at public auction, together with the date of auction and the income realized in the sale.⁴⁰ Registers ad hoc were kept for specific typologies of donations, such as those collected on the occasion of a jubilee, those offered by crafts and guilds of the city, and those offered by the administrations of communes around Milan.⁴¹

Not everyone had time to bring their donation to the altar. In order to reach all the people, boxes were located at major crossroads of the city and the countryside, as well as in places where the faithful might gather: churches and chapels to be sure, but also at the gates of the city, in front of the room used by the archbishop's vicar for audiences, and even at the quarries outside Milan.⁴² From its inception, the *Fabbrica* obtained the right to seek donations in the territories of the Visconti Dukedom.⁴³ Teams formed by two priests, two lay officials of the *Fabbrica* and two *boni homines* of Milan would go to countryside villages around the city to celebrate the morning

³⁸ ANNALI, t. 1, 11 settembre 1390, p. 37.

³⁹ For instance, "1400. Visconti Achilla, vedova di Signorino Omodei. Biolche 322 di terreno in territorio di Reggio (Emilia), venduto poi nel 1420 per lire 1600 imperiali" ANNALI, *Appendici*, t. 2, p. 264.

⁴⁰ AFD, *Liber Dati et Recepti*, fondo Registri.

⁴¹ AFD, cart. 26-27; ANNALI, t. 1, May 18, 1395, p. 137-138.

⁴² Soldi Rondinini, Gigliola. *La fabbrica del Duomo come espressione dello spirito religioso e civile della società milanese (Fine sec. XIV- sec. XV)*, op. cit., p. 57-58.

⁴³ *Lettera del duca Gian Galeazzo Visconti concedente facoltà di questua a favore della chiesa maggiore*, ANNALI, *Appendici*, t. 1, October 12, 1386, p. 211.

mass, announcing on that occasion the news of the cathedral's construction. At the conclusion of the mass, after a sermon focused on the virtue of charity and the rewards that awaited generous donors in heaven, the group of six people passed door to door throughout the village, requesting donations. Sometimes the quests could be targeted to the collection of specific goods, in answer to the most immediate necessities of the *Fabbrica*: targeted quests for construction materials, for instance, or wine and fodder.⁴⁴ During a public ceremony that usually took place on the feast of All Saints, November 1, the collectors announced in detail the year's funds raised through bequests.⁴⁵ We can well imagine one village contesting against another to achieve acclaim as the most generous donor. Also the *puellae cantagolae*, the girls with the singing throats, helped the *Fabbrica* in its devout fundraising. These young ladies, dressed in white, paraded through the streets of the city and the villages nearby singing and dancing in the squares and at the crossroads to encourage popular donations.⁴⁶ The *Fabbrica*'s firm commitment and sense of mission, the large number of dedicated mendicant friars and volunteers, along with the capacity to organize them efficiently, had the result of making men and women in the city and the countryside aware of the construction work, and gave each member of the diocese the possibility of partaking in the effort with his or her donation entrusted to the collectors.

While developing ingenious ways to channel donations, the *Fabbrica* also employed its sovereignty over the cathedral to dedicate itself to one of the Church's eternal aims: educating the people to religiosity. Myriad are the listings and highly varied the motivations of the donors. Left unsaid, but in play, at least for some, must have been the desire for public acclaim or the need for repentance. Some donors expressed openly their wish, *causa devotionis et in remedio et mercede animae suae*, or for intercession for a loved one, in return for their gift, while others

⁴⁴ ANNALI, t. 1, September 6, 1394, p. 117.

⁴⁵ *Lettera del duca Gian Galeazzo Visconti concedente facoltà di questua a favore della chiesa maggiore, op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Cattaneo, Enrico. *op. cit.*, p. 17, 84.

stated that they were making restitution for ill-gotten gains.⁴⁷ Entirely congruent with such motives, however, are the more exemplary gospel messages featured by the *Fabbrica* in the three stories considered briefly below.

The *Fabbrica* officers, when they solicited potential donors may well have reminded them of a parable no doubt frequently heard at mass: the rich man who, after storing all his grains and goods, said to himself: “‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’”.⁴⁸ One of the city’s richest merchants, Marco Carelli, heeded this admonition in a spectacular and unexpectedly generous way. On the occasion of the 1390 Jubilee he named the new cathedral in his will as the recipient of his entire patrimony - houses, gold, clothes, and exotic goods.⁴⁹ The deputies sent to his house to make an inventory of the goods saw before them a world of dazzling riches: austere hallways obstructed by bales of clothes, moleskin, velvet, leather, linen and cotton piled against the walls; exotic perfumes suggesting the content of huge bags of nutmeg, salt and pepper; large cases of wax stacked next to boxes with iron, copper and alum, and precious caskets hiding splendid pearls and shining armaments. The world of trade and commerce had beckoned Marco even as a child. So strong was his calling that when his father opposed his chosen path, Marco renounced his land-based patrimony and at the age of twenty entered in a partnership with his uncles and a cousin. Together, they engaged in the buying and selling of fine wool cloth and various precious goods between Milan and Venice. A brilliant businessman with a keen acumen for the market and backed with the constant availability of large amounts of cash, he fruitfully invested his wealth in financial operations and land acquisition. In the face of

