I Spiritualità e “spirituali”. Sfide storiografiche e ermeneutiche del dibattito
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Some Clarifications on Michelangelo and the “Spirituali”

1. Any study of Michelangelo, and in particular of the last thirty years of his life, from the Sistine Judgement to his death, cannot fail to address the crucial issue of his religious faith, its links with his political orientations, its evolution from the first Savonarola-like matrix to the results, not without heterodox connotations, that emerge from his works, be they frescoes or drawings, sculptures or sonnets. This evolution was profoundly marked by instances of renewal which, springing from indignation at the profound moral and pastoral crisis into which the Renaissance Church had fallen, had then necessarily to contend with the explosion of the Protestant Reformation, with its spread beyond the Alps, and with its properly doctrinal instances. At the centre of the issue, as we know, is not only the controversial exegesis of great masterpieces, but also the intense relationship of filial affection (even though she was much younger than him) and devotion that bound him to Vittoria Colonna, whose own poetic work documents the religious crisis of which she was a protagonist between the ‘30s and ‘40s.¹ However, when it comes down to it, both the studies on the Roman noblewoman and those on Michelangelo use the definition of spirituals in a very


Note: This text appeared in Italian in my collection of essays *Studi e lezioni sulla vita religiosa del Cinquecento*, Alessandria 2020, pp. 11–22.
heterogeneous and often rather confused way. In fact, the term sometimes included people who were in many ways close to the Cardinal of England, but not to the point of fully sharing his religious choices, such as the Cardinal of Trento Cristoforo Madruzzo\(^2\) or the Cardinal of Mantua Ercole Gonzaga,\(^3\) or other cardinals such as the Dominican Tommaso Badia, the Augustinian Girolamo Seripando,\(^4\) the Benedictine Gregorio Cortese\(^5\) and above all Gaspare Contarini,\(^6\) who, shortly before his death in August 1542, explicitly distanced himself from the spirituals. On the other hand there are personalities as Federico Fregoso\(^7\) who, although

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\(7\) Guillaume Alonge, Condottiero, cardinale, eretico. Federico Fregoso nella crisi politica e religiosa del Cinquecento, Rome 2017.
not ascribable to the spirituali because he had already died in 1541, had arrived
to a quite similar position, as had probably also Pietro Bembo.8

There is no need, of course, to discuss research that is now very old, so
vague and confused as to identify the religious matrices of the spirituals, including
Contarini and Sadoleti, in an improbable reformist trend that would have in-
cluded Girolamo Savonarola, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Juan de Valdés and would
have been variously nourished by those Lutheran and Calvinist demands that
would later be at the heart of the experience of Ecclesia viterbiensis.9 But even in
more recent studies, such as Antonio Forcellino’s questionable work on Michel-
angelo and Colonna of 2002, one can read pages that are, to say the least, misin-
formed. For example, it outlines the characteristics of a “group” of cardinals who
“had substantially embraced the Lutheran theories of justification by faith alone
and tended to reduce the value of works and the observation [sic] of the sacra-
ments and therefore the subjection to liturgies, precepts and institutional hierar-
chies and a doctrine “expressed in the pamphlet entitled Il beneficio di Cristo”.10
In addition to Reginald Pole and Giovanni Morone, they included Ercole Gon-
zaga, who was never a member of the spiritualists, although he shared some
of their religious and political perspectives, and even Iacopo Sadoleti, who
did not hide the fact that his opinions on justification by faith alone were very
different from theirs.11 In a later book by Forcellino, this group was joined by

