

## The Ex Voto between Domestic and Public Space: From Personal Testimony to Collective Memory

*Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser*

Holy pictures for the house; modes of prayer recommended for use in the privacy of the chamber; vernacular religious texts for lay consumption: these leave no doubt of the perceived significance of the home as a place of Christian devotion during the Renaissance. To privilege the domestic context of Renaissance religion, which is the purpose of the present volume, is to bring welcome light to neglected evidence of spirituality within the household. At the same time, however, the focus of attention on the domestic environment should not be taken to imply a separation of spheres. It is a premise of the essay which follows that there was no form of devotion in the home which did not find its meaning in a larger context of shared identity and belief. The Italian Renaissance *casa*, at different social levels, comprised diverse social groups, economic activities, and functional locations, and this complexity blurred the boundary between domestic and communal or social spaces. The household was at once the site of both the 'personal' and the 'public'; and its individual members were equally multifaceted.

This point matters, because to give particular attention and priority to evidence of religious behaviour within the home is to risk polarising the historical picture – or rather, since the polarisation is already present, to exacerbate the problem. The original rhetoric of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation established a supposedly fundamental contrast between the Lutheran householder and his wife, at home, in intimate conversation with the deity, and an unthinking herd of Catholic parishioners gathered, in church, in passive incomprehension of a collective liturgy. Negative accounts of the pre-Reformation Church – influenced by Counter-Reformation Catholic no less than Protestant critiques – have been extensively dismantled by recent scholarship, yet the effect of the confessional debates of the sixteenth century is still evident in the divergent directions taken by recent and current research. Some years ago, André Vauchez drew a categorical distinction between two separate and 'contrary' traditions, respectively of the public cult of the saints

and of the private world of prayer.<sup>1</sup> The historiography of late medieval and Renaissance religion has continued to suffer from a marked divide between those historians who emphasise its social and collective aspect (parish life, fraternities, processions, and religious plays) and those who, by contrast, highlight the elements of the personal and the private in contemporary religious experience (prayer books, meditation, small-scale holy images, and mystical writings).<sup>2</sup> Beneath these diverse studies runs a common underlying assumption: that religious life is essentially to be understood, depending on the priorities and the method of the observer, as either 'public' or 'private', and that the period of the Renaissance witnessed a shift from the former to the latter as the dominant site of religious experience. Yet this commonly invoked distinction between 'public' and 'private' religion is deeply problematic in any historical context, and not least the one in question here, at which time neither the 'private' nor the 'domestic' (themselves categories which are too often unhelpfully elided) was conceptualised as a distinct devotional realm. It is an enduring characteristic of human personality to oscillate between the projection of an extrovert, sociable aspect, and the recourse to an interior self. People need both dimensions in order to exist in the world.<sup>3</sup> Each field of human activity finds its meaning simultaneously in both realms: as in other areas of life, so in religious and devotional behaviour, an individual creates a unique identity both through personal choices made at the level of the self, and through finding validation of those choices by interaction with others in the social arena. Any study of devotion needs, therefore, to take account of the necessary coexistence, in any one time and place, of both the intimate and the social aspects of religious experience.

The present essay, therefore, takes its assignment to consider the 'domestic' in Renaissance religion as an opportunity to consider the interrelationship both between the household and the larger social sphere, and between the

1 Vauchez A., *Les laïcs au Moyen Âge. Pratiques et expériences religieuses* (Paris: 1987) 287–288.

2 There is space here only for indicative citations. For the former, see e.g. Bossy J., *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford: 1985); Terpstra N., *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: 2000); Black C.F. – Gravestock P. (eds.), *Early Modern Confraternities in Europe and the Americas* (Aldershot: 2006); for the latter, see e.g. McGinn B., *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350–1550)* (New York: 2012); Andersen E. – Lähnemann H. – Simon A. (eds.), *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden – Boston: 2014); Poor S.S. – Smith N., (eds.), *Mysticism and Reform 1400–1750* (Notre Dame, IN: 2015).

