

COLNAGHI



Leonardo Flores  
*Saint John the Evangelist navigating the Ship of  
the Church*



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LEONARDO FLORES

(ca. 1680 – 1690)

*Saint John the Evangelist navigating the Ship of the Church*

Oil on canvas

158 x 200 cm

62 1/4 x 78 3/4 in.

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## The Iconographic Theme of the Ship of the Church

The iconographic theme of the *Ship of the Church* is an allegorical construct that equates the ecclesiastical institution with a vessel. In such representations, it is common to see Saint Peter, the head and cornerstone of the Church, steering the rudder from the sterncastle, which is why the image is sometimes referred to as the *Ship of Saint Peter*. In other instances, this role is assumed by Jesus Christ himself, although more frequently he is assigned a central position on the main mast of the vessel, either affixed to it as a transposition of the Cross or standing upon the fighting top (the platform crowning the mast), from where he surveys the horizon. At times, Virgin Mary accompanies him, seated upon the sail. The composition of the ship's crew varies according to the specific representation under consideration, as will be discussed below.

The biblical source for the representation of the *Ship of the Church* is found in the Book of Proverbs attributed to King Solomon, chapter 31, verse 14, which explains the frequent presence of this king among the ship's crew. The passage is often inscribed upon the hull of the vessel and reads *NAVIS INSTITORIS DE LONGE PORTANS PANEM SUUM* ("She is like a merchant ship, bringing her bread from afar"). However, the roots of this allegorical image are considerably older and can already be traced to the lyric poetry of Horace (*Carmina* I, 14; II, 10, 1–4; II, 16, 1–4 and 21–24)<sup>1</sup>, from which it would later be taken up and reinterpreted by several Spanish authors of the Golden Age. Among these reinterpretations, of particular relevance to the present study is the poem entitled *To the Ship of the Church, on the Occasion of the Victory of Lepanto*, written in 1634 by Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola, in which the author establishes a *paragone* between the Ship of the Church and another mythical vessel of the Old Testament: Noah's Ark. The visual counterpart to this comparison can be found in the engraving that accompanies *Conference of the Mystical Figures of the Old Testament with the Truth of the Gospel* (1602) by Guillaume de Requieu (fig. 1), which in turn served as a model for later works, such as the stained-glass window of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont. In these works, the parallel between Noah's Ark and the triumphant Ship of the Church—sailing upon a gigantic wooden cross—is made unequivocally clear. The visual equivalent of this comparison can be found in the engraving accompanying Guillaume de Requieu's *La Conférence des figures mystiques de l'Ancien Testament avec la vérité évangélique* (1602) (fig. 1), which in turn served as a model for later works such as the stained-glass window of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont in Paris. In these examples, the parallel between Noah's Ark and the triumphant Ship of the Church—sailing upon a gigantic wooden cross—is made explicit.

In Early Modern Hispanic painting, four principal sub-variants of the Ship of the Church may be identified: the Eucharistic Ship, the Ship of Patience (*Navis patientiae*), the Mystical and Contemplative Ship (*navis mysticae contemplationis*), and the Marian Ship, in which the Virgin Mary assumes the leading role as patroness of the Spanish navy. All of these possess an allegorical meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa María Marina Sáez, "Horatian Lyric Themes in the Poetry of Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola," *Alazet*, no. 15 (2003): 165.



consistent with the doctrinal principles of the Counter-Reformation; however, the latter two must also be understood in relation to two of the most significant maritime milestones of early modern Spain: the Battle of Lepanto and the *Carrera de Indias*. A brief examination of each of these typologies will help to clarify the singularity of the work under consideration.

## The Eucharistic Ship

Also known as the Eucharistic Caravel, this type depicts Jesus Christ casting consecrated Hosts toward various saints who, floating upon the waters, strive to receive them. The ship's cannons symbolize the Christian sacraments, while the *arma Christi* form different structural elements of the vessel. Its best-known formulation appears in the engraving conceived by Melchor Prieto and executed by Alardo de Popma for the *Psalmodia Eucharistica* (1622) (fig. 2). This image was copied only two years later in a painting by Alejandro Loarte, now preserved in the sacristy of Santa María la Real de Los Yébenes (Province of Toledo).

The explicitly Eucharistic character of this image is further corroborated by contemporary written sources. For example, in the ceremonial book of the Augustinian Recollect nuns, printed in Madrid in 1647, the description of the feast of Corpus Christi includes the following passage: "Just as all rivers flow into the sea, so all feasts and mysteries of Christ converge in this great sea of the Sacrament of the Altar, where God has condensed His marvels"<sup>2</sup>.

