

Wingless Angels: Homer as an Authoritative Historical and Aesthetic Source in Early Modern Period

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Abstract. This paper discusses the unusual reference to Homer in Federico Borromeo's *De pictura sacra* in which Homer is quoted as an authoritative aesthetic and historical source to justify the depiction of wingless angels by Michelangelo. It is said that the great Greek poet represented the gods without wings as if they could move with their feet joined together. The first part of the article examines this relatively obscure remark and its possible sources. One of the reasons for such a quotation is the general Renaissance attitude towards Classical texts to provide a historical perspective and establish an authoritative argumentation. However, a closer analysis discloses that Borromeo refers to Homer not simply as an aesthetic and historical but as a quasi-theological source of God-inspired wisdom.

Keywords: Homer, early modern period, humanism, art theory, art treatises, Federico Borromeo.

Besparniai angelai: Homero tekstai kaip autoritetingas istorinis ir estetiškas šaltinis ankstyvaisiais moderniaisiais laikais

Anotacija. Straipsnyje aptariama Federico Borromeo traktate *De pictura sacra* pavartota neįprasta citata, kurioje Homero tekstai pateikiami kaip autoritetingas estetiškas ir istorinis šaltinis, pagrindžiantis besparnių angelų vaizdavimą Michelangelo Buonarroti darbuose. Borromeo tekste teigiama, kad didis graikų poetas dievus vaizdavo be sparnų ir judančius tarsi suglaustomis kojomis.

Pirmoje straipsnio dalyje analizuojama ši sąlyginai miglota užuomina ir galimi jos šaltiniai. Viena iš minėto argumento radimosi priežastys – bendrasis Renesanso epochos požiūris į antikinius tekstus, siekiant argumentams suteikti istorinės perspektyvos ir kultūrine tradicija pagrįsto autoritetingumo. Detalesnė aptariamo teksto analizė atskleidžia, kad Borromeo pateikia nuorodą į Homero tekstus ne tik kaip į estetinį ir istorinį, bet ir kaip į savotišką pseudoteologinį Dievo įkvėptos išminties šaltinį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Homeras, ankstyvieji modernieji laikai, humanizmas, meno teorija, meno traktatai, Federico Borromeo.

The year was 1624. The archbishop of Milan cardinal Federico Borromeo published his treatise *De pictura sacra* in which he outlined his theory on sacred and profane images and defended the use of images in the Catholic church fixed on tradition, historical, and theological sources. Borromeo's ideas corresponded with the general post-Tridentine Catholic approach to visual arts of the age, and the humanism inspired disposition to return *ad fontes*. In the second book of *De pictura sacra*, which is dedicated to the instructions on how to create images of the saints that are consistent with historical truth, Borromeo also discussed the depiction of angels. His primary argument is that wings differentiate angels from human beings; and the author continues to analyse whether such distinctive attributes are required or not.¹ This question might seem straightforward, but Borromeo's answer is rather complicated. The cardinal argues that some important writers believe angels should be shown with wings, yet agrees that such images are merely fabrications of human imagination. As angels are formless pure spirits, any attempt to render their image ends up being an imperfect representation or the symbol of their true nature. Nonetheless, the very first name that Borromeo mentions as a precedent is Michelangelo who depicted angels without wings, and this is instantly backed up by an example from Homer.² This particular reference to Homer as a historical and aesthetic authority poses several questions that I am going to try to unravel in this article. To what exactly Borromeo is referring? Why Homer is chosen as a distinct source? And why Homer is employed as an aesthetic and historical testimonial?