3 For a fuller discussion in the related context of devotional confraternities, see Rosser G., *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages. Guilds in England 1250–1550* (Oxford: 2015) ch. 1.

individual and the Christian community. Its particular point of reference is the *ex voto*: the material acknowledgement of a grace or miracle, delivered by a grateful beneficiary as a donation to a holy shrine. All known religious traditions accommodate variants on this practice of recording a perceived supernatural intervention by the reciprocal dedication of a material record: an image whose purpose is to record, to absolve, and to commemorate a spiritual debt. Although the *ex voto* is far from unfamiliar to students of Renaissance religion, and is evident to modern visitors to many Catholic shrines, the scale of the phenomenon at all periods has been a great deal more extensive than is generally realised. It is inclusive: in recognition of a divine favour, anybody can bring a bunch of flowers to the site of the holy relic or miraculous image to which the blessing is attributed. Its forms are infinitely diverse: crutches, bandages and moulded limbs and internal organs in wax or metal, witnesses to the recovery of those of whom doctors had despaired; stuffed animals and reptiles, to recall mortal encounters with snakes or rabid dogs; bloodied clothing, as testimony to the survival of attack in feud or war; dresses and jewels, to ornament the shrine or sacred image. The most familiar type, although in fact by no means the most common, is the two-dimensional painted representation of a scene of crisis, the context of the vow: a child on her sickbed; a ship in a storm; a farmer falling from a tree; and in each case the depiction, in the upper part of the image, of the saint or the reputedly miracle-working image to which a successful appeal had been launched. Specialist manufacturers produced – and still produce – many of these multifarious objects and paintings, which may be adapted to individual requirements. Bishops and parish clergy, while not wishing to discourage altogether these manifestations of Christian piety, have at all times looked askance at what they consider the folkloric and pagan aspects of the practice. Clerical disapproval and distaste for what are seen as the expression of excessive independence on the part of the laity (not only but not least in the late twentieth century, following the directives of the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church to establish conformity with a consistent, clerically monitored religious programme) have caused many shrines to be purged of their *ex votos*, gravely limiting our awareness of their former ubiquity. Where a little chapel containing a statue known for its apotropaic powers once housed many thousands of *ex votos* of every variety, it is likely that not a trace of these accumulated tributes remains to be seen today. A few shrines, such as that of the painted Madonna of Montenero above Livorno on the northwest Italian coast, do currently display collections of *ex votos* on this scale, although even these are normally the surviving



nineteenth- and twentieth-century minority from what had been a far more numerous accumulation since the late medieval or Renaissance period (Fig. 2.1).<sup>4</sup> In such cases, the very vibrancy of the cult tends to privilege its more recent manifestations. The ex voto is a religious and social rite of enormous significance, which, despite some recent signs of scholarly interest, still has more light to shed on devotional beliefs and practice.

What do the ex votos tell us about devotion in the Renaissance? With the exception of a pioneering study by the museum director and student of popular religious culture, Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, published in 1972, studies of ex votos have until recently largely been confined to empirical catalogues, and to a sterile analysis of the categories of misfortune with which they are associated.<sup>5</sup> A recent collection of studies has drawn attention to ex voto traditions in diverse cultures, and to the potential of anthropological approaches for their comparative study.<sup>6</sup> But while anthropology and comparative history are invaluable aids to help to define the universal category of material offerings made in return for a divine intervention, they do not suffice to allow us to make more specific statements about the particular functions and potency of the ex voto in a given place and time. While recognising that the ex voto has had a global diffusion and a *longue durée*, we also need to ask both why and how it was employed in diverse particular communities and social situations. This is not to propose an arbitrary periodisation of the phenomenon, and indeed 'the Renaissance ex voto' is not a distinguishable category. This point needs to be underlined in the present context, and in view of one of the latest contributions to the literature. In her recently published monograph, Fredrika Jacobs,

4 *Ex voto marinari del Santuario di Montenero*, 2nd edn. (Pisa: 1999); Garnett J. – Rosser G., *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: 2013) 143.

5 The most significant monograph on the subject remains Kriss-Rettenbeck L., *Ex voto. Bild und Abbild im christlichen Votiv-Brauchtum* (Zürich and Freiburg-im-Breisgau: 1972). Paolo Toschi did much to draw Italian painted ex votos to scholarly attention, although his discussion of the material (like that of many authors of more recent catalogues of individual local collections of ex votos) tended to become grounded in quantitative analysis of the social types and diverse ailments of their subjects. Toschi P., *Arte popolare italiana* (Rome: 1960); Toschi P., *Le tavolette votive della Madonna dell'Arco* (Cava dei Tirreni: 1971). Other studies which offer more than empirical description of the material: Ciarrocchi A. – Mori E. (eds.), *Le tavole votive italiane* (Udine: 1960); Prosperi A., "Introduzione", in Ghirardini G. – Andreoli S. (eds.), *La Madonna della Ghiara di Reggio nelle immagini devozionali* (Reggio Emilia: 1990) 11–25; Clemente P. et al., *Pittura votiva e stampe popolari* (Milan: 1987).

