

# National Religiosity and Visual Propaganda: the Spanish Church of the Saints Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova in Rome<sup>1</sup>

**Pablo González Tornel**

## **Abstract**

The construction of the church of Sts Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova on the Via Sistina in Rome began in 1667. Headquarters of the Spanish Discalced Augustinians in Rome, the church was directly inspired by Francesco Borromini's Chapel of the Three Magi (Cappella dei Re Magi), and its artistic iconography featured a comprehensive program of Spanish political propaganda. The church was decorated as a monument to the Immaculate Conception, the favoured devotional cult of the Spanish monarchy, and its Marian content was reinforced by the paintings of the Virgins of Copacabana and Guadalupe, patrons of Peru and Mexico respectively. The entire ensemble, including the dedication of the church to the Spanish saints Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova, transformed the temple into a celebration of the Iberian monarchy.

[1] The main headquarters of the Spanish Discalced Augustinians in Italy is located in the Via Sistina in Rome, on the slope of the Pincian hill. The complex includes a church dedicated to the Spanish Saints Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova, constructed between 1656 and 1672 with a design very similar to Francesco Borromini's Chapel of the Three Magi at the college of Propaganda Fide (Fig. 1).

---

<sup>1</sup> This text corresponds to the paper given at the Annual Meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Berlin, March 26-28, 2015, and summarizes the article published in Spanish in Pablo González Tornel, "La iglesia de los Santos Ildefonso y Tomás de Villanueva en Roma: un monumento barroco a la *pietas hispanica*", in: *Archivo Español de Arte* 88 (2015), no. 349, 69-84, <https://doi.org/10.3989/aearte.2015.05>.



1 Church of Sts Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova, 1667, architect: Giuseppe Paglia (?), Via Sistina, Rome (photo: P. González Tornel)

Despite several problems, the order managed to establish a convent in Rome in 1619 thanks to the approval of Pope Paul V, and located its house on a lot along the then almost uninhabited Strada Felice.<sup>2</sup> Although the friars had wanted the new church to be built much earlier, its construction began only in 1667 under the direction of the Dominican architect Giuseppe Paglia (ca. 1616–1683).<sup>3</sup> Onto its first stone were chiseled the names of Pope Clement IX (r. 1667–1669) and King Charles II of Spain (r. 1665–1700).<sup>4</sup>

[2] On January 18, 1672, the Augustinians solemnly consecrated their small new rectangular church with two chapels per aisle, tribunes, and a square presbytery. The interior surfaces were entirely adorned with stuccoes by the brothers Antonio and Carlo Cometti.<sup>5</sup> The defining feature of the church was undoubtedly its vaulted ceiling, a very low vault with lunettes traversed by diagonal ribs (Fig. 2), a solution quite similar to the design of the magnificent Chapel of the Three Magi by Francesco Borromini (1599–1667). This similarity has traditionally been explained by the presence of the Sicilian architect Giuseppe Paglia, who had worked on the building of the

<sup>2</sup> Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional (hereafter AHN), Fondo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Santa Sede, Legajo 924, s/f.

<sup>3</sup> Stefano L. Forte, "Il domenicano Giuseppe Paglia, architetto siciliano a Roma", in: *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 33 (1963), 281-409. Paglia's authorship is already indicated by Filippo Titi, *Descrizione delle pitture, sculture e architetture esposte al pubblico in Roma: con l'aggiunta di quanto è stato fatto di nuovo fino all'anno presente*, Rome 1763, 340.

<sup>4</sup> Rome, Archivo General de la Orden de los Agustinos Recoletos (hereafter AGOAR), Hospicio de Sant'Ildefonso, Caja 21, Legajo 2, Apuntes cronológicos del Hospicio de San Ildefonso, s/f.

<sup>5</sup> AGOAR, Hospicio de Sant'Ildefonso, Caja 21, Legajo 2, Apuntes cronológicos del Hospicio de San Ildefonso, s/f.

college of Propaganda Fide between 1658 and 1667, and substituted Borromini as construction supervisor after the latter's death in 1667.<sup>6</sup>



2 Vault of the church of Sts Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova, 1667, architect: Giuseppe Paglia (?), Via Sistina, Rome (photo: P. González Tornel)

[3] But why was a Spanish church built in this area of Rome? Laurie Nussdorfer has described the distribution of power in the Early Modern *Urbs* and distinguished clearly between the power of the Pope and that of the citizens' Senate, showing how in Rome the power of the Pope prevailed over that of the city.<sup>7</sup> The conflict among the different authorities also found expression in urban planning and the two great public squares destined for the representation of power, the Capitol and Saint Peter's Square, were the result of papal initiatives.<sup>8</sup> But, in addition to the Papacy and the Senate, the

---

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Antonazzi, *Il Palazzo di Propaganda*, Rome 1979, 60-62. See also Aloisio Antinori, "I primi 'imitatori' di Borromini: Roma 1650-1675", in: *Francesco Borromini*, ed. Christoph Luitpold Frommel, Milan 2000, 431-439. Further considerations on the architecture of the church in Pablo González Tornel, "Francesco Borromini and the Spanish Church of Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso da Villanova in Rome", in: *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 22 (2019), no. 1, 121-142.

