Plagues and artistic votive expressions (*ex voto*) of popular piety

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SUMMARY

In past centuries, epidemics, the scourge of humankind, caused pain, anger, uncertainty of the future, social as well as economic disorder and a significant impact on their victims, involving also their spiritual sphere. The latter effect led to undoubted effects on participation in the religious and social life of communities. The custom of preparing artistic votive expressions has been lost in the mists of time and evidence of *ex voto* gifts, offered by believers to pagan gods, has been found in prehistoric archaeological sites. Furthermore, several finds from the Ancient Greek and Roman worlds may be observed in our museums. These remains are generally ceramic and metal artifacts, reproducing limbs and other body parts which had been healed. These elements, according to the belief of those making the offerings, had benefited from the miraculous intervention of a thaumaturgical deity. With the advent of Christianity, some pre-existing religious practices were endorsed by the new religion. Believers continued to demonstrate their gratitude in different ways either to miracle-working Saints or to the Virgin Mary, because they thought that, thanks to an act of faith, their own health or that of a family member would benefit from the direct intervention of the divine entities to whom they had prayed. In the Ancient Greek world, it was believed that the god Asclepius could directly influence human events, as testified by the popularity of shrines and temples to the god, especially at Epidaurus. In the Christian world as well, particular places have been detected, often solitary and secluded in the countryside or in the mountains, where, according to tradition, direct contact was established between the faithful and Saints or the Virgin Mary Herself. Manifestations occurred by means of miracles and apparitions, thereby creating a direct link between the supernatural world and believers. Religious communities, in these extraordinary places, responded to the call through the building of shrines and promotion of the cult. Over time, the faithful reached these places of mystery, performing pilgrimages with the aim of strengthening their religious faith, but also with the purpose of seeking intercession and grace. In this case, the request for clemency assumed spiritual characteristics and also became a profession of faith. Accordingly, the shrines in the Christian world are places where supernatural events may occur. In these environments the believer resorted to faith, when medicine showed its limits in a tangible way. For the above reasons, while epidemics were occurring, the requests for clemency were numerous and such petitions were both individual and collective. In particular, by means of votive offerings (*ex voto*) the believers, both individually and collectively, gave the evidence of the received grace to the thaumaturgical Saints. Through the votive act, a perpetual link between the believer and the Saints or Holy Virgin was forged and a strong request for communion was transmitted. The aim of the present study is to describe the role played by votive tablets (*ex voto*) in the last 500-600 years, as visible evidence of human suffering. From this perspective, these votive expressions may assume the role of markers because, in accordance with the expressions of popular faith, they allow us to follow the most important outbreaks that have caused distress to Christian communities.

Keywords: plague, popular piety, artistic votive expression.

INTRODUCTION

Starting from the twelfth century, a significant increase of overall "plagues" (in their comprehensive definition) occurred, due to the demographic rise, which was observed in Europe after the year 1000, concurrent with an ever growing

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availability of food, the improvement in climate conditions just observed during the first centuries of the millennium, and thanks to the resumption of trade exchanges with the near East, through the Mediterranean sea.

A relevant role in the diffusion of plagues was certainly played by the Christian crusades, which started at the end of the eleventh century, in order to liberate the Holy Sepulchre[1]. The movement of pilgrims, who spent time in precarious housing with poor hygienic conditions, favoured the circulation of infectious organisms, therefore breaking some fragile balance which maintained the epidemic risk more localized during previous centuries, probably due to the distance among cities and towns. In summary, infectious diseases had an easier diffusion, favoured by malnutrition, food poisoning, and environmental promiscuity. The "diagnostic tools" of physicians were extremely reduced, so that in the chronicles, the term "plague", were alternatively changed[2] with the terms "great mortality", "disease", or "plague". During the Middle Age the position of physicians was very different from that we recognize today, and included figures who practiced the "art" with different qualifications and competences. Some of them, the so-called "charlatans"[3] moved from town to town, following the path of markets and popular meetings, and selling long-life elixirs, magic potions, but in some cases also "substances" officially checked by pharmacists. During the low Middle Ages[4], the Medical art was exerted by a quite broad range of figures. The lowest level of practitioners was based on the so-called barbers-surgeons: they performed small interventions, like abscess incisions or limb fracture reductions and their art was predominantly empiric in origin, which had a somewhat relevant importance in the rural world. The so called "philosophers-physicians" were far away and were above barber surgeons. They had a solid cultural basis, and could take knowledge from University studies, based on the study of liberal arts, which were known as the Trivium and Quadrivium Arts. Because of their complex education, and an official recognition was not always attributed to these medical figures, also since the number of those who studied at the most important Universities[5] in Bologna, Paris, Padua, and Montpellier was very limited. Compared with cities, the countryside was apart due to the small number of physicians, so that health care practices were required to butchers (usually devoted to pig slaughtering), who could be requested to cure teeth, excise abscesses, or fix limb fractures, due to their recognized technical skill. Anyway, it is interesting to report the butchers were required of more complicated interventions, like the removal or urine stones, blocking the urethra (the so called "stone's disease"), and the castration of young boys, who were expected to have a lyric singing career as "white voices". When considering the most popular and poorer classes, the management of sick individuals was sometimes devoted to popular women who have learnt the "medical knowledge", by working together with other women acting as "healers". In this particularly varied category of people, some person hold at the edge of the medieval society, exerted magic arts, in a somewhat illicit way. However, the reality was uncertain and confused. During epidemics, these persons could be perceived by the people as figures who expanded the contagion (called "greasers"), who were also suspected of witchcraft. Also the most culturally elevated medicine was absolutely impotent against epidemics, and the treatments were not effective or even dangerous for patients. The most wise physicians suggested to avoid the contagion, moving away from the areas afflicted by the epidemic and do not entering cities who were already known to be involved by the plague. Obviously this advice was

[1]The first crusade was announced on November 27, 1095, by Pope Urbano II, at the end of the Clermont council.