6 Weinryb I. (ed.), *Ex voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures* (New York: 2016), is a collection of studies ranging from Antiquity to the present and from Europe to Japan. Its diverse contents are richly suggestive, but are not brought together in an integrated or rigorously comparative discussion.

on the basis of the surviving evidence from the single shrine on which she bases most of her discussion, implies that the long sixteenth century, from 1470 to 1610, was of distinct significance in the history of the painted Catholic ex voto. She writes: 'If the *terminus a quo* for a study of the *tavolette votive* can be set around 1470 on the basis of extant panels, then the *terminus ad quem* can be reasonably, if somewhat arbitrarily, placed roughly within the first decade of the seventeenth century.'<sup>7</sup> Jacobs acknowledges in an afterword that ex votos continued to be made after this period, and notes that painted ex votos of a similar kind may today be seen in New Mexico, but she explicitly sustains that the early seventeenth century saw an interruption in the practice because of Tridentine clerical disapproval of folkloric practices.<sup>8</sup> The fact is that notwithstanding the element of ecclesiastical reserve, painted (and other) ex votos continued to multiply across the ensuing centuries (as innumerable shrines bear witness). The impact of the Council of Trent, on this as on other forms of lay devotion, was far more limited than its published decree of 1563 had envisaged. With respect to the preceding, medieval period, Jacobs's chronology is based on a lack of surviving painted ex voto panels prior to the late fifteenth century, which is not a strong argument, especially given extensive medieval evidence of other forms of ex voto, including fourteenth-century painted frescos, and given, too, the existence of painted predella panels dating from as early as the late thirteenth century which record quotidian miracles in very similar ways to ex votos.<sup>9</sup> In post-medieval inventories and visitation records, painted *tavolette*, even when known to have been present, were regularly omitted when other ex votos were recorded, due to the lack of material value of the former: this also has a bearing on the evidence for medieval painted ex votos. Finally, apart from natural disasters and the depredations of war, collections of ex votos, once the families of their donors are no longer present to supervise them, have always been vulnerable to being removed from view, becoming subsequently susceptible to loss: this is documented in the post-medieval period and is sure to have occurred earlier. However, Jacobs further distinguishes the pictorial ex votos she discusses by an argument that non-pictorial ex votos constituted a different phenomenon. She sees the latter – crutches, wax limbs, rings, etc. – as functionally less effective than pictures and therefore both inferior to and distinct from the painted *tavolette* on which she exclusively

7 Jacobs F.H., *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: 2013) 79.

8 Jacobs, *Votive Panels* 79–84, 196.

9 On the precedents for the late fifteenth-century *tavolette* see Bacci M., "Italian Ex-Votos and 'Pro Anima' Images in the Late Middle Ages", in Weinryb, *Ex voto* 76–105.

concentrates.<sup>10</sup> But given the continued widespread use from the sixteenth century until the present, within the same cults, of ex votos in diverse media, this distinction does not seem conceptually convincing.<sup>11</sup>

We need to be wary of tying the chronology of ex votos to developments in other areas, with the consequent risk of creating circular arguments. A century ago, in a classic essay, the attempt was made to connect the late-fifteenth-century ex voto to the contemporary development in painting of new techniques of naturalism. Julius von Schlosser proposed that the Renaissance ex voto in the form of a wax portrait of the grateful donor, of which examples are known from Mantua, Florence, and elsewhere, was a catalyst of lifelike portraiture in secular contexts.<sup>12</sup> The hypothesis was doubly problematic. In the first place, it depended upon a simplistic teleological assumption about 'the rise of naturalism' in Renaissance art; and in the second, it inferred that the ex voto functioned as a kind of sympathetic magic based upon a formal resemblance between the image and the beneficiary.<sup>13</sup> Building on this suggestion, David Freedberg made extensive use of ex votos in the development of his thesis that all artistic representations function as surrogates for reality.<sup>14</sup> Yet the thesis was flawed in its foundation: the briefest survey of ex voto material, in its fantastical diversity, makes it clear that a literal or naturalistic representation of life is not an element which is essential to its operation. Apart from the naturalistic portrait in wax, the ex voto offers a variety of other ways to allude to its donor, including the indexical reference of an item of jewellery, or the mensural similitude of a candle of the same length as the subject's height. Representational ex votos, meanwhile, offer formulaic depictions of their protagonists, the detail of whose experience, never more than

