



## OUR LADY OF THE MILK

You can find this point of interest in Cantù – Path 1

### DESCRIPTION

(Silvia Fasana)

The “Our Lady of the Milk” or “Breastfeeding Madonna”, *Virgo lactans* in Latin, from an iconography's point of view, is a Madonna who feeds the Holy Child with milk while uncovering her breast. It is a widespread devotion, documented since the origin of Christendom, especially in the countryside during the XIV-XVI centuries, addressing a very precise need for many women: a divine help to solve the many problems concerning motherhood, birth and breast-feeding. The ancestral themes of fertility, generation and birth find their roots in the popular culture since the antiquity, to the point that, from an anthropological point of view, the figure of the breastfeeding Madonna is strictly tied to those of the prehistorical Venus, of Isis and of the great Mother Goddesses. After the Council of Trento (1545-1563) this Madonna was considered “improper”, embarrassing and, as such, progressively dropped. The Archbishops of Milan themselves, St. Carlo Borromeo and his cousin Federico, looked forward to aligning and addressing holy painting and arts in the Milanese area towards greater dignity and religious rigour.

Many paintings of the breastfeeding Madonna, especially in the XVIII-XIX centuries, were censored, covered or renamed, to the point of being replaced by images of the Madonna of the Rosary, or of the Immaculate Virgin, that is, by expressions of changed religious models and needs.

With their modest and humble gesture of breast-feeding, so motherly and human, the breastfeeding Madonnas still translate in everyday terms a key theological concept, indeed the outstanding expression of the novelty of the Christian message: the Incarnation of God. This message is so important, to be expressed by a tender and familiar figure, close to everyday happiness and sufferings, to the difficulty and greatness to be a woman, a mother and, at the same time, the powerful mediator with her own son, who is God, to achieve material and spiritual graces. The ethnographer Natale Perego pointed out that: *«the image of the breast-feeding Madonna brings us back to ages when children were born with much greater frequency, were considered a present from God, and when genuflecting in front of the Virgin Mary took its sense from the sacredness ingrained with life, and the sense of mystery of seeing a new being coming to life in a mother's womb. This belief, this awareness, were the cultural foundation that gave sense and legitimated the devotion for the “breast-feeding Madonna”, a belief that today is more and more difficult to find»*.

In Cantù the “*Madonna Bella*” (Beautiful Madonna) was painted on a wall right out the medieval gate of Campo Rotondo; the *Madonnina di San Paolo* (St. Paul's Little Madonna) was originally painted on a stretch of the city walls besides Porta Ferraia; another Madonna, in S. Antonio, was found aside the west entrance point to the city, and, at the same time, other images of the Virgin Mary have been signaled in San Rocco (formerly Coldonico) and Porta Sant'Ambrogio (Saint Ambrogio's Gate). Graziano Alfredo Vergani writes about the attribution of a sacred value to the entrances of the city, a visible request of protection: documented sources show that in Cantù, as in other places, the entrances were often decorated with sacred images, *«at times devotional paintings were placed close to the city gates, at times oratories were built on the sides of the gates, or greater and relevant churches were situated along the roads that led out of the city, just before the gates»*.