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“Baby Donato” in Abruzzo (Italy): From A Mother’s Veneration to Popular Devotion

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Cover Page Footnote

1. Since at least the fifth century, relics have usually been kept in objects of liturgical use, called “reliquaries”. We consider bodies preserved over time, a factor the Catholic Church deems an indication of holiness. 2. The cult of relics, with relative rules of public display, is governed by articles 1276–89 of the Code of Canon Law. 3. According to Christian and Catholic doctrine, the veneration of relics differs from magic: in the case of relics, it is not the veneration that is effective, but the prayer that accompanies it (Bible: II Book of Kings, 13.21). Protestantism rejects the cult of saints and their relics. 4. These scholars studied expressions of popular religion, including non-official cults, in Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Marche, Umbria, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, from 1959 to 2020. 5. Extra-liturgical cults include that of “Blessed Giovannino” [Rossi 1969: 49–54 and 124–130]; that of “Blessed Alberto” and many other phenomena of popular devotion for bodies and relics not approved by the Church. 6. St Donatus is celebrated each 7 August, the traditional date of his beheading (362 or 304 BC). 7. The loss of the ritual is a result of medical care provided by the national health service. In the side chapel of the church of San Donato, the large, ancient wooden scales were used for this rite. The person sat on one plate and a cotton bag filled with grain on the other. Our book on the subject included contributions from a neurologist and a psychologist (D’Amico, Cipulli, Giancristofaro 2010). 8. These are the words of Anna G., who was about eighty when we interviewed her in Celenza sul Trigno in 1987. Over the course of thirty years I have interviewed over one hundred women who pay homage to “St Donatus” and to “Little Donato” every year on the saint’s day of 7 August. This article is the result of observation of their behavior.

**“BABY DONATO” IN ABRUZZO (ITALY): FROM A MOTHER’S VENERATION
TO POPULAR DEVOTION**

LIA GIANCRISTOFARO¹

Abstract

The article considers a cult that developed and still thrives in a small Abruzzo town in the years between the two world wars. During these decades, the mummified body of a baby became the object of worship and devotional practices. The epileptic Baby Donato died and after few months his body was given to the Sanctuary of St Donatus in Celenza sul Trigno. St Donatus is the saint who protects epileptics and in Italian Catholicism is therefore the master of disease. The name Donato means ‘given’ and the ailment (epilepsy) is given by the saint to his subjects in exchange for being cured they give him devotion and gifts. In this case, the sick child’s mother embarked on a much greater initiative, and actually gave the saint the dead body of the sick child dead. Analyzing the cult of the mummified child in Abruzzo allows us to understand not only the establishment of an autonomous expression of popular religion, but also illustrates anthropological mechanisms that expand a simple mythical individual invention into a wider scenario. A devotion expands into a large-scale dimension when it satisfies the needs of the imagination of a large group, as is the case of Baby Donato. By exploring the reasons for the affirmation, persistence and local diffusion of devotional practices of this unique extra-liturgical worship, this article offers some general considerations of Catholicism and Southern Italy.

Key words: Women, Catholicism, Italy, Disability, Epilepsy, Relics, Devotion.

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Italian and Popular Religion: Introduction to the Methodology

The Church considers the bodily remains of saints and other exemplary individuals as a heritage for their ability to attract and bear witness to faith.¹ For this reason, relics are governed by ecclesiastical law.² The political importance of the remains of sacred figures has varied extensively during the history of Christianity and is linked to periods of its expansion, when the relics were used “as precious goods bartered to build alliances with communities.”³ The word “relic” (from the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning remains) indicates part or all of the body of a venerated person. According to the Catholic Church, the relic has the power to act as an intermediary with the divine and can therefore assist believers in obtaining favors and miracles.⁴ In short, despite Platonic–Christian tradition’s determination that the soul must have the central role, corporeality triumphs thanks to the fiction of the relics whose persistence asserts that life prevails over death.