<sup>7</sup> Laurie Nussdorfer, "Politics and the People of Rome", in: *Rome - Amsterdam: Two Growing Cities in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, eds. Peter van Kessel and Elisja Schulte, Amsterdam 1997, 165-178. See also Laurie Nussdorfer, *Civic Politics in the Rome of Urban VIII*, Princeton, N.J. 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Nussdorfer, "The Politics of Space in Early Modern Rome", in: *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 42 (1997), 161-186. Also Joseph Connors, "Alliance

different nations of Europe and their representatives in the capital of Catholicism also played a crucial role in the definition of the baroque city of Rome.<sup>9</sup>

[4] A few years before the construction of the Augustinian convent, the embassy of the kingdom of Spain had been established in the nearby Palazzo Monaldeschi. The building had been bought by the Spanish ambassador Íñigo Vélez de Guevara, seventh count of Oñate, in 1647, and then sold to the Spanish crown in 1654, thus becoming the first permanent foreign diplomatic representation in Rome (Fig. 3).<sup>10</sup>



3 Palace of the Spanish Embassy and column of the Immaculate Conception, Piazza di Spagna, Rome (photo: P. González Tornel)

Just a few meters away from the Spanish embassy, at the beginning of the Via Sistina, the Minim convent of SS. Trinità dei Monti, of French patronage, disputed the Spanish prevalence in this area of the city, since France was the main political antagonist of the Spanish crown during the 17th century.<sup>11</sup>

---

and Enmity in Roman Baroque Urbanism", in: *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 25 (1989), 207-294 faces the problem.

<sup>9</sup> See Irene Fosi, "Roma patria comune? Foreigners in Early Modern Rome", in: *Art and Identity in Early Modern Rome*, eds. Jill Burke and Michael Bury, Aldershot 2008, 27-43. About the Spanish presence in Early Modern Rome, Thomas James Dandeleit, *Spanish Rome 1500-1700*, New Haven and London 2001. Dandeleit's conclusions have been contested by Maria Antonietta Visceglia, "Vi è stata una Roma spagnola?", in: *Roma moderna e contemporanea* 9 (2003), 313-325. About the cultural presence of Spain in Early Modern Rome, see Pablo González Tornel, *Roma hispánica. Cultura festiva española en la capital del Barroco*, Madrid 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Alessandra Anselmi, *Il palazzo dell'Ambasciata di Spagna presso la Santa Sede*, Rome 2001, 53 and 70-71.

[5] The confrontation between Spain and France increased according to the political situation in Europe, with consequences for the urban area around the Spanish embassy. Probably the most overwhelming example of urban planning conditioned by politics was the French attempt, between 1660 and 1661, to construct a monumental stairway between the Piazza di Spagna and the convent of SS. Trinità dei Monti.<sup>12</sup> Elpidio Benedetti, an agent of the French crown in Rome, tried with Bernini's help to obtain papal approval for a project in which a set of ramps surrounded an equestrian statue of Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715).<sup>13</sup> Had it been constructed, the stairway would have been the most impressive royal monument in the city, just a few meters away from the Spanish embassy. Pope Alexander VII (r. 1655–1667), in the interests of maintaining the status quo, decided to reject it. Public royal monuments were not welcome in Early Modern Rome since the city had its own sovereign, the pontiff, and was supposed to be a *communis patria* for all the Catholic nations. Consequently, the two European powers that disputed the square and the neighbourhood were forced to look for more subtle ways of expressing their supremacy.

[6] The definition of a 'Spanish neighborhood' was not only a matter of national reputation, but implied political authority as well, since extraterritoriality was granted to the urban area around an embassy.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, national neighborhoods linked to embassies became an

---

<sup>11</sup> About the French presence on the Pincian hill, see Elena C. Napolitano, "Erasing Papal Presence: the Minims and the Marking of French Territory on the Pincio, 1662–1670", in: *La chiesa e il convento della Trinità dei Monti*, eds. Colette Di Matteo and Sebastiano Roberto, Rome 2016, 44–48. The French actions in this district began much before, as showed by M. A. Kuntz, "Celebrating the Surrender of La Rochelle in Rome: Urban VIII, the French National Churches, and Bernini's Barcaccia Fountain", in: *La chiesa e il convento della Trinità dei Monti*, eds. Colette Di Matteo and Sebastiano Roberto, Rome 2016, 57–67. See also Auguste Leman, *Urbain VIII et la rivalité de la France et de la Maison d'Autriche de 1631 à 1635*, Lille and Paris 1920. About the complex diplomatic relationship between France and Spain, see Alain Hugon, *Au service du roi Catholique. "Honorables ambassadeurs" et "divins espions". Représentation diplomatique et service secret dans les relations hispano-françaises de 1598 à 1635*, Madrid 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Lotz, "Die Spanische Treppe. Architektur als Mittel der Diplomatie", in: *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 12 (1969), 39–94. See also Sivigliano Alloisi, "La scalinata tra storia e progetto", in: *La scalinata di Trinità dei Monti*, ed. Luisa Cardilli, Milan 1996, 43–94.