⁴⁷ ANNALI, t. 3, July 3, 1488, p. 42.

⁴⁸ Lk 12:16.

⁴⁹ ANNALI, t. 1, October 8, 1391, p. 54.

Church doctrine forbidding usury, some looked with suspicion on the merchant's craft, given how easy it was for men of commerce to cross the labile boundary between licit and illicit.⁵⁰ However, Carelli always managed to handle his business transactions without blame or accusation of any sort. Money in the right hands, he believed, could do great good; for this reason he founded a religious confraternity together with some influential merchants of Milan and Monza.⁵¹ The aim of the confraternity was to aid the city's poor and sick people with donations of food supplies and with burial services at their death. Trade skills, diplomatic talent, loyalty and devotion made Carelli a rare trustworthy person, as the Visconti soon acknowledged, appointing him to prestigious offices such as Procurer of Salt and member of the aforementioned Council of Provisions. Whenever he could, Carelli put his talents at the service of the *Fabbrica*, helping with supervision of the works and with the collection of donations in his home district of Porta Orientale. Because Gian Galeazzo Visconti held him in such high esteem, the *Fabbrica* chose Carelli as their ambassador to the prince, exactly the right man to present an important request or explain a challenge to the prince's authority in a diplomatic way. This was the case in 1390, when officials of the *Fabbrica*, which was running short of money, begged the prince to intercede with Pope Boniface IX for the proclamation of the extraordinary jubilee noted earlier.⁵²

Marco Carelli was one among many individuals who hailed the announcement of the jubilee and promptly answered the call. But only he was in a position to donate the astonishing sum of 35,000 ducats, a donation that exceeded the total income of the cathedral that year from

⁵⁰ Verga, Ettore. *La camera dei mercanti di Milano nei secoli passati*. (Milano: Allegretti, 1914). On the tendency of medieval merchants to practice usury, to be greedy and to be deceitful, see Langholm, Odd. *Economics in the medieval schools: wealth, exchange, value, money, and usury according to the Paris theological tradition, 1200-1350*. (Leiden; New York; Koln: E.J. Brill, 1992), p. 55, 158, 222, 255, 427, 463, 542.

⁵¹ Papagna, Gabriella. *Marco Carelli, mercante milanese del XIV secolo* (Laurea dissertation, Università Cattolica di Milano, 1975-76).

⁵² ANNALI, t. 1, April 4, 1390, p. 32.

all other sources.⁵³ But even this generosity was not sufficient to meet the need at hand and in 1392, only two years after this generous initial disposition, total donations failed to cover the huge initial expenses for excavation of the church foundations. The *Fabbrica* called upon Carelli to consider, given the urgent necessities of the cathedral, anticipating at least a part of his generous donation.⁵⁴ He did yet more and agreed to donate everything he owned in that precise moment, divesting himself entirely of his vast wealth. He requested only to exempt one mill located on his property, so that he might keep an intended dowry for Ursina, a girl educated in his house, to assure her marriage.⁵⁵ He also specified that his clothes and linens be distributed to the *pauperibus Christi*, those ‘poor of Christ’ to whom he and his confraternity had always been munificent, and to give them two bushel of bread every year on the occasion of the mass celebrated in his memory.⁵⁶ Marco Carelli died in Venice in 1394, aged 70, and the spectacular funeral honors accorded to him speak eloquently both of the gospel message and of the gratitude the *Fabbrica* had toward this exceptional benefactor. On the seventh day after his death, in the Basilica of San Babila, dozens of priests took part in twenty-five masses celebrated for Marco’s soul and eight bushels of bread and four of chickpeas were distributed to the houses of refuge for beggars and the city’s prisons.⁵⁷ In the afternoon of the same day a solemn mass was celebrated in the cathedral in the presence of the city’s leaders: the Twelve of Provisions with the Vicar, the Council of Judges and the officials of the *Fabbrica* – all there to support Marco’s family in its grief and to pray for his soul. The same rituals were celebrated thirty days after his death, and then again when his corpse, initially buried in Venice, arrived at Milan on a boat decorated with

⁵³ ANNALI, t. 1, October 8, 1391, p. 54. 35,000 *ducati* are equivalent to 61,000 *lire*. To make a rapid comparison, one can look at the total incomes of the *Fabbrica* in the years 1389, 1390 and 1391, that amounted respectively to 46,337 *lire*, 29,338 *lire* and 57,288 *lire*.