10 Jacobs, *Votive Panels* 127, 151.

11 Michele Bacci has suggested that in the Middle Ages, wax limbs were offered to shrines in anticipation of a grace, and not in thanks for a cure. Bacci, "Italian ex-votos" 79–80. If this were the case, it would represent a significant continuity with antique practice, in which offerings were made both following the receipt of a healing or other grace and, more commonly, in the hope of receiving one. Didi-Huberman G., *Ex-voto, image, organe, temps* (Paris: 2006), principally considers classical evidence of this nature. Post-medieval Catholic practice has been almost exclusively to promise an offering in the moment of crisis, and to bring it to the shrine in the aftermath of its resolution.

12 von Schlosser J., "Geschichte der Porträtbilder in Wachs", *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 29 (1910–11) 171–258.

13 Jacobs appears to have been influenced, in the construction of her chronology of ex votos, by Schlosser's argument: '[...] tavolette began to proliferate around 1470, a time that coincides with an increase in portrait paintings and even more monumental fresco cycles featuring a donor, his family, and even his well-placed friends.' Jacobs, *Votive Panels* 77.

14 Freedberg D., *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: 1989) esp. 146–160.

summarily indicated in the visual depiction, is sometimes amplified by accompanying texts. It cannot be agreed as a general rule that the ex voto functions on the basis of 'the felt efficacy [...] of the exactly lifelike'.<sup>15</sup> The same point applies to the representation, within the painted ex voto, of the venerated statue of the saint or the miraculous image: the image provides a sufficient, but never more than approximate indication of the particular saintly power to which a grace is attributed. Printed reproductions of the cult image, which since the sixteenth century have been vital means of dissemination of these devotions, also provide more-or-less crudely simplified copies of the prototype, with no loss of perceived efficacy. In the mind of the devotee, the strength of remembered presence of the holy image has only a weak relationship to visual resemblance.<sup>16</sup> As with the paper copy or *santino*, so too in the case of the ex voto, the material visual image does not depend for its operation on its mimetic qualities, but functions, instead, as a catalyst of remembered stories.

Every ex voto claims to be the authentic record of an event. But rather than offering a complete or precisely accurate visual description, the vowed image or object donated to the shrine is the trace of a memory which is, at the same time, both personal and collective. It is a part of a larger nexus of relationships between the donor, the deity, and the community.<sup>17</sup> Catholic belief and practice continued to be influenced by the example of the Jews, who in ancient times brought thank-offerings to the Temple, as described in the Psalms:

For thou, O God, has proved us: thou hast tried us by fire, as silver is tried. Thou hast brought us into a net, thou has laid afflictions on our back: Thou hast set men over our heads. We have passed through fire and water, and thou hast brought us out into a refreshment. I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble. I will offer

15 Freedberg, *Power of Images* 157. As Kriss-Rettenbeck pointed out, the 'likeness' of the donor in a medieval or Renaissance vowed image was not understood to be a literal, earthly portrait, but, rather, a sufficient demonstration that the vow had been fulfilled. Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Ex voto* 277–278.

16 Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles* esp. 195–199.

17 As Kriss-Rettenbeck already noted, each pictorial ex voto, displayed at the shrine, shows both the relationship between the grateful donor and the supernatural agent, and the relationship of the miraculous event to the present beholder. Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Ex voto* 156–157. Jacobs, *Votive Panels* 88–98 makes the point that the ex voto should not be understood as a 'gift', because divine grace is understood in Catholic culture to be unrepayable. Indeed, the ex voto is not a unilateral donation, and still less the settlement of a debt, but rather the fulfilment of a vow to acknowledge the infinite generosity of divine compassion for humanity.

up to thee holocausts full of marrow, with burnt offerings of rams: I will offer to thee bullocks with goats.<sup>18</sup>

Similar declarations were made by innumerable deponents concerning ex votos brought to shrines in sixteenth-century Italy. The testimony of Giovanni Battista Roccatagliata, concerning the cure of a Genoese dyer attributed to the miraculous painted Madonna of Mondovì, is typical. To make his vow to the picture, whose powers had recently become a *cause célèbre* throughout a wide area, the crippled man made his way to a chapel of the Virgin Mary in the cathedral church of Genoa, where his ex voto would remain with others as an offering and a local witness to the cult, whose epicentre lay beyond the mountains in Piedmont:

I have known [for some time] a Genoese man named Francesco Semino, a dyer, who for about five years was lamed in his left leg and foot, the leg being greatly swollen. When he moved about his house, at the start of the condition, he went from one room to another on all fours, and outdoors he went with crutches, as, more recently, he did also at home. On the fourth Saturday in August [1595] this dyer went to San Lorenzo in Genoa, to the chapel of St John the Baptist and to that of the Virgin Mary, and in the Virgin's chapel he vowed himself to the Madonna of Savona and to the Madonna of Mondovì, praying for the grace to be able to visit them without crutches. Having finished his prayer he came with his crutches to the shop of Messer Pietro Rocha, the druggist, in Piazza Nuova, and related to him what he had done, and also that he felt more robust than before. The druggist told him to try to walk without the crutches, and he did this, returning home on his feet, to the amazement of the neighbourhood. News of the miracle spread through the city, and on the following day the archbishop's vicar, wanting to know all about it, called Francesco and examined many witnesses. And the whole city flocked to that chapel of the Madonna, and by permission of the ordinary [the archbishop's representative] they continue to bring numerous wax and other ex votos [*molte imagini di cera et voti*]. That Francesco had previously gone everywhere with crutches I saw myself, and is commonly known throughout Genoa: indeed I have now seen his crutches, which I recognise, in that very chapel of the Madonna, hung one on each side of the altar.

18 Ps. 65 [66], 10–15 (Douai translation from the Vulgate).

A second deponent reported that, although he had not seen Francesco Semino since his miraculous cure, he had observed the man's crutches hanging in the chapel.<sup>19</sup> Such narratives, similar to countless others in the period, show how the *ex voto* functioned at once as the outcome of a personal vow born in the context of individual and domestic suffering and prayer, and as a catalyst of public rumour, conversation, and shared history.

Once placed on view in the august and public setting of the chapel, the *ex voto* records and validates a personal experience.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it makes a contribution to a composite image of multiple lives: the collective memory of an evolving community. An *ex voto*, in other words, does not function in isolation, but works as a metonym for a narrative of personal experience which exists simultaneously within the life of the giver and, as a story shared with the wider community, as an element in a multifaceted and enduring embodiment of the society of participants in the cult. It is significantly misleading, therefore, to categorise the *ex voto* as an 'egodocument': Ittai Weinryb, who makes this suggestion, risks underestimating the communal dimension which is no less essential to the object than its reference to its donor.<sup>21</sup> The frame of *ex votos* surrounding the statue of the saint or the miraculous crucifix is the deposit of innumerable personal stories: a palimpsest of particular narratives which have become integrated into a shared history. The author of an official guide, published in 1571, to the shrine of the miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary at Altötting in Bavaria declared that when one stood surrounded by all the traces of those who, as their wax and other *ex votos* testified, had been helped by the image, it seemed as though they were all actually present.<sup>22</sup> Even as it pays the debt of personal gratitude for supernatural intervention, the *ex voto* helps to construct a collaborative image of the larger community of devotees as both virtuous and powerful in the assurance of divine support in the future. The *ex voto* refers to an individual event, whether experienced as a personal or (as in the case of natural disaster) a collective grace; but it reconfigures that experience in the language of the community. Around 1600 in Genoa, Nicolo de Blagio was bedridden in his house with an illness and for some time in great danger of his life, when his prayer to the Virgin Mary and the miracle-working crucifix of the local church of Santa Maria di Castello was answered

19 Cozzo P., "*Regina Montis Regalis*". *Il santuario di Mondovì da devozione locale a tempio sabaudico* (Rome: 2002) 392–393.

20 "Chi fa raffigurare la sua vicenda esistenziale sul quadro votivo, non solo riconosce la grazia, ma si fa riconoscere come graziato davanti a Dio e agli uomini", Bessone A.S. – Trivero S., *I quadri votivi del santuario di Oropa*, 4 vols. (Biella: 1995), I, 16.

21 Weinryb, *Ex voto* 8.

22 Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Ex voto* 279.