<sup>13</sup> Madeleine Laurain-Portemer, "Mazarin, Benedetti et l'Escalier de la Trinité des Monts", in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 72 (1968), 273–294, and Tod A. Marder, "Bernini and Benedetti at Trinità dei Monti", in: *The Art Bulletin* 62 (1980), no. 2, 286–289. See, on Elpidio Benedetti, Yuri Primarosa, *Elpidio Benedetti (1609–1690). Committenza e relazioni artistiche di un agente del re di Francia nella Roma del Seicento*, Rome 2018. For a wider context of the relationships between France and the Papacy during this period, see Dietrich Erben, *Paris und Rom. Die staatlich gelenkten Kunstbeziehungen unter Ludwig XIV.*, Berlin 2004.

important display of power in 17th-century Rome, and Spain was a pioneer in trying to consolidate the borders of its urban influence.<sup>15</sup> The first documented attempt to establish a clear delimitation of a Spanish district is represented by a no-longer extant drawing by Antonio del Grande of 1660, coinciding with the diplomatically most delicate moment of the clash between Spain and France.<sup>16</sup> But many other maps of the urban area that surrounds the Spanish embassy, as that preserved at Simancas and dated 1683, demonstrate that national claims to urban space remained a problem until the end of the century (Fig. 4).<sup>17</sup>

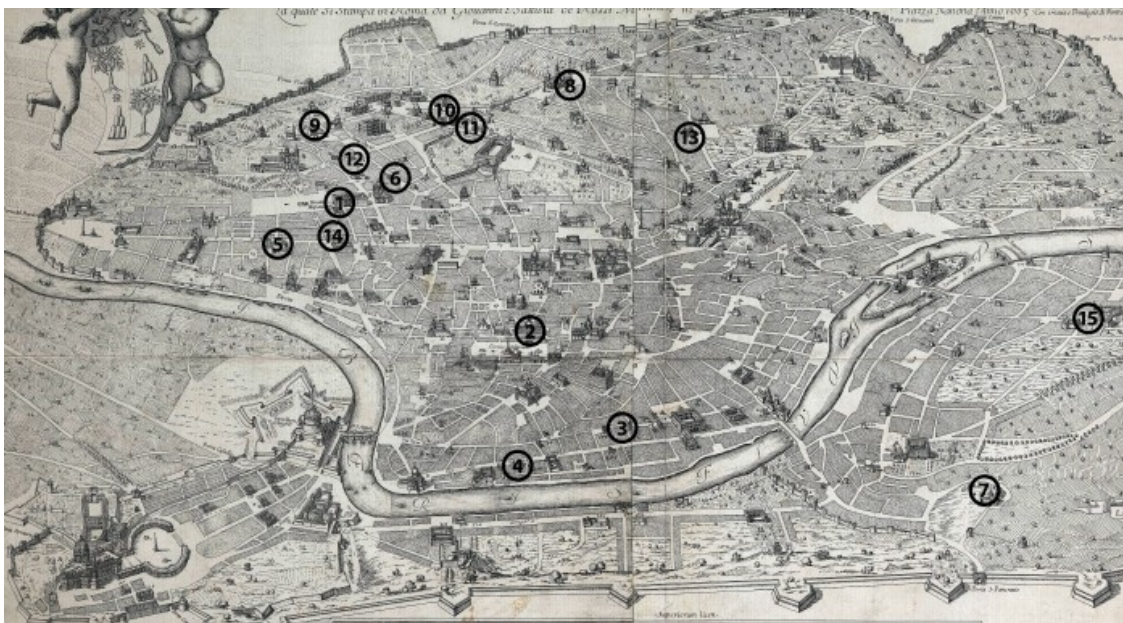
---

<sup>14</sup> Jorge García Sánchez, "Un privilegio diplomático conflictivo en la Roma del siglo XVIII: la jurisdicción de la Corona Española en el distrito del Forum Hispanicum", in: *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*, serie IV: *Historia Moderna* 18-19 (2005-2006), 203-222.

<sup>15</sup> Alessandra Anselmi, "Il quartiere dell'Ambasciata di Spagna a Roma", in: *La città italiana e i luoghi degli stranieri XIV-XVIII secolo*, eds. Donatella Calabi and Paola Lanaro, Bari 1998, 206-221, and Maximiliano Barrio Gozalo, "El barrio de la embajada de España en Roma en la segunda mitad del siglo XVII", in: *Hispania* 67 (2007), no. 227, 993-1024.

<sup>16</sup> Anselmi, *Il palazzo dell'Ambasciata di Spagna presso la Santa Sede*, 172 and endnote 17. See also Erben, *Paris und Rom. Die staatlich gelenkten Kunstbeziehungen unter Ludwig XIV.*; Elena Napolitano, "'Exposed to everyone's eyes': The Urban Prospect and the Publicity of Representation in Israël Silvestre's Profile of the City of Rome, 1687", in: *Making Space Public in Early Modern Europe: Performance, Geography, Privacy*, eds. Angela Vanhaelen and Joseph P. Ward, New York 2013, 151-172; Elena Napolitano, *Prospects of Statecraft: Diplomacy, Territoriality, and the Vision of French Nationhood in Rome, 1660-1700*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto 2012, URL: [https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/67304/1/Napolitano\\_Elena\\_C\\_2012\\_11\\_PhD\\_thesis.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/67304/1/Napolitano_Elena_C_2012_11_PhD_thesis.pdf) (accessed 25 February 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Alessandra Anselmi, "El marqués de Carpio y el barrio de la Embajada de España em Roma (1677-1683)", in: *La Monarquía de las naciones. Patria, nación y naturaleza en la Monarquía Española*, eds. Antonio Álvarez Ossorio and Bernardo J. García García, Madrid 2004, 563-596.