⁵⁴ ANNALI, t. 1, January 12, 1393, p. 90.

⁵⁵ ANNALI, t. 1, January 17, 1393, p. 91; May 18, 1393, p. 98.

⁵⁶ Two bushels correspond to 1.26267 bbl (US Dry).

⁵⁷ ANNALI, t. 1, September 27, 1394, p. 117.

twenty-four crosses and twenty-four torches.⁵⁸ Summoned by three nuncios sent to every parish and district to announce the funeral, an immense procession honored the memory of this pious man.⁵⁹ The *Fabbrica* invited one of Italy's leading sculptors to carve a marmoreal sarcophagus with the effigy of the merchant, and there Marco Carelli's corpse was put to rest - in the right nave of the cathedral where once a prince had sought permanent repose.

Marco Carelli was not the only citizen of Milan to obtain honors from the *Fabbrica*. My second case involves one Marta de Codevachi of Padua, known popularly as Donona, Big Woman, who earned her *nom de guerre* as a practitioner of the world's most ancient profession. Her wealth came to include houses, precious jewelry and luxurious dresses fit for a noble woman. She was a landlord and a moneylender. Then one day she came to repent her way of living and completely changed, leaving her lucrative profession and dedicating herself instead to helping others. She welcomed into her home, "*ob reverentia Dei*" the sources tell us, a baby she named Venturina, who had been abandoned, perhaps at one of the many wheels situated at convent entrances where desperate mothers in the Middle Ages left their unwanted children. Donona Marta also gave large sums to a Milanese convent, the Monache Umiliate di San Pietro, where the nuns faced serious economic hardships. Then a life-threatening disease acquired during her life on the streets overcame Marta and she realized that her days were numbered. She decided to donate all her money for the cathedral, now in its eighth year of construction and becoming visible at the center of the city. In February 1394, she wrote her will in favor of the *Fabbrica*, to which she donated two houses and all the items contained within them.⁶⁰ Her testament contained also two curious requests. In the first, she asked the *Fabbrica* to take care for the next twenty months of little Venturina, by then aged 5, and to give her a dowry of 100

⁵⁸ ANNALI, t. 1, October 11, 1394, p. 118; April 14, 1395, p.135.

⁵⁹ ANNALI, t. 1, October 8, 1391, p. 55.

⁶⁰ AFD, cart. 42, n. 16.

fiorini d'oro, reversible to the *Fabbrica si ipsa Venturina decederet antequam tradatur ad maritum*.⁶¹ The result of this clause was to turn the counselors into improvised nannies; and they did indeed spend some of the following meeting in deliberations over the purchase of clothes and shoes for the baby.⁶² Her second request concerned a dear “colleague” by the name of Margherita but known on the street as Novella de Mandello. Marta entrusted a *Fabbrica* counselor with the sum of 200 *fiorini d'oro*, to be given to Margherita along with four ounces of pearls and all her precious dresses, under the condition that *haec omnia habeant locum ipsa Novella recedente de loco communi, seu de bordello, ubi stat at praesens, et honeste vivente*.⁶³ The counselors decided that the only way they could be sure of Margherita’s conversion would be for her to marry.⁶⁴ Whether moved more by her friend’s example or by the conspicuous sum of money, Novella immediately left the brothel and in just forty days married a certain Andrejno de’ Meda.⁶⁵

In the meanwhile, Marta de Codevachi, two weeks after having dictated her last will to the notary, died. For the devout members of the *Fabbrica*, the words of Matthew’s Gospel once again gave instruction: “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.’”⁶⁶ The *Fabbrica* organized for this woman who had spent her life in sin a funeral of the sort usually reserved for bishops and

⁶¹ “*Item quod Venturina, quam ipsa nutris ob reverentiam Dei, quae est statis annorum quinque, vel circa, et quae exposita fuerat, habeat florenos 100 auri, quos ipsa Marta habet penes se, et vult quod ipsa nutriatur penes Ambrosium de Paliano, et si ipsa Venturina decederet antequam tradatur ad maritum, dicti floreni 100 sint dictae Fabricae, et qui floreni 100 debeant remanere penes dictum Ambrosium pro faciendo ut supra.*” AFD, cart. 42, n. 16.