1. The riddle of the quote

Borromeo writes that the great pagan poet Homer represented the gods without wings that are able to move without taking steps with their legs joined together (*iunctis pedibus*). Any admirer of the Classics would probably instantly consider that this implication is a clear reference to the first book of the *Iliad* in which Apollo strides down from Olympus.³

¹ Borromeo, *De pictura sacra*, 2.6.1 [75]: *Cum pulcherrimae mortalium formae hactenus tractatae sint, consentaneum erit Angelorum quoque formas tractari, cum Caelestes illi Spiritus in humanae formae speciem effingi soleant. Quae formae quoniam ab corporibus humanis alarum praecipue gestamine distinguuntur, videndum erit, deceat ne insignia illa addi Angelis, an vero etiam omitti melius sit* (Up to this point I have discussed the attractiveness of the human figure, but we can surely agree that the depiction of angels needs to be treated too. After all, those heavenly spirits are conventionally rendered with the appearance of human beings. Because it is the wings that primarily differentiate angels from human beings, we need to consider whether it is appropriate for angels to be depicted with or without those distinctive attributes (trans. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr.; I Tatti Renaissance Library)).

² Borromeo, *De pictura sacra*, 2.6.1 [75]: *Sane Michael Angelus absque alis fecit, quas esse supervacaneas petito etiam ab Gentilitate ipsa testimonio et argumento demonstrari potest. Nam Homerus ipse, qui cuncta vidisse et cognovisse creditus est, non solum alarum remigio Deos indigere non putavit, sed iunctis etiam pedibus incedentes fecit nec more nostro gradum explicantes* (Michelangelo, of course, showed them without wings and even the evidence of pagan antiquity suggests it is possible to show that the wings are unnecessary. Homer, for example, who is believed to have seen and known everything, not only thought that the gods had no need of wings but even represented the gods as if they could move about with their feet joined together [that is, without moving them] rather than by taking steps the way we do (trans. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr.)).

³ Hom. *Il.* 1.44–47: βῆ δὲ κατ' Οὐλύμπιοι καρήνων χωόμενος κῆρ, / τόξ' ὄμοισιν ἔχων ἀμφηρεφέα τε φαρέτρην: / ἔκλαγζαν δ' ἄρ' οἴστοι ἐπ' ὤμων χωομένοιο, / αὐτοῦ κινήθεντος: ὁ δ' ἦϊε νυκτι εἰοικώς (Down from the peaks of Olympus he strode, angered at heart, bearing on his shoulders his bow and covered quiver. The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved, and his coming was like the night (trans. A. T. Murray; Loeb Classical Library)).

However, it is as tenebrous as the night in which Phoebus comes. Latin translations of the *Iliad* by Lorenzo Valla or Andreas Divus⁴ do not mention such type of motion and most of the verbs in the Homeric text convey the meaning of bodily movement on foot. Apollo steps down ($\beta\eta$) or urges on (Hom. *Il.* 7.20: $\delta\rho\nu\nu\tau'$), Athena comes (Hom. *Il.* 1.194: $\eta\lambda\theta\epsilon$) or even walks across the plain (Hom. *Il.* 2.801: $\epsilon\rho\chi\omicron\nu\tau\alpha\iota\ \pi\epsilon\delta\acute{\iota}\omicron\iota\omicron$), Aphrodite walks home (Hom. *Il.* 14.224: $\epsilon\beta\eta\ \pi\rho\delta\ \delta\acute{\omicron}\mu\alpha$), Hypnos runs to the Achaean ships (Hom. *Il.* 3.354: $\beta\eta\ \epsilon\pi\acute{\iota}\ \nu\eta\alpha\varsigma\ \text{Αχαι}\acute{\omicron}\nu$), Iris stops for a short breath from her run in the house of Zephyrus (Hom. *Il.* 23.201: $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\eta$), and so on. Especially in the captivating battle scene of the book 5 of the *Iliad*, where Diomedes emboldened by Athena wounds Ares, we read of the Olympians as human warriors, e.g. Athena draws Sthenelus from the chariot and steps upon the car (Hom. *Il.* 5.837: $\epsilon\beta\alpha\iota\nu\epsilon$). Even in the *Odyssey*, Athena is constantly walking or otherwise moving in human manner. She follows Telemachus (Hom. *Od.* 1.125: $\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\pi\epsilon\tau\omicron$), approaches him (Hom. *Od.* 2.267: $\sigma\chi\epsilon\delta\acute{\omicron}\theta\epsilon\nu\ \omicron\acute{\iota}\ \eta\lambda\theta\epsilon\nu$), or leads the way (Hom. *Od.* 3.12: $\eta\rho\chi\epsilon$).