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8 See especially Paolo Simoncelli, “Pietro Bembo e l’evangelismo italiano”, in: Critica storica
says Valdesiani e spirituali. Studi sul Cinquecento religioso italiano, Roma 2013, pp. 159–71.
9 Maria Caì, Da Michelangelo all’Escorial. Momenti del dibattito religioso nell’arte del Cinque-
10 Antonio Forcellino, Michelangelo Buonarroti. Storia di una passione eretica, introduction
11 See for example the letter sent by Alvise Priuli to Ludovico Beccadelli on June 20, 1542
with which, no doubt at Pole’s behest, he wished to inform Contarini of the outcome of recent
talks between the Cardinal of England and some of the cardinals who were to be placed at the
head of the new Roman Inquisition a few weeks later, “in proposito delle cose di Napoli”
(“concerning the affairs of Naples”), that is, of the serious suspicions of heresy that weighed
on the Valdesian group, “per le qual cose et in particular et in genere monsignor si è ingeg-
niato far quel miglior officio ha potuto, et spero haverà giovato non poco” (“for which things
and in particular and in general Monsignor has endeavoured to do the best job he could, and I
hope it will have helped not a little”). As for the newly elected Cardinal Morone’s commitment
to reabsorbing the heretical dissent of the city of which he was bishop, Modena, in the most
painless way possible, he suggested renouncing any personal strategy and referring every-
thing to the Roman authorities, to avoid any misunderstandings, avoiding involving Sadoleti
who, “per quanto si po comprendere, è da temere che possa esser più scrupuloso in simil
materie che gli altri; anzi, havendosi Sua Signoria reverendissima lasciato intender chiaramente
Pietro Bembo and even Paolo Giovio, a man of letters with close ties to the papal curia, hostile to any instance of reform that risked spoiling “la coda al fagiano di questa santa sede” (“the tail of the pheasant of this Holy see”) and did not limit itself to closing “la bocca a questi blasfematori di Germania” (“the mouth of these blasphemers of Germany”), as he wrote in March 1547. In addition to Sadoleto, Bembo, Fregoso, Cortese and Badia, others mentioned Gian Matteo Giberti and Ludovico Beccadelli. Some have spoken of the spirituali as a group that already existed in 1535, and one could go on and on citing similar historical judgments that, apart from Michelangelo, of course, enlist among the spirituali.

spirituali all or almost all the personages mentioned here, starting with Colonna and Contarini, who according to some was even “the head”.\(^{17}\)

Although with some appropriate distinctions, also Maria Forcellino wrote of the “group” of the “spirituali” as “dominated by the figures of Contarini and Pole” and marked by the common adhesion to the doctrines of the *Beneficio di Cristo*, ascribing to it also Ercole Gonzaga, Ludovico Beccadelli, and Carlo Gualteruzzi. In her opinion, both Contarini and Pole had a “moderate position” on the crucial question of justification, but then she affirmed that Marcantonio Flaminio,\(^{18}\) Pole’s initiator into the Valdesian magisterium, had Lutheran convictions,\(^{19}\) almost as if it had not been the humanist from Serravalle who wrote to Carnesecchi at the beginning of the forties to deplore the fact that even in Italy “molti, seguendo l’opinione del Lutero, condannano d’idolatria la messa et d’impietà coloro che l’ascoltano” (“many, following the opinion of Luther, condemn the mass as idolatry and those who listen to it as impiety”), polemising with unusual harshness against “l’abominevol setta zuingliana” (“the abominable zuinglian sect”) and the “falsa dottrina” dei protestanti.\(^{20}\) The widespread claim that Vittoria Colonna met and frequented Juan de Valdés in Naples, where the Spanish exile only moved in 1534, after the Roman noblewoman had returned to Rome, also lacks any foundation.\(^{21}\) It is of little or no use to refer to an unspecified “circle” of Michelangelo and the Marquise of Pescara, without defining its religious contents and aggregation practices, especially taking into account the fact that both Pole and Contarini, as well as Ochino\(^{22}\) and Ambrogio Catarino Politi, who wrote bitter polemics both against the famous Sienese preacher and against the *Beneficio di Cristo*, belonged to it.\(^{23}\) And even less to affirm that that famous little book was the “central document of Italian Evangelism”, without

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\(^{17}\) Anne Dillon, *Michelangelo and the English Martyrs*, Farnham 2012, p. 95.  
\(^{19}\) Forcellino, *Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna e gli “spirituali”*, pp. 17, 21, 32–35, 47.  
\(^{21}\) Thus for example Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*, p. 47.  
having specified what is meant by Italian evangelism. The lack of clarity that reigns in the historiography on the identity of the “spirituali” constitutes the premise for generic and imprecise judgements, both in the definition of the religious content of Michelangelo’s faith and in the dating of their origins and developments. The purpose of this contribution is therefore to clarify who the spirituali really were, what their intellectual matrices and doctrinal common denominator were, what their brief history was: when, and in relation to which figures, can one speak of spirituali? What were their origins? What were their results, after the brief season of intense proselytising and political commitment they experienced roughly between 1541 and 1547? These are fundamental questions – I believe – to understand the tormented religious faith of the last Michelangelo, starting from his relationship with Vittoria Colonna.

