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## THE ALBA MADONNA: RAPHAEL'S SPHERICAL METHOD OF DESIGN

The creative process of *The Alba Madonna*

Pierre Beaudry, 12/25/2018

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*“How generous and kind Heaven sometimes proves to be when it brings together in a single person the boundless riches of its treasures and all those graces and rare gifts that over a period of time are usually divided among many individuals can clearly be seen in the no less excellent than gracious Raphael Sanzio of Urbino.”<sup>1</sup>* Giorgio Vasari

Raphael's spherical method of design developed in *The Alba Madonna* is epistemologically unique and revolutionary in the sense that the intention of the design is to emphasize simultaneously the embrace of the child and the mother as being all-inclusive of humanity's destiny, but only made feasible through participating in the Passion of the cross as an expression which unites two opposite emotions: one of attractive attachment and tenderness and the other of self-sacrificial detachment. The two emotions are characteristics of the creative process, which requires that the two be unified into a single and unique experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The lives of the Artists*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 305.

Raphael succeeded not only in assimilating and transforming the great artistic principles of composition of Perugino, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, but he mastered, as no other artist has, the power of transmitting the genius of the Italian Renaissance to future generations of artists such as Correggio, Rubens, Velasquez, and many others.

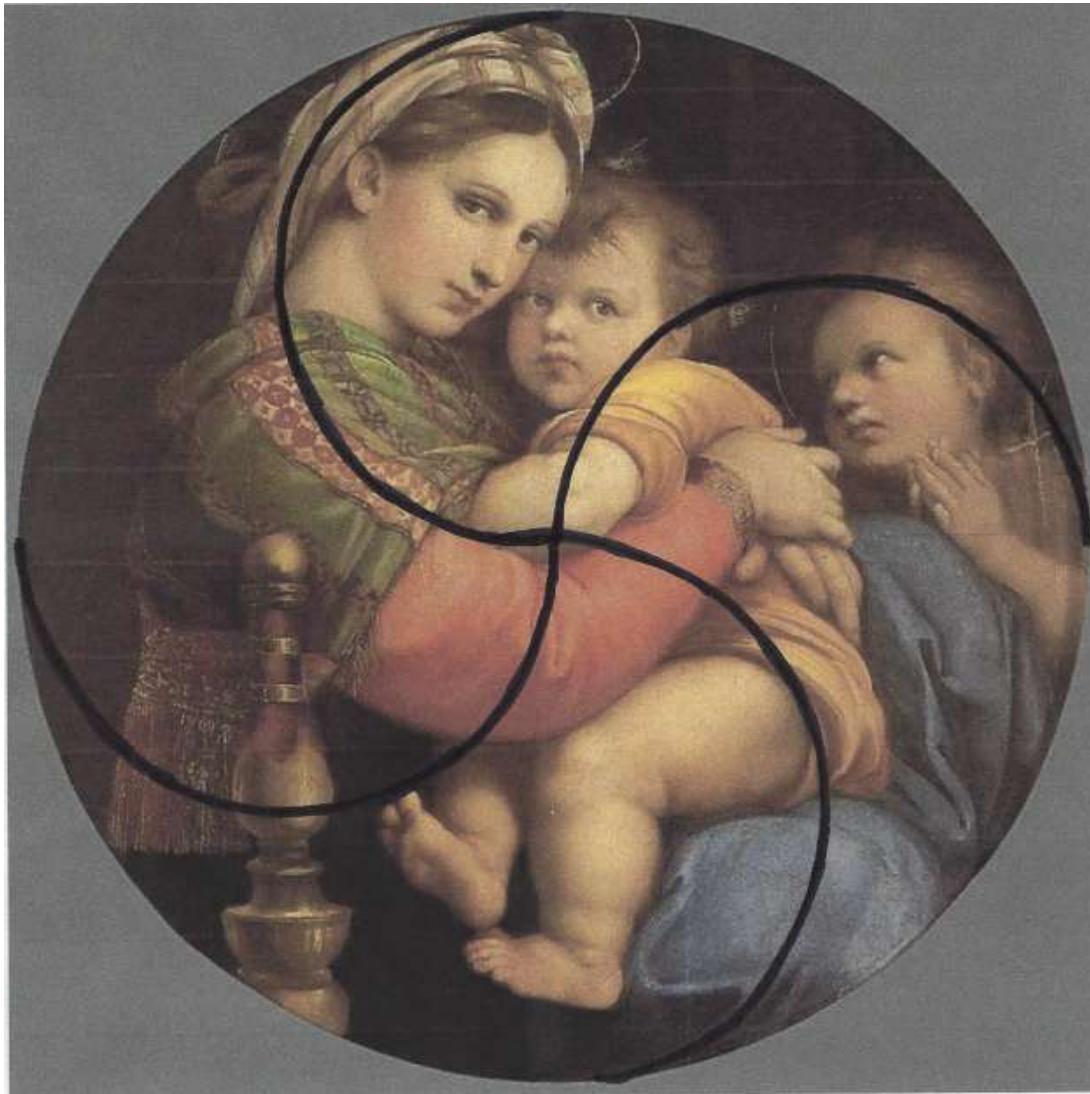
Raphael's genius reached its highest point when, during the short period of the last twelve years of his prolific artistic life, he succeeded in concentrating his mental powers of design as if his mission was to solve the paradox of the Holy Trinity; that is, the *Filioque*, through Cusa's method of the *coincidence of opposites* characteristic of a process of transformation through positive and negative curvature in the spherical form of artistic composition. Raphael's method of composition was applied to the two great frescos of the *Stanza della Segnatura* of the Vatican in Rome, *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* and *The School of Athens*.