4 Lieven Cruyl (design) and Giulio Testone (etcher), *Pianta di Roma [...]*, Rome: Giovanni Battista de Rossi, 1665, engraving (photo: public domain). Spanish buildings highlighted: 1. Spanish Embassy | 2. San Giacomo degli Spagnoli | 3. Santa Maria di Monserrato | 4. Spirito Santo dei Napoletani | 5. San Carlo dei Lombardi | 6. Santa Maria Odigitria dei Siciliani | 7. San Pietro in Montorio | 8. Santa Maria Maggiore | 9. Sant'Isidoro | 10. San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane | 11. Santi Gioacchino e Anna | 12. Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova | 13. San Francesco di Paola | 14. Santissima Trinità degli Spagnoli | 15. Chiesa dei Santi Quaranta Martiri e San Pasquale Baylon

[7] Ascendancy over a district was granted not only by the presence of the embassy palace, but also through the construction of national religious buildings. Other foundations that therefore may have reinforced the Spanish presence in the urban area that surrounded the headquarters of the Spanish ambassadors were the churches of the Milanese and Sicilian communities, San Carlo al Corso and Santa Maria dell'Itria.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the nearby basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore had a particular link to the Spanish monarchy, and during the years of the construction of the Augustinian convent, the church set a monumental bronze sculpture of Philip IV in its portico.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See Anna Bortolozzi, *Santi Ambrogio e Carlo al Corso: identità, magnificenza e culto delle reliquie nella Roma del primo Seicento*, Rome 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Justo Fernández Alfonso, "España en Santa María la Mayor", in: *Anthologica Annua* 42 (1995), 799-810. See, for the political intentions of the monumental bronze sculpture by Bernini, Steven F. Ostrow, "Gianlorenzo Bernini, Girolamo Lucenti, and the Statue of Philip IV in S. Maria Maggiore: Patronage and Politics in Seicento Rome", in: *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991), 89-118, and Diana Carrió Invernizzi, "La estatua de Felipe IV en Santa Maria Maggiore y la embajada romana de Pedro Antonio de Aragón (1664-1666)", in: *Roma moderna e contemporanea* 1-3 (2007), 255-270.

[8] This expansion of the Spanish presence through the development of an extensive network of religious foundations filled Rome's urban space with such obvious examples as Santa Maria Maggiore, or the main altar of San Francesco di Paola, where the coat of arms of Philip IV crowns an astonishing ensemble.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the Spanish flavor of some districts of the city's center and the consolidation of a national identity were achieved in many different and less evident ways. Elías Tormo has compiled a list of the principal Spanish religious establishments in the city besides those of the national churches of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli and Santa Maria di Monserrato.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the representations of Milan, Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia, these institutions included the churches of Santissima Trinità degli Spagnoli in Via Condotti, Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso da Villanova, Santi Quaranta Martiri e San Pasquale Baylon, Santa Maria in Campo Marzio and San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane.<sup>22</sup> Though many more churches could be added to the list, this cluster of Spanish religious establishments in Rome is already overwhelming, and each of them did its best in order to contribute to the representation of national identity.

[9] The display of saints and Marian devotions easily recognizable as 'national' was usual in 17th-century Rome. National churches, as well as religious foundations, reinforced the presence of different nations before the Pope. In the case of the Spanish monarchy, the self-proclaimed leader of the Catholic states, this presence was fundamental. The Spaniards made a concerted effort to create a dense network of their own national foundations in an urban area that was both close to the papal residence on the Quirinale and to the Spanish embassy. Aspiring to counteract the neighboring French headquarters in the convent of SS. Trinità dei Monti, the Spanish Franciscans founded the church of Sant'Isidoro in 1622.<sup>23</sup> The foundation was a direct

---

<sup>20</sup> Diana Carrió Invernizzi, "Los embajadores de España en Roma y la fabricación del mito de San Francisco de Paula", in: *Roma y España. Un crisol de la cultura europea en la Edad Moderna*, ed. Carlos José Hernando Sánchez, Madrid 2007, 717-728.

<sup>21</sup> On the national churches, see Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, "Chiese nazionali fra rappresentanza politica e Riforma cattolica: Spagna, Francia e Impero a fine Cinquecento", in: *Identità e rappresentazione. Le chiese nazionali a Roma, 1450-1650*, eds. Alexander Koller and Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Rome 2015, 17-64.

<sup>22</sup> Elías Tormo y Monzó, *Monumentos de españoles en Roma, y de portugueses e hispano-americanos*, Madrid 1942, vol. 1, 59. See also José Luis Colomer, "Luoghi e attori della 'pietas hispanica' a Roma all'epoca di Borromini", in: *Francesco Borromini*, eds. Christoph Luitpold Frommel and Elisabeth Sladek, Milan 2000, 346-357, and Alessandra Anselmi, *Le chiese spagnole nella Roma del Seicento e del Settecento*, Rome 2012.