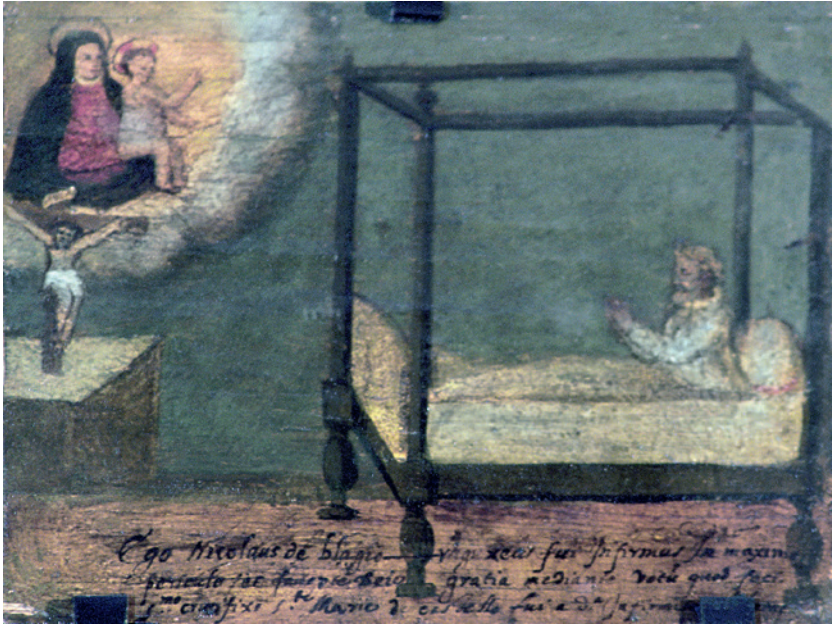


FIGURE 2.2 Ex voto at the sanctuary of Santa Maria di Castello, Genoa  
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

with his recovery. The scene which he subsequently had a painter depict shows the patient alone in his bedroom, calling into his mind the Virgin of Castello and the adjacent thaumaturgic crucifix, which may have been present in the room in the form of a printed reproduction (Fig. 2.2). The domestic intimacy of the scene is typical of an infinite number of ex voto pictures. Yet when Nicolo de Blagio brought his visual testament as an offering to the cross, its public display alongside others both validated his experience as miraculous and recast it as part of a communal identity. To bequeath an ex voto offering to a shrine is to participate in a social ritual, one which cumulatively constructs the shrine containing the relics of the saint, or the miraculous painting or statue, in the image of the body of its devotees.<sup>23</sup>

Each time an ex voto is hung up at a shrine, a personal experience is given public importance. By the same token, the right of the secular community to define the sacred site is vindicated. The *raison d'être* of the holy place is

23 The argument developed here was first proposed in Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles* 142–156.

constituted by the accumulated testimonials to its potency.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, a standard type of print of a venerated saint or a miraculous image includes a frame which incorporates in addition a series of the accompanying ex votos, demonstrating again how the personal stories of the *miracolati* have been translated into a communal narrative.<sup>25</sup> Such prints, themselves made to be framed and contemplated at home, or taken on travels as a means of creating and recreating a 'home' on the move, provided a constant reminder of the web of interconnections between the personal, the familial and the social. The narrative was both infinitely extendable and intensely felt in its specificity. Hence the ambivalence of the clergy, torn between the desire to foster an active piety and unease at the degree to which Christianity, in the hands of its lay devotees, is susceptible to being fragmented into myriad local, particular and mobile cults, determined and directed by the laity and ultimately uncontrollable. The material deposits of these cults could often be manifested in distinctly secular, even pagan forms. When one of the leaders of the Tridentine reforms, Cardinal Bossio, conducted his visitation of the diocese of Genoa in 1582, he demanded the removal of what appeared to him to be outlandish ex votos in the Ligurian shrines of miraculous images, including flags, weapons, model ships, and displays of dogs, snakes, and other 'brute animals'. At Lavagna, evidently with raised eyebrows, he observed a crocodile suspended from the rafters of the chapel of the miracle-working painted panel of the Madonna del Ponte. This animal had been brought to the shrine in 1566 by sailors from Lavagna who had miraculously been saved from its jaws in the waters of the Nile. No less symptomatic of this ongoing tension, between clerical ideas of orthodoxy and decorum and the power of the laity to determine the scope and social character of religion, is the fact that in the late nineteenth century, visitors to the chapel of the Madonna del Ponte found, amongst the thousands of ex votos expressive of a long-lived secular community, the crocodile still in its place.<sup>26</sup> In the minds of the episcopate, the Counter-Reformation sharpened issues of orthodoxy and conformity surrounding ex votos; but the long-term endurance of these practices amongst the laity is itself a testimony to their perceived

24 "Se privata della relativa serie di testimonianze, comprovanti grazie e miracoli e favori celesti, un santuario è destituito della sua ragion d'essere [...] Assenza di ex-voto è condanna all'oblio", Vecchi A., "Per la lettura delle tavolette votive", in B. Avesani B. – Zanini F. (eds.), *Le tavolette votive della Madonna della Salute di Dossobuono* (Verona: 1987) 11–29: 13–14.