There are also other types of divine movement when Athena flies away as a bird (Hom. *Od.* 1.320: $\delta\rho\nu\iota\varsigma\ \delta'\ \acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\omicron}\pi\alpha\iota\alpha\ \delta\acute{\iota}\epsilon\pi\tau\alpha\tau\omicron$), Apollo moves enwrapped in the cloud (Hom. *Il.* 5.186: $\nu\epsilon\phi\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\eta\ \epsilon\acute{\iota}\lambda\upsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \acute{\alpha}\mu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$; and Hom. *Il.* 15.308: $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \acute{\alpha}\mu\omicron\upsilon\iota\nu\ \nu\epsilon\phi\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\eta\nu$), or Iris is described as the golden-winged; yet this epithet is named only twice (Hom. *Il.* 8.398 and Hom. *Il.* 11.185) and can justifiably be associated with the messages Iris is delivering since in the Homeric universe words have the quality to be winged ($\acute{\epsilon}\pi\epsilon\alpha\ \pi\epsilon\rho\acute{\omicron}\nu\epsilon\tau\alpha$). In Homeric Hymns, Aphrodite recounts to Anchises that Hermes carried her off and her feet seemed not to touch the earth⁵ but she was being transported by Argeiphontes and not moving herself. The closest type of movement to which Borromeo alludes might be when gods move with a quick shooting motion ($\acute{\alpha}\acute{\iota}\sigma\sigma\epsilon\iota\nu$), e.g. when Athena darts down from the peaks of Olympus to Ilion (Hom. *Il.* 7.19), or she leaps down into the midst of men so quickly that everyone is almost stupefied (Hom. *Il.* 4.78–80). Hera does the same and swiftly moves over from Olympus to Pieria, Emathia, over Thracian mountains to Athos, finally reaching Lemnos (Hom. *Il.* 14.225–230); her movement is described as being faster than the human mind (Hom. *Il.* 15.80–85). This particular denotation of movement could be the best contender to express the same action that Borromeo describes as *iunctis pedibus incedentes*; because in idiomatic Latin it expresses vigorousness and intense action (Renahan 1981, 472) and can be associated with the meaning of *modus saltandi* denoting an energetic and forceful action. However, it seems that this notion of divine movement might not come directly from Homer's text.

In his notes on the Vergil's *Aeneid*, the Spanish Humanist historian and jurist – the archbishop of Tarragona Antonio Agustín y Albanell – comments that Heliodorus in the 3 book of his *Aethiopica* describes gods as moving not on foot but by some kind of aerial impetus and that this notion comes from the Egyptian statues of divinities standing with their feet joined together (*iunctis pedibus*) (Carbonell Manils 1994, 423–424). In these

⁴ *Homeri Ilias ad verbum translata*, Andrea Divo Iustinopolitano interprete. Parisiis: In officina Christiani Wecheli, 1538; *Homeri poetarum omnium principis Ilias*, per Laurentium Vallam Latio donata. Lugduni: apud Seb. Gryphium. 1541.