[2]Based on the poor reliability of historical Medical sources, the plague episodes have been handed down time by time thanks to local chronicles, declarations, and statutes, which indirectly point out the emergence of an health care problem which was always dramatically perceived by the population.

[3]During this historical period, the term "charlatan" was not perceived as a negative judgement. In fact, the charlatans took their name since they originally came from the town of Cerreto (with Cerretani as the name for the local inhabitants), located close to the city of Spoleto.

[4]The low Middle Ages is known to include the period from the year 1000 until 1492.

[5]The year of foundation for The University of Bologna, Paris, Padua and Montpellier was recognized to be 1088, 1170, 1222, and 1289, respectively.

given to people who could pay for it. On the other hand, the "cure", which included prescriptions of strange potions, given by people's women or by charlatans, were taken by those who could not leave the areas involved by the epidemic.

When an epidemic was expected in cities, where relevant populations movements could be registered, the walls were closed, and all fairs and markets were temporarily suspended. Also schools were closed, and sometimes religious celebrations were stopped, too. But the variations in this protocol could be extensive. In fact, the impotence of medicine conditioned these choices, so that some religious celebrations could be favoured, although the outcome of this behaviour could be unfavourable. When a city became closed due to an epidemic, the access from the countryside was not allowed, and these events contributed to a severe economic damage [1-5][6]. During the sixteenth century also syphilis appeared, with an epidemic contagion never seen in the past. As a consequence, all prostitutes and beggars were expelled from cities. In Bologna, the numerous prostitutes and beggars were shut up in a novel hospital-lazarette, later called S. Orsola, located at the border of the city walls [6][7].

At the end of fifteenth century the Jews, concurrently with the diaspora from Spain (at the end of the "Reconquista"), after 1492, paid a very elevated tribute. In fact, the Jews were suspected to play an active role in the diffusion of epidemics; so that, their trades were affected, it was emerging the idea that the goods, which had their primary role in the trades, could represent a significant vehicle of contagion. After the first wave of phobia, marginalization and later expulsion from Spain occurred. When the people's rage mounted, stirred up by power centres, the Jewish were considered to be the "greasers", spreading the contagion. Therefore, a lot of processes were initiated. Confession was obtained by torture and claims of joint responsibility. The promise of escaping death was made, in the event that the defendant gave his/her confession, but in the majority of cases the processes ended with a funeral pyre on the public square [7][8]. A central role was carried out by the Saint Inquisition, just in Spain.

Concerning the treatment of patients, in some instances of epidemic plagues, the resort to bloodletting was preferred, and it is disconcerting that this practice was maintained until the nineteenth century, despite its completely unfavourable results. An abundant removal of blood was thought to favour the elimination of "poisons" cumulated in the sick organisms. The transmission of official prescriptions, used by professional physicians and checked by pharmacists, was carried out by notaries. The consultation of notary's documents in the Viterbo province, has allowed to find several prescriptions, accompanying notary acts[9] [8]. The prescriptions consisted of formulae, describing herbs and other organic and inorganic substances, which were used, since a therapeutic potential was attributed to them since the older Middle Ages. Among all "medicines", which were used for the different diseases, the theriac was the most famous, and had a very old origin in its formulation. It was used through the Middle Ages, starting from the sixteenth century it was prepared[10] publicly in the pharmacies of Venice, Bologna, Naples, and Rome, therefore it added an important economic impact, due to its relevant commercial diffusion. Thanks to the revision of demographic registries, we have a detailed knowledge of the numerous plague epidemics, which occurred in the European countries. An

[6]Additional articles concerning this topic and by the same author are the following: Sabbatani S. Observations on the 1348 plague epidemic. Measure taken to combat its tragic effects and avoid epidemic recrudescence. *Infez. Med*. 11(2): 40-61, 2003. Sabbatani S. Health service organization during the age of pestilence. *Infez. Med.* 11(4): 216-21, 2003. Sabbatani S., Fiorino S. The Antonine Plague and the decline of the Roman Empire. *Infez. Med.* 17 (4): 261-75, 2009. Sabbatani S, Manfredi R., Fiorino S. The Justinian plague (part one). *Infez Med.* 20 (2): 125-39, 2012. Sabbatani S., Manfredi R., Fiorino S. The Justinian plague (part two). Influence of the epidemic on the rise of the Islamic Empire. *Infez. Med*. 3: 217-232, 2012.

[7]An additional article concerning this topic and by the same author is the following: Sabbatani S. Syphilis in sixteenth-century in Bologna. Wealth care and social assistance (part one). *Infez. Med*. 1: 45-56, 2006

[8]See Prosperi A. Il seme dell'intolleranza. Ebrei, eretici, selvaggi: Granada 1492. Editori Laterza. Second Edition, Rome.Bari 2012.

