

Smell, taste and space elevated, individualised and contextualised lay devotion in the early modern period. As smell, taste and space each act on the body, they can be referred to as corporeal senses.¹ David Howes has stated that senses acted as a medium for situational experience in the early modern era.² Sensory history is a challenging area. Sensory experience is inherently individual.³ Evidence for lay experience of the senses is mediated through limited textual sources, removing us from immediate experiential data.⁴ This essay will first consider the scholarly debates around this question. Then, it will demonstrate that the corporeal senses expanded lay participation in liturgical devotion, acted as channels by which devotion was interiorised, and finally contextualised lay reverence within communities of devotion.

Scholarship corresponding to this question falls into three discussions, revolving around sensory scholarship, lay devotion and understandings of space. The efficacy of understanding past sensory experiences is richly debated. Lucian Febvre grounded historical-sensory research in modern psychology, an approach defended by Peter Hoffer.⁵ More recently, historians have proposed sensory experience as too subjective to understand retrospectively, with Alain Corbin, Mark Smith and Weitse de Boer warning against anachronism.⁶ Scholarship has also recently reevaluated the paradigms through which the relationship between lay and episcopal religion in this era is viewed.⁷ Though some scholars argue against the characterisation of early-

¹ Robert Jutte, *A History of the Senses from Antiquity to Cyberspace*, trans. James Lynn (Cambridge, 2005), p. 42.

² David Howes, 'Introduction', in David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses* (Oxford, 2005), p. 4.

³ Alain Corbin, 'Charting the Cultural History of the Senses', in David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses* (Oxford, 2005), p. 129.

⁴ Wietse de Boer, 'The Counter-Reformation of the Senses', in Alexandra Bamji, Geert Janssen and Mary Laven (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation* (London, 2013), p. 246.

⁵ Corbin, 'Cultural History', p. 128; de Boer, 'Senses', p. 249; Peter Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds of Early America* (Baltimore, 2004), p. 253.

⁶ Corbin, 'Cultural History', p. 129; Mark Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching History* (Los Angeles, 2007), p. 120; de Boer, 'Senses', p. 243.

⁷ Trevor Johnson, 'Holy Fabrications: The Catacomb Saints and the Counter-Reformation in Bavaria', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47:2 (1996), p. 274.

modern lay devotion as private, Elisa Novi Chavarria poses that a public-private devotional paradigm circumvents problematic ideas of top-down or centre-periphery relationships.⁸ Scholars have framed both public and private space as religiously constructive.⁹ Drawing these discussions together, it can be posed – with Irene Galandra Cooper – that public devotion and domestic piety were mediated through the senses.¹⁰

Space, taste and smell extended lay devotion both spatially and temporally. Marcia Hall has highlighted the early-modern spatial inclusion of laypeople in liturgical devotion.¹¹



Image 1 - Andrea Sacchi, 'Il Gesu: Reference', oil on canvas, 1639, found at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13898167>> [accessed 29th November 2022]

Ecclesiastical architecture demonstrates this. The Church of Gesù, in Rome was built 1568-1580 on a centralised plan.¹² This enhanced congregational focus on both the high and peripheral altars.¹³ Andrea Sacchi's painting of the church demonstrates the proximity of the congregation to the elevated altar [Image 1]. Similarly, extant church buildings were

⁸ Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser, 'The Ex Voto between Domestic and Public Space', in Maya Corry, Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin (eds), *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden, 2019), p. 46; Elisa Novi Chavarria, 'Domestic Religion and Connected Spaces: Isabella della Rovere, Princess of Bisagno (1552-1619)', in Maya Corry, Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin, *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden, 2019), p. 139.

⁹ Simon Ditchfield, 'Reading Rome as a Sacred Landscape', in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 191; Duane Corpis, 'Mapping the Boundaries of confession: space and urban religious life in the diocese of Augsburg, 1648-1750', in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 21

¹⁰ Irene Galandra Cooper, 'Unlocking 'pious homes': revealing devotional exchanges and religious materiality in early modern Naples', *Renaissance Studies*, 33:5 (2019), p. 852.

¹¹ Marcia Hall, 'Introduction', in Marcia Hall and Tracy Cooper (eds), *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 3.