⁵ HH 5, 125: $\omicron\acute{\upsilon}\delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \pi\omicron\sigma\acute{\iota}\ \psi\alpha\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\epsilon\iota\nu\ \acute{\epsilon}\delta\acute{\omicron}\kappa\omicron\upsilon\nu\ \phi\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\zeta\acute{\omicron}\upsilon\ \alpha\acute{\iota}\eta\varsigma$ (My feet never seemed to touch the life-giving earth).

notes, Antonio Agustín compares the commented Vergilian line *et vera incessu patuit dea* (Verg. *A.* 1.405) with the episode of Homer's *Iliad*, in which Aias recognises Poseidon, who has taken the form of the prophet Calchas, from the way he walks.⁶ In the aforementioned passage of *Aethiopica*, Heliodorus writes that gods and other heavenly powers can change into the likeness of men or other creatures, but they can still be recognised by their eyes or by their gait because they move not by setting one foot before another but seem to slide through the air⁷. Heliodorus indicates that this has already been revealed by Homer when he writes that Achilles recognises Pallas from her fiery eyes (Hom. *Il.* 1.200: δεινὸν δέ οἱ ὄσσε φάραθεν), or in the aforementioned lines about Poseidon identified by Aias. Another similar notion can be found in *The Library* by Apollodorus in which the Palladium is described as having feet joined together.⁸ This expression (τοῖς ποσὶ συμβεβηκός) is interpreted as *modus motus* in later commentaries. E.g. Apollodorus is quoted in the Byzantine scholia of Lycophron by Ioannes and Isaaz Tzetzes (Tzetzes 1806, 558) or in the notes on Eusebius' *Chronicle* by Joseph Justus Scaliger (Scaliger 1606, 43). It is not certain which of these sources were accessible to Borromeo but Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, rediscovered and circulated during the 16th century with several editions by Gabriele Giolito de' Ferrari in an Italian translation by Leonardo Ghini (Bongi 1895, 71), might have been in the *Biblioteca Ambrosiana* collection (Argelati 1767, 2:7).

It seems reasonable to imply that Borromeo's notion of movement *iunctis pedibus incedentes* does not come directly from Homeric texts but rather from the later sources and commentaries. In any case, Borromeo's *iunctis pedibus incedentes* denotes a type of fast movement and is important in discussing the depiction of wingless angels. Speed is an angelic quality which the Italian author explores further in his treatise⁹ and that corresponds with the angelological writings by Dionysius the Areopagite¹⁰ as cited by Borromeo in the same chapter. But this leads to a more important question. Why does Borromeo choose Homer as a historical and aesthetic source along Michelangelo to justify the depiction of wingless angels?

⁶ Hom. *Il.* 13.71–72: ἔχρια γὰρ μετόπισθε ποδῶν ἠδὲ κνημῶν / ρεῖ' ἔγνω ἀπίοντος: ἀρίγνωτοι δὲ θεοὶ περ (for easily did I know the tokens behind him of feet and of legs as he went from us; and plain to be known are the gods (trans. A. T. Murray; Loeb Classical Library)).

⁷ Hel. *Aeth.* 3.13: ἀλλὰ τοῖς τε ὀφθαλμοῖς ἂν γνωσθεῖεν ἀνεγὲς δίολου βλέποντες καὶ τὸ βλέφαρον οὐποτε ἐπιωμόντες· καὶ τῷ βαδίματι πλέον, οὐ κατὰ διάστασιν τοῖν ποδοῖν οὐδὲ μετάθεσιν ἀννομένων, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τινα ῥύμην ἀέριον, καὶ ὀρμὴν ἀπαραπόδιστον, τεμνόντων μᾶλλον τὸ περιέχον ἢ διαπορευομένων (He will know them either by their eyes, in that they look steadfastly and never shut their eyelids; or better still by their gait, in that they move not their feet nor set one foot before another, but are carried by some force and unchecked power through the air, rather sliding through than striding over the winds (trans. T. Underdowne, revised by F. A. Wright)).

⁸ Apollod. 3.12: ἦν δὲ τῷ μεγέθει τρίπηχον, τοῖς δὲ ποσὶ συμβεβηκός, καὶ τῇ μὲν δεξιᾷ δόρυ διηρμένον ἔχον τῇ δὲ ἐτέρᾳ ἡλακᾶτην καὶ ἄτρακτον (It was three cubits in height, its feet joined together; in its right hand it held a spear aloft, and in the other hand a distaff and spindle (trans. Sir. J. G. Frazer; The Loeb Classical Library)).