The devotional practice around “Baby Donato” in Abruzzo can be placed within the broader context of lay devotional practices in Italy and the “lived religion” methodology. Doing so contextualizes this practice into the anthropological work within religious scholarship. Our principal hermeneutical context is the *Land of Remorse* (*La Terra del Rimorso*, first Italian edition 1961), a classic work by Ernesto De Martino, the founding figure of Italian cultural anthropology and ethno-psychiatry.⁵ Based on fieldwork conducted in Southern Italy in 1959, the study deals with the phenomenon in Puglia of “tarantism,” a form of possession related to the belief in the bite of a mythical tarantula and its ritual cure in the “taranta dance.” De Martino draws together the contributions of various specialists who participated in the fieldwork, including a psychologist, a psychiatrist, an ethnomusicologist and a social anthropologist. As both an ethnologist and classically trained religious historian, the author reviewed the fieldwork data through the lens of tarantism’s historical analysis. This resulted in a compassionate and

¹ Since at least the fifth century, relics have usually been kept in objects of liturgical use called “reliquaries.” The Catholic Church deems bodies preserved over time as an indication of holiness.

² The cult of relics, with related rules of public display, is governed by articles 1276–89 of the *Code of Canon Law*.

³ Adriano Favole, *Resti di umanità. Vita sociale del corpo dopo la morte* (Roma–Bari: Laterza, 2003), 112.

⁴ According to Christian and Catholic doctrine, the veneration of relics differs from magic; in the case of relics, it is not the veneration that is effective, but the prayer that accompanies it (Bible: *II Book of Kings*, 13.21). Protestantism rejects the cult of saints and their relics.

⁵ Ernesto De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, trans. Dorothy Zinn (London: Free Association Books, 2005).

compelling account of this kind of belief. It no longer appeared as mere mental illness or as a “survival” of shamanistic irrationality, but as a product of a cultural history defined from above and endowed with its own forms of rationality. The rigidity of the cultural framework within the rural South of Italy where “tarantism” flourished explains why this kind of therapy, or solution to human sufferings, did not work to alleviate the conditions of suffering or to push practitioners to discover a new sense in their existence.⁶ The goal of this cultural and religious system was to modulate the disrupted and painful elements of their emotional meanings and to restore in people their physical strength to work and survive under the protective value of the popular and local religion.

This article uses the ethnographic materials collected between 1980 and 2020, beginning with the research of Alfonso M. Di Nola, Annabella Rossi and other authors, dedicated to the cults of saints and blessed figures in general, and in particular with regard to the cults of a number of mummified bodies found in churches and chapels in Southern Italy.⁷ Of course in Italy, the historical and anthropological study of these phenomena of popular religion has been conditioned by the work of Ernesto De Martino. In addition to the importance of his *Land of Remorse*, his *Sud e Magia* investigates the dramatic social and ethical conditions of the population and embarked on the study of folklore, popular Catholicism, and the persistence of traditional beliefs. Particularly useful is *Morte e pianto rituale*, in which De Martino studied the unique processing of grief in Southern Italy.⁸ Death causes people distress, and pain is processed in a socially codified rite. The consolation offered by religious belief makes pain bearable by referring it to the tragic death of Christ on the cross, which implies a promise of resurrection and eternal life for all. De Martino investigates the persistence of funeral weeping, an ancient and widespread pre-Christian rite throughout the Mediterranean area. Ritual weeping makes mourning an event in a mythical–ritual dimension, therefore shifting it “out of history” to make it more bearable.⁹

⁶ Vincent Crapanzano, “Foreword to Ernesto De Martino,” in *The Land of Remorse. A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, trans. and annotated Dorothy Louise Zinn (London, Free Association Books, 2005).

⁷ These scholars studied expressions of popular religion, including non-official cults, in Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Marche, Umbria, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, from 1959 to 2020. Annabella Rossi, *Le feste dei poveri* (Bari: Laterza, 1969); Alfonso M. Di Nola, *Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana* (Torino: Boringhieri, 1976); Gabriele De Rosa, *Chiesa e religione popolare nel Mezzogiorno* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1978); Giuseppe Galasso, *L'altra Europa. Per un'antropologia storica del Mezzogiorno* (Lecce: Argo, 1997).