2. The first attestations of the term “spirituali”, not as an appellation generically opposed to “carnal” or “worldly”, but with a precise reference to the group gathered around Pole in Viterbo, date back to the summer of 1542, in the middle of Morone and Contarini’s attempt to reabsorb the heretical dissent in Modena with tiresome negotiations, trying without success to involve the cardinal of England in them. It was a moment of incomprehension and fracture between the latter and his Venetian colleague, although usually very close to each other, which nevertheless involved important doctrinal issues. It was then that the definition was used for the first time to designate the Ecclesia viterbien-sis, in a letter addressed on 15 July by Beccadelli, then Contarini’s secretary in Bologna, to his friend Carlo Gualteruzzi, Bembo’s secretary in Rome. He informed him that he had sent him some ceramic plates from Faenza that were to be delivered to Rome through the “spirituali” of Viterbo, whom he himself had shortly before – on 31 May – quite effectively defined as the «Chiesa viterbiense».

Shortly afterwards it was the bishop of Verona Gian Matteo Giberti who commented on Bernardino Ochino’s flight to Geneva, writing a letter to Ercole Gonzaga at the end of August, perhaps intended not so much for him as for the Roman inquisitors who would have intercepted it, in which he took care to distance himself from the Sienese friar, whom he had carefully protected until then, and to outline a reassuring programme for the future. “Poiché questi
nostri spirituali ne dan si poca consolatione, parte con morire parte con andar profugi, credo che sarà bene lassare la loro compagnia” (“Since these spirituali of ours give so little consolation, partly by dying and partly by going into hiding, I believe it will be good to leave their company”). Of course, in this letter Giberti united the radical Ochino with the moderate Contarini, enlisting the latter in the ranks of the spirituali, but it should be borne in mind that the Sienese friar was saying that it would have been the great Venetian cardinal himself who suggested that he should not go to Rome but instead take the road to escape.

The fact that the latter had by then distanced himself from Pole’s Viterbo “company” is amply attested by the negotiations started by Morone in Modena to convince the so-called Modenese Academicians to subscribe to a catechism specially drafted by Contarini, which was rejected by the tenacious group of heterodox who said they were willing to accept as a compendium of their faith the Valdesian catechism Qual modo si dovrebbe tenere in formare i figliuoli de’ christiani delle cose della religione “pur in lingua vulgar, qual dicevano esser fatto da Marcantonio Flaminio et dalla compagnia viterbiense”. They did not therefore act alongside the Venetian cardinal but alongside the heterodox with whom he sought a compromise. A few weeks later, on the eve of his death, Contarini was finally able to read the still unpublished Beneficio di Cristo, after the last revision and rewriting of the original text by Don Benedetto Fontanini carried out by Flaminio in Viterbo. It was perhaps the text that on 15 August Priuli suggested to Beccadelli “darli a legger dextramente un di doppo pranso o dapoi il sonno meridiano, [. . .] pregandolo si degni advertirvi se in esso vi fusse cosa alcuna che li paresse contraria alla vera et sana dottrina cattolica, pigliando voi fatica di avisarmene poi particolarmen, rimandandomi il medesimo scritto” (“to read rightly one day after lunch or after meridian sleep, [. . .] begging him to deign to inform you if there was anything in it that seemed contrary to true and sound Catholic doctrine, taking the trouble to inform me about it in particular, sending me back the same text”), he specified, aware of the reaction it

27 Cfr. Fragnito, “Gli ‘spirituali’ e la fuga di Bernardino Ochino”.
could provoke.\textsuperscript{30} And in fact, if we are to believe the ambiguous deposition of the Bolognese priest Niccolò Bargellesi, who was eager to hide some past deviation from doctrinal orthodoxy, Contarini’s deposition was one of bewilderment and concern when he noticed that it “passed the terms”, exclaiming several times: “Oh povero Flaminio, el passa troppo!” (“Oh poor Flaminio, he oversteps too much!”).\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, it is not true that the Beneficio di Cristo was an “expression” of the “environment of Contarini and Pole”, distinguishing the latter from an unspecified “magistero valdesiano In senso stretto”,\textsuperscript{32} since it marked the theological ridge that divided one from the other.