<sup>23</sup> David García Cueto, "El mecenazgo de los embajadores de Felipe IV en los conventos de Roma: política, prestigio y devoción en la Ciudad Eterna durante el siglo XVII", in: *La corte en Europa: política y religión (siglos XVI-XVIII)*, eds. J. Martínez Millán, M. Rivero Rodríguez and G. Versteegen, Madrid 2012, 1661-1697. See *Il Collegio di Sant'Isidoro. Laboratorio artistico e crocevia d'idee nella Roma del*



consequence of the canonization of the patron saint of Madrid the same year, and, simultaneously, it celebrated Spain's diplomatic success in managing to see not one but four national saints sanctified within the same year.<sup>24</sup> However, owing to a lack of funds, the new foundation soon changed hands, and it became necessary to look for a new counterbalance to the French presence.

[10] But how did the church of the Augustinians manage to contribute to the Spanish politics of spatial occupation and national reputation? Nowadays, the images displayed in the church comprise a mix of the original 17th-century works of art and later interventions: Between the chapels, pairs of pilasters surround niches containing 18th-century sculptures of Sts Rita of Cascia, Fulgentius of Cartagena, Ferdinand III of Castile, Clare of Montefalco, Alypius of Thagaste and Louis IX of France. On the main altar is a painting by an anonymous artist representing Sts Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova. The chapels on the Epistle side are dedicated to St Joseph, with a marble altar by Francesco Grassia,<sup>25</sup> and to Sts Augustine and Monica, with a painting of the two saints flanking the Immaculate Conception. On the Gospel side, the first chapel is presided over by the Virgin of Guadalupe and four miracle paintings traditionally attributed to the painter Juan Correa. The second chapel is decorated with a representation of the Sacred Heart.

[11] Nevertheless, in the General Archive of the Order in Rome and in the Historical National Archive of Madrid are preserved a series of documents that permit the reconstruction of the original iconography of the foundation. At the beginning of the 20th century, the church of Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova underwent profound alteration to adapt it to its new status as headquarters of the General Curia. Previously, the decorative programme of the church endowed the setting with a particular character, providing the foundation with content directly connected to the Spanish empire. In the early 20th century the painting of Sts Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova was moved from a chapel to the main altar and the original altarpiece was hidden, though not destroyed.<sup>26</sup> Before this intervention, the place of honor had been assigned to the Holy Virgin of Copacabana, patroness of Peru (Fig. 5).

---

*Seicento*, ed. Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Rome 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Alessandra Anselmi, "Roma celebra la monarchia spagnola: il teatro per la canonizzazione di Isidoro Agricola, Ignazio di Loyola, Francesco Saverio, Teresa di Gesù e Filippo Neri (1622)", in: *Arte y diplomacia de la Monarquía Hispánica en el siglo XVIII*, ed. José Luís Colomer, Madrid 2003, 221-246.

<sup>25</sup> Mascia Meleo and Jacopo Curzietti, "Alcune novità documentarie sullo scultore Francesco Grassia", in: *Annali dell'Associazione Nomentana* 7 (2006), 77-87.

<sup>26</sup> AGOAR, Hospicio de Sant'Ildefonso, Caja 20, legajo 5, s/f.



5 Placido Siculo (?), *Virgin of Copacabana*, ca. 1655, oil on panel. Curia Generale degli Agostiniani Recoletti, Rome (photo: P. González Tornel)

[12] The dedication of the Augustinian church to St Ildephonsus, the patron saint of Toledo, and especially to Thomas of Villanova is connected to the promotion of the Spanish monarchy and its sacred heroes in Rome. The canonization of the Augustinian, who had been an archbishop of Valencia, took place in 1658 thanks to the efforts of the crown. In fact, during the 17th century the sanctification of Spaniards was a key objective of royal diplomatic efforts, and no less than fifteen new Hispanic saints were created during this period.<sup>27</sup> The meteoric ascent of the Iberian canonizations is directly linked to the image of the Habsburg kings as heads of a claimed Catholic and universal monarchy, materialized in the *Pietas Hispanica*, which justified and legitimized them.<sup>28</sup> In Rome the immediate consequence of this

<sup>27</sup> Miguel Gotor, "Le canonizzazioni dei santi spagnoli nella Roma barocca", in: *Roma y España. Un crisol de la cultura europea en la Edad Moderna*, ed. Carlos José Hernando Sánchez, 621-639, and Clare Copeland, "Spanish Saints in Counter-Reformation Italy", in: *The Spanish Presence in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Images of Iberia*, eds. Piers Baker-Bates and Miles Pattenden, Farnham 2015, 103-124. About the importance of the Spanish origin to become a Counter-Reformation saint, see Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication*, Cambridge, UK 1989, 48-62.