⁸ Ernesto De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico: dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria* (Torino: Boringhieri, 1958); Ernesto De Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South*, trans. Dorothy Louise Zinn (London: HAU – Classics in Ethnographic Theory, 2015 (1959)).

⁹ De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*.

Other authors, above all Alfonso M. Di Nola, point out that the population still has a conservative vision of saints, similar to the medieval vision of the saint–healer widespread before the Counter-Reformation; with this type of image of the “saint next door” it is possible to make a pact and to barter. Indeed, in Italy it is still customary to make ex-voto presents (from the Latin, meaning “gifts because of a vow”) or, in other words, gifts following a promise made to the divinity. The believer often agrees to make a gift or sacrifice to the divinity in exchange for the fulfillment of their requests. The gift to the saint as thanks (for a “miracle” or a “grace”) can be made before or after the saint works the miracle or offers the favor.¹⁰ This “material dialogue with the saints” and the fact that many positive events are still attributed to the saint, explains why the expectation of the “miracle” – namely the special intervention through a saint – persists in the south of Italy.¹¹ The theoretical discourse on the relationship of people with saints is important for understanding the cults dedicated to mummified bodies kept in churches and chapels in Southern Italy. These cults are still active precisely because people turn to them for a “miracle” or a “grace.”¹²

The Mummy of Donatino: A Baby in Limbo Between Life and Death

In 1980, in the church of St Donato in Celenza sul Trigno, I noticed a mummified infant in a glass shrine labelled “Donatino” (little Donato). The reliquary is kept on an altar in the church and has been there in all the years I visited, the most recent time being in 2019. The presence in the Church of this small corpse intrigues me. The women of the village say that a woman very devoted to St Donatus suffered from epilepsy. In Catholic doctrine St Donatus protects epileptics and – as we will see later – is the “patron” of this sickness. The child’s mother asked St Donatus to favor her with a son, despite her condition as an epileptic (often the sick women were forced to not have children). In exchange for the grace of a male child, she promised Donatus the baby would be “the property of the saint.” The woman became pregnant, gave birth to the baby, and called him Donato. Sadly, however, the boy was epileptic like his mother, had convulsions and died when he was a few months old. So the mother decided to give his body to the church to honor the promise (“vow”) she had made to the saint. The woman embalmed the body to preserve it, and covered the face of the corpse with a wax mask that made him look as if he were asleep or a doll. Every year, on the feast day, the mother and her

¹⁰ Paolo Toschi, *Bibliografia degli ex voto italiani* (Firenze: Olschki, 1970).

¹¹ Di Nola, *Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana*.

¹² Extra-liturgical cults include that of “Blessed Giovannino” [Annabella Rossi, *Le feste dei poveri* (Bari: Laterza, 1969), 49–54 and 124–130]; that of “Blessed Alberto” and many other phenomena of popular devotion for bodies and relics not approved by the Church.

family would return to “change the baby” or, in other words, to clean the body. This can be seen both as care in preservation of the body and as an atonement rite for her bearing a sick child who suffered her same affliction. Popular belief still insists that epileptics should not marry to avoid procreating sick children. Thus, the sick woman who challenged her fate was blamed for the death of her son. This risk was included in the “covenant” that the woman had made with St Donatus, so the woman respected her vow to him until her death.

The church of San Donato in Celenza sul Trigno (dated 1598) in Southern Italy is a popular center for “healing epilepsy” through magical and religious practices. The territory is mountainous and poor, and many inhabitants have emigrated to coastal towns. Agriculture revolves around wheat farming and uses antiquated systems that bring limited economic resources. This context of marginalization hands down therapeutic rites practiced within Catholic feasts. Here, St Donatus,¹³ Bishop of Arezzo, a martyr beheaded in the third century, is the protector against epilepsy connected to neurological deficits caused by poor nutrition and intermarriage. The saint “lost his head” as do all those suffering mental or neurological illness. St Donatus is depicted as an elderly male who holds a book in one hand and a sickle moon in the other, which symbolize harvest, death and the relationship between the moon and mental illness. This neurological short-circuiting leads to formal analogies in the psycho-physical disconnection that the epileptic person, who is “absent,” “unconscious,” and “between life and death” experiences during an epileptic fit.