## The Mystical and Contemplative Ship

Under this designation—taken directly from the inscriptions that identify such compositions—we may group a type of Mystical Ship that is closely linked to the Battle of Lepanto and to the struggle against heresy. An example of this variant is the painting preserved in Tepotzotlán (fig. 3), which advances from Damascus toward Constantinople. At the prow stands Saint Michael the Archangel, wielding his flaming sword as he leads the assault against the infidels, while the Doctors of the Church prepare to row. The "Founders of the religious orders"—Saints Francis, Bruno, Peter Nolasco, Bernard, and Dominic—grasp the rigging of the main vessel, and surrounding it appear the "ships of the heretics," as explicitly labelled in the painting. In the heavens float the dove of the Holy Spirit and angels bearing the *arma Christi*, as well as the four Evangelists sounding long trumpets. The combative emphasis of this type of Mystical Ship lies precisely in the warfare it stages against the infidel. As Santiago Sebastián described it<sup>3</sup>:

But beware, for the heretics and schismatics attack from one flank, unaware that other enemies were vanquished in earlier times, whom we see as trophies dragged along in three small boats; these were the Jews, the emperors, and the kings. Around the periphery appear further scenes of persecutions already overcome by the Church: the youths in the furnace of Babylon, the persecution by Saul, those of the Roman emperors, and others of more recent date.

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<sup>2</sup> *Praxis de las ceremonias que en nuestro Real Convento de la Encarnación de Madrid observan las religiosas en el coro y oficio divino* (Madrid: Catalina de Barrio, 1647), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Santiago Sebastián, *Contrarreforma y barroco. Lecturas iconográficas e iconológicas* (Madrid: Alianza Forma, 1981), 154.

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## The Ship of Patience

This further variant of the Ship of the Church is identified as *Navis patientiae*, or Ship of Patience, and represents a less belligerent interpretation than the preceding type. Although the vessel is assailed by skeletons, demons, and dragons, no response is offered from aboard. This theme was widely represented in the Americas, and its common source is invariably an engraving by Gerhard Altzenbach. Painted versions derived from this model include those preserved in the Temple of San Diego de Alcalá, Huejotzingo (fig. 4), the Thoma Collection, and the Museo de Arte Virreinal Santa Teresa.

## The Marian Ship

A fourth group of works presents the Virgin Mary as patroness of the Spanish fleets, occupying the central position of a vessel sailing between the Iberian Peninsula and the viceregal territories. The work that appears to have served as the prototype for all subsequent representations of this theme is the anonymous engraving entitled *The Virgin of the Rosary, Captain and Protectress of the Fleets of Spain* (fig. 5).

## A New Version of the Nautical Allegory

Of these four versions of the Ship of the Church, numerous examples are preserved in Hispano-American painting. Other variants may also be found in which the founding saint of a particular religious order commands the vessel carrying the saints and prominent figures of that order. What had not been identified until now, however, is an iconographic variant centred on Saint John the Evangelist, whose message focuses on two principal ideas: the discernment of true religious leadership and the defeat of infidel enemies.

In order to follow the discourse articulated by the painter, it is necessary to attend to the numerous inscriptions in Latin that he has left throughout the composition:

- At the upper corners appear a sun and a moon bearing the inscriptions *SOL IUSTITIAE* and *PULCHRA UT LUNA*. The former expression derives from the prophet Malachi (Malachi 3:20) and refers to Christ as the “Sun of Justice,” while the latter comes from the *Song of Songs* (6:10) and underscores the purity of the Virgin Mary.
- A fundamental element is the rainbow, inscribed *QUASI ARCUS REFULGES INTER NEBULAS GLORIAE*, that is, “Like a rainbow shining among the clouds of glory”.

The rainbow, known as *k’uychi* in Quechua, was a symbol of paramount importance in Inca culture, as it was regarded as an emanation of Inti, the sun god. It was one of the emblems of the city of Cuzco and also served as a symbol of the Inca, the supreme ruler considered to be the son of the Sun; for this reason, it appeared on banners, shields, and royal garments. Moreover, within Andean cosmology, the rainbow functioned as a bridge between the different planes of the universe, which



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helps to explain its continued prominence in Bolivian painting after the Spanish conquest. It appears in numerous representations of the Last Judgment, such as the work painted by Melchor Pérez de Holguín for the Church of San Francisco de Potosí, as well as in anonymous versions in the churches of Santiago de Curahuara de Carangas and Caquiaviri, among others<sup>4</sup>.

With regard to the ship itself, the mast bears the inscription *IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM*, the celebrated opening phrase of the prologue to the Gospel of Saint John the Evangelist (John 1:1), which proclaims the pre-existence, divinity, and eternity of Jesus Christ. At the stern, surrounding the lantern, appears the inscription *QUASI LUCERNA DENSE FULGES*, which may be translated as “As though you shine brightly like a lamp” (fig. 7).