With a special emphasis on the intricacies of such a double curvature, Raphael succeeded in unifying in a unique style of artistic composition both the works of the previously talented Italian artists and the study of philosophical and theological characteristics of the father of the Renaissance, most emphatically from Leonardo da Vinci and Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa. As Vasari remarked appropriately:

“But in spite of his diligence and the studies he undertook, he was never able to surpass Leonardo in his approach to certain problems: and if it may seem to many people that Raphael had surpassed Leonardo in his sweetness and in a certain natural facility, nevertheless he was never superior to Leonardo in the fundamental majesty of his concepts or the grandeur of his art, in which Leonardo had few equals. But Raphael came nearer to Leonardo than any other painter, especially in the elegance of his colours.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Vasari, Op. Cit., p.331.



*The Madonna della Sedia*, 1513. Galleria Palatina, Florence. The underlying rotating motive.

Geometrically and epistemologically, Raphael's "spherical" Madonna reflects helical motions of both attraction and repulsion integrated into one single process. *The Alba Madonna* and *The Madonna della Sedia*, for example, are not awaiting an admirer to contemplate them; they act on your subconscious awakening the creative power in you; they reach out and pull you out of your passivity and very gently introduce you to the passion they want to share with you,

as if they were acting from some higher galactic principle of action which forces you to think and to investigate the reason for their *attractive-(repulsive) process*.

Conceive of Mary and Baby Jesus in *The Madonna della Sedia* as rotating around each other in the kind of motion of the *coincidence of opposites*. That is the kind of tense relationship which exists between God and Man through the paradox of the *word made flesh* which is at the source of all artistic creative action. But, think also that such an action involves the Christian notion of the *Filioque*; that is, the composition of the Holy Trinity through which man is conceived as created in the Image of God by a triply-connected motion that is attractive and repulsive, positive and negative, at the same time. What does that mean? Look at this triply-connected idea as the foundation of the preparatory drawings that Raphael made for the three figures. The sketches for *The Madonna della Sedia* are on the same sheet as the study for *The Alba Madonna*. The sketches are both spherical, but the positions of the observer (who is not there) are different. The point, here, is that the essential is what is not there.

In *The Madonna della Sedia*, Mary is looking at the observer located outside of the painting while, in *The Alba Madonna*, Mary is looking at the cross and the spectator is located in the position of John the Baptist, who is attracted by a spiraling action whose motion is rotating counterclockwise; that is, from left to right with a concentrated force that pulls him into the arms of both Jesus and Mary. The process is much like the collusion of two people organizing a third person, as in the Peace of Westphalia. Raphael chose the action of spiral attraction as the best way to express the creative process of the *filioque*. Mary and Jesus extend themselves outward to pull John the Baptist (observer) into their higher geometry. However, this spiral action also has the power of pushing away. Why?

The geometrical/epistemological dynamic of the process of spherical spiral action corresponds to what Leibniz called the “*universal characteristic*.” *The Alba Madonna* develops many similar forms of such twisted actions which should help the observer relate to the creative process. The high point of Raphael’s spherical method of design applied to this Madonna is best represented by the interactions

between *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* and *The School of Athens*; interactions which can best be characterized as Raphael's Promethean period in Rome.



Raphael, Sketch (recto) for *The Alba Madonna*, 1508-1511. Counterclockwise motion.

Never, during the whole of the Italian Renaissance was a talented young painter more courageous and challenging than Raphael in stealing fire from heaven and giving it to mankind in the form of sharing the creative process of artistic composition with his fellow artists and with the observer. There may never be, in the whole of Art history, an equally powerful master as Raphael capable of transmitting in artistic form the method of axiomatic transformation of the human mind. Why do you think that British Intelligence created an anti-Renaissance Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at the end of the eighteenth century? The British oligarchy believed that the elegant compositions of Raphael were a deadly threat to their way of thinking and therefore declared that it had a corrupting influence over art.<sup>3</sup>

In April of 1508, Raphael created the greatest masterpieces ever produced in the domain of plastic arts. At that time, he wrote a letter to his uncle asking him to provide him with a recommendation from Francesco Maria della Rovere, the nephew of Pope Julius II, in order to obtain for him “a certain room” (*una certa stanza*) for the purpose of decorating it with the most daring subject ever entertained by any artist: the idea was to paint two great frescos facing each other on the subject of the creative process itself; and thus, capturing the mind of the observer who would be standing between the two frescos in the middle of the room.