In Christianity, ailments related to the head are associated with negative stereotypes.¹⁴ Popular treatment allowed social inclusion of the sick through their consecration to the saint and their permanent inclusion in healing rituals. Indeed, people believed that St Donatus had given epilepsy to his “chosen” people and if people prayed to him, he would grant the grace to cure the illness. In this way, people never recovered and never stopped depending on “religious treatment.”¹⁵

In Celenza sul Trigno, the epilepsy healing ritual is based on the symbolic offering of the sick body to owner–protector St Donatus. The sick person was weighed on consecrated

¹³ St Donatus is celebrated each August 7th, the traditional date of his beheading (362 or 304 BC).

¹⁴ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice–Hall, 1963); Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971); Patrick West, *Investigation into the Social Construction and Consequences of the Label “Epilepsy”* (Bristol: University of Bristol, 1979).

¹⁵ Rita D’Amico, Mafalda Cipulli, and Lia Giancristofaro, *Vivere con l’epilessia. Aspetti clinici, psicologici e culturali* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2010).

scales who then gave to the saint the equivalent of their weight in grain as a pledge to be freed of epilepsy. The ritual of “weighing the sick body” is thus an exorcism to “remove evil” in the name of St Donatus. The exorcism was performed in the church of San Donato in Celenza until 1985.¹⁶ Now the ritual of “weighing the sick body” no longer occurs, but the mummy of the epileptic child (“Baby Donato”) is still there to fascinate visitors. The mummified infant conveys local devotion more than the “adult” St Donatus because the body of “Baby Donato” expresses a primitive and material creed based on the exchange with the saint.

Today, popular devotion for St Donatus has changed. Praying to the saint or giving grain is not considered an effective way to treat epilepsy as it had been in the past. Instead, the extra-liturgical devotion for “Baby Donato” seems to be growing and people now pray to this little mummy for help with various problems, as we will see later.

The Embalmed Body: Shared Symbols of Vows to St Donatus

We do not know how “Baby Donato” was mummified nor is it possible to date the body. All we know for sure is that the mother was not from Celenza, but from a nearby town. According to some townsfolk, the story dates to the 1910s; the newborn’s family was well-off and asked a doctor to treat the body with formaldehyde. Other residents say the story dates to the 1950s and every year the unlucky mother returned to Celenza to “clean the baby.” A further source specifies that the body dates to the 1930s and was not chemically treated, but it was the loving care of the mother that made it possible for the small swaddled body – now just a skeleton – to dry out and be preserved. Witnesses agree that every seventh of August, on the feast day of St Donatus, she would dress the mummy in its Sunday best. The woman has now been dead for many years but the sad story of her inability to overcome her grief survives in the testimony of her devotion to St Donatus.

The bodily remains of a human being can assume – and in this case did assume – complex symbolism. Realization of the transience of the body is the most terrifying experience for the living. Therefore, the biological body, which would normally be destined to decay and decline, encounters a “social life” originated by the need for sacredness that unites all humans in the mystery of life. The sense of the relic is precisely its peculiar conservation over time.

¹⁶ The loss of the ritual is a result of medical care provided by the national health service. In the side chapel of the church of San Donato, the large, ancient wooden scales used for this rite remain. The person sat on one plate and a cotton bag filled with grain on the other. Our book on the subject included contributions from a neurologist and a psychologist (D’Amico, Cipulli, and Giancristofaro, 2010).

For this reason, relics are the object of veneration and their persistence contributes to keeping alive legends that speak of life, death, and the prodigious preservation of a body.

In the case of the Celenza mummy, devotion arises from the mother's behavior towards her son's body. She was unable to get over her pain and her grief was not processed, but there was also her guilt for the pact she had made with St Donatus. Therefore, emotional dependence turned into a cult for memory and, more tangibly, for the child's body. Awe of this devotion—memory initially spread to a number of individuals close to the family who accepted the woman's behavior. After being accepted by her family, the woman's actions were accepted by the entire community and thus "Baby Donato" became a local extra-liturgical cult. In this way, an outright sequence of stereotyped prayer actions originated, triggered support and legitimized a new devotion in a culture constantly alert to powerful manifestations of the sacred.