<sup>28</sup> Adelina Sarrión Mora, "Identificación de la dinastía con la confesión católica", in: *La monarquía de Felipe III*, eds. José Martínez Millán and Maria Antonietta Visceglia, Madrid 2008, 246-302. About the *Pietas Hispanica* see Anna Coreth, *Pietas Austriaca*, West Lafayette, IN 2004, and Jan Mikrut, "La politica religiosa e il culto dei santi degli Asburgo: la *Pietas Austriaca*", in: *Hagiologica. Studi per Réginald Grégoire*, eds. Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, Ugo Paoli and Pierantonio Piatti, Fabriano 2012, 1421-1465.

new success for royal piety was that Alexander VII dedicated the construction of a church in Castel Gandolfo by Bernini to Saint Thomas of Villanova. Shortly thereafter, also the Augustinians consecrated their foundation in the *Urbs* to the new hero of Catholic Spain. Nonetheless, the patron saints of the church were relegated for centuries to one of the lateral altars, and the Virgin of Copacabana reigned over the Via Sistina.

[13] The image of the *Holy Virgin of Copacabana* that originally presided over the church (Fig. 5) was painted by a little known artist, Placido Siculo, and corresponds to a panel painting of the *Virgin of Candelaria* now preserved in the General Curia of the Augustinians in Rome. It is a *vera effigies* of the original sculpted American *Copacabana Virgin and Child* with its conical profile, portraying it in two dimensions and with cropped edges. In addition to this representation, another 17th-century painting is conserved in the Curia. The latter work, executed in oil on a large-scale canvas, depicts the Virgin suspended above a wide landscape that shows the Copacabana sanctuary at Lake Titicaca. It most likely corresponds to the painting recorded in the inventory of 1887 and demonstrates the loyalty of the Order to this American devotional cult.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the frieze that surrounds the perimeter wall of the church over the entrance door shows its original dedication inside a medallion: "S. Maria de Copacavana ora pro nobis".

[14] The American vocation of the Augustinians is reinforced by the presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe, patroness of New Spain, in one of the chapels of the church. The altarpiece, attributed to the Mexican Juan Correa and datable to the second half of the 17th century, has an elaborate composition formed by the Marian central image and four small pictures with the apparitions of the Virgin to the native American Juan Diego. The central painting of the *Virgin of Guadalupe* shows a monk holding the canvas with the miraculously imprinted Marian image (Fig. 6). This fact, together with the Marian and Mexican decoration of the chapel, suggests that the American devotion was included in the iconography of the church from the very beginning.

---

<sup>29</sup> AGOAR, Hospicio de Sant'Ildefonso, Caja 14.



6 Juan Correa (?), *Virgin of Guadalupe*, ca. 1667, oil on canvas. Church of the Saints Ildephonsus and Thomas of Villanova, Rome (photo: P. González Tornel)

[15] The devotion to the Peruvian sanctuary at Lake Titicaca is part of the dissemination of Spanish American devotional cults in the Old World.<sup>30</sup> Between 1652 and 1665, at least six images of the Virgin of Copacabana were enthroned in Spain.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the Roman Copacabana's image was taken to the convent of Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova in 1655 by the Peruvian father Miguel de Aguirre, and immediately after the donation the order published in Rome a relation regarding its miracles in order to promote the veneration of this new Hispanic cult.<sup>32</sup> The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe predates the consolidation of worship of the Virgin of Copacabana. Already by the sixteenth century, a distinctive iconography had developed for the Virgin of Guadalupe, given the incredible success associated with the miraculous power of her image. It is an apocalyptic

---

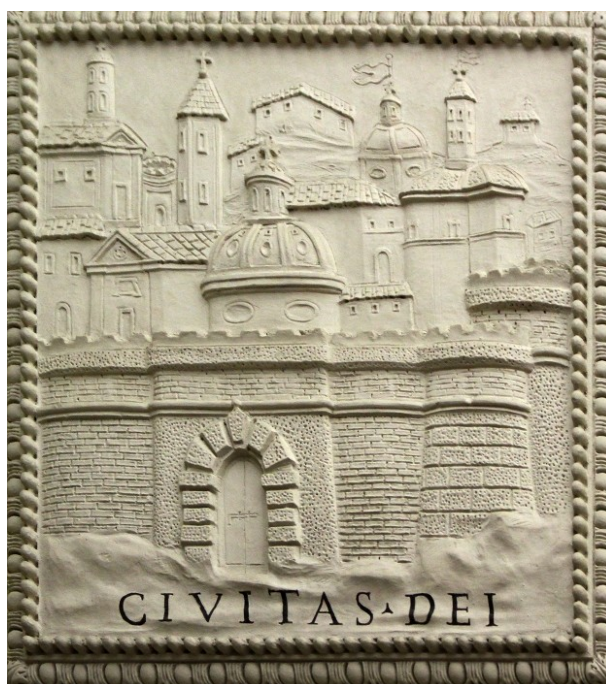
<sup>30</sup> See Alonso Ramos Gavilán, *Historia de Nuestra Señora de Copacabana*, La Paz 1976, and Verónica Salles-Reese, *De Viracocha a la Virgen de Copacabana: representación de lo sagrado en el lago Titicaca*, La Paz 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Daisy Rípodas Ardanaz, "Presencia de América en la España del seiscientos: el culto a la Virgen de Copacabana", in: *Páginas sobre Hispanoamérica colonial. Sociedad y cultura* 2 (1995), 47-78. The most complete among the books devoted to the Virgin of Copacabana was Gabriel de León, *Compendio del origen de la esclarecida y milagrosa imagen de N.S. de Copacabana patrona del Perú*, Madrid 1663.

