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*Semiotics as a Theory of Culture: Deciphering the Meanings of Cultural Texts*

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**LEONE, Massimo<sup>1</sup> (2010). *Saints and Signs. A Semiotic Reading of Conversion in Early Modern Catholicism*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co.KG.**

ISBN 978-3-11-022951-6, Copyright © 2010 by Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG (23 x 15.5 cm, xii, 652 pages). Series: Religion and Society. Languages: English. Type of Publication: Monograph. Readership: Academics, Institutes, Libraries.

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In his book titled *Saints and Signs. A Semiotic Reading of Conversion in Early Modern Catholicism*, Massimo Leone adopts a semiotic approach in his analysis of a corpus of hagiographies, paintings, and other materials related to four of the most prominent saints of early modern Catholicism: Ignatius of Loyola, Philip Neri, Francis Xavier, and Therese of Avila. His book is divided into four sections, focusing on the four saints and on the particular topics related to their hagiological identity: (a) early modern theological debates on grace (Ignatius of Loyola, Chapter 2, pp. 23–203), (b) cultural contaminations between Catholic internal and external missions (Philip Neri, Chapter 3, pp. 205–319), (c) the Christian identity in relation to non-Christian territories (Francis Xavier, Chapter 4, pp. 321–479) and (d) the status of women in early modern Catholicism (Therese of Avila, Chapter 5, pp. 481–530).

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<sup>1</sup> Massimo Leone is a research professor of semiotics and cultural semiotics at the department of philosophy, University of Torino, Italy. His work focuses on the role of religion in modern and contemporary cultures. He has authored two books (a) *Religious Conversion and Identity. The Semiotic Analysis of Texts*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, and (b) *Saints and Signs. A Semiotic Reading of Conversion in Early Modern Catholicism*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010, as well as numerous papers in semiotics and religious studies. He is the chief editor of *Lexia*, the Semiotic Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication, University of Torino, Italy.

The selected corpus, verbal and visual documents produced between the end of the Council of Trent (1563) and the beginning of the pontificate of Urban VIII (1623), is placed in its historical context so that the following questions may be answered: (a) How did these four saints become signs of the renewal of Catholic spirituality after the Reformation? (b) How did their verbal and visual representations promote new Catholic models of religious conversion? (c) How did this huge effort of spiritual propaganda change the modern idea of communication?

The author's semiotic hypothesis is that saints rank among the more important communication media or 'signification simulacra' of Catholicism. His case study centres on the contributions made to the early-modern definition of sainthood by hagiography on the four early-modern saints canonized in 1622. For Leone, the early modern conception of sanctity differs substantially from that of the mediaeval period.

He argues that the importance of saints in Catholicism lies in the fact that it is they and their representations that signify and communicate the Catholic idea of spiritual achievement and make it possible for believers to put this idea into practice. To prove his argument, Leone focuses on the aforementioned sixty-year period between 1563 and 1623. The author justifies his chosen point of departure by explaining that the end of the Council of Trent marked a change in the way that saints were conceived. In reaction to Protestant accusations, the Catholic Church began to promote its saints not as the ultimate object of worship, but as media, a way for believers to approach God. This change in conception inevitably led to a change in the way that saints were written about and visually represented, and thus the Council of Trent had a marked influence on both hagiography and the iconography of the saints, thus shaping their role as signification simulacra. In subsequently stressing the didactic purpose of images and ultimately declaring that images of saints served as a means of religious education, Leone argues, the Council of Trent also emphasized the role of saints as communication media.

Leone's choice of *terminus ante quem* is based on two reasons. Firstly, 1622 is the last year before canonization became more centralised and bureaucratic, and before visual representations of sanctity became subject to much stricter control. Secondly, and more relevantly, in 1622 five new saints were canonised, namely Ignatius of Loyola, Philip Neri, Francis Xavier, Therese of Avila and Isidore the Labourer, all except the latter having played a role in the Church's recent history. They thus symbolised the Church's present and represented its new spiritual models for

believers to aspire to emulate. In addition, given that their canonisation was celebrated practically throughout the Catholic world, the author argues that 1622 could also be viewed as a turning point in the history of globalization.