⁹ Borromeo, *De pictura sacra*, 2.6.3 [76]: *Alae ad velocitatem indicandam adduntur, vestis modestiae causa* (They should be wearing wings to signify their speed and clothes to affirm their modesty (trans. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr.)).

¹⁰ Dionysius the Areopagite, *De caelesti hierarchia*, 15.3: τοὺς πόδας δὲ τὸ κινητικὸν καὶ ὄζυ καὶ ἐντρεχὲς τῆς ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα πορευτικῆς ἀεικινήσιος (The feet denote the moving and quickness, and skilfulness of the perpetual movement advancing towards Divine things (trans. J. Parker; The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite)).

2. Borromeo the Renaissance Humanist

There is no point to get into a lengthy examination of how the Renaissance was immersed within the philosophical ideas and cultural dispositions of Antiquity. The humanists perceived themselves as the rational inheritors of the Classical culture, and they reclaimed this tradition to conform to the Christian context (Eire 2016, 90). Borromeo was no exemption. He was almost an archetypal Italian Catholic humanist, and he adhered to the same cultural practices employing Classical texts to provide a historical perspective (Ališauskas 2012, 629–630). I have already discussed in detail the quotation frequency and reference strategies that Borromeo engages in *De pictura sacra*, demonstrating that his theological arguments are justified by the prevailing texts of the Catholic tradition, Christian philosophers, and references to the Bible (Riklius 2019, 104–106).

Borromeo extensively quoted or referred to Classical sources (Jones 1993, 65) in the light of historical perspective to elicit the long-standing cultural, philosophical, and theological tradition. Cicero, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, Xenophon, and other Classical sources are referred to establish a precedent for any cultural practice, however, the instance of Homer as an authoritative historical and aesthetic source appears to be of essentially different disposition. There are only two mentions of Homer in the Borromeo's treatise on sacred art. Another reference is in the chapter on clothing and attributes of the saints, where Homer is referred as a source for Phidias inspiration to make the marble statue of Zeus at Olympia so large that the god could not have stood up inside.¹¹ But in the chapter on the depiction of angels Homer is quoted along the books of Exodus, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zachariah of the Old Testament, the Gospel of Matthew and the Apocalypse of the New Testament, *De caelesti hierarchia* by Dionysius the Areopagite, *Oratio apologetica adversus eos qui sacras imagines abjiciunt* by John of Damascus, and *De imaginum, signorum, et idearum compositione* by Giordano Bruno.¹² Homer is the only non-Christian source considered in *De pictura sacra* chapter on the depiction of angels. Even though Borromeo's conclusion is that angels should be represented with wings as a clear sign of angelic speed, the wingless representation done by Michelangelo and justified by the example of Homer is not refuted. The author agrees that due to the divine nature of angels they can appear in various forms and shapes.¹³ This reference to Homer as a premise to depict wingless angels leads to another important question. Is it possible that Homer is employed by Borromeo not only as an aesthetic and historical testimonial, but also as a quasi-theological source of God-inspired wisdom?

¹¹ Borromeo, *De pictura sacra*, 2.11.7 [104–105]: *Sed ille fortasse respexit Numinis magnitudinem, cuius nutu, et sicuti Homerus cecinit, motu superciliorum regi cuncta arbitraretur* (but Phidias was probably taking into account the significance of a divinity who governed all things by merely nodding or raising his eyebrows (as Homer put it) (trans. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr.).

¹² See notes 120–125 of the Pamela M. Jones commentary to Borromeo's *De pictura sacra* (Borromeo 2010, 246–247).