<sup>32</sup> Ippolito Marracci, *De Diva Virgine copacavana in peruano novi mundi regno celeberrima, liber unus, quo ejus origo et miracula compendio descripta*, Roma 1656.

Virgin linked with the devotion to the Immaculate Conception in the Hispanic world that would acquire a notable and early diffusion in Europe.<sup>33</sup>

[16] The strong Marian content of the iconography displayed in the church of Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova is reinforced by the decoration that covers the walls of the temple. The Immaculate Conception of Mary is present not only in a lateral chapel, where she shares the prominence with two saints, but throughout the whole church. The stucco frieze and the reliefs between the chapels display a series of Marian elements by the Cometti brothers (Fig. 7).



7 Antonio e Carlo Cometti, detail of stucco reliefs in the church of Sts Ildephonus and Thomas of Villanova with emblems of the *Tota Pulchra*, 1667, Rome (photo: P. González Tornel)

The complex symbolic device of the stuccoes of the church of the Augustinians goes back to an iconographic tradition that developed in the fifteenth century and materializes the verses of the Loreto Litany into a series of figures extracted from the Old Testament in order to extol the figure of the Virgin and, particularly, her Immaculate Conception. The *Tota Pulchra* image of Mary, with some variable elements, implies the presence of the Virgin stripped of all narrative content and surrounded by a series of symbols of her immaculate purity often accompanied by explanatory texts.

<sup>33</sup> Jaime Cuadriello Aguilar, "La propagación de las devociones novohispanas: las Guadalupanas y otras imágenes preferentes", in: *Discursos en el Arte. XV Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte*, preprints, México 1991, 268-288. For the dissemination in Spain see Patricia Barea Azcón, "La iconografía de la Virgen de Guadalupe de México en España", in: *Archivo Español de Arte* 80 (2007), n. 318, 177-206.

[17] Johannes Molanus described the different elements of the Immaculate Conception's iconography in his treatise on sacred images published in 1570, though by then the *Tota Pulchra* tradition had existed for almost a century.<sup>34</sup> Suzanne Stratton sets the date of the initial appearance of the symbols of the *Tota Pulchra* image of Mary in engravings to around 1503, and its first artistic manifestation to 1484 in France.<sup>35</sup> As Stratton notes, the symbols that surround the Virgin and cover the walls of Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova have a literary origin. Most of them, i.e. *Sol, Stella, Luna, Porta Coeli, Liliun inter spinas, Speculum sine macula, Hortus conclusus, Fons signatus* and *Civitas Dei*, are derived, according to Molanus, from the biblical Song of Songs, though the repertory is not the same in all the artistic representations; in addition to the images mentioned by Molanus, emblems of *Virga Jesse, Oliva speciosa, Turrus David, Scala Coeli, Templum Dei* or *Quasi cypressum in monte Sion* are also represented in the Augustinian church.

[18] The omnipresence of the Immaculate Conception in the Spanish church constructed in the Via Sistina reinforces the presence and meaning of the three Marian paintings originally inside the building, and underlines the foundation's political links to the Iberian monarchy. Just as the canonizations were a political affair and a demonstration of power before the major spiritual authority of the Catholic world, so did the devotion to the mystery of the Immaculate Conception become, during the seventeenth century, a Spanish affair.<sup>36</sup> After bitter dispute between Franciscans and Dominicans, the definitive royal support for this devotion arrived in 1616 with the convocation of a Royal Council by Philip III in order to defend the proclamation of the dogma before the Papacy.<sup>37</sup> The determined support of the monarch, who would convoke a second council in 1617 and, subsequently, a third the following year, did not contribute toward any significant advance in the definition of the dogma. However, it achieved two other outcomes: on the one hand, the doctrine in Spain was popularized up to the point that Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca dedicated theatrical

---

<sup>34</sup> Johannes Molanus, *De picturis et imaginibus sacris*, Leuven 1570. I have used the edition Johannes Molanus, *Traité des saintes images*, trans. and ed. by François Boespflug and Olivier Christin, 2 vols., Paris 1996, vol. 1, 471-472.

<sup>35</sup> Suzanne Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art*, New York and London 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Jaime Cuadriello Aguilar, "The Theopolitical Visualization of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception: Intentionality and Socialization of Images", in: *Sacred Spain. Art and Belief in the Spanish World*, eds. Ronda Kasl and Alfonso Rodríguez G. de Ceballos, Indianapolis and New Haven 2009, 121-145. See *L'Immacolata nei rapporti tra l'Italia e la Spagna*, ed. Alessandra Anselmi, Rome 2008.

<sup>37</sup> José M. Pou y Martí, "Embajadas de Felipe III a Roma pidiendo la definición de la Inmaculada Concepción de María", in: *Archivo Ibero-Americano* 34 (1931), 371-417 and 508-534; 35 (1932), 72-88 and 424-434; 36 (1933), 5-48.

pieces to the topic.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, the association of Spain and the monarchy with this devotion expanded the idea that its definition as a dogma was a battle of the crown whose success would mean a great victory.<sup>39</sup>

[19] Following his father, Philip IV (r. 1621–1665) became the great champion of the defense of the Immaculate Conception, and his voluntary identification with the doctrine is clearly demonstrated by the abundant iconography that links the king with the Virgin *Tota Pulchra*. Examples include an engraving after an oil sketch of 1631–1632 by Rubens depicting the monarch accompanied by the Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand of Austria and Prince Balthazar Charles (Fig. 8), and Pedro Valpuesta's oil on canvas painting in which Philip IV swears to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception<sup>40</sup>. In fact, the Immaculate Conception Councils continued during the reign of Philip IV, consolidating the idea of the need to define the dogma for the glory of the Spanish monarchy.