This detachment, although mitigated by great mutual respect, by ancient friendship, by the prelacy and stately composure of the formulas of courtesy, was the outcome of a path inaugurated the previous year, when on the occasion of the delicate negotiations of Contarini at the Diet of Regensburg, Pole seemed to distance himself from his doctrinal positions, leaving from Rome without participating in the bitter debates in progress within the sacred college on the formulas of concord with the Protestants that he had proposed. His retreat to Capranica and abandonment of the field was a source of disconcertment for the Venetian cardinal, who had never needed his support more than at that moment to stem the accusations of having “troppo […] condesesso a quelli germani” (“condescended too much […] to those Germans”).\textsuperscript{33} “Desidereria che il reverendissimo Polo fusse in Roma a questi tempi et a questi manegi: in vero non poteva essere absente a tempo più incomodo”, he complained to Bembo on 28 June, to whom he wrote again on 4 July begging him to greet the Colonna and the English cardinal, “del quale sommamente desidero intendere qualche novella” (“of whom I most desire to hear some news”).\textsuperscript{34} That silence and absence concealed in reality a theological dissent on the part of those who were then gathering in Viterbo around Pole, who was now oriented towards the new


\textsuperscript{32} Forcellino, Michelangelo, \textit{Vittoria Colonna e gli “spirituali”}, p. 47.


\textsuperscript{34} Franz Dittrich, \textit{Regesten und Briefe des Cardinale Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542)}, Braun- sburg 1881, pp. 341, 344.
Valdesian horizons opened up by Flaminio’s proselytism. As I have reconstructed elsewhere, in fact, in the first months of 1541 the latter had started a dense correspondence with Alvise Priuli, whose ultimate recipient was naturally his mentor and patron Reginald Pole, to convince him to embrace the doctrine of justification sola fide (thus distancing himself from the tortuous *duplex iustitia* of Contarini). This was only the first step in a gradual initiation into the doctrines of Valdès, the positive outcome of which was confirmed by the departure from Naples of the humanist from Serravalle in May, when the Spanish exile of whom he had become the most authoritative interpreter and heir was still living. With him, other members of the Neapolitan group, such as Iacopo Bonfadio, Donato Rullo, Apollonio Merenda, Marcantonio Villamarina, Pietro Carnesecchi and Vittore Soranzo, also moved away from the Spanish master, some of whom met again in Viterbo after the summer. This suggests the start of a new and conscious political strategy, aimed at breaking out of the closed Neapolitan cocoon in which Valdesianism had grown up until then and trying to involve authoritative prelates in its refined spiritualism, probably in view of the by now imminent Council convocation but in any case promoting an ambitious proselytising campaign.

It was his adhesion to the Valdesian doctrines in the first months of 1541 that distanced, if not separated, Pole from Contarini, and that was the birth of the “spirituali”, with which we must identify only the Viterbo group, adding to it two exceptional characters such as Vittoria Colonna and Giovanni Morone, who were variously involved. The newly elected cardinal from Milan also underwent a sort of sudden conversion between the end of 1542 and the beginning of 1543, when he was sent to preside with his English colleague over the first and then failed convocation of the Council of Trent. It was then, according to some witnesses of his subsequent inquisitorial trial, that he “per opera et industria del prefato reverendissimo cardinale Polo, mediante le parole di messer Marcantonio Flaminio, fu sedotto nelli suoi errori” (“by the work and industry of the most reverend Cardinal Polo, through the words of Marcantonio Flaminio, was seduced in his errors”) and involved in the Valdesian spirituality. A spirituality free from any spirit of controversy and transmitted above all by means of “una certa confabulatione spirituale”, as he himself would effectively


define it, aimed at attenuating and in any case masking any theological dissent from the Magisterium of the Church. Some will recall that in Trento Morone took every opportunity to say “cose grandissime in laude del cardinale reverendissimo Polo, et inter caetera come da lui era stato illuminato circa di questa materia della giustificazione” (“very great things in praise of Cardinal Reverend Polo, and among other things how he had been enlightened by him about this matter of justification”), openly declaring “che prima era inimicissimo di questa opinione ma, poi che parlò et prese pratica con monsignor Polo, prese questa dottrina come cosa sanctissima” (“that at first he was inimical to this opinion but, after he spoke and took up practice with Monsignor Polo, he took this doctrine as a most holy thing”), and that “in questo articolo et lume, novamente per Sua Signoria reverendissima appreso, se ne rallegrava [. . .] et de essere in questo illuminato dal reverendissimo de Polo, quale molto exaltava in queste cose” (“in this article and light, newly learned by His Most Reverend Lordship, he was delighted [. . .] and of being enlightened in this by the most reverend de Polo, whom he exalted much in these things”). A bishop who then had the opportunity to discuss with him in Trent, drew the impression that “ipsum maxime delirare et convenire cum haereticis in materia de gratia et libero arbitrio: omnia enim tribuebat gratiae, nihil nostro arbitrio”. It is true that he asserted that also Contarini and Badia, as well as Pole, “erant in hac sententia”, but from a man who was basically ignorant of theology such a statement seems only to denounce a certain confusion if not, as is perhaps more likely, a clever proselytising strategy on the part of his interlocutors, as suggested by the similar action carried out by Marcantonio Flaminio with Pietro Carnesecchi in Naples.