The following mysterious circumstance opened for Raphael the doors of what was later to become known as the *Stanza della Segnatura*; that is, the room where the Pope, when in doubt, goes to meditate in order to ponder and solve world problems. As art historians Tom Henry and Carol Plazzotta reported on the social circumstance of that moment:

“Whether by the intervention of Soderini, through recommendations from friends and fellow artists or through links between the Della Rovere at Urbino and the Pope (who would have encountered works by Raphael during his peregrinations through the Papal States), by January 1509

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<sup>3</sup> As usual, British intelligence misinterpreted the art of Raphael by assimilating it to the snobbish “Grand Style” of Joshua Reynolds. American-British founder of the American School of Design, Benjamin West, made two celebrated self-portraits aimed at ironizing the mannerism of Reynolds’ self-portrait. See my report: [BENJAMIN WEST AND PETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ART OF DESIGN](#).

Raphael was firmly ensconced in the Vatican and had already received the substantial sum of 100 ducats for work in the Stanza.”<sup>4</sup>



The Virgin and Child with John the Baptist (*The Alba Madonna*) c. 1509-11

The epistemological context of Raphael’s coming into the Vatican was a crucial moment of change, because it is not an accident that the design for the two

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Henry and Carol Plazzotta, [Raphael From Urbino to Rome](#), p. 51.

greatest frescos in Art history, first *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*, and secondly *The School of Athens*, were both conceived from the discovery of principle underlying *The Alba Madonna*. The germ of *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* is already present in *The Alba Madonna*, even though it is not clear when the latter was painted. German art historian, Georg Gronau, puts it at 1508-1510 and W. E. Suida around 1509. Others date it as late as 1511. In fact, from the vantage point of epistemology, *The Alba Madonna* is the creative source of inspiration for *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*.<sup>5</sup>

It is the visual-conceptual dialogue between the three figures of *The Alba Madonna* which exemplifies the sublime character of understanding the significance of the crucifixion as it is being forecasted, which leads the observer to understand how the same subject matter became the subject of *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*.

As the introductory foreword to the painting from the National Gallery of Art in Washington noted quite appropriately: “*Mary, Jesus, and John the Baptist are linked—by gaze, pose, and understanding—as they contemplate the cross Jesus takes in his hand. With calm gravity they apprehend the gesture’s significance: in this moment all see and accept Christ’s future sacrifice.*”<sup>6</sup>

What is less visible, however, is that all three subjects are looking in different directions. What is going on in these three minds? It was Leonardo da Vinci who taught Raphael how to express what is in the mind of the subject being painted. As Leonardo wrote in his notebooks: “*A painting or any representation of a human figure must be treated in a manner such that those who see it can easily recognize the concept of its soul through its physical demeanor.*”<sup>7</sup>

The spiral action underlying the design of the dialogue among the three integrates both meaning and transformation as the performative function of negative curvature in the composition as a whole; the natural circular interaction of

<sup>5</sup> See my two reports: [\*\*RAPHAEL SANZIO, THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS AND THE DISPUTE.\*\*](#)

<sup>6</sup> Raphael, [\*The Alba Madonna\*](#), National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

<sup>7</sup> *Les Carnets de Leonard de Vinci*, Gallimard, Vol. I, 1942, p. 229.

the three figures is not only integral to the story that is being told, but it is also the story being told as it conveys how the creative process of artistic composition works in two different and opposite directions at once.

A close examination of the three penetrating exchanges of minds tells the story of how they come to a unity of agreement in the acceptance of the expected sacrifice of Christ, offering a spiritual gift to the observer by bringing him into participating in such a *unity of conception and perception*. This is the same powerful subject that Raphael developed during the same period regarding the most profound mystery of the Unity of the Holy trinity in *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*. How do you make the discovery of such an axiomatic change?

In *The Alba Madonna*, the idea of axiomatic transformation is expressed in its simplest and most natural form. Jesus looks into the soul of John the Baptists to see how his own cousin will accept his sacrifice while leaning, almost imperceptibly, against the belly and the arm of his mother, who shows her consent by looking at the cross and taking the head of John the Baptist into her hand. This is possibly the most sublime painted expression of the idea of *the benefit of the other* that was ever painted; and that is why it is universally valid. Such a triply-connected interaction of negative curvature is the key to understanding that creativity is exclusively for *the benefit of the other* as *the benefit of the other* is the key to creativity.