[9]The prescriptions were usually located at the beginning or at the end of the notary protocol [8].

[10]The theriac had different variants in its components, but had a common basis in the use of viper flesh.

useful support is given by the study of chronicles, parish registries, and public documents written by the town councils, and the bureaucratic apparatus of lordships. An interesting source of information, especially for the study of the impact of the black plague outbreak in rural areas in Europe in the year 1347, is represented by notary acts [9, 10][11].

From an anthropologic point of view, a very interesting aspect is represented by the analysis of behaviour related to religious worship, either individual or general, in the event of epidemics.

Since Middle Ages, by means of pilgrimages, the faithfuls have provided the most intense and participated demonstrations of the Christian faith and the sanctuaries were probably in the sites where the devoutness had the most interesting signs, related to both amount and quality of devotees' participation. The believers went to sanctuaries to take part in the liturgies, to pray, and offer particular worships addressed to "miracle workers" Saints, and to Mary, the Mother of Christ. Pilgrims reached the sanctuaries either should some healthy care problem was of concern or to thank for the recovery from diseases which were not cured by medicine as well as during or at the end or epidemics, in order to thank for the escaped danger[12].

It is interesting a quote from Alfonso Dupont: "the sanctuary is a space which participates of the virtues of the holy site, which has the features of a thaumaturgic site and it does not necessarily depend on the Church. It often coincides with a site where a sort of contact between believers and God may be recognized, although remaining outside the original criteria of time and space [11][13]. As a consequence, the Sanctuaries are recognized as the most extraordinary aspects of religion, but perhaps it's better to consider them as the most extraordinary aspects of popular faith, when the Saints' miracles, the apparition and miracles of Our Lady, and supernatural events, like the transubstantiation, are considered. The Sanctuaries usually preserve the relics of "thaumaturgic" Saints, parts of the Holy Cross or even the Holy House, like inside the Sanctuary at Loreto, the Home of Christ nativity. It should be the Holy Mary's Home, where the Virgin received the annunciation from the Archangel Gabriel; according to the tradition this house would have been transferred by Angels in flight, after the falling of the Holy Land into the hands of Muslims.

It has to be underlined that in some case the worship practiced in some Sanctuaries changed, to become an alternative and autonomous liturgy. As a consequence, many times the catholic Church acted to discipline the phenomenon of pilgrimage to Sanctuaries. The incentive became so great to deserve an intervention, aimed to reorganize popular worships which became too autonomous and uncontrolled, in order to bring them back to the orthodoxy path [11].

It is evident that during epidemics the control of believers, operated by both politic and religious authorities unavoidably dropped down, and potent mystic incentives grew; the people found a refuge in the faith, and not infrequently, in a blind

[11]In the notary's acts, the property passages in favor of the survivors were annotated rigorously. These acts indirectly allow us to establish the number of deaths in the areas affected by the plague. See: Del Panta L. Le epidemie nella storia demografica italiana (secoli XIV-XIX) Loescher Editore, Turin 1980 (9). Magee G.B. Disease Management in pre-industrial Europe: a reconsideration of the Efficacy of the Local Response to Epidemics. The Journal of European economic history; 26 (3), 605-623, 1997 (10).

[12]We report the most important catholic sanctuaries. The oldest is the Sanctuary of S. Giacomo from Compostela (in the North of Spain). It was founded by the Benedictine monks in the year 893. The Loreto Sanctuary (Italy) was built later. It was a site of pilgrimage since 1294 after the appearance of the Holy House, carried by Annunciation angels. In this place, since 1468 the building of the Basilica, which preserves the Holy Mary's House, was started. In the Basilica at Assisi, since 1230 S. Francis' relics, the Italy's patron Saint, are preserved. The history of the Sanctuary at Lourdes is more recent: in this place, on July 16, 1858, Our Lady appeared, and since those years this location is a common site for pilgrims. They ask for miracles with the aim to solve untreatable diseases. At the end, the Sanctuary at Fatima in Portugal has to be considered. In this place, in the year 1917 three young shepherds referred the apparition of the figure of a white dressed woman, taking a rosary in her hands. She was identified with Our Lady. Our Lady has been seen five times from May 13 up to October 13, in a site called Cova da Iria.

[13]See: Arte e devozione popolare nel trevigiano. Gli ex voto del Santuario della Madonna di Loreto a Carbonese di tarzo. (by Luccio Puttin) Signum Editions, Padova 1983.

Figure 1 - San Cristoforo, San Rocco, and San Sebastiano. (1532-1533) by Lorenzo Lotto. Painting preserved in the Museum-Old Treasure of the Holy House at Loreto.

fanaticism. Furthermore, we cannot forget that just during epidemics the church authorities escaped towards more safe places, and in this lack of government also the search of a divine miracle became a believable solution. At the end of the epidemics, those who saved their life necessarily found in the religious (also mystic) faith the answer to a true miracle, based on the progression and aggressiveness of the plague.

The most invoked Saints as patrons against plague epidemics were S. Anthony the Abbot, and in particular S. Sebastian (Figure 1) and S. Rocco, who, according to the tradition, became sick of plague, but succeeded in healing up. Even important painters, such as Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1556/1557), an exponent of the Venetian Renaissance-artists, devoted themselves to the celebration of the most invoked and acknowledged miracle-worker Saints.