8 Peter Paul Rubens, Franciscan allegory of the Immaculate Conception with king Felipe IV and other members of the Habsburg dynasty, oil sketch, 1631–1632. Philadelphia Museum of Art (photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Howe, "Lope de Vega and the Immaculate Conception", in: *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 38 (1986), no. 1, 39-53, and Donald T. Dietz, "Theology and Art: the Visualization and Staging of the Immaculate Conception in Calderon's *Auto, La hidalga del valle*", in: *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 62 (2010), no. 2, 79-101.

<sup>39</sup> See *Intacta María. Política y religiosidad en la España barroca*, ed. Pablo González Tornel, Valencia 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Pedro Valpuesta (1614–1668), [\*Felipe IV jurando defender la doctrina de la Inmaculada Concepción\*](#), 205 x 188 cm, Museo de Historia de Madrid, acc. no. 3107.

[20] After decades of military defeats during the Thirty Years War and humiliating truces, such as that of the Pyrenees, Spain needed a renewed protection of the Virgin. In all likelihood, memories of the battle of Lepanto in 1571, when the Virgin of the Rosary had helped Philip II to defeat the Ottoman troops, propelled his grandson to seek a new form of Marian devotion. Indeed, the conceptionist definition of the decoration in the church of Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova must be linked to a big Spanish diplomatic success in 1661. At that time, the Valencian ambassador Luis Crespí de Valldaura obtained from Pope Alexander VI the decree *Sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum*, that made official the feast celebrated by the Catholic Church every 8th of December.<sup>41</sup> During the reign of Charles II (1665–1700), the Immaculate Conception was maintained as a protector of the monarchy and the principal banner of Habsburg piety in its Spanish variant.

[21] As has been briefly explained in the preceding discussion, an apparently insignificant church could be iconographically qualified to become an outstanding element of political propaganda and national visibility. In 1667, when the first stone of the church of Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova was laid in the Via Sistina in Rome, the building was dedicated, together with the patron of Toledo, Saint Ildephonsus, to Saint Thomas of Villanova, one among the new heroes of the Hispanic Catholicism, who had been canonized earlier in 1658. Nevertheless, the iconographic components that strongly characterized the new church were the American devotions to Copacabana and Guadalupe, who personified the immense American empire of the Spanish monarchy and its configuration as a symbolic monument to the Immaculate Conception, whose defense had already become almost genetic for Spain.

[22] Santi Ildefonso e Tommaso di Villanova was conceived and decorated as a portrait of Spain. In fact, at the end of the seventeenth century the monks refused to place tombstones inside their church, arguing that it had been constructed by and for Spain and, therefore, only the name of Spain could be represented.<sup>42</sup> The artistic choices that the Augustinians in Via Sistina made in order to contribute to the network of Spanish foundations were far less evident than the ones materialized in other buildings of the city. No coat of arms or royal portrait celebrates the royal presence, but there were many other ways in which a kingdom could be portrayed. The representations of two important Spanish saints, Thomas of Villanova and Ildephonsus, together with two major devotional images from Spanish Mexico and Peru, the Virgins of Guadalupe and Copacabana, and the dedication of the church

---

<sup>41</sup> Constanancio Gutierrez, "España por el dogma de la Inmaculada: la embajada a Roma de 1659 y la bula 'Sollicitudo' de Alejandro VII", in: *Miscelánea Comillas* 24 (1955), 7-480.

<sup>42</sup> AHN, Fondo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Santa Sede, Legajo 924, s/f, "essendo fondata la loro chiesa a spese della Spagna ed alimentata della medesima".



to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, protector of the monarchy, managed to create a clear image of Spain through its national religiosity.

### **About the Author**

Pablo González Tornel received his PhD in 2005 from the School of Architecture, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain. Since 2018, he has been Associate Professor of Art History at the Universitat Jaume I in Castelló de la Plana, Spain. His research focuses on Early Modern Spanish art and its European connections, and the cultural configuration of the Early Modern Spanish monarchy. González Tornel was awarded grants and fellowships by the Mellon Foundation, the Università degli Studi di Palermo and the Bogliasco Foundation. His research has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals such as *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, *Hispanic Research Journal*, *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, or *Renaissance Studies*. He is the author of the monograph *Roma hispánica. Cultura festiva española en la capital del Barroco* (Madrid 2017) and editor of the exhibition catalogue *Intacta María. Política y religiosidad en la España barroca/ Unblemished Mary. Politics and Religiosity in Baroque Spain* (Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia, 2017).

### **Special Issue Editors**

Susanne Kubersky-Piredda and Tobias Daniels, eds., Constructing Nationhood in Early Modern Rome, in: RIHA Journal 0237-0243.

### **License**

The text of this article is provided under the terms of the [Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