It is clear, from this epistemological standpoint, that Raphael was not only a student of Leonardo but also of Nicholas of Cusa who had been the principal theologian to have solved the paradox of the *Filioque* through the *coincidence of opposites*.

The combination of gracious surfaces of positive and negative curvature reflects Raphael's masterful ability to change from the convex to the concave as the artistic practice of replicating the idea of negative curvature had reached new heights in the spherical designing of expressing powerful new ideas through bending and twisting the human body as it has never been thought of or understood before. Such perfection had never been reached up to that time, at the exception of Leonardo da Vinci, and has not been equaled since.



Raphael, Sketch (verso) for *The Alba Madonna*, 1508-1511. The inverse rotation of the two hands shows the required unity of opposite motion.

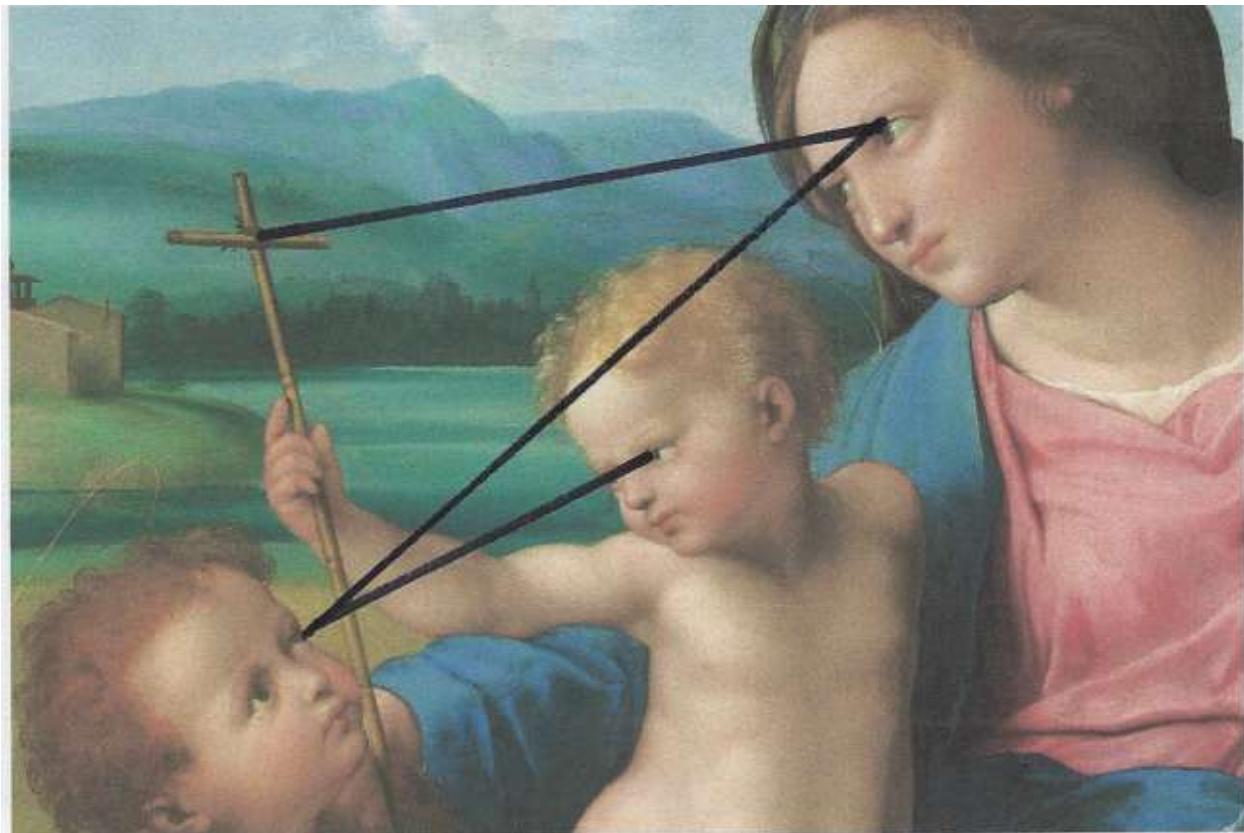
## THE SUBLIMATION OF THE CRUCIFIXION

Consider the process of sharing the experiment of self-sacrifice which Raphael represented as a process which enfolds and unfolds itself as a progression form of *agape*, or love of mankind, among three persons; that is, as the principle that was later to become adopted as the political principle of the Peace of Westphalia for all of Europe in 1648.

In *The Alba Madonna* the three persons relate to the cross in that unique way which you can trace as a quadratic mental pathway which goes (1) from Mary to the cross, (2) from the cross to Jesus, (3) from Jesus to John the Baptist who also takes the cross in his hand, and (4) from John the Baptist back to Mary. The completed pathway of those four steps forms a single mental surface of problem solving similar to the *coincidence of two opposite* surfaces unified in a Moebius strip. The four different and similar steps of the process of exchange and transformation can also be geometrically expressed in a way that Raphael explicitly elaborated in the *Stanza della Segnatura* with the use of the generation of the Five Platonic Solids. This process is extensively reproduced in the recent publication of my [LANDERNLAND](#).