Other miracle-worker Saints, like San Charles Borromeo, who was the Archbishop in Milan in the sixteenth century, were claimed with faith during the epidemics [12][14].

[14]See: Niola M. I santi patroni.. Series: L'identità italiana. Il Mulino. Bologna 2007.

It is interesting to observe that the popular worship was pragmatic, and therefore sometimes it was subject to changes. In fact in some circumstances sudden changes of devoutness occurred. For instance, in Palermo in the year 1624 the inhabitants, who previously placed their trust in S. Cristina, S. Oliva, S. Ninfa and S.Agata, decided to rely on S. Rosalia who, according to the tradition, took part in the thaumaturgic salvage of the city. According to the tradition, S. Rosalia appeared to a soap worker called Vincenzo Bonello and indicated the location of her remains. She predicted to the man that whether her remains have been taken in a procession, the plague would have stopped. In the cave pointed out by the vision, 27 relics were found and on July 15 the Archbishop, followed by all Palermo's clergy, senate, ad some outstanding citizens held procession through the city streets with the relics of the Saint. In a few days Palermo became free from the plague. Since that date S. Rosalia become the patron Saint in Palermo, dethroning all other Saints [13][15].

The ex voto

In the historic-ecclesiastic dictionary the term "*ex voto*" is defined as follows: "Images of painted wood or cloth as well as of silver or of different raised metal, representative offerings, that, as bid sign made with a vote or as dissolution of vote itself, are hung to the walls in the Churches, Sanctuaries, Chapels, and Altars, near to some image of Saints. These gifts are usually hung, following mercies received, as oblations and devotional donations, in sign of deference or veneration; briefly, it is a public witness of gratitude or special devotion of Saint images, which aims to stimulate the request for a grace [14][16].

In the Greek-Roman world, votive bids were already offered, but also the ancient Etruscans thanked their divinities, by bringing into their pagan temples objects reproducing healed limbs or other objects as thanksgiving signs. A large series of archaeological finds have been retrieved near to sanctuaries of sites with a thaumaturgic role [15][14]. In the Greek-Roman world the most widespread worship objects may be subdivided

[15]See: it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Festa_di_Santa Rosalia (Last updated on August 12, 2013)

[16]See: Moroni G. Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica. V. Cill, Venice 1861, ad vocem.

into two main categories. The first one includes votive tablets where the miracle event is depicted, the second one includes the reproduction of healed limbs, which may be either terracotta or metal handcrafts or the whole reproduction of the entire healed body [11][13].

The Church at the beginning started to evangelize the pagan world in the bigger cities, then the Christ faith spread among an increasing number of pagan people[17] living in the countryside.

Following this event, a kind of continuity of Christian worships with former pagan religion sites was sometimes maintained, so that, as the new faith spread, the conversion of pagan temples into Christian basilicas occurred and was accepted. Concurrently, some recurrences of the pagan calendar were incorporated into the Christian religion, including the Christmas anniversary[18].

In this perspective, some aspects of the popular religion were maintained, after an adequate conversion to Christian worship; among these adaptations, the devotion to images, the pilgrimages and the use of ex voto are among the most interesting ones.

During the old Middle Ages the most frequent ex voto were represented by wax statues, which reproduced the graced subject or his/her body part healed by a miracle-worker Saints (*i.e.*, heads, arms, or internal organs), sometimes reproduced in silver or copper. Later, starting from the second half of the fourteenth century, a substantial change of the ex voto type occurred. In this period, an increasing frequency of votive paintings, which was not so frequent in the past, was observed. During 1500s the votive tablet leads to replace every other mode of expression, such as the different painted or sculptured works, which were previously widespread [11][13]. The possible reasons for this change have been studied in depth, and we report the results of some studies, although a complete discussion relies outside of the purposes of our present contribution.

The votive plaques represented by painted tablets had a relevant success, since they were considered more practical and less expensive by the faithfuls[19], compared with the cumbersome statues.

Beyond their cost, the statues created some hitch in the areas of worship, where the liturgical functions had place, and their grouping during the time would have made unworkable the altars and the liturgical chapels. The two-dimension tablets resulted easier and practical to be managed. They were positioned on the wall close to the statues of the miracle-worker Saint, in order to leave a perpetual proof of the graced people, without disturbing the worship functions. Cumbersome *ex voto* could also divert the attention of the believers' assembly, by decreasing the attention to the main objective of the pray (the miracle-worker Saint, or Our Lady).

The exhortatory value of the votive tablets has increased especially in the sixteenth century, during the Counter-Reformation time. In this period, the *ex voto* played a dual action: first, it represents an act of recognition and self-dedication by individuals who benefited from the grace, and second it was a warning to all believers who could benefit from the same help, when facing dangerous situations [11].

A significant debate has been opened around the significance of the painted votive tablets, with special attention focused on the most popular ones [17-19][20].

Beyond the evaluations on faith perspectives we cannot discuss here, some scholars attributed to

[17]It's noteworthy to observe that the name "pagan" (pagus), etymologically indicates the inhabitant of the rural village, as opposed to citizen (civis). The spread of Christian fath in the rural world was more difficult, as it was more conditioned by the lowest level of people culture.

