

Mater Admirabilis and the Saints

The story of a fresco that became a place of grace and pilgrimage

Julien Béchard, 17 October 2026

To look at Mater Admirabilis today, at Trinità dei Monti, one might think that the fresco was conceived from the outset as a devotional image, the centre of a chapel and a place of pilgrimage.

Yet its beginnings are much simpler, and even rather improbable. The fresco was commissioned neither for a chapel nor to be placed above an altar. No ecclesiastical authority had asked for it to be made. It was painted in a corridor by a young French postulant who was only just beginning to learn the technique of fresco. For a time, the possibility of scraping it off was even considered.

A few years later, however, a pope had knelt before it; healings and conversions were attributed to it; ex-votos appeared on the walls; a medal was struck and reproductions began to circulate. Figures who would later be canonised also came to pray before this image.

The story of Mater Admirabilis is therefore that of the transformation of a painting, born in the ordinary life of a religious community, into a widely diffused devotional image. This development can be traced with remarkable precision thanks to the testimony of Pauline Perdrau herself. In 1862, eighteen years after the events, the painter wrote a *Petite notice historique sur la chapelle de Mater Admirabilis à Rome* ("Short historical notice on the chapel of Mater Admirabilis in Rome"). This text is the main thread of the present study. It can be supplemented by the book published in 1864 by Abbé Alfred Monnin, still very close to the events, and by the more recent research of Monique Luirard, based in particular on the private archives of the Society of the Sacred Heart.

The Society of the Sacred Heart and Trinità dei Monti

The birth of the fresco must first be placed in its institutional setting. The Society of the Sacred Heart was then a relatively young congregation, founded in 1800 around Madeleine-Sophie Barat. From the beginning, education, particularly the education of young girls, held an important place in its mission.

In 1828, Pope Leo XII invited the Society of the Sacred Heart to establish a community and a school at Trinità dei Monti. When Pauline Perdrau arrived there in 1844, the Religious of the Sacred Heart had therefore been settled in the place for only sixteen years.

This context is essential. Mater Admirabilis was born in a convent and at the same time in a school, which helps to explain why the boarders so quickly welcomed this representation of a very young Virgin.

Pauline Perdrau: a postulant and an artist

Pauline Perdrau arrived at Trinità dei Monti in the spring of 1844, shortly after her twenty-ninth birthday. She wished to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart while continuing in Rome the artistic training she had already begun.

Monique Luirard specifies that she was received as a postulant at Trinità while attending painting classes in the studio of Maximilian Seitz. She also indicates that Pauline was the daughter of an acquaintance of Madeleine-Sophie Barat.

Pauline was then at a turning point in her life: she was discerning her religious vocation while pursuing her artistic training. Although she already had some practice in painting, she was still inexperienced in the particular technique of fresco.

A few weeks after her arrival came the episode that Pauline herself presents as the immediate origin of the fresco.

The origin of the project: “Ah, if only the Blessed Virgin would deign to come herself...”

In May 1844, the heat was beginning to be felt in Rome. Pauline explains that the sisters had left their common room and now took their recreation in a large corridor on the first floor, above the cloister.

One Sunday, during the midday recreation, the superior, Mother de Coriolis, was called to the parlour. Pauline then reports this exclamation: “Ah, if only the Blessed Virgin would deign to come herself and preside over our recreation!”

Opposite the place that Mother de Coriolis had just left stood a large empty niche. Pauline then conceived the idea of representing the Virgin there and proposed to her sisters: “Would you like me to bring the Blessed Virgin here?” The proposal was immediately welcomed with enthusiasm.

These words are reported by Pauline in her notice of 1862. They therefore belong to the memory that the painter herself wished to preserve of the origin of her work. The form given to this representation, however, is rooted in an older memory, going back to her childhood.

An image from childhood

Pauline in fact recalls a memory from her childhood in the Vendée. She had learned to spin, an apprenticeship to which her grandmother attached great importance. The young Pauline, however, sometimes grew weary of her spindle.

Her nursemaid, Jacqueline, had found a particular way of encouraging her. She suggested that she imagine the Temple of Jerusalem and the Blessed Virgin at her own age, also busy spinning, hardworking and silent.

Pauline later wrote: “My childish imagination already pictured the simple and pious Blessed Virgin whom I reproduced many years later.”