Women began to pray to the relic of "Baby Donato" more than to the statue of St Donatus Martyr. Popular success is explained because the cult of "Baby Donato" proposes models for narration of the lives of saints and their miracles. Devotees even believe that "Baby Donato" is the body of the true martyr "who died as a child", before dying again by beheading as told by legend. Hence a paranormal popular logic accepts that a dead child and a dead adult can be one and the same person and can be venerated in the same church.

This religious process raises some questions about the attitude of the Church and local civil authorities. The mother was left free to present the child's body not as the corpse it was but as a "gift to the Church" and as the body of a saint because it was mummified; precisely for this reason it was immediately recognized as worthy of worship. Indeed, the woman alone decided to designate the child's corpse as a "holy body" through the fiction of life and this was accepted by the sanctuary. Moreover, she covered the baby's face with a pink wax mask that gave it the appearance of a chubby-faced child with lively eyes that seemed to look at the devotees. Thanks to this action, the corpse seemed almost alive. In the culture of Southern Italy, looking at something or someone is the equivalent of physical touching by making contact with the object of a gaze. In Italy, as in many other cultures, people believe in the power of the gaze,¹⁷ so the saint's gaze has a positive value because it seems to protect their devotees.¹⁸

¹⁷ De Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South*; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

¹⁸ De Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South*.

The connotation of physicality present in the devotion of “Baby Donato,” especially that of the mother who treats her son’s corpse as if it were still alive, is clear from the method and nature of the offerings she and the devotees bring to the mummy in the casket. As one devotee recalled:

The mother came often, dressed in mourning, crying and speaking gently to the child as if he were still alive. I remember she was already old, with white hair, when I was a child. She came with a sister and other relatives, bringing offerings to the boy. Other women also brought flowers, biscuits, cheese, and salami to the ‘Baby Donato’ glass shrine. The food was taken by the parish priest who distributed it to the poor. Some women sent money from America and France, where they had emigrated. The women asked ‘Baby Donato’ to heal their sick children. They say that ‘Baby Donato’ is St Donatus as a child and can work miracles. Many women still prefer to ask the child for grace, rather than the ‘adult St Donatus.’¹⁹

These actions express devotion to figures that religion recognizes as saints and acknowledges the holiness of the body of a person – a child – considered holy only because he is mummified. In short, holiness is automatically certified and legitimized when the body does not decay. For this reason, the mother of “Baby Donato” treated the child’s body as a mummy and presented it as a relic in a religion such as Christianity–Catholicism, which has a mythical–ritual basis. Christianity–Catholicism has always considered saints in the context of their works and the “miraculous” preservation of their bodies as seen in the cases of St Clare of Montefalco, St Rita of Cascia, St Giuseppe Moscati, and St Pio of Petralcina. If the body is preserved, this indicates holiness; the process of natural mummification is considered a wonder that occurs by the will of God. This belief is also documented on an ethnographic level for non-Christian religions, but in Christianity–Catholicism it is the basis of the worship of saints.²⁰

This story of devotion accepted by the community allows us to understand the mechanisms of so-called “popular religion.” In Italy, holiness is identified through the application of models borrowed from the legends of other saints whose bodies are preserved as relics. These models create a “formalization” of religion and allow the creation of new mystical phenomena such as that of “Baby Donato.” The myth of the sanctity of “Baby

¹⁹ These are the words of Anna G., who was about eighty when we interviewed her in Celenza sul Trigno in 1987. Over the course of thirty years I have interviewed over one hundred women who pay homage to “St Donatus” and to “Little Donato” every year on the saint’s day of August 7th. This article is the result of observation of their behavior.

²⁰ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12.

Donato,” regardless of his official liturgical acceptance, becomes the basis of a new cult because it is accompanied by a ritual: in this case, the care given by his mother and the veneration by other mothers who pray to “Baby Donato” to seek protection for other epileptic children.