[18]The pagan people who adored Mithra, celebrated the Dies Natalis Solis invicti (the day of birth of the Sun). It should not be surprising that the date of December 25, before representing the birth of Christ, was a day of feast for peoples and cultures which were extremely far away each other, both in space and in time. The roots of the ancient worships should be found in the origin of life, which "since the origin" was venerated: the Sun [16].

[19]The growing number of graced believers imposed a reduction of costs, and the ex voto tablets had an undoubted lower cost, compared with the statues which could be ordered only by the richest customers.

[20]See: Vecchi P. Il Culto delle immagini. Studi in onore di Carmelina Caselli. Catania., 1968. Bronzini G.B. Fenomenologia dell'ex-voto in Puglia. In E. Angioli Ex voto, Lecce 1977. Terenzi P. Culto 2. Figura, Culto, Cultura. I dipinti votivi nella diocesi di Rimini. Ravenna, 1981.

the *ex voto* tablets a predominantly folkloristic value, while others arrived to ascribe to these tables an extra-religious sense, suggesting a popular, superstitious significance.
An interesting position is expressed by those who consider the votive tablets as an expression of a subordinate culture. According to this aspect the votive tablets have to be assessed and studied in their relationship with the artistic world which characterize the different social classes.
Beyond the different interpretations, the *ex voto* represented a people's answer to different and also tragic events, where the faith act assumed *per se* the role of a thaumaturgic cure of a disease. In other terms, when medicine was ineffective and powerless the faith, in its most popular and naïve significance, gave to the *ex voto* tablets a thaumaturgic potential. This belief was accepted either when the unfavourable event had been solved or when the outcome was negative, since this potential was considered "therapeutic" in all cases. The catharsis in a supernatural dimension was always acting effectively for the people, since it was an act of faith and this was sufficient, in a context where the "medical reason" represented only an ineffective weapon, unable to influence and to control the natural world.
During the epidemics, not only the single believers, but also the communities tried to create a relationship with a miracle-worker Saint or Our Lady trough the *ex voto*: collective promises were expressed through pilgrimages to the sanctuaries and, at the end of these rituals, the practice to give the *ex voto* was common.
In the years 1579-1580 the Liguria region was hurt by plague, but the city of Rapallo was miraculously preserved[12]. In the city of Rapallo only 76 persons died in the year 1579, and 24 in 1580, all of them of natural death [20][21].
According to the tradition, on July 2, 1557, on the hills at Ponzenna, Our Lady appeared to the farmer Giovanni Chirchizola di Carnevale, to make him a witness of a gift among the inhabitants of Rapallo, *i.e.* messenger of a promise and also a bearer of a clear request from Our Lady. With her mysterious visit, she asked to be venerated on that mountain, ensuring her maternal predilection for the people living in the Tigullio area, also leaving as a confirmation a valuable Byzantine icon [21]. The Rapallo citizens had the intention to thank Virgin Mary, on August 29 1657, concurrently with an assembly convened by the Captain Giovan Pietro Grimaldo, just when a severe plague outbreak occurred, causing the death of over one fifth of the population of the Genoa country[22]. Therefore, they decided a special thanksgiving to the Holy Virgin at Monte Allegro, promising to organize a popular pilgrimage to the sactuary, and every year "infra l'ottava" *i.e* "within eight days" since the Virgin Mary's appearance.
Since 1657, this collective ritual pilgrimage to the Sanctuary occurred [21] [21]. In the Figure 2 the image of the Holy Lady at the Monte Allegro sanctuary is represented, and it is surrounded by many *ex voto*. During centuries, the devotional manifestations in this sacred site became extremely numerous.
The Figure 3 shows a silver plated *ex voto*, dated 1836, and collectively donated at the end of one of the first cholera epidemics which scourged the Liguria region in the nineteenth century. This is the written dedication: «TERRIBILI AC PRAECIPITI MORBO CIRCUMQUAQUE GRASSANTE RAPALENSIS CIVITAS VIRGINE MONTIS LAETI OPITULANTE INCOLUMIS EVASIT ORDO ET CIVEIS ARGENTI LAMINAM IMMORTALIS BENEFICI] TESTIMONIUM VOVEBANT ANNO 1835 DIE 22 AUGUSTI PERSOLVEBANT ANNO 1836 DIE 23 MAII.»
It is clear that, starting from the fourteenth century, plague outbreaks, among all epidemics, inspired the majority of devotional crafts, not only because of the elevated number of victims, but also due to its recurrence over time. In May 1630, a severe plague epidemic hit the city of Bologna, it was spread by the Landsknechts soldiers of the Imperial Army, who were engaged in the

[21]See: Santuario Basilica Nostra Signora di Montallegro. www.santuarionsmontallegro.com.

