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The Book of Hours for a 21st Century World

Francesco Fimiani
Loyola Marymount University

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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

The Book of Hours for a 21st Century World

By Francesco Fimiani

Abstract: This 'Book of Hours' project begins on the Monday hours of the Dead all the way to the Sunday Hours of the Trinity and is inspired almost entirely by the 1440 Book of Hours of the Dutchess Catherine of Cleves. This project is the sum product of a semester's worth of instruction from my Medieval Religious Thought and Practice class taught by Professor Anna Harrison. The main purpose of this art installment is to show that even though they originate from a society highly unlike ours today, facing issues that medieval people couldn't even begin to imagine, they can be still be used to give a brand new perspective on how to tackle problems plaguing 21st century society, such as war and mental health. In the original illuminated manuscript pieced together by the Master Catherine of Cleves, and contained elaborate depictions of biblical imagery intertwined with the offices, prayers, and litanies relevant to each hour of each day. Catherine of Cleves' Book of Hours is often regarded as a masterpiece of Northern European illumination and religious artwork and is one of the best preserved artistic expressions of its time. This modern book of hours does not specifically cite prayers or litanies so as to make it more accessible to the multicultural and increasingly secular society of today. The emphasis lies purely on the emotion invoked by each drawing. While the old book of hours sought to visualize important messages and prayers, this modern book seeks to use art to express those same teachings but in a way that intersects faith and spirituality with current culture and politics. The grand social statement of these drawings make this book stand out from traditional books of hours. The book of hours is split up into seven drawings, one for each day of the week, and paragraphs will follow each drawing thoroughly explaining the message and subtext of each drawing. Through this lens, this project hopes to reveal how traditional christian teachings can be applied to both an increasingly secular society and among non-christians. The drawings adhere to reality by depicting current social issues however they are also given a dose of surrealism to depict the often surreal feelings or punishments that were commonly taught and dispersed in medieval literature. Though some are more complex in style than others, the natural gravitation is toward simplicity so as to allow for even inexperienced art audiences to clearly understand the emotion and message that the drawings wish to convey. While it may seem like this book of hours and Duchess Catherine's book may have nothing in common, the thread that ties them together is that both of them are statements of their time. Both these books seek to immortalize the messages of their time and depict the world as it is seen in each respective culture and society. Though each experience is vastly different, it is a testament to how flexible religious teachings can be in serving the needs of the world no matter what kind of world it may be.

Keywords: Medieval Thought and Practice, Modern Art, Spirituality and Society, Social Issues of the 21st Century, Catherine of Cleves, Book of Hours

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The Monday Hours of the Dead displays a disastrous war scene. In the background, we see a ruined brick wall and several other damaged walls following it in the background. One side of the brick wall has a flag with a black background and a green Scottish-flag like cross. The other side has a green background with the same cross in black. While not directly addressing any existing conflict, the implication here is that one side may say they fight for different things, but when it comes to war and loss many victims see them as just one in the same just rearranged and presented as if they were fundamentally different from each other. But in the end, both are to blame for the destruction caused and the lives killed.

The loss of life is depicted through the fallen petals of flowers on the vase by the broken window and the dying tree branches. Equally so, the symbolism of death is extended into the animals that decorate this drawing, a black cat, an owl, and a black crow. The fallen sign on the floor with the word "hospital" written in Arabic implies what was hollowed out by acts of war behind the people, and ergo the cause of the grief and tremendous sadness in the entire drawing, was a medical care center. The woman towards the left is dressed in a long flowy blue dress, akin to that found among various depictions of the Virgin Mary, but whose hair has been covered in a grey veil. Also akin to depictions of the Virgin Mary, the woman is holding a child and clinging onto him close to her chest to comfort him and shield him from the destruction they are surrounded by. She's salvaging what she has left; all she has left. Standing to her right, is a nurse. Despite her place of work being pummeled to stones, she continues her work to the best of her abilities. She embodies the resilience of victims of war and the sense of community that death can bring among all walks of life. To her right, is a man grieving for the loss of fellow citizen, whether he be a brother or friend is up to the audience interpretation, dressed in a traditional Gutrah found in men's fashion in the middle east, a region who's all too familiar with devastating war and loss of life, while donning an outfit that one could find in medieval depictions of Jesus, apostles, and lay men of medieval society. Despite the nurse's best efforts, the blood symbolically remains on her hands because the patient couldn't be rescued and he's draped in a colorful rug as he bleeds out. She stands in solace with him and the people around him as they grieve for the loss of one of them in their tight-knit community. He may not have seen peace on earth, but the halo around him assures his soul will experience that sweet sensation when it crosses through the gates of heaven.