The interactions among the three persons and the cross of *The Alba Madonna* reflect the *filioque* principle of the Holy Trinity. Contrary to what art historians say, the three figures are not looking at the cross; they are looking at each other in relationship to the cross. In fact, the epistemological principle of action is not the same for the three persons. The point is that the epistemological principle of action must be understood as a triply-connected form of transformation of their differences among the three by simple circular action of enfolding and unfolding, i.e. by a process of resolving the same problem at different levels of assimilation and understanding among three very different people and among three very different states of mind with respect to the future. That calls for understanding the axiomatics of a *three minds problem*; that is to say, understanding how to cause

an axiomatic change to take place in one of those three minds by the other two and with respect to a common purpose.

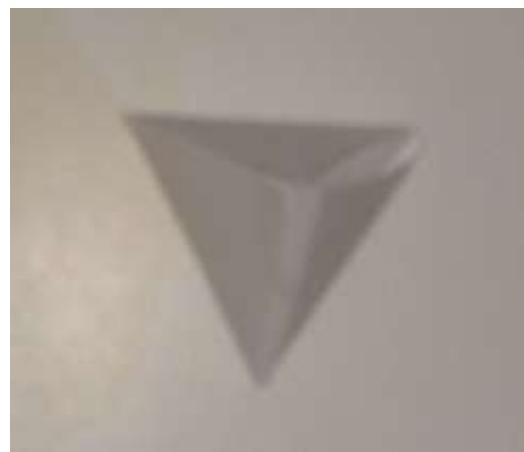


Raphael, *The Alba Madonna*, detail.

Think of the visual process of the three subjects of *The Alba Madonna* as the reflection of a mental process of generating the most elementary of the Five Platonic Solids, the Tetrahedron, that is, a four sided figure similar to the family grouping. However, you must generate this solid with a single band of paper that you close and fold on itself by circular action; as if you were creating a Platonic Solid from within a sphere of positive and negative curvature. That is the experiment that your mind is forced to go through when you stand in the center of the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican and you look backward and forward at *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* on one side, and at *The School of Athens* on the other. But, how do you transform a Moebius strip into a Tetrahedron?



Take a Moebius strip, and unfold it into eight equilateral triangles; then, enfold the eight triangles into a single Tetrahedron.



If you play around with this idea and this band of paper long enough, you will be able to generate the eight equilateral triangles necessary to produce the Tetrahedron, only by folding circular action on itself. When you find the way to fold them *four by four*, as if you had created two interconnected tetrahedra, then rotate one inside of the other and you will have completed, geometrically and epistemologically, the closure and the design of this report and of *The Alba Madonna*. The reason you have to fold eight triangles together is because you have to account for the inside and the outside of the tetrahedral Moebius surface. This is

also the equivalent of folding the eight lights of a menorah for Hanukkah. This type of action is typical of Raphael's way of thinking in and out of the box at the same time, which is expressed as an invasion of the observer's domain by making him participate in the creative process.

Finally, imagine yourself as being one of the figures inside of Raphael's *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* and, as such, you wish to see the role you are playing as an observer inside of the creative process you are coming out of. You have to extract yourself from the surface of that painting, bend forward and outward, and then turn around to see the scene that you have just come out of, as if you had suddenly become the creator of your own process of observing.

At that moment, you have made a transfinite leap out of yourself and you have acquired a higher view of everything that surrounds you, as if you were in that world, but not performing from that world. You are both in and out of this world at the same time.

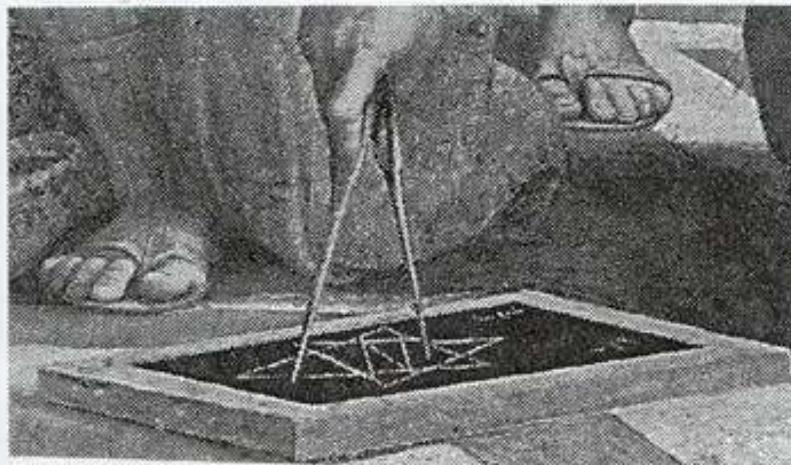


This curious and paradoxical exintroversion is how Raphael pulls the observer out of his contemplative position of observing by giving him the opportunity to experience Leonardo's method of axiomatic change. Think of it as playing the role of the "angel" in [LEONARDO DA VINCI, THE VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS](#).