[22]P. Antero Maria from S. Bonaventura so wrote: "the dead people in Genoa are more than 60,000 and less than 70,000, and 4,000 more deaths occurred in the suburbs. In S. Pier d'Arena and Cornigliano over 6,000 deaths were recorded. In the Polcevera river valley they were less than 4,000. With regard to the town of Sestri and its countryside, over 5,000 deaths occurred. Among the towns of Pegli, Prà, Voltri, Voraggine and the city of Savona, they do not reach the number of 2000. The victims at Recco and its countryside were 1016. In the town of Chiavari together its suburbs, the deaths did not reach the amount of 2,000"].

siege of Mantua at that time. As Manzoni tells, in Milan the plague epidemic had already exploded in the year 1629. The chronicles report that in Bologna 13,398 inhabitants died in 7 months, and the overall population decreased from 61.559 to 48.161 citizens. Beyond the deaths observed in the city, 16,300 persons died in the countryside [22, 23][23]. In order to thank God for the escaped danger, the survivors raised two columns, one located in S. Domenico Square, and the other in Malpighi Square. On the first column, the Dominicans posed a statue of Our Lady of the Rosary (now kept inside S. Domenico Basilica), while on the second the Franciscans posed a statue of the Immaculate Holy Lady [24][24]. At the end of the epidemic, an anonymous author painted a canvas (Figure 4), now included in the "Genus Bononiae" collection.

Figure 2 - Statue of the Monteallegro Holy Lady surrounded by *ex voto*.

Figure 3 - Silver *ex voto* (62 x 45cm), dedicated from the Rapallo community in 1836, after the end of the cholera epidemic, located in the Monteallegro sanctuary.

In this oil painting, the artist represented the sad events of that tragic year. The most severely affected area of Bologna is represented in the painting, *i.e.* the San Mamolo street. At the forefront, the Triumph of Death is painted over a group of corpses, and many persons are engaged in moving sick and dead persons, while a priest is ready for a function. A written phrase allows us to recognized the house of Giacomo Amaseo Fabbri, a citizen of Bologna and lecturer in Medicine, who gave his work during the epidemic [25][25]. Because of features, the subject, and the context, a devotional value is attributed to this piece of art.

Coming back to the votive tablets, they had a large success, starting from the sixthteenth century in the sober climate supported by the Counter-Reformation; however, already at the end of the previous century the believers brought *ex voto* objects to worship locations, with great fervor. The Figure 5 presents a votive tablet exposed in the *ex voto* museum of the Sanctuary of Madonna della Quercia (Our Lady of the Oak Tree) in Viterbo [26][26]. The transcription of the text and the joined grace relation tells: "I as a priet coming from Modena, being sick and recommending to our Lady of the Oak Tree, became free of my disease".

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[23]See: Brighetti A. Bologna e la peste del 1630. In Strenna Storica Bolognese, page 267. Bologna 1967. Gatteo P. La peste a Bologna nel 1630. La Poligrafica Romagnola. Forlì 1930

[24]See: Peste a Bologna 1630. Bologna e dintorni. www.sselmi.net/peste.html

[25]See: La peste del 1630 A Bologna. The Genus Bononiae Collection. Collezioni.genusbononiae.it

[26]Ex voto Museum www.madonnadella quercia.it/il.

The sixteenth century is also characterized by the epidemic diffusion of syphilis, which involved all social classes. A very interesting *ex voto* is present in the Sanctuary of the Holy House at Loreto (Figure 6).
It represents a believer, affected by the "French disease" (primary syphilis), kneeling and praying in front of the Saint Virgin. Our Lady watches over the Holy House which had been transferred

Figure 4 - *Ex voto* painting. The 1630 plague in Bologna. Anonymous from Bologna (first half of the eighteenth century. Oil on canvas. Genus Bononiae collection.

Figure 5 - *Ex voto* tablet exposed in the *ex voto* museum of the basilique of the Holy Lady of Oak tree in Viterbo. Right left wall. *Ex voto* with museum reference n. 7. Painting in tempera on a panel (21x 19 cm), Fifteenth century. Unknown author.

Figure 6 - *Ex voto* representing a believer, suffering from the French disease, who is prayng the Virgin. Painting on paper reported on a wood tablet (cm 30x35). (sixteenth century.). Courtesy of the Pontificial delegation for the Sanctuary of the Holy House at Loreto.

by flight from the Holy Land to Italy by two angels, when the Muslims occupied the holy sites of Christian religion. This *ex voto* table is exposed in the Museum-Ancient Treasure of the Holy House at Loreto. The painting represents a man healed from the "French disease". It was produced in the sixteenth century when it was painted on a piece of paper, and posed on a wood tablet, with a surface measuring 30x35 centimetres. In the painting paper, we can read the following inscription: "Noto fazo io Zorzi da Bressa coma siando stato gran tempo amalato de mal franzoso et essendo in venesia serrato per sospecto de peste solo in casa senza alchuno subsidio humano et una sera volendo andare in lecto caschai si per el male si etiam per la paura in **terra in** angoscia e quasi morto et alquanto revenuto me andai [a] la gloriosa madre de gratia Madonna S. Maria da Lore[to] et andar a visitar la sua benedecta casa elymosinando e cusì senza altra medicina et humano adiuto per sua clementia fui subito liberato e del tuchto resanato".
The votive tablet has been retrieved, together with other six *ex voto* tablets painted on wood, under the base of the fifth side altar at the Loreto Basilica. This altar is devoted to the name of Jesus, during some excavations performed in tne year 1985 to verity the state of wall of building foundations [27][27]. Unfortunately this *ex voto* was not well preserved, and it was not possible to restore it.

[27]See: Grimaldi F. La Basilica della Santa Casa di Loreto. Indagini Archeologiche geognostiche e statiche, by Floriano Grimaldi. Ancona, 1986.

