Among Franciscan literature, the spiritual exercises, also known as meditations, have had perhaps the most lasting impact for Christians of all varieties. These meditations, such as the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, call on the reader to “seek,” “hear,” “touch,” and “see” in their imagination the discrete moments in the Passion of Christ. Sarah McNamer describes the literature as “scripts”—an apt description of texts that direct the reader’s mood and behavior. She identifies the texts as the mise-en-scène for the “production of emotion” that aspires to the “performance of feeling,” and for the meditations, that feeling is compassion. The hope of the believer is that through compassion for the suffering and death of Jesus, they will achieve a more intimate knowledge of God.

Like the meditations, pilgrimage too is performative but as both a spiritual and physical exercise. Also like the meditations, pilgrimage of the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods was orchestrated. No longer simple wandering, it was “goal centered, religious travel for an efficacious purpose,” such as atonement, release, personal growth, new connections to a community of faith, or new connections to the divine. In sum, the pilgrim’s goal was personal transformation. By the Early Modern period, pilgrimage and the use of images were two loci of Protestant contestation. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) affirmed the value of the practices, and various church agents, including the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Borromeo (active 1564–84), worked to assure the orthodox embrace of both.

The Sacri Monti, sacred mountain complexes developed over the 15th–18th centuries in the Lombard and Piedmont regions of northern Italy, are distinctive pilgrimage centers. They are cultural phenomena influenced by historical context: Ottoman control of the Holy Land; high costs of pilgrimage travel abroad; and, in the main, a desire to promote in plastic the decisions of the Council of Trent. They are centers where the traditions of spiritual exercises, pilgrimage, and imagery combined into a Church-approved multisensory, multimedia, multivalent theater for the penitential soul.

With an emphasis on affective devotion, mimesis allowed the pilgrim to a Sacro Monte to become a member of the Jerusalem crowd, to feel Christ’s suffering, or to share in Mary’s grief in a very tactile way: to seek, hear, see and touch as embodied witness within the simulacrum. At the Sacro Monte di Orta, which simulates the spiritual life of St. Francis of Assisi, the pilgrim’s goal is to conform to Francis the way the saint conformed to Jesus, to know Jesus through simming Francis.

The Sacri Monti offer important testimony not only to the Counter Reformation, but to popular religious practice and popular artistic forms as well. Yet as a focus of academic attention, their share has been...
concomitantly small, especially for English readers whose access to published material has been very limited. This is especially true in the case of the Sacro Monte di Orta, which has long stood in the shadow of its older and more well known counterpart, the Sacro Monte di Varallo. In the following pages we hope to bring the richness of the Sacro Monte di Orta to a modern audience in the first English language large-scale treatment and as such we have used, whenever possible, scholarly articles and translations in the English language. Sacred Views of Saint Francis: The Sacro Monte di Orta is intended for an audience of both experts and lay readers. It contains analysis such as that found in scholarly works as well as the stunning photography of a picture book for which our photographer chose work in natural light in order to capture the daytime experience of the pilgrim. With our publisher, punctum books, we affirm our commitment to open access and the free intellectual commons that benefits everyone. The grandeur of the site, in terms of both depth and breadth, extends beyond that of a single monograph and the open-access platform of punctum allows us to make ongoing additions with supplemental text and the development of a large photo index. This current edition includes introductory material, a catalogue of all the chapels, chapters devoted to particular chapels, a biographical list of the artists, and accompanying photographs.

Acknowledgment belongs first and foremost to Cynthia Ho. In the early 2000’s Cindy, a well-regarded medieval scholar, bought a palazzo in Vogogna, Italy, after falling in love with its seventeenth-century frame and the neighborhood’s storied association with Chaucer. As she explored the Piedmont, Cindy came across the Sacro Monte di Orta. Cindy found it compelling, so compelling in fact that she changed her research agenda and began an ambitious project to bring the richness of the Sacro Monte di Orta to English language readers and researchers. Sadly, by 2012 Cindy had been diagnosed with a rare, and terminal, cancer; yet, her dedication to the research project did not abate. Instead she enlisted the help of two colleagues, one with expertise in religious studies and material culture, the other a scholar of early modern Europe. She asked the husband of the first colleague, an educator, poet, and photographer, to take the photographs. This book is the product of Cindy’s vision. Cin cin, Cinzia.

We are also indebted to Community of the Franciscan friars, the traditional Custodians of the Sacro Monte di Orta, whose centuries of service preserved the site into the postmodern era. The Italian National Park Service and Caesare, our indefatigable park ranger, were indispensable in facilitating our work. Lauren Crow, friend and tour guide, helped us secure the permissions we needed to get behind the scenes at the Sacro Monte di Orta, while friends Ken and Kali Marquart of the Associazione Canova, and Nicole Rose of Palazzo del Gabelliere, welcomed us into their homes over the years. Fr. Noel Muscat assisted with translation of the seventeenth-century Italian edition of Mark of Lisbon’s Croniche degli ordini istituiti dal P. San Franc esco, and we owe special thanks to Atlas Savini Kinzel for his mapmaking acumen. Our deepest gratitude is also due Dr. John Paul McDonald, omnipresent grammarian, linguist, and colleague in every sense; Eleanor Spencer Peters for her wry humor, patience, and willingness to “count the goiters”; the family of Cynthia Ho, especially Johnnie Ho, Amy Olson Chang, Elise Olson and Rebecca Geier, for their unerring encouragement; and Eileen Joy at punctum books for her steadfast belief in this project.
Endnotes

4 Though uncommon, nighttime visits to the chapels were not unheard of, although they seem to have been reserved for special feast days and dignitaries. We know that Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, for example, preferred to visit the chapels of Varallo at night (see Göttler, “The Temptation of the Senses,” 403). For those occasions, the chapels would have been illuminated with candlelight. Wrought iron candleholders, albeit now without candles, are still present in several of the chapels of the Sacro Monte.