This testimony is essential for understanding the genesis of Mater Admirabilis. The image does not result first of all from a carefully worked-out iconographic programme; it arises from a personal memory, an old and very simple one: that of a child who associates her own work with that of a young Mary.

Many years later, before the empty niche of Trinità dei Monti, this childhood image resurfaced and provided Pauline with the subject of the fresco.

Pauline’s hesitations over the fresco technique

Initial enthusiasm soon gave way to an awareness of the technical difficulties. The niche had to be painted in fresco, whereas Pauline says she had been studying this technique for only a fortnight and had never yet done anything similar.

Fearing failure, she considered for a time giving up her project, before finally presenting it to Mother de Coriolis.

The superior was reserved. The place seemed to her badly chosen: it was a corridor close to the chapel. Above all, Pauline’s inexperience made failure possible; in that event, the painting would be scraped off.

Pauline even specifies that Mother de Coriolis had at first thought of having her make a first attempt on a staircase, precisely because it would have been easier to get rid of. Despite these reservations, permission was finally granted.

Pauline began to paint on 1 June 1844. In her notice she calls this date “the feast day of the interior of the Blessed Virgin.” The expression, a singular one, would call for a study of its own. It refers to a spiritual register distinct from the material history of the fresco and is therefore not developed here.

Attention can now turn to the composition of the fresco itself.

An iconography rooted in the life of the house

Pauline chose to represent Mary as an adolescent in the Temple of Jerusalem, busy at work, with a distaff and a workbasket.

This basket is not invented: Pauline specifies that she reproduced the one belonging to Mother de Coriolis. This detail underlines how the fresco is anchored in the place where it was painted. The paving depicted visually continues that of the corridor, while certain objects belong directly to the daily life of the house.

The composition thus creates a continuity between the represented space and the real setting. The expression used by Pauline, “to bring” the Blessed Virgin, takes on its full meaning here.

The lily, the book, the distaff and manual work structure the iconography, while the silence and recollection of the young Mary would become one of the most characteristic features of Mater Admirabilis.

Monique Lurard offers a suggestive interpretation on this point. According to her, Pauline, then a postulant engaged in a period of waiting and discernment, may have projected something of her own questions onto this young Mary.

This reading belongs to historical interpretation and not to anything Pauline herself asserted. It nonetheless remains consistent with the painter's situation: at the moment when she was still seeking the form her own life would take, she depicted Mary before the Annunciation, before Nazareth and before Bethlehem, that is, at a moment when her future still seemed open.

Carrying out the fresco

The technique employed demands rapid work. Each morning, a mason prepared on the wall the portion of fresh lime plaster that Pauline was to paint during the day, the plaster having to remain damp while she worked.

Pauline reports the mason's recurring advice: "Signora, the day will be hot... presto, hurry!"

On 22 June, when she painted Mary's face, Pauline states that she worked from six o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening. She associates this date with a feast of Our Lady of Peace. The exact liturgical identification of this mention calls for caution, but it bears witness to the precision with which Pauline preserved the memory of that day.

Once the fresco was finished, its initial appearance nevertheless aroused strong reservations.

The drying of the fresco and the change of colours

Pauline explains that a fresh fresco has very dark colours and that one must wait for it to dry before the true tones appear. The community then had only the immediate appearance of the work.

The face looked red, the dress a very vivid poppy red and the mantle yellow. Pauline writes that the community kept before her work a silence, "charitable it is true, but discouraging."

A sister responsible for watching over her health said to her only: "At least you mustn't tire yourself out over this." The mason, by contrast, remained much more confident.

Pauline then decided to hide the painting behind a sheet and, every three or four days, came to observe its progress through a small opening.

As it dried, the colours changed: the face lightened and the tones softened. After about a fortnight, Pauline could write that the Virgin had become "the lily of the valleys, the flower of the fields."

The fresco, which for a time might have been scraped off, was finally kept. It did not yet bear the name under which it would later be known.

From the Madonna del Giglio to Mater Admirabilis

Pauline first called it the Madonna del Giglio, the Madonna of the Lily. The boarders began to come before it and to sing hymns there on the feasts of the Blessed Virgin.

Pauline received the habit at Trinità dei Monti in April 1845. When she later left Rome, she came to bid farewell to her *Madonnina*. She would write later that she was leaving this painting in her “beautiful cloister, then solitary,” unable to foresee the future development of devotion to it.

