

Francesca's difficult decision

Scholarly sources:

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Meet Francesca

Francesca was a fourteen-year-old girl living in Italy during the early sixteenth century.

In many ways, Francesca led a charmed life.



You see, Francesca lived in the city of Florence during the Renaissance. The Renaissance was the time when there was a great revival of art, literature, invention, and learning in Europe.

And it all began with Florence.



In the late Middle Ages, Florence became wealthy. One of their most profitable industries was the textile trade, including wool- and silk-making.



In time, the textile guilds became so rich that they were able to finance beautiful buildings, artwork, and even charitable and educational institutions.



One of these charitable institutions was an orphanage called the *Ospedale degli Innocenti*.

And this is where Francesca's life had its challenges.



You see, as an infant, Francesca was dropped off in a basket at the door of the *Innocenti*.

Because there was no note in her basket, the staff at the orphanage didn't know anything about her family. They had her baptized in the Catholic Church and named her Francesca.



Innocenti staff then sent her to a wet nurse in a village outside of Florence to be cared for until she was two.



Francesca then returned to the orphanage where she would be allowed to stay until she was about fifteen.

Francesca made friends with the other orphans. Many had come to the *Innocenti* with some family information. The parents may have talked to the staff or left notes.

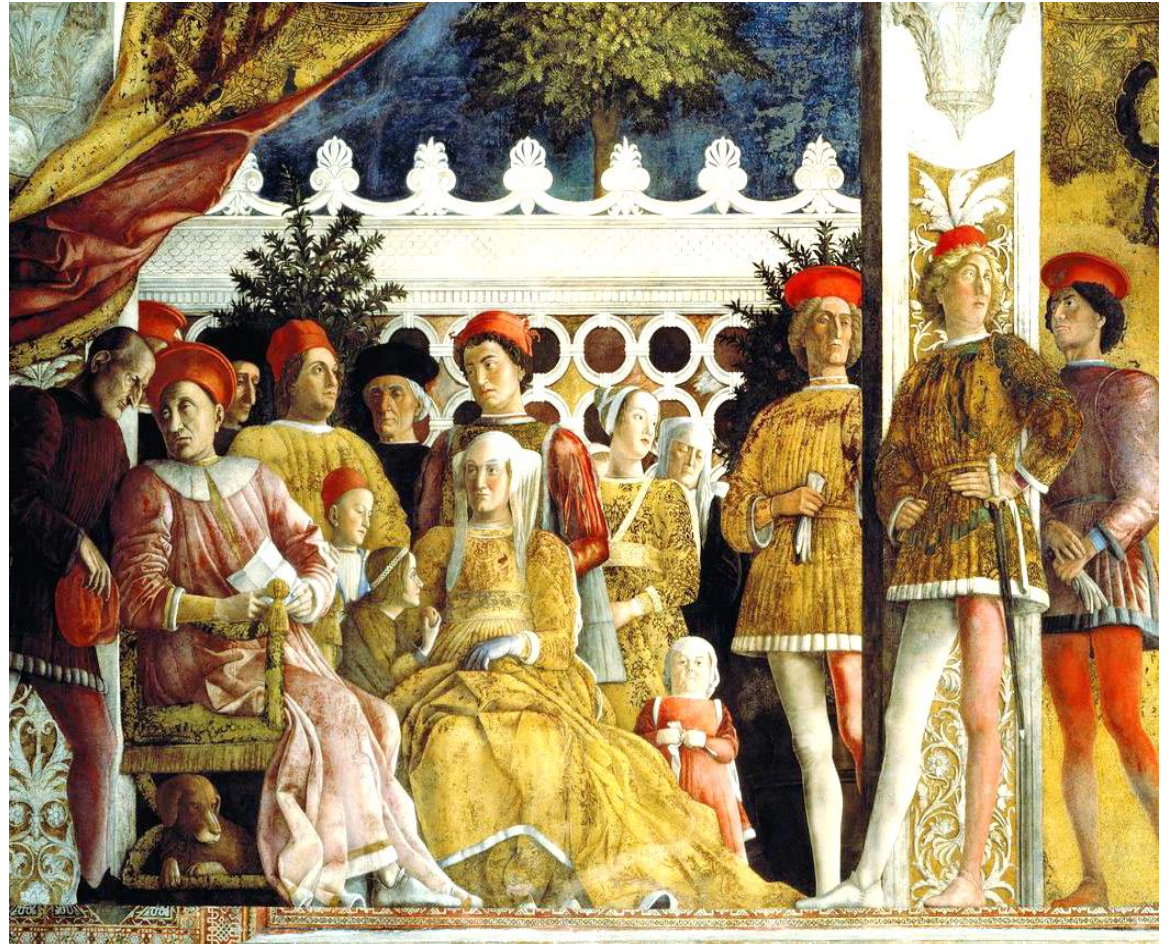


Most were children of unmarried mothers; others were children of parents too poor to support them; and some had come to the orphanage because one parent had recently died.