In the months he spent in Trento, Morone sometimes ended up taking compromising positions, stating, among other things, that the papal Church had given the Lutherans “gran causa d’esser diventati heretici et che, se Roma se fusse assettata [i.e. “reformata circa il vivere e costumi!”] facilmente essi sarebbero tornati alla fede” (“great cause to have become heretics and that, if Rome were adjusted” – that is, “reformed in terms of living and customs” – “they would easily return to the faith”). But even more incautious was the way in which in the following months he exercised the pastoral government of his diocese of Modena, where he sent friars with a reputation for heresy to preach, while he rudely chased away the Jesuit Alfonso Salmerón who was
refuting Lutheran doctrines from the pulpit, even telling him “che per la me-glior opera che lui faceva meritava lo inferno, come era quando lui andava a dire messa” (“that for the best work he did he deserved hell, as he was when he went to say mass”). Here he undertook to spread the Beneficio di Cristo while it was still freshly printed and, knowing that it was expensive (like all forbidden books), he told the bookseller that “se ce fosse qualche poveretto che non havesse el modo de pagarselo” (“if there were any poor man who did not have the means to pay for it”) he would pay for it himself. Even more serious was the fact that Flaminio took care to communicate to the Modenese heterodox, to whom a few months before he had given the Valdesian catechism to support their close confrontation with the Cardinal, the “bona novella che il loro vescovo, cioè esso reverendissimo Morone, era divenuto cosa loro et li amava” (“good news that their bishop, that is, the most reverend Morone, had become their thing and loved them”). The heterodox Modenese “facevano gran festa et allegrezza con dire che [. . .] era stato illuminato della verità et era devenuto loro fratello nelle cose della fede, et [. . .] lo magnificavano quanto potevano” (“made great rejoicing and joy with saying that [. . .] he had been enlightened of the truth and had become their brother in the things of the faith, and [. . .] they magnified him as much as they could”). Indeed, to some of them who had the courage to go and visit him, he is said to have shown “grande amorevolezza et scusatosi con loro et quasi dimandatogli perdonanza dell‘ha-verli altre volte travagliati per le cose della fede” (“great love and apologised to them and almost asked their forgiveness for having troubled them other times in the things of the faith”). It was from these events that the suspicions about him originated and were nourished, finally leading in the 1550s to a clamorous inquisitorial trial, even though he himself did not take long to realise the serious risks he was running and to change course, as early as 1544, when he found himself unexpectedly involved in the Roman trial of a Franciscan he had sent to preach in Modena. But that brief season, between the end of 1542 and the summer of 1544, would weigh on his head like a sword of Damocles until the end of his days.

42 Ibid. p. 194.
44 Ibid. pp. 697–98.
46 Firpo/Maifreda, L’eretico che salvò la Chiesa, pp. 397ff., 493ff., 696ff.
3. Also for Vittoria Colonna it is not possible to speak of an adhesion to the group of spirituali before 1541, when it began to gather in Viterbo around Pole who, with all due respect to Hubert Jedin, did everything but heal her “from the poison of Valdesianism”\(^{48}\) because it was he who instilled it in her by initiating her into the doctrines of the Spanish exile, as the Marquise of Pescara herself never tired of repeating. I cannot dwell here on what I have already written on other occasions,\(^ {49}\) starting with the observation that there is no knowledge of the still unpublished writings of the Spanish exile on the part of Colonna before 1540–41.\(^ {50}\) On the contrary, it was the Siensese preacher, first as a representative of the ascetic rigour of the Capuchin reform\(^ {51}\) and then as a spreader of the Valdesian doctrine in the peninsula, who initially guided the Marquise on the path indicated to her by the religious crisis following the death of her husband. Starting from the Roman sermons of 1534–1535, Colonna’s journeys in 1537–1538 between Ferrara, Bologna, Florence, Pisa and Lucca (where she met Carnesecchi\(^ {52}\) ) followed some of the stages of the Capuchin’s “mirabil prediche” (“marvelous sermons”),\(^ {53}\) thus revealing from these years the need for a guide, a solid point of reference that would also characterise the spiritual experience of the Marquise of Pescara in the future.

