

Ordo ad consecrandum virginum (Ordo for the Consecration of Nuns) for use at San Pier Maggiore, Florence

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment with musical notation

Italy (Florence), c. 1370-1400

i + 16 + i folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, complete (collation i-ii⁸), catchword on f. 8v, ruled in brown ink (justification 160 x 117 mm), written in grey ink in a round Gothic bookhand (southern textualis) on 20 lines, music on four-line red staves, rastrum 18 mm., 2-line pen-flourished initials throughout, one 2-line champie initial in gold on a painted blue and pink ground and a FULL FOLIATE BORDER in colors and gold, including a roundel with the Virgin and Child (overpainted) in the beginning of the volume, text written in grey ink rubbed in various places due to frequent use over the centuries, text in red ink intact throughout, overall in good condition. BOUND CONTEMPORARY, LIKELY ORIGINAL late fourteenth- or fifteenth-century blind-tooled brown calf over wooden boards, four bosses on each cover, two leather thongs with clasps, one of which is missing, and two catch-pieces in the form of a pointed trefoil on the front cover. Dimensions 253 x 180 mm.

This manuscript Ordo for the consecration of nuns was made for the convent of San Pier Maggiore, one of the finest late medieval foundations in Florence. Rebuilt in the late fourteenth century, San Pier Maggiore was the focus of a campaign to enrich not only the convent but its furnishings, such as the famous altarpiece by Jacopo di Cione and the present manuscript. In its original binding and with an illuminated frontispiece, this manuscript contributes to the study of the religious life of women, and it adds besides a crucial building block to establishing the history of this eminent institution.

PROVENANCE

1. This manuscript was made for use by the nuns at the Benedictine convent of San Pier Maggiore in Florence, as attested by the virgins's declaration on f. 1v ("...secundum regulam sanctissimi Benedicti in hoc monasterio quod est constructum in honorem beatissimi apostolic Petri maioris ... domini .N. dei gratia episcopi Florentini, et domine .N. abbatisse et aliarum sororum ..."). The style of the acanthus border on f. 1 suggests dating the manuscript to the end of the fourteenth century; it was very likely made for the newly rebuilt church, coinciding with the commission in 1370 of Jacopo di Cione's *Coronation of the Virgin* altarpiece for the high altar.
2. Almost certainly remained at San Pier Maggiore, and in active use there, until the destruction of the convent church in the eighteenth century. In places where the grey ink has rubbed out, the text and music have been re-entered later.

TEXT

ff. 1-15v, Ordo for the Consecration of Virgins, *Ordo ad consecrandum virginum*..., incipit, "Ecce venio ad te..." (noted music), including the virgins's declaration "Ego soror .N. promicto stabilitatem meam et conversionem morum meorum ..." (f. 1v), followed by benedictions, noted chant, a litany (f. 5), the consecration itself (f. 7v), and a mass, ends on f. 14v, "orare pro me ad dominum iesum christum";

Rubrics require that the bishop perform most of the actions, with occasional participation of deacons. The litany includes the two patron saints of Florence, St. Zenobius, the first bishop of Florence, and St. Reparata, the patroness of Florence.

f. 16rv, a later addition on noted chants, beginning with the chant for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany and the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, incipit, "Et nunc sequimur in toto corde, timemus te, et querimus faciem tuam videre...", and ending with the antiphon of St Agnes "Ecce quod concupivi Jam video: quod speravi Jam teneo; ipsi sum Juncta in celis quem in terris posita, Tota devotione dilexi."

In celebrating the consecration of virgins in the late fifteenth century, the nuns chanted an antiphon from the liturgy of St Agnes after the bishop placed the crown upon their heads (as known from the practice at the Benedictine convent of Lüne in Germany, see Hotchin, 2009, p. 189). Moreover, the language of the entire ritual draws heavily from the legend of this third-century virgin martyr.

ILLUSTRATION

As one often finds in functional manuscripts of this type, the decoration is modest. The book opens on f. 1 with a full border composed of acanthus in red, blue, pink and green, with gold discs. A roundel in the lower border represents the Virgin and Child, refreshed or over-painted in the nineteenth century. The 2-line initials alternating in red and blue are carefully decorated with purple and red pen-flourish, respectively, throughout the manuscript.

This manuscript contains the text required for celebrating the consecration of virgins, a rite dating back to the fourth century, performed by a bishop as Christ's representative. It was made for the Benedictine convent of San Pier Maggiore, an elite religious house reserved for daughters of well-born Florentine families. The convent had been founded before 1067 by a Chianti noble woman, Gisla Firidolfi, who provided the substantial foundation gift of a quarter part of seventeen manors and castles (Miller and Jasper, 2010, pp. 384-86). Firidolfi became its first abbess. In 1067 the community was consecrated and given a church by Bishop Peter Mezzabarba. Beginning in at least the thirteenth century, if not before, the convent of San Pier Maggiore had the preeminent institutional role of welcoming each new bishop of Florence on his ceremonial entry to the city. The bishop "married" the abbess and spent the night at the convent; the Florentines called the abbess of San Pier Maggiore the bride of the bishop (Miller, 2006; Strocchia, 2007).

The church of the convent was rebuilt in the mid-fourteenth century and can be seen in Jacopo di Cione's altarpiece of the *Coronation of the Virgin* (London, National Gallery). The altarpiece was made for the high altar of the church of San Pier Maggiore and was completed in 1371. Reflecting the importance of the convent, it was one the largest panels commissioned in fourteenth-century Florence. A century later, in the 1470s, an altarpiece representing the *Assumption of the Virgin* was commissioned from Francesco Botticini for the altar of the south transept in the convent church (National Gallery, London). Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio also collaborated in decorating the church and included a representation of it in his panel of the *Miracle of St Zenobius* (Florence, Accademia). The church of San Pier Maggiore was demolished in 1784 and converted into a market place.

A fascinating digital reconstruction of it, completed in 2015 by the National Gallery of London and the University of Cambridge, provides us with a fuller understanding of this religious institution and its importance in late medieval Florence (Online Resources). A careful study of the rubrics in this manuscript, providing practical directions for liturgical celebration specific to this church, could further contribute to the on-going research into reconstructing what was once one of Florence's finest churches.

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LITERATURE

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ONLINE RESOURCES

National Gallery of London, a short documentary film "Reconstructing the destroyed church of San Pier Maggiore, Florence":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUXa1nDtOB0>

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