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The next installment is the Tuesday Hours of the Holy Spirit. In Catherine of Cleves' book, these sets of prayers revolve around "corporal acts of mercy."¹ In the Book of Hours, those are manifested into two drawings of a woman giving coins to the poor, and another woman giving food to a prisoner. In my modernized version, the act of mercy depicted is a woman comforting and nourishing a sick man. It should be worth mentioning, that this specific drawing may seem familiar to many as it is a homage to Michelangelo's *Pietà*. A scene of Mary holding her dying Jesus in her arms. *Pietà*, or pity, is shown by the woman providing him comfort with her blanket, nourishment with her vase of water and the bread located under the man's arm, and a pot of grain on the very left of the drawing so that the man can learn to nourish himself by his own accord and wean off the dependence of other things, regardless of whether it be the woman herself or the drugs he's chained to.

The man, with a yellowed and expressionless face, is evidently sick. The man's sickness has pushed him toward the far edge of life. He has an orange flask of pills that are falling to the floor that he took too many doses of. The thing that's supposed to cure him of his sickness, is actually the cause of the sickness. According to the department of Health and Human Services, an estimated 9.7 million people misused prescription pain relievers in 2019². Between July 2016 and September 2017, emergency department visits for opioid overdoses rose 30%. The story of this drawing is one many people are all too familiar with. The man is also chained to an iron ball. He's being tied down by his misery. He is sick of the chains and sometimes it is through his own detriment with drugs that is the only way he can be released from those chains. The woman fulfilled her corporal act of mercy by providing this man, who she did not need to aid but she nonetheless showed pity on the poor soul and provided resources of hers, the water, the grain, the bread, and donated them to someone far more in need.

¹ "The Hours of Catherine of Cleves," The Morgan Library and Museum, June 01, 2018, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.themorgan.org/videos/hours-catherine-cleves>.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Opioid Statistics," accessed April 10, 2021, <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic/opioid-crisis-statistics/index.html>.

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Wednesday is the Hours of All Saints. The theme in this installment is also a rather somber one, depression and hopelessness. Feelings that in very recent times have been amplified due to social media, the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the uncertainty it's providing over the future of young people just about to enter into the independent world. As of April 2021, the world has grieved the loss of over 3 million deaths at the hands of the coronavirus.³ Accompanying those who feel hopeless, depressed, or grieving the loss of something has historically been St Jude.

St Jude is therefore appropriately referred to in popular culture as the "patron saint of the lost causes." Here, St Jude is depicted in a green robe over his pure white outfit. Around his head, circulates a halo and red flame that symbolizes warmth, comfort, and color. His vibrancy in color is in diametric opposition to the woman he's comforting. The woman is dressed in dark purple. She dons a black veil over her eyes to hide her tears and mournful face, her hair is tied in a bun, she wears a chain around her neck whose shape alludes to a coffin, implying she holds the pain of whoever in her life she lost very close to her. It's just as attached to her identity as the clothes on her body. In the center of her chest, is a symbolic exploding heart pierced through by a sword. Accompanying the equally somber coffin necklace and funeral face veil. St Jude attempts to infuse the warmth and color he has into her and by holding her close to his breast and attempting to dissipate the clouds that have enveloped her head.

³ Statista, "Number of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths Worldwide," accessed April 17, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>.

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Thursday Hours of the Blessed Sacrament has one of the more complex explanations in terms of references. While it is in tribute to the Book of Hours of the 15th century, the basis of this drawing comes from a story told in the “Miracles of the Eucharist” by Caesarius of Heisterbach where a woman was damned by God for using the power of the eucharist to selfishly grow vegetables in her garden.⁴ I interpreted that as being an early critique of capitalism, and that same critique has now been manifested into this particular depiction with a similar negative sentiment to that of Caesarius’ telling of that story.