25 Vecchi A., *Il culto delle immagini nelle stampe popolari* (Florence: 1968) 101–102.

26 *Synodi diocesanae et provinciales editae atque ineditae S. Genuensis Ecclesiae, accedunt Acta et Decreta visitationis Francisci Bosii episcopi Novariensis ann. MDLXXXII* (Genoa: 1833) 184–185, 265; Castellini P., *Pellegrinaggi al santuario di N.S. del Ponte: Cenni storici* (Chiavari: 1908) 15–16.

significance for the consolidation of a community which, as will become explicit in the discussion, below, of the Madonna dell'Orto of Chiavari, could be political no less than it was religious.

In this context, the 'domestic' exists as a function of the 'public', and vice versa: the ex voto is an interface between the two spheres, and provides a telling example of the way in which personal religious experience finds validation and significance in the context of a social community. A family drama becomes, through the pious act of one of its participants, the material of a collective devotion. The text inscribed on another sixteenth-century ex voto preserved at the shrine of the miraculous crucifix of Santa Maria di Castello in Genoa catches something of the tone of the news as it circulated in the neighbourhood, in the aftermath of one particular domestic crisis. These are the words of the main protagonist, Lorenzo Carrega:

On the Monday, which was 20 September, 1569, at the third hour of the night I went to bed. I woke at the sixth hour, but it not yet being time to get up for work, I went back to sleep. In the space of an hour, I don't know how, but a fire started in the house [...] and seeing the danger to myself and my family, I rescued my children as quickly as I could. Straight away on our knees we put ourselves in the hands of the Lord God, Our Lady and the glorious St John the Baptist, as the Crucifix of Castello came into our hearts.

The panel on which this text appears shows the drama of the house fire, with flames pouring from windows and chimneys, and in the foreground the family of four in their nightclothes, kneeling in imprecation before the imagined image of the miraculous cross (Fig. 2.3). In the moment of crisis, their minds had turned to God and the Virgin Mary, and to John the Baptist, the civic patron of Genoa, but most particularly – as the picture records – to the Crucifix of Castello. The cult of this carved wooden crucifix of ca. 1300 was well established by this period, and the outdoor shrine, attached to the nave of the church of Santa Maria di Castello, in the heart of the old city of Genoa, proclaimed its powers through a display of multiple ex votos. Those, like Lorenzo Carrega and his family, who grew up familiar with these images and stories of the powers of the crucifix, turned instinctively, in the moment of crisis, to this source of protection: the tutelary deity of all households bound together in the same narrative community.

The ex voto is normally presented at an established shrine. However, the communal potential of the personal offering to the deity is also demonstrated in the rarer instance in which an ex voto, created on a new, and sometimes



FIGURE 2.3 Ex voto at the sanctuary of Santa Maria di Castello, Genoa  
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

domestic, site, becomes in its own right the focus of a popular cult. Such was the case of the frescoed image of the Madonna dell'Orto of Chiavari, on the coast of Liguria. It was in the 1490s that a local woman, Maria Guercia, also known by her nickname of *la Turchina* – probably on account of a blue (*turchese*) dress which she wore in honour of the Virgin Mary – is said to have had painted, on the wall of a garden in the suburb of Chiavari, the image of the Virgin and Christ Child, flanked by those of St Sebastian and St Roch. The latter were both associated with protection from the plague, and in fact the image was commissioned by the woman as an *ex voto* of thanks for her survival of the plague. The image enjoyed the fluctuating interest of the Chiavaresi during the sixteenth century; but it was at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the context of mounting political tension between the town and the dominant city of Genoa, that Our Lady of the Garden began to work miracles, and became the catalyst of a major pilgrimage (Fig. 2.4). The many accounts of the cult which were written at that time all concur in the conviction that the fresco was in origin an *ex voto*. Whatever the true fifteenth-century history of the image (and the story of Maria 'la Turchina' perhaps has a legendary quality), the universal perception at the time of the birth of the civic cult was that