At a lower level are the ship’s gunports, whose doors (*portae*) are represented as books of the Bible inscribed “EPISTOLA I,” “EPISTOLA II,” “EPISTOLA III,” and “APOCALYPSIS IV” (fig. 8). In this way, the cannons are metaphorically firing four of the five texts traditionally attributed to Saint John the Evangelist; the fifth would be his Gospel.

The three Epistles were composed in the region of Asia Minor in the context of tensions that arose within the early Christian communities. In the first, the author warns believers about the need to discern true teachers in an environment in which false prophets, apostates, and antichrists were proliferating. The second reiterates this concern, drawing attention to heretics who denied that Jesus Christ truly became man. The third Epistle, addressed specifically to a man named Gaius, focuses on the improper leadership of a community exercised by a figure called Diotrephes. As may be observed, the unifying theme of these texts is religious orthodoxy and sound spiritual leadership.

To this is added the fourth cannon, which fires Chapter 4 of the Apocalypse. In this passage, a vision is described of God seated upon His throne, with all creation worshipping Him. Elements that resonate directly with the present painting include the description of a rainbow encircling the throne of God and, before it, a sea of glass, together with four “living creatures” who worship God day and night without ceasing. Significantly, in the painting there are likewise four defeated figures floating upon the waters.

Finally, with regard to the inscriptions, a scroll appears beneath the cannons bearing the text *INIMICOS DEMERSIT IN MARE* (fig. 8), which translates as “He cast his enemies into the sea,” taken from the Book of Exodus (Exodus 14:27). This passage recounts how God, through Moses, caused the waters of the Red Sea to close over the Egyptians as they pursued the Hebrews fleeing from captivity.

It should be noted that the depiction of vanquished heretics is a recurring motif in a substantial body of painting produced between Peru and Bolivia. Suffice it to recall

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<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, ed., *El arte de la pintura en Bolivia colonial* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2017), 48, 55, 72, 373.

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the well-known representations of the *Defence of the Eucharist*, or the image of **Saint Thomas Aquinas** vanquishing the heretics in the Church of **San Pedro de La Paz**, where their heads likewise appear floating upon the water, though already lifeless<sup>5</sup>.

## The Artist Behind the Painting

Having clarified the iconography of the painting and the discourse it articulates, it is now necessary to consider the authorship of this singular work. On the basis of its overall pictorial style, and particularly the physiognomy of the figures, it is evident that we are dealing with a Bolivian painting. It is possible, however, to narrow this attribution further and to propose a specific name: Leonardo Flores. This painter was active in La Paz, a prominent city that served as a mandatory point of passage between two even more important centres: Potosí, capital of the American mining empire, and Cuzco, the ancient capital of the Inca Empire. The emergence of the pictorial school of La Paz dates to the second half of the seventeenth century, coinciding precisely with the presence of Flores, who is regarded as one of the initiators of local painting. Although his artistic training remains unclear, by the time he appears on the scene in the 1680s he was already a fully established master, heading a powerful workshop capable of executing large pictorial cycles for the churches of the Bolivian altiplano. A decisive moment in his career occurred in 1683, when he came into contact with the ecclesiastical visitor Miguel de los Ríos Galaz. From that point onward, and upon his recommendation, Flores enjoyed the protection of Bishop Juan Queipo de Llano y Valdés<sup>6</sup>.

The affinities between this work and others in the corpus of Leonardo Flores are numerous. To begin with, the large scale of the canvas and its subject matter are characteristic of the artist, who is known for executing monumental works that articulate complex allegorical constructions. In addition, his figures display pronounced gestural expressiveness, adopting a wide range of postures and poses. Particularly telling in this regard is the figure located in the lower right corner which, shown with its face turned upward, exhibits a highlight on the upper eyelid that is only possible from this angle. The same pictorial device is employed by Flores in the *Fainting Saint Paul (The Conversion of Saint Paul)* in the Church of San Bartolomé de Cohoni. Alongside this, another notable feature is the treatment of the faces, whose contours are not sharply defined. As observed by Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, “exclusive to the art of Flores, in comparison with that of his contemporaries, is the soft *sfumato* that characterizes his faces<sup>7</sup>.”

Moreover, the most compelling points of convergence emerge when specific details of the present painting are compared with elements drawn from what is regarded as Flores’s masterpiece: the cycle dedicated to the Defence of the Immaculate Conception in the Church of San Francisco de La Paz. One such shared motif is the Johannine eagle which, although rendered here in a more simplified manner, corresponds closely to the eagle depicted in the *Defence of the Immaculate*

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<sup>5</sup> Stratton-Pruitt, 2017, 23, fig. 1.38.

<sup>6</sup> José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, *Leonardo Flores* (La Paz: Dirección Nacional de Informaciones de la Presidencia de la República, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, “The Art of Painting in Colonial Bolivia, 1600–1825,” in *El arte de la pintura en Bolivia colonial*, edited by Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2017), 25.