She even went so far as to regard as the first “miracle” of Mater the fact that she had been chosen as the painter and had been able to carry out a work of which she believed herself incapable.

After her departure, an exiled religious who had been received at Trinità came regularly to pray before the fresco and called it Mater Admirabilis. This is how, according to Pauline, the Madonna del Giglio gradually received its new name.

Pauline does not give this religious’s name in her notice. Monique Luirard, working from the private archives of the Society of the Sacred Heart, identifies her as a Basilian abbess from Lithuania, Mother Makrine.

The name thus seems to have taken hold in prayer even before the visit of Pius IX. Some more simplified versions of the story attribute the title directly to the pope, but Pauline’s testimony invites caution: when Pius IX discovered the fresco, the name was already in use. His intervention would, on the other hand, give the devotion a new scale.

20 October 1846: Pius IX

Elected a few months earlier, on 16 June 1846, Pius IX visited the Religious of the Sacred Heart at Trinità dei Monti for the first time on 20 October of that year.

Pauline reports that after meeting the community and the boarding school, the pope visited the house. Arriving before Mater Admirabilis, he knelt and, in her words, “prayed for a long time in silence.”

He then praised “the purity, the candour, the lovable simplicity” that had been sought to give to the Blessed Virgin. The subject of Mary in the Temple, aged about twelve, struck him as both pious and new.

According to Pauline again, Pius IX then granted an indulgence of three hundred days to those who would recite before the painting three Hail Marys and three times the invocation: “Mater Admirabilis, ora pro nobis.”

The date of 20 October thereafter acquired a particular importance and became the feast day of Mater Admirabilis. Pius IX’s link with the fresco continued afterwards: the historic site of Trinità dei Monti indicates that he returned twenty-one times to pray before the little Madonna to whom he was particularly attached.

From 1846, the status of the image changed markedly. From a devotion principally internal to the community, it became an image before which the pope had publicly knelt, which he had blessed and to which he had granted a spiritual favour.

The first accounts of graces appeared almost immediately after this visit.

The miracles in the sources

The term “miracle,” readily used by nineteenth-century documents, must be handled with caution.

The historian cannot take the place of a medical or canonical inquiry, nor declare, one hundred and eighty years later, that a healing is supernatural. He can, however, establish a precise historical fact: from 1846, the archives of Trinità gathered accounts of healings, conversions and favours that the persons concerned attributed to the intercession of Mater Admirabilis.

These accounts played a major role in the gradual transformation of the corridor into a place of devotion.

One of the main sources for this period is Abbé Alfred Monnin. In 1864, only twenty years after the fresco was made, he published *Mater Admirabilis ou les quinze premières années de Marie Immaculée* (“Mater Admirabilis, or the First Fifteen Years of Mary Immaculate”).

Monnin explains that he relies on what he calls the “Archives of Mater-Admirabilis,” kept at Trinità. He notes there in particular pontifical briefs and decrees, as well as accounts of conversions, vocations and healings.

Among these accounts, that of Abbé Blampin holds a special place.

Abbé Blampin and the first ex-voto

According to Monnin, Abbé Blampin was a priest, a member of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary. He had exercised his ministry for several years on Bourbon Island, today La Réunion, before losing his voice completely.

He arrived in Rome in 1846 in the hope that a change of climate would improve his condition, but noticed no change.

Some time after Pius IX’s visit to Mater Admirabilis, he was advised to come and pray before the fresco. He then began to visit the corridor regularly.

On 6 November 1846, according to Monnin’s account, he tried to pronounce the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. At first he managed only a hoarse sound, then recited three Hail Marys.

Still according to Monnin, his voice then returned. The next day he celebrated Mass “in a half-voice, without effort.”

The episode also takes on a material dimension. During his loss of voice, Abbé Blampin had used a small slate to communicate. After his healing, it was hung in the corridor; Monnin presents it as the first ex-voto of Mater Admirabilis.

The grace attributed to Mater thus left a tangible trace. The oral or written account was now matched by an object kept on the spot, soon joined by other material testimonies.

Monique Luirard, who works in particular from the *Journal de la Trinité*, also finds the tradition of a first healing obtained about a fortnight after Pius IX’s blessing.

The chronology highlights the speed of the process: on 20 October 1846, Pius IX came to pray before Mater; on 6 November came, according to the sources, the healing of Blampin; on 21 November, Monique Luirard places the first Mass celebrated before Mater.