Raphael, *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* (detail).

In case you have doubts about how this epistemological exercise is the basis for the architectonic construction of Raphael's two great frescos of the *Stanza della Segnatura*, reconstruct the spherical geometrical design that Raphael has included

on the floor of *The School of Athens* and apply it to the construction of the Five Platonic Solids, and some others:

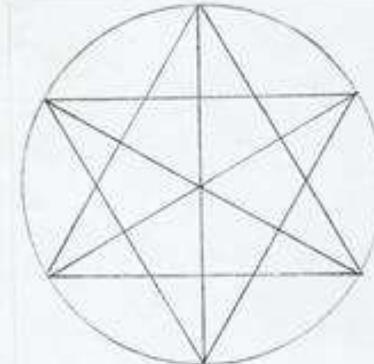


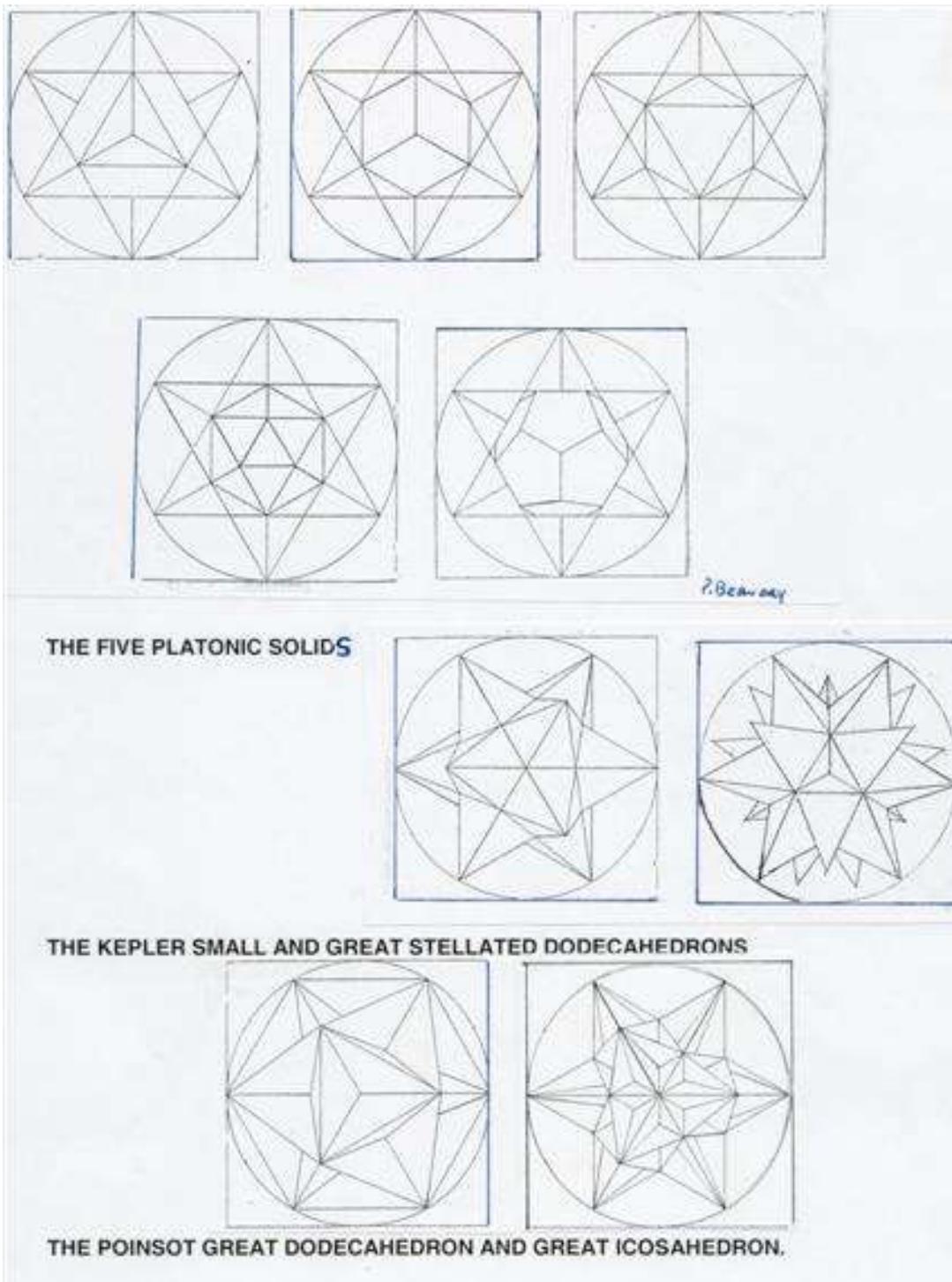
DETAIL OF THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS

Take a compass and two scalene triangles and construct a Star of David, like this. This is similar to the construction that Archimedes has drawn on his tablet, in RAPHAEL'S painting.