¹³ Borromeo, *De pictura sacra*, 2.6.4 [77]: *sed nec figura semper apparuere humana. Nam animalium interdum sumpsere formam: rotaeque et lapides preciosi et nubes et venti et flammae in Sacris Litteris divini illi Spiritus fiunt* (Then again, angels have not always appeared in human form. They have, from time to time, taking on the shapes of animals, and in Sacred Scripture they took on the forms of wheels, precious stones, clouds, winds, and the flames of the Holy Spirit (trans. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr.).

3. Homer the Theologian

Homer's ancient epics were extensively studied in the Byzantine tradition but took a long time to make a comeback in the Western culture and even then Homer was regarded as somewhat an exotic writer (Zerba 2017, 831–832; Proserpi 2019, 48–51). There was a translation of the Homeric epic in the personal library of Petrarch interpreted into rough word-by-word Latin sometime in 1360s by Leontius Pilatus (Pertusi 1964, 1–20), which inspired other retranslations by Leonardo Bruni, Pier Candido Decembrio, and Lorenzo Valla, already mentioned before,¹⁴ (Zerba 2017, 832) and a partial hexametric translation into Latin done around 1470 by Angelo Poliziano (Russell 2011, 586). The *editio princeps* of Homer by Demetrius Chalcondyles appeared in Florence only in 1488, but there were few teachers of Ancient Greek in Italy and fewer dictionaries (D'Amico 2018, 10–11). At the same time, the Renaissance humanists had an overwhelming admiration for Homer, attributing to him the origins of art and philosophy (Ford 2006, 2), yet the Renaissance's literary interest in Homer was not in him as an independent author but rather as a Virgil's source (Sowerby 1997, 50–51; Wilson-Okamura 2010, 127).

The general humanistic scholarly attention regarding Greek writings had been focused mainly on the humanist thought based on the interpretation of works by Plato and Aristotle (Monfasani 2008, 1–5). It took nearly two centuries for Homer to steadily come in to the focus of humanist attention (Demetriou 2015, 539–541). Based on the Pseudo-Plutarchan essay *Περὶ Ὁμήρου* which has been translated, rewritten, and incorporated in Poliziano's book *Oratio in expositione Homeri* (1498), the Homeric epics were deemed to contain extensive moral wisdom of Antiquity and hidden allegorical meanings (Ford 2006, 3; Gregory 2002, 572). Renaissance Neopythagoreans and Neoplatonists expanded on the ancient Platonic lines about the divine nature of Homer's poems (Plat. *Ion* 534e) and ascribed Homer the role of quasi-theologian (Lamberton 1986, 10–12). The exegetical method allowed to read Homer as a Christian allegory and to re-evaluate the Homeric epics as texts of God-inspired wisdom partaking in the *doxa* of the Christian tradition (Lamberton 1986, 295–297; Ford 2006, 29). By recourse to allegory, the Renaissance readers were able to select the most spiritually or morally valuable fragments and disregard the pagan context (Wolfe 2020, 502).

The syncretic spirit of the Renaissance tried to reconcile the Christian beliefs with the Classical pagan culture (Burke 2016, 173; Hankins 2006, 139–142) and Homer was no exception. The Renaissance humanists wished to supplement the Christian *Wissenschaft* through the sources of ancient God-inspired wisdom, therefore the prevalent cultural synthesis of the period fostered the attitude towards the Homeric epics as a quasi-theological source of virtue and justness (Grafton 1992, 150–155). Few Renaissance humanists would have disputed Homer's profoundness, wisdom, and morality. Phillip Melanchthon, Guillaume Budé, Estienne and Isaac Casaubon attested that Homer and Moses were contemporaries and by reason of their cultural concurrence researched concordances between the Homeric epics and the Bible (Wolfe 2020, 502). In Melanchthon's oration

¹⁴ See note 4.