The transformation of the place of prayer thus took place in a few weeks.

Some other graces

The accounts gathered by Monnin are numerous. Without listing them all, a few examples help us understand how the reputation of Mater Admirabilis was built.

Monnin reports several healings attributed to her intercession, notably among the Roman Jesuits. He also tells the story of a poor workman who had become unable to work and who promised to offer a silver crown to Mater if he recovered.

Having only very meagre resources, this man gradually set aside a portion of the alms he received, until he was able to have the crown made and come to offer it before the fresco.

Another group of accounts concerns children. Monnin even devotes several pages to what he calls “the little miraculously healed girls of Mater-Admirabilis.”

He reports in particular the case of a child of about one year, given up for lost after violent convulsions; her mother came to pray before Mater and afterwards attributed her recovery to this intercession.

He also mentions a little girl of Polish origin deprived of the use of her legs, then a three-year-old child given up as dying.

Beyond the question of miracle in the strict sense, these accounts show the rapid establishment of a bond between Mater and childhood. The youth of Mary in the fresco had already prompted identification among the boarders; it also fostered the development of a family devotion.

Parents and children thus came to ask for protection, comfort or healing before the fresco.

The ex-votos multiplied. Monique Luirard notes that they would eventually cover the walls of the oratory, preserving the memory of graces attributed to Mater and coming from many countries.

The transformation of the corridor into a chapel

The growing number of visitors soon made it necessary to fit out the place.

Monique Luirard indicates that from July 1847 the sisters transformed the corridor into a chapel, notably thanks to gifts from Polish benefactors.

The contrast with 1844 is striking. Three years earlier, Mother de Coriolis had hesitated to let Pauline paint in this corridor, fearing a failure that would have led to the fresco being scraped off.

Now the corridor was transformed to preserve the work and welcome those who came to pray: the place adapted itself to the image.

1849: the Mater medal

A new stage in the spread of the devotion was reached with the medal of Mater Admirabilis.

Until then, encountering Mater meant coming to Trinità dei Monti. The fresco, fixed to its wall, could not travel. The medal now made it possible to spread the image beyond its place of origin.

During the siege of Rome, the community, according to the superior's account reproduced by Abbé Monnin, made a vow to have a medal of Mater Admirabilis struck if the convent and its pupils were spared.

The text reports the return of peace to Rome on 2 July 1849. The community then hastened to fulfil its vow and had the medal commissioned.

Its reverse bears, among other things, the inscription: *Ego flos campi et lilium convallium*, "I am the flower of the field and the lily of the valleys."

The medal is not merely a souvenir; it also becomes a vehicle for spreading the devotion.

Monnin associates it almost immediately with an account of a conversion. A young Protestant, who had come before Mater without showing much interest, received one of the first medals. He then returned to Trinità, asked to receive religious instruction and then, according to the account, was baptised.

The historian cannot determine the causal relationship between the medal and this conversion. The episode nevertheless shows that devotion to Mater was beginning to circulate beyond the very place where the fresco stood.

The spread of the image

Monique Luirard shows how this spread took place: boarders left Rome taking images with them, religious moved from one house to another and pilgrims returned to their own countries.

Reproductions appeared, medals circulated, then statuettes and various devotional images multiplied.

Mater Admirabilis thus gradually found her place in the houses and institutions of the Sacred Heart throughout the world.

The phenomenon is remarkable: a fresco, by definition inseparable from its wall, gave birth to a particularly mobile image.

The spread of reproductions thus reverses the initial movement: the faithful no longer came only to Mater; the image of Mater in turn reached communities and families.

This spread also explains why the history of the fresco crosses that of figures whom the Church would later recognise as saints or blessed.

Mater Admirabilis and the Saints

The presence of saints and great ecclesiastical figures before Mater is not an isolated episode in her history. It results from the place the chapel gradually acquired in Roman religious life.

A few figures suffice to account for this attendance.

Saint Madeleine-Sophie Barat

Madeleine-Sophie Barat naturally holds a special place, even though her relationship to Mater Admirabilis is the subject of another contribution of the day.

Monique Luirard reports that the boarders of Trinità were immediately struck by the Virgin's age: "She is our age, this Virgin, and no other Madonna is."