Tell, Touch and Pray to Charm Away the Pain

The story of “Baby Donato,” like all events deemed supernatural, is defined in a stereotyped style through popular legend, which constitutes the first method of the cult’s spread. The second method of circulating the cult is by a direct experience of seeing, touching and witnessing the condition and nature of the body of a person whose history is known. This creates communication and empathy. The figure is recognized as a bearer of supernatural power and can serve to alleviate people’s suffering. These demonstrations of the supernatural are sought constantly because devotees want to be direct witnesses of the supernatural. This, in Christianity–Catholicism, is consistent with the Eucharist, which calls upon the faithful to participate in the sacrifice of the Last Supper which is continually evoked and experienced through the Holy Mass.

Initially the sanctification process of the “legend” and the “body” is self-managed. If the worship develops the required criteria of the Church it becomes liturgical. In the case of “Baby Donato,” the requirements were lacking and the cult remained extra-liturgical, which is to say, unofficial. Christianity–Catholicism identifies the supernatural with the saint, who remains a physical person in their real humanity. But the sacred and the saintly are only so if recognizable and defined in the concrete and tangible expressions of bodies. In this way, every devotee can use religion independently and personally.

In Southern Italy, sacredness lives in holiness. Religion and the Church communicate with the sacred through communication with the saint. Sacredness is entirely personalized. The cult of the sacred is a cult of the saint in person. The sphere of the sacred is achieved through the relationship with a saint.²¹

To understand the culture, politics and economy of Southern Italy it is essential to understand the district’s popular religion, which is the instrument for defining the type of society it

²¹ Galasso, 82.

remains. The saints and their miracles are not a folkloristic appendix, but the very underpinning of society.²²

The case of “Baby Donato” like many other extra-liturgical cults in Southern Italy follows the path leading to the recognition of the holiness of primitive Christianity in the 20th century.²³ The cult of the saints in Christianity was established by defining the unique relationship between the body of the deceased and devotees’ physical contact with their remains, which requires a more accessible placement separate from other dead. “Baby Donato” is located on the altar of a sanctuary, not in the cemetery together with the other dead. This superiority comes from the mythical story of the mother herself and of her supernatural pact with St Donatus. The narration is accepted by devotees and representatives of the local church when they retain the body in the church as a “gift.” The case of “Baby Donato” and others like it, can be considered an example of “religious liberalism,” a form of democracy of the recognition of the sacred. Any believer who suffers can manage the divine directly, becoming a “mystic” or a “lay priest.”

The Gift of the Body for the Redemption of Pain: Are We Still in a “Land of Remorse”?

The representatives of the local church accepted the body in the church as a “gift” or, in other words, as the outcome of a promise to the saint. Having become a relic and a holy body, the funeral rite of the dead, consecrated child never ended. “Baby Donato,” compliant with the wishes of his mother, continues to be part of the group of devotees of the “headless Saint.” Even now he is presented as protecting the social group of devotees and, more generally, all local inhabitants.

Like any gift to the sanctuary, the unadulterated “residue” of a newborn child testifies to the power of the saint and nourishes the faith of devotees who still go to the shrine. After entering the church, the women make the ritual sign of the cross and blow a kiss towards Donatino’s glass shrine, in an affectionate maternal gesture. Other faithful pray to St Donatus both in front of his “adult” statue and in front of the child’s glass shrine. Because the name Donato means “given” in Italian, Catholics believe the ailment (epilepsy) is “given” by the saint to his “subjects.” Thus, in exchange for being cured, they give him grain. In this case,

²² De Rosa, 80.

²³ Brown, 12.

though, the sick child's mother embarked on a much greater initiative, and actually "gave" the saint the dead body of the sick child. Her act is truly paradoxical.

Analyzing the cult of the mummified child in Celenza sul Trigno, in Abruzzo, allows us to understand not only the establishment of an autonomous expression of popular religion, but also illustrates anthropological mechanisms that expand from a simple mythical individual "invention" into a wider scenario. A devotion expands into a large-scale dimension when it satisfies the needs of the imagination of large groups, as is the case with "Baby Donato."

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“Baby Donato” in the church of San Donato in Celenza sul Trigno, Abruzzi, Italy (2020).