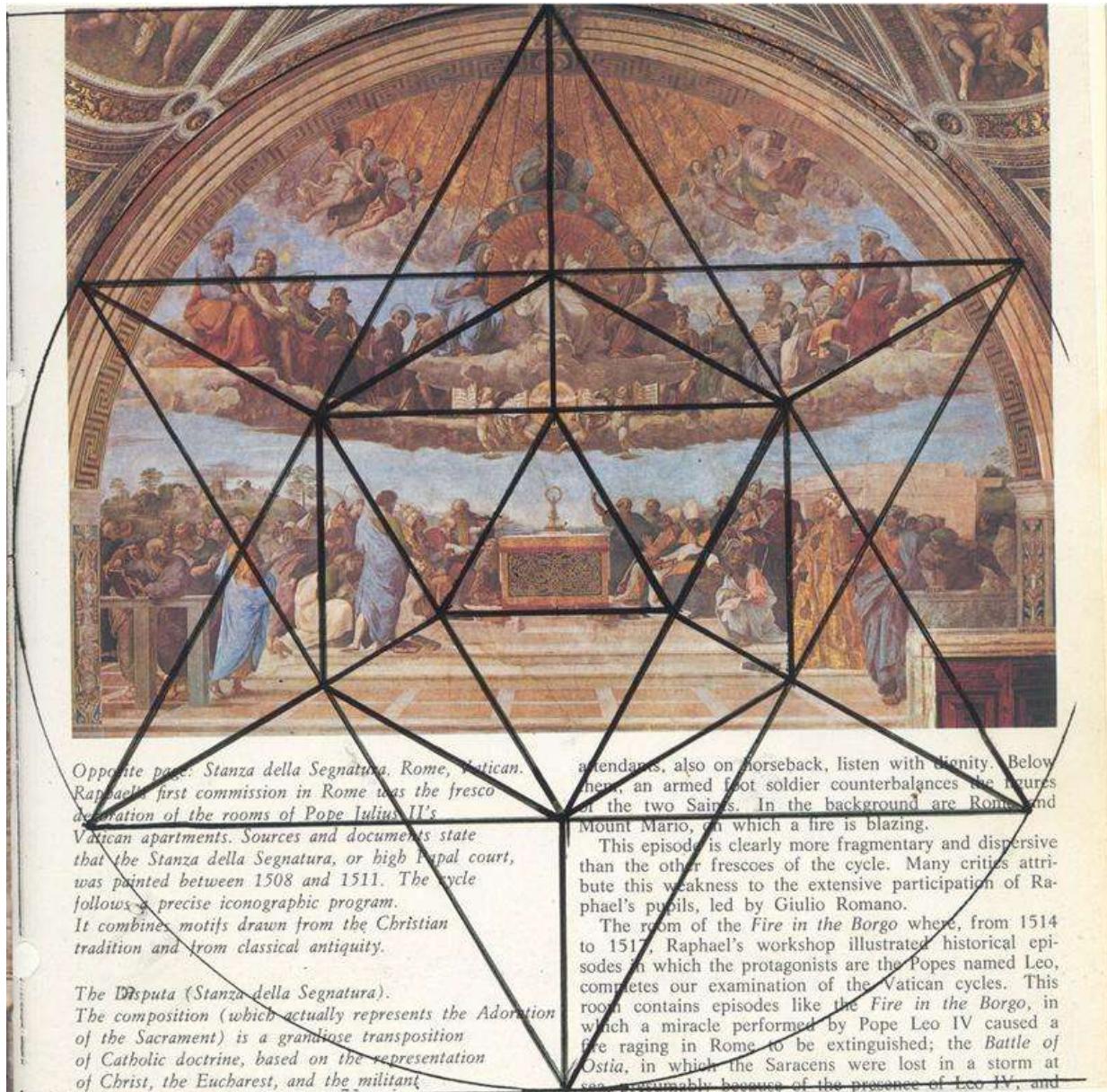
The hexagonal geometry is the geometry of the flat plane which only bees have been able to elevate to a higher dimension, and produce golden honey from it.

Inscribe points of decagons marking a golden section along the hexagonal radii of the Star of David. Project lines from the six points of the hexagon, as if from the inside of a sphere, to the six points of the decagons. You will see emerging from the plane a full size Kepler stellated dodecahedron. You can also generate the Poinsot great dodecahedron.