In any case it was not in Ochino but in Pole that she wanted to identify the master who had marked the decisive turning point in her itinerary towards the liberating discovery of the “benefit of Christ”: “Io sono a Sua Signoria reverendissima della salute dell’anima e di quella del corpo obligata, ché l’una per superstitione

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\(^{49}\) Firpo, Inquisizione romana e Controriforma, pp. 131ff.; Firpo, Maifreda, L’eretico che salvò la Chiesa, pp. 179ff.

\(^{50}\) The brief stay of Valdés in Naples in 1533 and that of the Marquise in 1536 (whose scanty documentation was offered by Amalia Giordano, La dimora di Vittoria Colonna a Napoli, Naples 1906, pp. 151ff.; but see in general pp. 14ff.) do not constitute sufficient proof of any direct relationship between the two characters. Serious errors in this regard must unfortunately be found in the entry on Colonna in the Dizionario biografico degli italiani, vol. XXVII, pp. 448–57, in whose bibliography, among other things, the most recent contribution on Colonna’s youth is not cited, namely the volume by Suzanne Therault, Un cénacle humaniste de la Renaissance autour de Vittoria Colonna chatelaine d’Ischia, Florence 1968.


\(^{53}\) Vittoria Colonna, Carteggio, Ermanno Ferrero/Giuseppe Müller (eds.), II ed. by Domenico Tordi, Torino 1892, p. 157.
l'altra per mal governo era in pericolo” (“I am obliged to His Most Reverend Lordship for the health of my soul and that of my body, since one was in danger because of superstition and the other because of bad government”).\(^{54}\) She wrote to Giulia Gonzaga on 8th December 1541, from Viterbo, where according to Carnesecchi she lived “retirata [. . .] per poter, secondo diceva, attendere a servire Dio più quietamente che non faceva a Roma” (“retired [. . .] in order to be able, as she said, to serve God more quietly than she did in Rome”).\(^{55}\) The inquisitors had no doubts that those words meant that “dictam marchionissam accepisse opiniones haereticas a dicto domino cardinali Polo” (“the Marquise had learned heretical doctrines from Cardinal Pole”), while the embarrassed comment of the Florentine protonotary seemed to have been made on purpose to corroborate their already consolidated certainties:

La signora marchesa avanti che pigliasse l'amicitia del cardinale si affligeva talmente con degiuni, ciliarci e altre sorte di mortificationi della carne che si era redotta ad havere quasi la pelle in su l'osso: et ciò faceva forse con ponere troppa confidentia in simili opere, imaginandosi che in esse consistesse la vera pietà et religione, et per consequente la salute dell'anima sua. Ma poi che fu admonita dal cardinale ch'ella più tosto offendeva Dio che altro avvenimento et rigore contro il suo corpo, [. . .] la suddetta signora cominció a retirarsi da quella vita così austera, reduscendose a poco a poco a una mediocrità ragionevole et honesta.\(^{56}\)

The Marquise, before she took the friendship of the Cardinal, afflicted herself so much with fasting, ciliarci and other kinds of mortification of the flesh that she was reduced to having almost the skin on the bone: and this she did perhaps with too much confidence in similar works, imagining that in them consisted the true piety and religion, and consequently the health of her soul. But when she was admonished by the Cardinal that she was more likely to offend God than otherwise by using such austerity and rigour against her body, [. . .] the lady began to withdraw from that very austere life, reducing herself little by little to a reasonable and honourable mediocrity.

This can also be confirmed by other inquisitorial sources, such as the first deposition given against Cardinal Morone and the spirituali by the Bolognese Giovan Battista Scotti, in 1551–1552, a passage of which directly links Pole to Colonna as his “padre et maestro spirituale ne le cose della religione” (“father and spiritual

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\(^{54}\) Ibid. p. 239; *Processo Morone*, vol. III, p. 857. On 21 June 1541, in a letter from Orvieto to Pole himself, Colonna acknowledged that she was “extremamente obligata, et delle cose spirituali et delle temporali, ché in questa mia necessità et esilio sopra tutte le persone me ha consolata, aiutata, socorsa et accomodata” (“extremely obliged to him, both for spiritual and temporal things, since in this necessity and exile of mine he has consoled, helped, rescued and accommodated me above all people”), ibid., p. 548.