⁶² ANNALI, t. 1, May 1, 1394, p. 112.

⁶³ “*Item quod Malgarita dicta Novella da Mandello filia quondam Johis habeat florenos 200 auri, et omnes drapos, quos ipsa Novella habet pro suo usu, et sibi factos per dictam Martam, et unzas quatuor perlarum; et haec omnia habeant locum ipsa Novella recedente de loco communi, seu de bordello, ubi stat at praesens, et honeste vivente; et in casu quo ipsa Novella nollet honeste vivere, de dicto loco recederet infra mensum unum post decessum dicta Marta quod tunc omnia remaneant dictae Fabricae; et ad hoc ut veritas appareat de praedictis, dicit dicta Marta quod ipsa habet penes se dicto florenos 200, et dictas perlas, et vestimenta.*” AFD, cart. 42, n. 16.

⁶⁴ ANNALI, t. 1, 12 April 1394, p. 112.

⁶⁵ ANNALI, t. 1, May 20, 1394, p. 113; ANNALI, t. 1, May 28, 1394, p. 114.

⁶⁶ Mt 21:32.

cardinals. The priest of the parish where she had lived solemnly accompanied her body, with torches and black palls, to the cathedral. Then she was buried right behind the church, in the area reserved in future years as the final resting place for the richest and most noble Milanese.⁶⁷ The administrators of the cathedral not only paid for her funeral, as Marta had requested in her testament, they also decided to honor her passing with a solemn celebration by all the priests of the cathedral after seven and then again thirty days following her death. Lastly, in everlasting memory of the repentant prostitute, starting the following year the cathedral celebrated a mass every year on the March 3 anniversary of her death. At this solemn occasion, celebrated at the Cathedral Chapter, the priests also distributed wheat and corn to the city's poor.⁶⁸

My third case illustrates that the amount of money an individual donated was not all that mattered. Members of the *Fabbrica* re-enacted Christ's judgment, for whom any devout offering acquired an infinite value. When Jesus saw a poor widow place two very small copper coins in a donation box, he called his disciples and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."⁶⁹ Caterina di Abbiateguazzone, a *pauperrima* old woman who often helped the workers of the cathedral by transporting in her pannier their construction materials, on a freezing morning of November 1387 deposited at the altar as an offering the old, cheap fur that protected her from the cold, her only possession of any value.⁷⁰ The next day Manuele Zuponerio, a man at the public auction table, recognised Caterina's fur and immediately bought it for one *lira*, then hastened to the building yard, found her and put the

⁶⁷ ANNALI, t. 1, March 7, 1394, p. 110.

⁶⁸ AFD, cart. 42, n. 16; AFD, cart. 56, n. 1, fol. 9; ANNALI, t. 1, March 3, 1395, p. 132.

⁶⁹ Mk 12:41-44.

⁷⁰ AFD, *Liber Dati et Recepti*, year 1387.

fur on her shoulders again.⁷¹ Moved by the immense value of that donation, amounting to everything that the poor woman owned, the *Fabbrica* decided to reward Caterina for her noble gesture by giving her the considerable sum of three *fiorini d'oro* so that she could pay for a pilgrimage to Rome, where she ardently desired to go to gain the special indulgence proclaimed in occasion of the jubilee.⁷²

These men and women with their examples of charity showed eloquently how one did not need supernatural powers in order to live according to the Church's teaching. No longer were gospel stories mere mythological parables from the dead past. Marco Carelli the merchant, Donona Marta de Codevachi the prostitute, Caterina di Abbiateguazzone the *pauperrima* old woman and the innumerable other donors remembered in the *Fabbrica*'s registers brought out the omnitemporal import of Christ's message, much in the way that Tuscan countryside in the works of a Raffaello or a Botticelli conveyed the immediacy of the gospel message. The protagonists of these stories, and those who surely heard them in sermons and celebrations, knew that faith was not a matter of blind acceptance anymore. *Fabbrica* officials brought these examples to the attention of the whole city, reigniting popular devotion and presenting themselves as the only governing body that could legitimately claim sovereignty over the cathedral. Where once a proud and tyrannical prince ruled, now devout men were exerting their authority. I do not claim that the Visconti simply left town or in other areas relinquished their sovereignty to the people of Milan. That process would take decades and even then would not be complete or permanent. What I do suggest, based on the cathedral's massive archival record, is that in this major undertaking the people of Milan, represented by over three hundred of their

⁷¹ AFD, *Liber Dati et Recepti*, year 1387.

⁷² ANNALI, t. 1, March 27, 1390, p. 32.

fellow citizens, used their authority, indeed, their sovereignty, to deny legitimacy to the prince under whose yoke they survived.