¹² Elizabeth Tingle, 'The sacred space of Julien Maunior: the re-Christianising of the landscape in seventeenth-century Brittany', in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 243.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

renovated to enhance lay integration with liturgical services. Cesare Baronio's restoration of the Church of St Nero and St Achilleo, 1596-1587, raised the presbytery, allowing congregants greater proximity to the displayed relics.¹⁴ The French parish church of Saint-Thegonnec typifies mid-sixteenth century architectural reform – the steps to the altar were widened and the rood screen was demolished, giving the congregation spatial and visual access to the elevation of the host during mass, enhancing lay liturgical participation.¹⁵ The English Protestant archbishop Thomas Cranmer, mocking Catholic saintly veneration, wrote that “the people run from their seats to the altar, and from altar to altar”.¹⁶ That Protestant critics emphasised the spatial engagement of lay congregants illustrates the integrity of this spatial participation to early modern Catholicism. Within Niall Atkinson's rubric that architectural space operates as an extension of the body, these examples show that ecclesiastical space allowed lay devotees corporeal space in liturgical devotion.¹⁷

Similarly, taste and smell temporally and physically extended the experience of lay devotion beyond the bounds of the church building and service. This is clearest in the example of the Agnus Dei. These wax tokens, made from the previous year's Paschal candle and infused with scented baptismal balsam, symbolised the wafers of the host, which was tasted by the congregants during Mass.¹⁸ Dominican Vincenzo Bonardo recorded that they were “given to [congregants] to take home”, with the recommendation to burn them to release “their

¹⁴ Ditchfield, 'Reading Rome', p. 177.

¹⁵ Tingle, 'Julien Maunior', p. 244.

¹⁶ Thomas Cranmer, quoted in Virginia Reinburg, 'Liturgy and the Laity in Late Medieval and Reformation France', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23:3 (1992), p. 527.

¹⁷ Niall Atkinson, *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture and Florentine Urban Life* (Philadelphia: 2006), p. 138.

¹⁸ Barbara Baert, 'An Odour. A Taste. A touch. Impossible to Describe': *Noli me tangere* and the Senses', in Wietse de Boer and Christine Gottler (eds), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2013), p. 140.

perfume”.¹⁹ This perfumery release olfactorily re-enacted the tasting of the Eucharist. Lay worship of Christ – admittedly, not a saint, but the one whom the saints represented – was thus temporally and spatially extended into the domestic sphere. Just as the lay experience of ecclesiastical space operated to extend lay liturgical devotion, the scent of the Agnus Dei enabled them to sensorily continue corporeal devotion beyond liturgical spaces.

Beyond enhancing lay liturgical devotion, smell, taste and space functioned in relation to the body to interiorise lay devotional activities. Scented rosary beads illustrate how smell individualised lay veneration to the Virgin. Amber rosary beads, popular in this period, when warmed in contact with the skin or in friction with each other, released a scent.²⁰ Rosewood beads accomplished the same effect, as did pomander beads [Image 2; Image 3].²¹



Image 2- Rosewood and bone rosary, c. 1550-1650, Diocese of Trent, found in Maya Corry, Deborah Howard, Mary Laven (eds), *Madonnas & Miracles, The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 97.



Image 3 - Coral Rosary with a pomander, c. 1570, Budapest, Iparművészeti Múzeum, found in Maya Corry, Deborah Howard, Mary Laven (eds), *Madonnas & Miracles, The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 96.

¹⁹ Bonardo Vincenzo, *Discorso intorno all'origine, antichità et virtù degli Agnus Dei di cera benedetti* (Rome, Vincenzo Accoliti: 1586), p. 29, quoted in Irene Galandra Cooper, 'Investigating the 'Case' of the Agnus Dei in Sixteenth-Century Italian Homes', in Maya Corry, Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin, *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden, 2019), p. 226.

²⁰ Lisa Beaven, 'The Early Modern Sensorium: The Rosary in Seventeenth-Century Rome', *Journal of Religious History*, 44:4 (2020), p. 461.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

The hyper-individual experience of smell can be tied to the personalisation in bead design, highlighted by Suzanna Ivanic, indicating the individualised nature of this form of devotion.²² Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* stressed the personally spiritually creative nature of smell.²³ De Boer argues thus that just as smell was experienced internally, so the devotion it contributed to fashioned the inner self.²⁴ The example of scented rosary devotion therefore illustrates the individualisation of lay devotion achieved through smell.