\(^{55}\) *Processi Carnesecchi*, vol. II, p. 429.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., pp. 1034–35.
master in the things of religion”), recalling that she “medesma lo diceva alli amici suoi che l’andavano a visitare, lodando et inalzando sopra le stelle la dottrina et santità di questo cardinale” (“herself said this to her friends who went to visit her, praising and raising above the stars the doctrine and holiness of this cardinal”). In the Apologia delivered to the Holy Office the day after his arrest, in June 1557, Morone used words very similar to those pronounced ten years later by Carnesecchi to refer to his conversations with Colonna, often centred on the “reverendissimo Polo, dal quale mi disse una volta che haveva ricevuta la salute sua, perché l’haveva firmata et ritirata da molte vane fantasie. [. . .] L’animo suo era tutto del reverendissimo Polo” (“the most reverend Polo, from whom he once told me that he had received his health, because he had signed it and withdrawn it from many vain fantasies. [. . .] Her soul was entirely of the most reverend Polo”). Finally, around 1542, it was Vittoria Colonna herself who declared apertis verbis to a heterodox friar, for some time very close to the Viterbo group, the Dominican Bernardo Bartoli, that she believed “questa giustificazione per le persuasione del cardinale d’Inghilterra” (“this justification for the persuasions of the cardinal of England”) and wrote in absolutely unequivocal terms to Morone himself, on 22 December of that year, recalling

the chaos of ignorance where I was and the labyrinth of errors where I walked in safety, clothed in that gold that shines and shrieks without holding firm to the paragon of faith nor refining itself in the fire of true charity, being continually in motion with the body to find rest and with the mind in agitation to have peace. And God wanted that on his side [Pole] should say to me: “Fiat lux”, and that he should show me that I am nothing and can find everything in Christ, as your Lordship will have understood better than me. [. . .]

57 Processo Morone, vol. I, p. 20; see ibid., note 42, where it appears that the Compendium of the Morone trial deduced from these words that the Cardinal of England had been “pater et magister spiritualis in falsa doctrina marchionissae Piscariae et ab ea unice dilectus et nimio affectu ac reverentia adamatus propter istam disciplinam”, and that Colonna had been “filia spiritualis et discipula cardinalis Poli haeretici”.
58 Ibid., pp. 469–70.
59 Ibid., p. 77.
60 Ibid., p. 1019.
And God knows how hard I have tried to contain the excessive abundance of my heart, so that it does not spread in this paper.

What should be underlined is the rapidity with which Colonna not only became part of the group of spirituali, certainly also in consideration of her social and political rank, but acquired a leading role, as demonstrated by her involvement in the discussion that marked the doctrinal divide that then occurred between Contarini and Pole. What, together with the cardinal of England and presumably through him, the Marquise of Pescara discovered in those decisive months was the intense, involving religious message of the man who had been the common teacher protagonist of Pole and Ochino, as well as of Flaminio, Carnesecchi, Priuli, Soranzo, Di Capua, Merenda, cancel Villamarina, Rullo and many others, that is Juan de Valdés, as it is clear in many of her spiritual sonnets and in the intense and often cryptic and allusive correspondence she started in 1543 with Morone, who had also become a disciple of Flaminio and Pole, common and venerated teacher of faith.61 Still in July 1546, a few months before her death, the Marquise of Pescara returned to profess all her gratitude towards the English cardinal, evoking him “tutto absorpto et elevato sempiternamente” in the “nimia largitae et superabundante grandezza di amore” of the divine grace, with evident reference to a doctrine of justification that the Council of Trent was preparing to condemn: “Et ivi guardandolo per fede, desidero servirlo per quella dilectione per la quale essa fede opera” (“And looking at him through faith, I desire serve him because of that affection through which faith operates”).62

It is therefore in this perspective that the relationship between Michelangelo and the spirituali must be framed, all mediated through Colonna, because if he had the opportunity to meet the Cardinal of England during his visits to San Silvestro al Quirinale in the 1530s he met a personage of great prestige and a reputation for refined spirituality, the one that emerges from the pages of his De unitate Ecclesiae addressed to Henry VIII, but not yet the most illustrious disciple of the Spanish heresiarch nor the revered teacher of the Marquise of Pescara, who was at that time totally absorbed in Ochino’s preaching.63 It is very likely that he had never met Valdés or read any of his writings. If these explanations have any foundation, it follows that Michelangelo’s adherence to Valdesian spirituality, through the mediation of Colonna – it is difficult to say with what awareness of its heterodox implications – took place only at the