Madeleine-Sophie Barat herself is said to have told Pauline: "Your little Blessed Virgin is not bad at all. On my way to the gallery, I often make a detour to go and look at her. She draws me; she is the age of our pupils and speaks to me of that youth to which I have devoted my life."

Luirard here refers to the writings of Pauline Perdrau, *Les Loisirs de l'Abbaye*.

This remark is enough to show why the fresco was able to find such a natural place in a congregation devoted to the education of young girls.

Blessed Pius IX

The role of Pius IX is not limited to an official approval of the devotion.

In Pauline's account, his attitude before the image holds a central place: he knelt, prayed at length in silence and afterwards returned several times.

The historic site of Trinità dei Monti even indicates that he returned twenty-one times to visit the little Madonna.

The bond between Pius IX and Mater thus belongs fully to the spiritual history of the place.

Saint John Bosco

Among the other saints whose memory the Trinità tradition preserves is Saint John Bosco. Monique Luirard mentions his visit and gives the date of 7 January 1867.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

Thérèse Martin, the future Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, is also among the visitors to the chapel.

Monique Luirard writes simply: "It is known that Thérèse Martin came to pray before the fresco."

No known source allows us to say what she thought of this silent and recollected young Mary.

The mere attested presence of Thérèse before Mater is nevertheless enough to place the fresco within her Roman pilgrimage.

A place frequented by priests and churchmen

Attendance at Mater is not limited to those later canonised. The chapel gradually became a place of prayer for priests and churchmen staying in Rome.

Monique Luirard cites the *Journal de la Trinité*, which reports that Monsignor Manning, during the First Vatican Council, called the chapel of Mater his "cathedral." He brought the people he was accompanying there and celebrated baptisms and abjurations in it.

The same *Journal de la Trinité* stresses the devotion of seminarians of different nationalities. Luirard also mentions the future Cardinal Raphael Merry del Val as well as Giacomo della Chiesa, the future Benedict XV, among the devotees of Mater.

In the Rome of the second half of the nineteenth century, the little chapel thus became a relatively important place of ecclesial passage.

John Paul II: the continuing spread

A last episode allows us to measure the permanence of this spread. On 26 March 2003, at the general audience of John Paul II, a life-size reproduction of Mater Admirabilis stood near the steps leading to St Peter's Basilica.

This copy was intended for the parish of Saint Catherine in Warsaw.

The document recounting the event notes the presence of a large Polish delegation led by Cardinal Glemp, as well as a delegation from Trinità dei Monti and the ambassadors of Poland and France to the Holy See.

The previous day, after a Mass celebrated at Trinità, the copy had been taken to the Vatican, where it spent the night in the pope's private chapel.

The next day, John Paul II blessed the copy before its departure for Poland.

The episode sums up the distance travelled since 1844: a fresco painted by Pauline Perdrau in a corridor, whose very preservation had at first seemed uncertain, gave birth to an image destined to circulate far beyond Rome.

In 2003, the blessing of a life-size reproduction by John Paul II before its departure for Warsaw illustrates this international and lasting spread of Mater Admirabilis.

Conclusion

The history of Mater Admirabilis finally leads back to its starting point: an empty niche in a corridor of Trinità dei Monti.

At the origin, there was no grand project: no pontifical commission, no sanctuary to found, no explicit will to create a new devotion.

The project was born of a recreation among religious sisters, of an empty niche, of the childhood memory of a young postulant, of her still recent training in fresco and of the very concrete constraints imposed by the technique.

The fresco was painted, at first aroused the community's anxiety, then was hidden behind a sheet until its colours lightened.

The boarders then began to come before it; an exiled religious gave it the name Mater Admirabilis; Pius IX knelt before it; the first accounts of graces spread.

A small slate became the first ex-voto, the corridor was transformed into a chapel, a medal was struck and reproductions left Rome.

Priests, pilgrims, popes and saints came to pray before the fresco, while its image gradually spread throughout the world.

The prayer that Pauline reports having uttered before her finished work takes on, in retrospect, a particular significance.

She writes: "If in this place you are honoured and prayed to, I shall always be with those who pay you homage, and I leave my heart at your feet so that it may be united with all the acts of love that will be offered to you before this blessed image."

The history of Mater Admirabilis can thus be understood as that of an image born in the intimacy of a community, gradually become a place of prayer and graces, then a meeting point for a Church far larger than Pauline Perdrau could have imagined.

This whole history has its origin in a simple empty niche.

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