Similarly, space personalised lay devotion to saints by bringing veneration into the structural interior of the devotees' lives. Whilst some scholars argue against the notion of early modern domestic privacy, others have emphasised the intimate nature of domestic oratories.²⁵ For example, Alain Mero has highlighted the bedroom's function as a devotional space.²⁶ The



Image 4 - 'Sick man in bed prays with rosary, attended by wife and children', Sixteenth Century, Naples, Ill Museo degli ex voto del santuario di Madonna dell'Arco, found in Maya Corry, Deborah Howard, Mary Laven (eds), *Madonnas & Miracles, The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 2017), p.7.

Princess of Bisagno's death records detailed saints' images in her private chamber, whilst one sixteenth century painting illustrates veneration of the Virgin in a bedchamber [Image 4].²⁷ The situation of the bedroom as the site of personal milestones – birth, death, sickness and reproduction,

²² Suzanna Ivanic, *Cosmos and Materiality in Early Modern Prague* (Oxford, 2021), p. 179.

²³ 'The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola', trans. Charles Seager (London, 1847), p. 56.

²⁴ De Boer, 'the Senses', p. 246.

²⁵ Garnett and Rosser, 'Ex Voto', p. 46; Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard and Mary Laven, *The Sacred Home In Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 2018), p. 3.

²⁶ Cited in Jennifer Hamilton, *Female Piety and the Catholic Reformation in France* (Abingdon, 2016), p. 74.

²⁷ Chavarria, 'Connected Spaces', p. 153.

suggests that the spatial conflation of bedroom and oratory acted as a highly personalised form of lay veneration.²⁸

Lay veneration to saints often involved kissing saintly bodies, demonstrating that taste also interiorised lay devotion to saints. Descriptions of lay devotees' reactions in Goa to the incorruptible body of Francis Xavier, even before his canonisation, reference that they "would not stop kissing his feet".²⁹ That such kissing was ultimately an act of tasting is clear in its extension into faux- and real-ingestion of relics. Clara Alvares' testimony to the beatification trial for Francis Xavier recalled that a woman "kissing his feet...bit [off a toe] with her teeth."³⁰ Though this toe was not ingested, others did eat relics – in Arjona, Juan Diz de Salas baked bread using bone dust from locally-venerated martyrs.³¹ Devotional texts associated the acquisition of saintly virtue with ingestion– Cardinal Borromeo recommended "a life of the saints" be read "after supper" to "acquire...[their] virtues".³² This association of the acquisition of personal holiness with mealtimes, in tandem with the kissing and ingestion of saintly remains, shows that taste held an assimilative role in lay devotion to saints – symbolically and functionally interiorising sanctity within the body of the devotee.

²⁸ Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard and Mary Laven, *The Sacred Home In Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 2018), p. 3; Valeria Viola, 'Spaces for Domestic Devotion in the Noble Residences of Palermo in the Age of Catholic Reform', in Maya Corry, Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin, *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden, 2019), p. 75.

²⁹ Aires Brandao, to Colleagues in Coimbra, Goa, December 23, 1554, *Documenta Inca* 3:176, quoted in Liam Brockey, 'The Cruellest Honor: The Relics of Francis Xavier in Early-Modern Asia', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 101:1 (2015), p. 49.

³⁰ 'Canonization Process for Francis Xavier from Cochin, Santa Cruz de Cochin, July 10, 1616 December 10, 1616', quoted in Liam Brockey, 'Cruellest Honour', p. 50.

³¹ Igor Sosa Mayor, 'Experimenting with Relics: Laypeople, Knowledge and Relics in Seventeenth-century Spain', in Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin, *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World* (Leiden, 2019), p. 239.

³² Carlo Borromeo, quoted in Katherine Tye, 'Daily Devotions, in Maya Corry, Deborah Howard, Mary Laven (eds), *Madonnas & Miracles, The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 19.

The corporeal senses, then, functioned to interiorise lay devotion – emotively through scent, domestically, through space, and bodily, through taste. However, they did not limit lay devotion to the personal sphere but contextualised it within broader schemas of devotion.³³ Valeria Viola proposes that the opening of oratories to the public consolidated religious communities.³⁴ The private oratory of the Palagonia Villa in Bagheria, built 1658, was semi-public, as was the oratory chapel of the confraternity of San Filippo Benizi.³⁵ In keeping with Atkinson’s theory about the urban dynamics of Catholic devotion in this period, these public lay devotional spaces held lay devotional activity in communal terms.³⁶ Community processions venerating the holy bodies of the catacomb saints in Bavaria and Italian urban displays of the IHS symbol, both understood contextually as symbolic of the eucharistic host, demonstrate that allusions to taste also functioned to contextualise lay devotion in relation to community veneration.³⁷ Thus, through spatial mixing and the communal veneration of visual invocations of the host, taste and space rooted lay veneration of saints in communities of devotion.