This story tells of how money-oriented and capitalist our society has become today that it would be considered rotten by biblical standards. In this drawing, the woman is a very successful apple grower. Yes, the apple does have a biblical attachment to it. In front of her lay crates and crates of apples that are to be shipped off to various places around the world. The success of her apple business has allowed her to buy lavish and superfluous bodily decorations to flaunt her wealth such as apple earrings and a pink dress advertising her success and business constantly with the engraved “Buy Apples” text. This signifies that she not only achieved extraordinary amounts of wealth, embodied also in her big black car and large blue house in the background, but her flaunting of wealth embodied in these superficial objects seem to show that she’s not satisfied and is desiring more and more money and hoping through the incessant promotion of herself and her apple business that she will attract more and more money. She will never be satisfied, there will never be “enough” wealth for her. These blessings came to her in the same way the woman from the vegetable garden got hers, by implanting the eucharist, displayed in this drawing as a shiny gold sun-like design above the “Congo” crate of Apples, in her garden and letting its sacredness do the rest of the work. The sin of this scene is that she has enriched herself and only herself through the body of Christ who suffered for all of humanity and expected all of humanity to in turn serve him through humility and faith. She contradicts humility, her faith lies in following money and success not in being a humble servant to God. Because of this misguidance, the power of revenge the eucharist can entail on a person is represented in the red devilish looking creature arising from the flames and grasping at her forearm to consume her into him. This creature is what comes out of greed and abuse for the body of Christ and God will always prevail over those who seek to achieve God-like power for themselves.

⁴ John Raymond Shinnars, *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500: A Reader* (Calgary: Broadview Press, 1997), 107-108.





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Friday Hours of the Compassion of God is a relatively heart-warming story compared to the previous 4 days. The theme is compassion and it's the start of the weekend, so misery shouldn't prevail on this day especially. The theme is unfortunately one of death, the lady is in the process of separating her physical body from her soul, her metaphysical body. She carries a white rose to symbolize her passing. However, what makes this somber theme warm and comforting is that she is being pulled upwards to heaven, by that rope and the anonymous hand from above. The halo on top of her is her entryway into heaven. She is receiving the hand of Jesus behind her, telling her that she can be allowed into heaven. The way a friend would pat you on the back or grasp your shoulder to tell you that you're gonna be okay and that he's got your back. Jesus is dressed in a pink robe because pink symbolizes love, compassion, kindness and comfort.

However, what makes God's compassion worthy of artistic expression is that the woman is rather unconventionally dressed and adorned for what one considers "holy" or "good" in the eyes of God. She is flagrantly exposing her voluptuous body, wearing rather revealing undergarments and a top, and a sarong around her lower body. She is draped in vibrant red, a color associated with sexuality, arousal, lust, and general temptation. She decorates her figure with golden earrings, a diamond necklace, a silver bracelet, silver, gold, and jade rings, and lustrous cherry red lipstick with nails to match. From this, one can infer that her occupation on earth revolved around sex work. A reality so many women around the world are part of today. The especially heartbreaking stories are those done against their will and those who face violence for the work they do. A 2012 Report on sex trafficking, funded by the US Department of Justice, found "two hundred and four out of 100,000 sex workers are murdered annually."⁵ The compassion God exhibits in this drawing is not one of merely forgiving her or framing her as a sinner in dire need of redemption. The compassion in this drawing does not come from a place of anointing her in shame, it comes from comforting her and providing her security in the heavens because she had none in her previous life. Life had worn her down to feel like an object, a beautifully decorated and popularly sought for object, but nonetheless an object. In heaven, she is given repose from the physical and mental strain her previous life brought on her and she can begin the process of healing from her wounds. The Compassion of God is one of healing from earthly traumas and mistreatments, not one of forgiving her in spite of her sins or in spite of who she is. In the 21st century, a woman who engages in sex work should be treated and regarded in this matter. Not stoned to death. She can still embrace her beauty and femininity in the way Botticelli would his Venus, because she's not a character to fix or change but rather one to protect and heal.

⁵ Michael Shively, Kristina Kliorys, Kristin Wheeler, and Dana Hunt, "A National Overview of Prostitution and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts," June 2012, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238796.pdf>.