61 Firpo/Maifreda, L’eretico che salvò la Chiesa, pp. 185ff.
beginning of the 1540s, after the uncovering of the Sistine Judgement. It fol-


dows, for example, that Leo Steinberg’s acute and fascinating essay on this

work as a synthesis of a Vadesian “merciful heresy” is based on the presumed

link between that extraordinary depiction of the Last Judgment and the Cento e
dieci divine considerazioni of the Spanish exile, which were almost certainly un-

known to Michelangelo when he was working on that fresco, which was rather

full of reformist and anticlerical instances that could not be defined as hetero-

doxx. Instead, it is in his artistic production of the following years that we

should look for it, in the intense drawings for Vittoria Colonna, Cristo in croce,

the Samaritana al pozzo and the Pietà, in the frescoes of the Pauline Chapel, in

the tormented Pietà Bandini and in the bare Pietà Rondanini, in the numerous

crucifixions nervously sketched on his sheets, in the painful and bitter sonnets

of his last years on which, in fact, with all the anguish it entailed, it left visible

and indelible traces.

The problem remains open as to how Michelangelo reacted to the profound

crisis of the spirituali after the approval in January 1547 of the Tridentine canon

on justification, which defined this doctrine in terms completely different from

those they had hoped for, as demonstrated by Pole’s withdrawal from Trent in

the spring of 1546 and his refusal to sign the formal act. According to Carnesec-

chi, Vittoria Colonna was pleased “come di cosa che fusse tornata mirabilmente

a proposito del sudetto signore, dicendo che Dio haveva quasi miracolosamente

disposto et ordinato così, accioché il cardinale non fusse intervenuto a tal de-

creto, quasi volesse inferire di sapere che fusse discrepante il senso di Sua Si-

goria illustrissima da quello che tenevano gli altri” (“as if it had been done

admirably with regard to the aforesaid lord, saying that God had almost mirac-

ulously disposed and ordered this way, so that the cardinal did not intervene in

this decree, as if he wanted to infer to know that the sense of His Most Illustri-

ous Lordship was discrepant from that held by the others”). Shortly after-

wards, during the conclave that followed the death of Paul III, whose ballots

were held in the Pauline Chapel, the very serious accusations of heresy by Gian

Pietro Carafa resounded among the frescoes, still damp from the brush of the

great Tuscan artist, preventing Pole from being elected pope, despite the fact

64 Leo Steinberg, “Michelangelo’s Last Judgment as Merciful Heresy”, In: Art in America 63
(November-December) 1975, pp. 49–63, cf. also id., “A Corner of the Last Judgment”, in: Daeda-
lus 109 (1980), pp. 207–73., and John W. Dixon Jr., “Michelangelo’s Last Judgement: Drama of
65 Massimo Firpo/Fabrizio Biferali, Immagini ed eresie nell’Italia del Cinquecento, Rome-Bari
2016, pp. 231ff.
that in the ballot of 5 December 1549 he was one vote short and many illustrious cardinals had proposed to entrust him with the tiara for adoration. It was then, between 1547 and 1549, that the propaganda and proselytising action promoted by the spirituali gradually came to an end, with the publication of various editions of the *Beneficio di Cristo*, the *Alfabeto cristiano* and other Valdesian writings, with the intention of directing the Tridentine assembly towards different outcomes, such as to promote an incisive reform of the Church and a doctrinal agreement with the Protestants capable of finally reabsorbing the fracture. Far from being exhausted on the grounds of spirituality, it was a consciously political action, aimed at flanking the action of Charles V, whose failure drove Pole and his associates to the defensive, finally forcing them to conceal their religious identity in the secret of their conscience, to entrust to an unlikely future their hopes for an authentic religious renewal, to take refuge in prophetic expectations in the conviction that always and in any case history is entirely in God’s hands. In the meantime, however, inquisitorial pressure on them grew stronger and stronger, leading to the heresy trials launched against almost all the members of the *Ecclesia Viterbiensis* in the 1550s and then to the terrible pontificate of Gian Pietro Carafa, who recalled Pole to Rome and revoked him from the English legation, with the purpose of locking him up in Castel Sant’Angelo with Morone.67 We know too little about Michelangelo to understand how he reacted to these events, which marked the definitive counter-reformation turn of the Church, destined to affect its history for centuries. But they were certainly not indifferent in marking the bitter loneliness of his last years.

(English translation by Jason Di Resta)