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*Conception* (fig. 9), where it appears pulling the Franciscan chariot alongside the other symbols of the tetramorph. A closer examination of this cycle reveals further correspondences, including the manner in which the scrolls are resolved, the recurring depiction of books—with red-dyed edges and open clasps—across the compositions (fig. 10), the distinctive treatment of curling marine waves, and even the painter's characteristic letterforms, which are identical down to their most minute details. Equally significant is the sense of familiarity in the anatomical features of the figures; for instance, the figure in the lower left corner may be directly compared with the representation of John Duns Scotus in the La Paz painting (fig. 11).

Another characteristic of Flores that has already been noted, and which once again coincides with what we observe here, is that “the artist does not appear to adhere too closely to engraved sources,” despite the fact that he undoubtedly draws upon them. This has been observed in particular in relation to the cycle in the village of Cohoni, where “the artist introduced multiple modifications into the paintings,” thereby demonstrating a high degree of creative appropriation of his models<sup>8</sup>. Finally, it is worth noting the important role played by the biblical passages in Latin, which articulate key concepts of the message and reinforce the work's discursive dimension, situating it at a point midway between the visual and the textual. In sum, this is a singular painting for several reasons: its monumental scale, its distinctive and highly sophisticated symbolism, and the importance of its author.

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<sup>8</sup> Agustina Rodríguez Romero, “Paintings of the Old Testament in Colonial Bolivia: A Remote Past for New Believers,” in *El arte de la pintura en Bolivia colonial*, edited by Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2017), 217.

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Fig. 1. *Noah's Ark and the Ship of the Church*, Léonard Gaultier, 1602. Engraving on paper. From *La Conférence des figures mystiques de l'Ancien Testament avec la vérité évangélique* by Guillaume de Requieu (Paris: Antoine du Breuil, 1602).



Fig. 2. *The Eucharistic Ship*, Alardo de Popma, 1622. Engraving on paper, private collection. Included in the book *Psalmodia Eucharistica* by Melchor Prieto.



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Fig. 3. Mystical and Contemplative Ship, unidentified New Spanish artist, 18th century. Oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán (Mexico).



Fig. 4. Navis patientiae, unidentified New Spanish artist, 18th century. Oil on canvas, Temple of San Diego de Alcalá, Huejotzingo (Mexico).

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Fig. 5. The Virgin of the Rosary, Captain and Protectress of the Fleets of Spain, unidentified Peruvian artist, 18th century.  
Oil on canvas, private collection, Lima (Peru).



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Fig. 6. Detail of the "Sun of Justice."



Fig. 7. Detail of the stern lantern.



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Fig. 8. D Detail of the cannons and the scroll.



Fig. 9. Comparison with: Defence of the Immaculate Conception by the Franciscans (detail), Leonardo Flores, 1680s. Oil on canvas, 315 × 257 cm, Church of San Francisco de La Paz, Bolivia.

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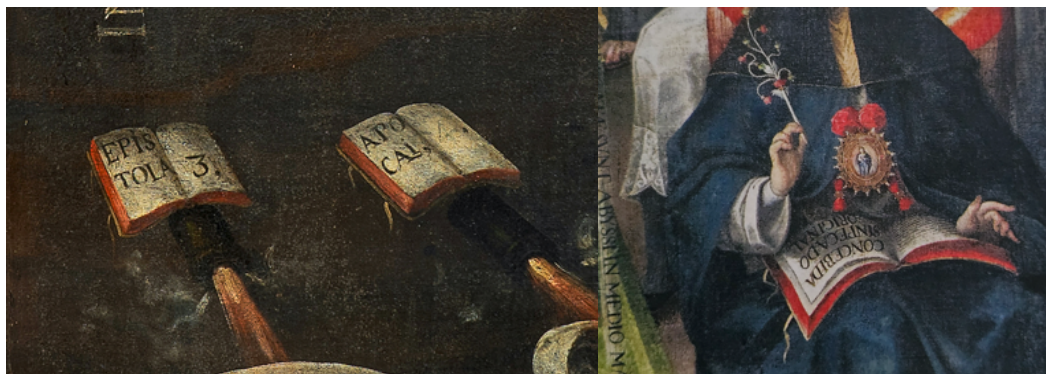


Fig. 10. Comparison with: Defence of the Immaculate Conception by the Franciscans (detail), Leonardo Flores, 1680s. Oil on canvas, 315 × 257 cm, Church of San Francisco, Bolivia.



Fig. 11. Comparison with: Defence of the Immaculate Conception by the Franciscans (detail), Leonardo Flores, 1680s. Oil on canvas, 315 × 257 cm, Church of San Francisco de La Paz, Bolivia.

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