Furthermore, whilst the corporeal senses enabled the interiorisation of lay devotion and rooted it in lay communities, they also acted as frameworks through which ecclesiastical authority over lay devotion was asserted. The regulation of ecclesiastical space directed lay devotion to saints in conformity to ecclesiastical order. This is clear in the restriction of access to saintly bodies. Giovanni Francesco Careri described how the Jesuits kept the body of Francis Xavier

³³ Garnett and Rosser, ‘Ex Voto’, p. 61.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁵ Viola, ‘Noble Residences’, p. 68; Ludovica Sebgondi, ‘Religious Furnishings and Devotional Objects in Renaissance Florentine Confraternities’, in Konrad Eisenbicher (ed), *Crossing the Boundaries* (Kalamazoo, 1991), pp. 114-145.

³⁶ Atkinson, *Noisy Renaissance*, p. 202.

³⁷ Brudin, Howard and Laven, *Sacred Home*, p. 52; Noria Litakaer, ‘Hoc Est Coprus Meum: Whole-Body Catacomb Saints and Eucharistic Doctrine in Baroque Bavaria’, in Walter Melion, Elizabeth Carson Pastan and Lee Palmer Wandel (eds), *Quid est sacramentum?* (Leiden, 2020), p. 158.

locked away from public view for most of the year.³⁸ Other saints' bodies were kept in sight



Figure 5 - Gold lantern-shaped pendant reliquary, gold, enamel, rock crystal, wood, c. 1550-1600, London, British Museum, found at:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_WB-183> [accessed 29th November 2022].

but out of reach of lay devotees.³⁹ Thus, the direction of the space within which lay devotees interacted with the saints they venerated emphasised the mediation of the Church in their devotions. The architectural framing of lay devotional devices – for example, the framing columns of one Mexican pendant reliquary – demonstrates the extent to which veneration of saints was understood in ecclesiastically-mediated spatial terms [image 5].

Finally, Trevor Johnson posed that the use of visual olfactory imagery – of St Primianus holding thuribles on an altarpiece – conveyed Tridentine ideas to the laity about the role of the saints as channels for devotion rather than objects for worship.⁴⁰ In this way, lay veneration of St Primianus was channelled through the invocation of smell into an ecclesiastically-sanctioned attitude of veneration. Thus, space and smell communicated the place of lay devotion within ecclesiastical stricture and structure. Thus, the corporeal senses acted both to contextualise lay devotion in community and in ecclesiastical schemas of devotion.

In conclusion, smell, taste and space had three core roles in early modern lay devotion to saints: extending lay liturgical participation, interiorising veneration, and rooting lay devotion in community and ecclesiastical structures. As Will Coster and Andrew Spicer have argued with

³⁸ Brockery, 'Cruellest Honor', p. 60

³⁹ Ditchfield, 'Reading Rome', p. 179.

⁴⁰ Johnson, 'Holy Fabrications', p. 290.

regards to space, there can be no one meaning or function attributed to the corporeal senses.⁴¹ The sensory experience of the early modern lay devotee was one of complementary layering. Where the corporeal senses enabled lay agency in liturgical contexts, they similarly functioned to regulate lay devotion under ecclesiastical frameworks. This illustrates not a top-down nor a centre-periphery approach to lay devotion, but one rooted in situational experience. Similarly, the conclusions of this essay speak to the tension between private and public devotion, as highlighted by Garnett and Rosser.⁴² Where sensory experience interiorised devotion to saints, it also contextualised it within community contexts. Together, these conclusions offer a direction for sensory historiography: the reclamation of sensory pasts provides new lenses through which to view early modern dynamics of devotion. Ultimately, space, taste and smell complementarily extended and regulated lay devotion to saints.

⁴¹ Will Coster and Andrew Spicer, 'Introduction', in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 14.

⁴² Garnett and Rosser, 'Ex Voto', p. 45.

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