Preface to Homer, we can notice an attitude towards Homer as a moral teacher that instils in his readers modesty, respect, and the other virtues (Melanchthon 1999, 43). Melanchthon assesses the morality of Homer from the Christian eschatological position as being beneficial for the soul (Melanchthon 1999, 53), e.g. he reads the lines on the adultery of Aphrodite (Hom. *Od.* 256–332) as an allegory for the vain results of evil deeds, and it is equated with the moral teachings of the Church Fathers (Melanchthon 1999, 43–44). Melanchthon, as other Renaissance Christian humanists, searched for interconnections between Christian theology and the inheritance of Classical Antiquity for the sake of a spiritual renewal and reform (Nauert 2006, 155–158).

The prevalent humanistic approach in the Italian peninsula advocated that theology based purely on the Bible had limited usefulness and needed the assistance of philosophy and the arts, as the theology practised by Saint Paul in his famous Areopagus speech (Acts 14:15–17). A purely scriptural interpretation was deemed to be less vigorous and even fragile. The Catholic theology, influenced by the long-standing tradition of the Church Fathers as Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Origen, Gregory Nazienzen, and John Chrysostom, recognised that by the power of the Holy Spirit God bestows understanding of even the most intricate substance (Minnich 2008, 287–294). Whole human culture is perceived as a manifestation of God’s will and natural revelation (Schlag 2017, 197–198). Human reasoning is required to apprehend divine revelation; thus only a theologian who has the highest erudition of the Bible, patristics, philosophy, and the arts is the exemplary theologian. Such perception of a competent Christian scholar had become conventional around the end of the Tridentine Council (Wicks 1988, 232–234). Catholic humanists saw Homer as a quasi-theological repository of God-inspired wisdom that foreshadows and confirms traditional Christian theology (Wolfe 2020, 503). This is evident in Borromeo’s words about Homer who is believed to have seen and known everything.¹⁵ Borromeo’s argumentation on the depiction of angels includes all the aforementioned aspects: Homer as the God-inspired source of wisdom from Antiquity, Michelangelo as an artistic example, writings of Church Fathers, and the scholarship of the Bible. Such notion was immensely important in the post-Tridentine Church which grounded its theology and practice on the established tradition. Homer and other texts of Classical Antiquity supplied Catholic humanists with a requisite philosophical support in the direct and indirect combat against Protestant heresy (Hankins 2006, 146–148). And Borromeo’s *De pictura sacra* deals with the significant question of the usage of sacred images in the Catholic church, an established practice which has been challenged by the Northern reformers.

4. Concluding Remarks

We can easily infer that for the Renaissance humanists the Homeric epics were like an archaeological site from which they could dig out information about the culture and morality of the ancients. The syncretic regard towards the past allowed humanist schol-

¹⁵ Borromeo, *De pictura sacra*, 2.6.1 [75]: *Nam Homerus ipse, qui cuncta vidisse et cognovisse creditus est.*

ars to hold Homer in the highest possible esteem as originator of art and philosophy, of morality and human values. Borromeo was no exception. He employed Classical texts to provide a historical perspective to his arguments along with theological Christian sources and the Bible. In Borromeo's passage on the depiction of angels, Homer is regarded as an authentic historical and aesthetic authority as well as God-inspired source of wisdom because Borromeo belongs to the same humanist tradition that deemed the Homeric epics to contain extensive moral wisdom and hidden allegorical meanings.

As I have tried to demonstrate, it is unclear to what exact lines of the Homeric epics Borromeo is referring and it is probable that the source for this information might have been later texts or commentaries. It is also possible that such an approach demonstrates the Italian cardinal exerted other concurrent Renaissance sources that use the exegetical method allowing to read Homer as a Christian allegory. In the analysed passage, Homer is the only non-Christian source, and his authority is not refuted but accepted along with the artistic example of Michelangelo, references to the Bible and other Christian authors. Employing the prevalent Catholic humanistic approach, it allowed to establish Homer as an authentic historical, aesthetic authority and God-inspired source of wisdom confirming traditional Christian theology for the depiction of wingless angels. The question remains why Borromeo wanted to justify such representation as a possibility, but this is a subject for further studies analysing the intellectual and aesthetic background of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church and the attitude towards Michelangelo within it.

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