Figure 7 - *Ex voto* G.R. entitled: "all sich people at bed" (attributed to J. Cenna at, 1872. Tempera on a panel. Sanctuary of the Holy Lady of the Palace. Limone Piemonte. On the back a writing is present: "Vote to express to the Holy Lady of the Palace with three beds, *i.e.* a woman and a child, and two man and a child".

The features of votive tablets are extremely varied, however, we can distinguish four main groups. Some paintings reproduce the event: they are usually represented by small pictures where the divine miracle is reproduced (Figure 7).
They have a very lively appearance and they are considered as the *ex voto* "for excellence". In addition, we have some *ex voto* as a petition, the believer is represented, while is asking for a grace and may be alone or may be helped by relatives (Figure 8). It is interesting that this type of *ex voto* is the most numerous category.
In the Figure 8 a family is reproduced, including a father and six sons. They are thanking S. Nicola, since they escaped the plague. It is an oil on canvas painting, measuring 42.6x34 centimetres, coming from the Marche school of the first half of the Sixteenth century. In the related scroll we can read: "for a mercy received at the time of contagion in Rome". This attractive *ex voto* is kept in the Museum of the S. Nicola Sanctuary at Tolentino [28][28]. On the basis of the date, it is likely that this tablet had been donated by a rich family which escaped the plague in years 1629-1630. It was the epidemic described by Manzoni, which from Lombardy spread through the entire Italian peninsula, scourging all populations.
The votive tablet reported in the Figure 9 also belongs to this category; this *ex voto* shows two patients, suffering from typhoid fever.
They are in their beds, in a room separated by a wall with a blessing Madonna located in the middle. At the bottom of this *ex voto* this script is

Figure 8 - *Ex voto* tablet exposed in the *ex voto* museum of San Nicola da Tolentino. Author unknown. Oil painting of 42.6 x34 cm. A family represented by a father with six female sons praying the taumaturgic Saint, who thanks for having escaped the plague. Presumably painted in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Figure 9 - *Ex voto* dated 1884, exposed at the Museum of the Foundation for received favours. The author is unknown. In this small painting of 54 x 42 cm, two sick patients suffering from typhoid fever, are assisted by relatives in a room divided by a wall, both under the protection of the Holy Lady.

[28]See: Gli ex voto per San Nicola a Tolentino. S. Nicola's Basilica. Mari Graphics. Tolentino. 1972.

Figure 10 - The Holy Lady of the Good Heart. Collegiality of Santa Maria Assunta at Monte Cassiano. In 1839, the image of the Holy Lady was painted in 1752 by Saverio Alberti on a more ancient image which was particularly deteriorated. This image became particularly venerated after several miraculous events occurred during the cholera epidemic; as a consequence, it was posed in the Collegiality of Santa Maria Assunta, and solemn cerimonies have been celebrated until now every five years.

visible: "Tommaso Midralini and his two sisters Francesca and Virginia, suffering from a severe and life threatening typhoid fever, were saved due to a grace of our Holy Lady, on February 20, 1884".

The third category of *ex voto* paintings is more difficut to be intepretated, since simply only prayig persons are represented (Figure 10). In this case it is difficult to distinguish if asking or graced believers are present, or alternatively simple believers are depicted in a votive image and in front of the miracle-worker Saint in order to invoke a generic and everlasting protection and, with the purpose to avoid some danger (*i.e.* an epidemic).

The fourth category is the most infrequent one. In this event, only the miracle-worker Saint is depicted, whereas the praying believer is lacking. In the Figure 10 the Holy Lady of the Good Heart at Monte Cassiano (Macerata province, Marche region), is depicted. In this last case the interpretation is more difficult, but not less interesting. This painted Image had been already recognized as thaumaturgic several centuries ago. Since 1839, after miraculous events occurred during the cholera epidemic in the Marche region in those years, this Image strongly attracted the believers' expectations and the Church, where Her Image is preserved, became a site of pilgrimage and celebration of popular worship, every five years.

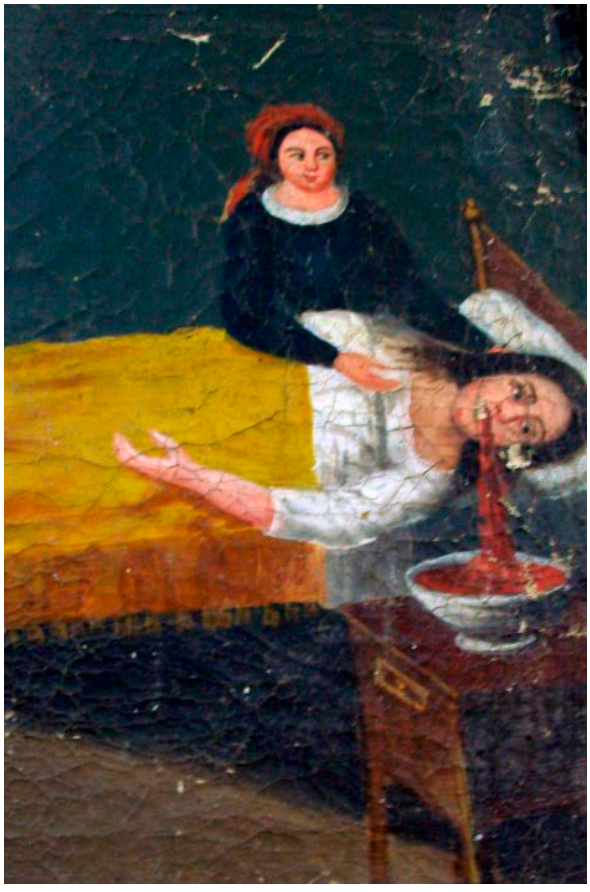

Figure 11 - Votive tablet representing a young lady suffering from tuberculosis, with a prominent hemoptysis. This tablet belongs to the Archive of Verbano. Cusio Ossola.