In two cases, the babies had been the children of noble families where there had been a recent death of a wife or husband.

Sometimes the parents promised to return for the children at a later date.



And so Francesca waited. Would she learn about her family one day? Would one of her parents return for her before she was fifteen?

But alas, this did not happen. And now Francesca would have to make a decision—what would she do with the rest of her life?



As she sat sadly considering her options, her thoughts wandered back to her days at the *Innocenti*.



The *Innocenti* was different from other orphanages of its time. Even though the *Innocenti* owned taverns and a great estate of lands for share-cropping, the orphanage did not turn their children into laborers. Instead, they used the profits from the land and enterprises to provide food and clothing for the orphans.



The orphanage took in any child that was dropped off at their door. Francesca herself had once found a child left naked on a blanket on the cold walkway.

"Oh you poor darling," she'd cried, carefully lifting the infant.



She brought the baby girl inside and looked for the most beautiful blankets the *Innocenti* had, and then wrapped her like a grand lady.

"You will be safe now, my little princess," she cooed. "I was once left on a walkway like you too."

Francesca watched over the child for years, making sure that she always had the finest clothes available at the orphanage.



The Silk Guild had set up the orphanage to be a *famiglia*—or family—to the children. The staff played roles of parents.

They provided the children with what they needed. Boys got to go to school to learn a trade. Girls were taught cooking, weaving, sewing, and keeping house--preparing them for possible marriage.



The children were often taken on outings to the great cultural centers in Florence, such as the magnificent Duomo. Francesca remembered the first time she looked up and saw the gorgeous paintings on the inside of its dome.



At times, the children were taken on long boat or carriage rides along the Arno River in Florence.



Francesca and her age mates got to see the great works of art of her townsman, Leonardo da Vinci.



And in some ways the paintings of Leonardo reminded Francesca of the *Innocenti*.

Francesca knew that Leonardo himself was the child of an unmarried woman. She often wondered how this had affected his life. "But he is a man," she thought. "He probably wasn't judged as harshly as we girls at the *Innocenti* will be."



But the biggest gift that the Silk Guild and the *Innocenti* had offered its children was the dowry fund. Each girl was guaranteed a modest dowry, or a set amount of money that would go to her future husband to help him become independent and care for her and their future children.

Without a dowry no girl in Florence could marry.



Without a dowry a young woman couldn't even enter a convent.

And single women without dowries in Florence were often forced to become ladies of the street (or brothels) just to earn enough money to feed themselves.

The dowry was everything.



And now the time had come. Francesca had to make her decision. She would be fifteen in a month.

She could stay on at the *Innocenti* and work as a member of staff. She might cook, or care for the young children, or teach the young women needed household skills. Was this a good choice?



Being a good Catholic girl, she certainly considered the convent. Many of her age mates had made this choice. As a nun she could live a life of prayer and service to others. Francesca liked the idea of service.

Her dowry would enable her to enter the convent.

Would this be her choice?



She also considered marriage. After all, she certainly loved children. One of the sharecroppers on the orphanage's estate was a man from a nearby village with three grown sons.

Francesca had visited their home with her *Innocenti* "mothers" once to pass out Christmas gifts. One of the sons—Antonio (see right)—had taken an interest in her.

Francesca's dowry would enable Antonio to purchase a plot of land and live independently with a new family. Antonio's father was really pushing for this marriage.



Would this be her choice?



But Francesca had reasons to worry.
Because she knew nothing about her own
birth family, she feared that the
outside world would discriminate against
her.

She just was not sure.



What would you do?
Time to discuss.

Now let's see what she decided

Francesca had made her decision. She would stay at the *Ospedale degli Innocenti*. Here she would live out her life in service, and be surrounded by the children she so loved.



And she would still have the opportunity to go on her cultural outings from time to time.

Her life would be as full as it could possibly be, given the times.



Were you right?

The end

Let's talk!