FIGURE 2.4 Devotees at the garden shrine of the Madonna dell'Orto, Chiavari (commemorative image). Oil on wood. Cathedral and sanctuary of the Madonna dell'Orto.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

it had begun life as the fulfilment of a humble woman's vow. The status of the image as the modest ex voto creation of a simple lay woman of Chiavari, and its location in an undistinguished garden outside the town walls, made it the ideal palladium of the Chiavarese community – comprising townspeople both rich and poor – which desired to make a stand against what were perceived as the excessive burdens of Genoese rule. Attempts by the authorities to suppress the nascent cult were powerless to resist the crowds of devotees who came

from a wide hinterland to honour the Madonna dell'Orto, and in a number of instances to add to her tally of miraculous cures. In the end the Genoese senate was persuaded, in return for a measure of supervision, to remove its opposition, and the triumph was celebrated locally as a moral and political victory for the whole population of Chiavari. On the completion of a new basilica to house the image, on 8 September 1634 the frescoed *ex voto*, still attached to part of the garden wall, was carried in festive procession through all the main streets of the town before its installation in the purpose-built shrine (Fig. 2.5). A new harvest of *ex votos* now began to flourish around the venerated image, consolidating the reputation of this modest fresco, in origin the outcome of a personal vow, as the civic patron of Chiavari.<sup>27</sup>

Almost without exception, *ex votos* are the expression of what today would be considered private concerns, or personal responses to public events.<sup>28</sup> Typical of the circumstances which have occasioned their manufacture are dramas of the home such as a difficult childbirth, an infant falling downstairs or – as we have seen – an incurable illness or a house fire. The devotional context of the vow made to the saint or miraculous image at the moment of crisis is either personal or domestic. Yet the vow itself requires that the story find a social expression, becoming incorporated into the common memory through the relation of the event in speech and its enduring commemoration in the *ex voto* deposited at the shrine. Those responsible for leaving *ex votos* have always, especially on the annual feast day of the saint or the image, returned regularly to reconnect with their offerings, to dust them and to ensure that they remain in view both of the thaumaturgic image and of the secular community.<sup>29</sup> The *ex voto* negotiates a continuous loop of devotional energy between the field of the personal and the domestic, and that of society at large.

In every religious tradition, devotion finds forms of expression which may be described as either personal or domestic, or both. Yet that personal belief and intimate devotional practice only make sense within a larger context of communal history. Every invocation of the patron saint or thaumaturgic image plots the relationship of the individual to a supernatural presence which is not remote, but which is located within the community. Attempts to censor that wider field of devotional expression, on the part of clerical authority, have always had a political undercurrent. The local cult has the capacity – as in the Chiavarese case just discussed – to catalyse a strong secular community,

27 Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles* 80–83, 181–183, 185–187, 196–199.

28 A very small minority of *ex votos* are erected by groups, notably in the aftermath of natural disasters such as a threat of disease or an earthquake.

29 See e.g. Bessone and Trivero, *I quadri votivi* 108–109.



FIGURE 2.5 The Madonna dell'Orto. Fresco, ca. 1490, formerly on a garden wall, in its transposed, 17th-century setting.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

confident of divine support at both the personal and the collective level.<sup>30</sup> The attempts by clergy since the sixteenth century, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, to encourage moral discipline within the household, under the direction of the *paterfamilias*, while imposing in the public sphere a prescribed

30 See e.g. Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles* and *passim*.

model of devotional observance, should be seen for what they have in fact been: efforts to limit the communal aspects of lay religion in both contexts to standardised forms approved and regulated by the clergy. From this clerical perspective, domestic devotion has been intended to be devotion kept safely under control. Yet the ordered separation of spheres has never been easy to impose, and the long history of the *ex voto* demonstrates the repeated appropriation by lay men and women of the right to reveal the presence of the supernatural within the quotidian realms of the home and the wider community. The placement of an *ex voto* at the shrine secures the public authentication of a personal encounter with the divine. And at the same time as it validates that individual spiritual experience, the action consolidates and legitimises a public history of divine support for the community.

### Selected Bibliography

- Didi-Huberman G., *Ex-voto, image, organe, temps* (Paris: 2006).
- Garnett J. and Rosser G., *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: 2013).
- Jacobs F.H., *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: 2013).
- Kriss-Rettenbeck L., *Ex voto. Bild und Abbild im christlichen Votiv-Brauchstum* (Zurich and Freiburg-im-Breisgau: 1972).
- Weinryb I. (ed.), *Ex voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures* (New York: 2016).