In conclusion, it may be considered that all types of votive tablets represent a message of popular religiousness; as expression of *ex voto in se*, they are clearly referred to an explicit or an implicit request of the believer or a group of believers, who have been accommodated or will be accommodated by the thaumaturgic figure.

The nineteeenth century, from an historical epidemiology point of view, is characterzied by two relevant diseases. The increase of travel and trade exchanges caused the introduction of cholera in Europe. It came from India (the Gange river basin was retained as the home of cholera) and this event was an absolutel novelty. The massive urbanization, as a consequence of the industrial revolution, is followed by the epidemic spread of tuberculosis. In the Figure 11 a votive tablet of 1800s shows a sick woman apparently affected by tuberculosis being cured by another person, while she suffers from an hemoptysis [29][29]. It has to be considered that a thaumaturgic figure is not visible. The representation is absolutely dramatic, it does not need further explanation and the extreme strenght of the picture leaves everyone astonished. The women is saved due to a divine intercession, and this is the reason for her faithful expression.

In the Figure 12 an *ex voto* is presented, where a woman thanks, because she is cured of cholera, with this accompanying sentence: "*Ex voto*. Thanks to the Holy Virgin: "for the cholera morbus from day 7 to day 14 of August, 1854" [30][30]. The unknown author had the purpose to represent, in a painting with oil on sheet dated 1854, the appearance of the Holy Mother and Christ child to the miracled woman. In this event the artist reproduced the witnesses, beyond the protagonists of the miracle. The vision of the image had an evident exhortatory purpose directed to other believers; the message is typical of this historical period.

In the 1800s cholera repeatedly spread in Italy, affecting the inhabitants of small and great centres and causing thousands deaths. Almost all urban centres in Italy paid a great human price during the different waves of the epidemic. In the Figure 13 a collective *ex voto* tablet is presented. In the written part it is possible to read:

"This was directed to M.S.S. dal Gazzo dalle Manifatturiere de Zigari, as She released the city of Sestri Ponente from cholera morbus in the year

Figure 12 - Thanks-giving *ex voto* for a cholera cure dated 1854. It's a small oil painting on plate of an unknown author. This tablet is preserved in the Sanctuary of the Holy Lady del Sasso, in Valtellina.

Figure 13 - Collective *ex voto* tablet presented as a gift in 1835 by the the citizen at the Sancuary of Monte Gazzo.

[29]See:www.Archiviodelverbaniocusioossola.com/category/ex voto.

[30]See:it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santuario_della_Madonna_del Sasso

1835, it was dedicated on September 29". The votive tablet is preserved at the Sanctuary od our Lady of Mercy "Monte Gazzo", in Genoa [31][31]. The understanding of the image is very easy and evocative; the pilgrims pray all together climbing the Monte Gazzo, that is flooded by a glorifying light, to thank Our Lady.
Gazzo, after that the town of Sestri Ponente was released by the cholera epidemic.

Conclusive notations
The strict union among well being, religion, and votive practices, is lost in the mists of time. Even before the coming of the Christian faith, sick people turned to thaumaturgic sites and sanctuaries, like Epidaurus in Greece. Here, it was thought that in his asclepion a direct intervention of Asclepius was possible. He was able to save the people from disease and suffering. When the Christian faith became predominant, the believers in some way adjusted their believing to older worships and favored the growth of a popular faith around sanctuaries. These sites were dedicated to thaumaturgic Saints or to the Holy Lady. This popular faith identified the sacred site with the possibility to heal from diseases thanks to a leap of faith. It was thought that in the sanctuaries a direct contact between believers and the divine, either Saints or the Holy Lady occurred, without an indispensable mediation of church's representatives, *i.e.* the priests. The *ex voto* objects, including all their different artistic manifestations, represented the evidence of miracles based on the faith. It was visually witnessed as a personal thanksgiving act, a perpetual memory for the present and the future. The votive tablets were dedicated to the miracle worker Saint or to the Holy Lady also for events, like working wounds, shipwrecks, fires, lightnings, wounds caused by others and other suffering, These life-threatening conditions could occur outside of the major collective situations like the epidemics or escaping death during a war.
In our paper, we focused our interest on the study of some *ex voto* dedicated to the epidemics. The study of the extremely elevated number of *ex voto* exposed in the sanctuaries of our country has allowed us to describe an attractive and multi-faceted research model, at halfway between the history of medicine, the artistic manifestations of popular origin, and anthropology. The microhistory needs information and documents guaranteed by scientific evidences to obtain its capillary and more reliable reconstruction. In conclusion, we would underline that the study of *ex voto* gives an immediacy of the message, although expressed by means of a naïve language and emphatic suggestions, may represent a significant source of knowledge for writing the history of worship and faith manifestations of Christian people.

[31]See: www.vegiazena.it/santuari/gazzo/curioso.htm

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