Massimo Leone furthermore emphasises the central role of semiotics in *Saints and Signs*, given the importance of the concept of enunciation in understanding the representations of early modern Catholic sanctity. He goes on to specify the meaning of semiotics in this book ‘as the discipline that studies signs, signification, and meaning’ and states that it has two purposes, firstly, to analyse and interpret texts and, secondly, to serve as a theory of culture so that it may be used to ‘reconstruct, study, and interpret such cultural background’.

As regards the corpus of texts chosen for analysis, the author concentrates on the representations of sanctity of four of the five saints canonized in 1622, stating that they are a perfect example of the idea of sanctity in early modern Catholicism. He furthermore classifies the hagiographic texts published between 1563 and 1622 into two broad categories, anthologies of Lives of saints and individual Lives of saints, citing six reasons why the latter category is more illuminating as regards how early modern Catholicism used hagiography to promote a certain idea of sanctity and, consequently, a specific image of spiritual perfection: individual Lives were authored by writers who were less thorough when it came to historical and philological detail, they focused on specific topics of interest rather than broad hagiographic traditions, they contained more narrative and imaginative elements, they had a broader and less learned readership, they had smaller formats, were roughly printed and more poorly bound and, lastly, unlike the first category, they included many visual representations.

More analytically, Leone devotes the second chapter, on Ignatius of Loyola, to a historical and semiotic analysis of the way in which early modern Catholicism used verbal and visual representations of the saint to spread a new conception of religious identity. In the third chapter, on Philip Neri, he focuses on the saint’s “popular” aura’, on the ‘humble nature of his apostolate, his proximity and involvement with the poorest people of Rome’, to this end conducting a cultural and semiotic analysis of both verbal and visual representations of Philip produced during the relevant period. In Chapter four, Leone uses Francis Xavier as a means of exploring the manner in which early modern Catholic sanctity was represented in the context of Europe’s religious expansion towards other continents, in particular Asia. Through the fifth chapter’s analysis of both biographies and artwork devoted to Therese of Avila, the

author delves into the role that the saint's Jewish origins played 'in shaping her hagiological identity into a narrative simulacrum of religious conversion and spiritual renewal'. He furthermore analyses early modern works written by or on Therese, focusing on religious transformation from the gender perspective, and deals with how images shaped Therese of Avila's identity as a saint and transformed this identity into a powerful spiritual model.

Leone reminds the reader of the role that sanctity played in early modern Catholicism not so much as a value, but rather as a medium for other values, and of the consequent status of early modern Catholic saints as signs, which should thus be studied as such by the discipline of semiotics. Having conducted a thorough semiotic analysis of the relevant corpus of texts, he concludes that in early modern Catholicism, sanctity was used as a means of expressing (a) a new conception of exceptionality, which was achieved through spiritual transformation, (b) a new conception of agency, since saints were used to convey the new religious values to the masses and were also the link between the human and the divine, and (c) a new conception of spiritual change, 'as an interior and individual matter' entailing not only religious conversion, but also a renewed focus on one's existing faith.

The author furthermore adds that representations of saints in this time also served as laboratories that helped to shape believers' spiritual and religious identity, and identifies a remarkable bias against religious minorities in the new representations of sanctity, a bias that also extends, he suggests, to the female gender. Lastly, Leone winds up by describing the early modern Catholic discourse on sanctity as having both a global and local dimension, and as being multimedia, given its expression through different substances, and parasitic, having often adopted profane and even pagan expressive forms.

Adopting the semiotic approach to the different semantic load carried by the conception of sanctity in the period chosen by the author is certainly significant, since it conveys the researcher to a new sphere, that of semantic significations (loads) and society. In other words, the author is indirectly led to the conclusion that conceptions acquire meaning within a specific socio-historical context, and that this meaning, which is reflected in icons and texts, conveys the era's ideology regarding the conception of sanctity. However, while the author is very knowledgeable about the relevant literature, providing highly detailed analyses of the icons and decoding them, the specialised reader would expect him to incorporate into his conclusions

comparative results of the analyses conducted on the texts and icons related to the four saints.