The architectonic design for the Raphael *Stanza della Segnatura* in the Vatican. From  
[LANTERNLAND](http://www.lanternland.com)



Opposite page: Stanza della Segnatura, Rome, Vatican. Raphael's first commission in Rome was the fresco decoration of the rooms of Pope Julius II's Vatican apartments. Sources and documents state that the Stanza della Segnatura, or high Papal court, was painted between 1508 and 1511. The cycle follows a precise iconographic program. It combines motifs drawn from the Christian tradition and from classical antiquity.

The Disputa (Stanza della Segnatura). The composition (which actually represents the Adoration of the Sacrament) is a grandiose transposition of Catholic doctrine, based on the representation of Christ, the Eucharist, and the militant

attendants, also on horseback, listen with dignity. Below them, an armed foot soldier counterbalances the figures of the two Saints. In the background are Rome and Mount Mario, on which a fire is blazing.

This episode is clearly more fragmentary and dispersive than the other frescoes of the cycle. Many critics attribute this weakness to the extensive participation of Raphael's pupils, led by Giulio Romano.

The room of the *Fire in the Borgo* where, from 1514 to 1517, Raphael's workshop illustrated historical episodes in which the protagonists are the Popes named Leo, completes our examination of the Vatican cycles. This room contains episodes like the *Fire in the Borgo*, in which a miracle performed by Pope Leo IV caused a fire raging in Rome to be extinguished; the *Battle of Ostia*, in which the Saracens were lost in a storm at sea, presumably because of the presence of Leo IV; and

A mental projection of the Icosahedron onto the scene of *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* as the observer stands in the center of the *Stanza della Segnatura*.

You will find that the Star of David design is the geometrical cradle for *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* and *The School of Athens*. The design is constructed in such a way as to help the observer visualize the emergence of an Icosahedron from *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament* and the emergence of a

Dodecahedron from *The School of Athens* as they grow out of the single sphere of his mind. Such is the epistemological progress achieved by Raphael by means of which he was able to make a three dimensional Platonic idea grow out of a two dimensional mind.



The two Platonic solids peeking through the wall of the *Stanza della Segnatura*, the Icosahedron at the top and the Dodecahedron at the bottom, were the two models that Raphael used for the architectonic design of the two frescos. They had been drawn from original drawings that Leonardo da Vinci had made for Luca Pacioli's book *De divina proportione* (Milano, 1496–98).

Trompe l'oeil detail of two Platonic Solids drawn on the wall panel near the entrance of the *Stanza della Segnatura*. <https://www.annholyoke.org/list-of-works-01-48/12-timeo-wall-piece/>

## CONCLUSION

The irony, here, is that if you accept to bear the cross that is offered to you in applying your mind to the creative process, your old way of thinking is going to die; but what you don't know before you accept that challenge, is that after you die, you are going to rise again and be resurrected from a higher dimensionality. Isn't that something you should be looking forward to with mixed emotions? Yes and no. You unfold and then, you enfold into something new, something like an angelical state that did not exist before, and this new state takes you to a higher level of existence. As Lyn put it:

“What I mean by being an angel is this: You’re born, right? Well did something happen before you were born? I mean, perhaps you were sent

here? Perhaps you were an angel. But don't look for wings, because nobody gave you any. You don't have any magical powers, you weren't given any. You were only given Reason, the Power of Reason. You weren't told what your mission was. You were supposed to figure that out when you got here. But what you've got to do, is you've got to find your mission, like the Good Samaritan found his mission; you've got to find the mission you've got to fulfill, perform a miracle, figure out how to do it, succeed, and then, when it comes time to pass on, people will say, "*That was an angel who was here at the time that an angel was needed.*"

"In philosophical terms, this is called a world-historical personality. If we are well-educated and well-cultured, we embody, through the process of educational experience, the reliving of the discovery of great ideas from the past. We embody the greatest gifts, in terms of ideas that were given to us, by previous generations. Thus, we are the living representatives of the ideas of the past, which are beneficial to mankind. We are also the people who are responsible for creating the conditions which are necessary for the well-being of coming generations. We are an individual, like an angel, who comes, who is born, who develops, who finds a mission, does the mission, and we pass on. And you must find in that concept of oneself as an angel, a sense of happiness."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the voyage on Earth is an obstacle course that you have to go through like a forced march across a valley of tears but, if the cross is accepted and internalized as a challenge for a higher purpose than selfishness, then the pain is surmountable and can be turned into a sublime experience for the benefit of others.

Why? Because the creative process of transformation, as Raphael demonstrated so vividly with *The Alba Madonna*, can be replicated as a timeless integration of creative action and grace for the improvement of mankind.

**Happy Hanukkah and Merry Christmas!**

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<sup>8</sup> Lyndon LaRouche, [How the top one percent of American citizens think](#), EIR, January 30, 1998, p. 15-16.