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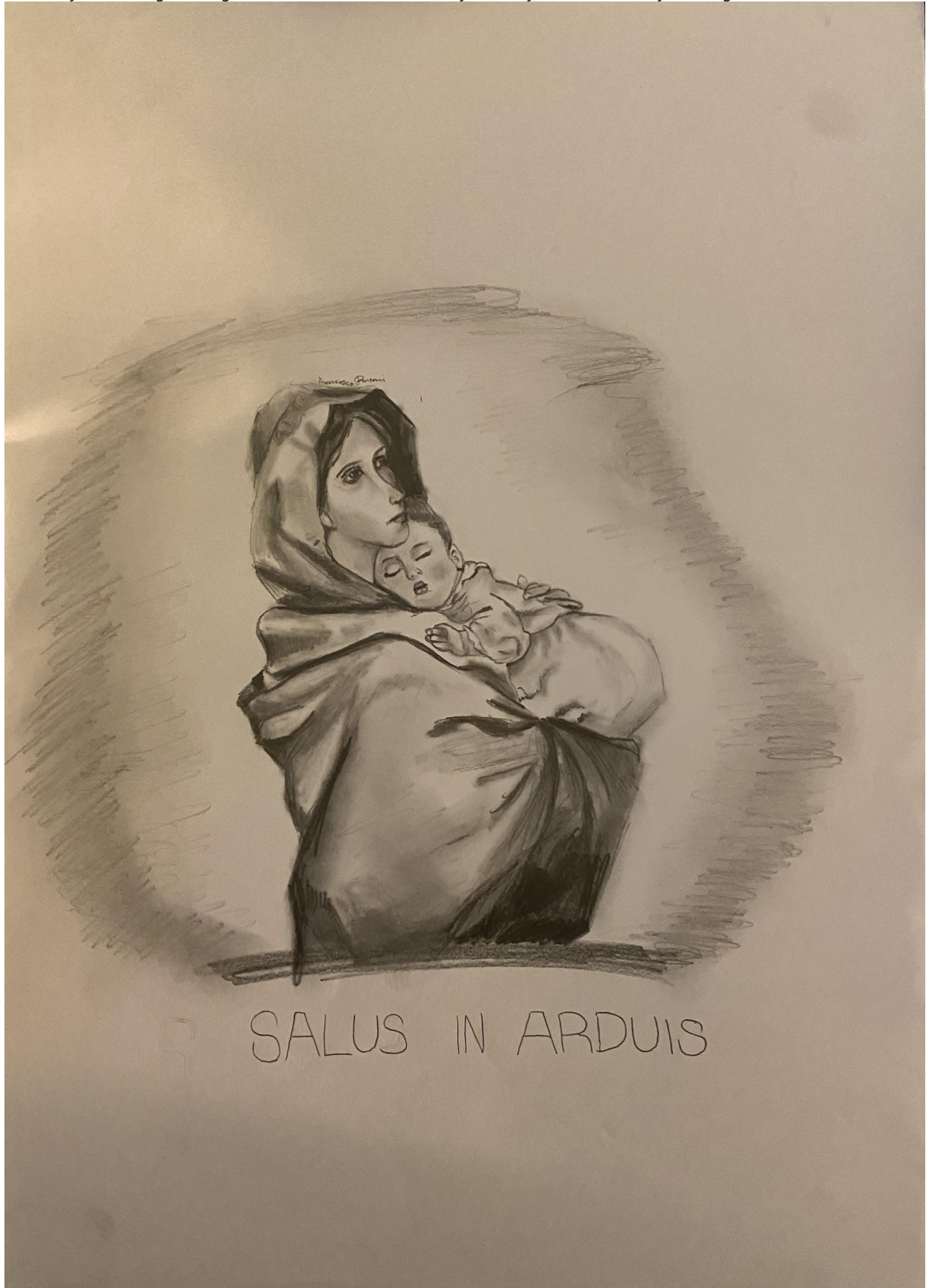
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Saturday Hours of the Virgin is probably the simplest drawing and explanation of this series. The Virgin Mary is timeless. The act of a nurturing mother guarding her creation is one that is just as relatable in the backdrop of feudal society as it is in the industrial development of the world in the 19th century as it is in the age of globalization and online culture during a deadly pandemic in 2020. The timelessness is reflected in this drawing's lack of color. The idea being that one can place this figure at any moment in history and still "fit in." In its simplest form, it's a tribute to Mary, to mothers, motherhood, to peace in the world, and to caretakers. The Latin writing of "Salus In Arduis" means "stronghold in difficulties" and that is what Mary represents best in the least amount of words.

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Sunday Hours of the Trinity closes off the modernized series. In this drawing, three basic elements are present to align with the Trinity theme. The holy spirit is symbolized in the white dove and halo figure on the top of the drawing. The soul of the central figure is flying towards the heavens and being carried into eternal peace. On the right of the drawing, is God tending to the suffering hospital patient. The light blue mask around her face can allude to what current common disease she's suffering from. She's crossed over the edge of life and is now preparing for ascension into the afterlife. She is a nurse who has fallen victim to the thing she was trying to protect others from but it is exactly because she put others above herself, that she's worthy of the cross she lies in front of. She bared her cross in life and she now deserves eternal protection and salvation for it. God is dressed in a lavender purple, associated with power and peace. He is almighty, he is all powerful, he determines the fate of us all yet he also can bring us peace and serenity with that power. Peace and serenity is what this poor victim of our health system and our mishandling of such a public health crisis deserves after all she's been through. God, more so the holy trinity, is the reason why we center our lives so much around them because they can remove the suffering which us mortals inflict on ourselves at the expense of each other's right to life and happiness.

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