In 1982 The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired two fragments of a fifteenth-century painting with Saint Donatian depicted on one fragment, and a second holy figure, almost certainly Saint Victor, on the other (Figure 1). A donor, a cleric who until now has remained unidentified, kneels before Saint Victor.

Didier Martens ascribed the painting from which the Metropolitan fragments derive to the Master of the Saint Ursula Legend (active 1475–1504), possibly identified as Pieter Casenbroot. The work was previously dated to about 1490 and its place of origin understood to be Bruges. Martens also suggested that the donor must have been a priest of the Church of Saint Donatian, and indeed several arguments support this thesis. First and foremost, Saint Donatian was a holy figure who was rarely portrayed in early Netherlandish art—he is found in only four other paintings. In one case, the name of the saint was shared by the donor, but the other instances are paintings that were commissioned by distinguished clergymen of the Church of Saint Donatian for their grave monuments or to decorate a chapel. The best known of the group is *Madonna with Canon Joris van der Paele* by Jan van Eyck (1436), in which the canon is presented by his patron saint, Saint George (Joris), to Mary and the Infant Christ (Figure 2). Notable similarities in the placement of the figures strongly suggest that the Metropolitan fragments were cut out of a larger work that imitated the composition of Van Eyck’s painting. Saint Donatian must have stood at the left with Mary and the Child in the middle, and the donor with his patron saint at the right. In this case, the saint was not Joris, but Victor. Comparison with the work commissioned by Joris van der Paele advances the supposition that here the donor’s first name must have been Victor.

To discover the identity of the donor, we might sensibly search for a clergyman named Victor connected to the Church of Saint Donatian in the second half of the fifteenth century. Ultimately only one cleric emerges: Victor van Zwavenarde, canon from 1458 until his death in 1481. In 1477 he acquired a plot near the altar of Saints Victor and Livinus in Saint Donatian’s in which he was ultimately buried. We may therefore reasonably conclude that the original painting of Saint Donatian, Saint Victor, and a canon was commissioned by Van Zwavenarde to decorate his funeral monument.

Victor van Zwavenarde was born about 1413, and although his surname refers to present-day Zwaanaarde (near Sint-Niklaas), his origins were in Ghent. Zwavenarde was born out of wedlock and it is possible that he was the son of a member of the clergy. He was ordained in the diocese of Tournai between 1438 and 1446 and must have been acquainted with several other fifteenth-century clerics from that diocese, and possibly the child of one. The clerics include his uncle Antonius, pastor of the Church of Saint Jacob in Bruges; Pius, chaplain of the Church of Saint Salvator in Bruges; and Henricus, chaplain of the Church of Saint Salvator in Harelbeke.

Van Zwavenarde is documented for the first time when he was enrolled in 1432 in the newly established University of Leuven. In 1434 and 1435 he earned diplomas of *baccalaureus* and *licentiat in artibus*, respectively, and then remained connected to the university for several years afterward. He is recorded as the *judex apellationum* of the liberal arts faculty on the university council in 1436, and as examiner of the licenses of that faculty in 1440.

In the same period, while living primarily in Leuven, Van Zwavenarde was also the pastor of Zwijnaarde (near Ghent), a position that he eventually must have passed on to a
replacement. He became pastor in Harelbeke in 1442, and until 1446 was chaplain of the Church of Saint Michael in Ghent. In that year he is recorded for the first time in Bruges, where he served as the chaplain of the Holy Blood Chapel (Chapel of Saint Basil). In 1448 he informed the chapter of Saint Donatian's of his plans to study abroad and to reside with the Roman Curia; it is uncertain, however, whether he actually left his native land. Records show that in 1457 Van Zwavenarde was identified as a doctor of ecclesiastical law, indicating that at some point he must have pursued regimented studies. After 1458 he applied for a prebendary position as canon in the Church of Saint Donatian, but the post was disputed until 1460, following several years of competition with other candidates. He resided there as canon until his death.

Like many clerics of his era, Van Zwavenarde did not strictly adhere to the rule of celibacy, and he had an illegitimate son, Johannes, who entered the Carmelite convent of Muilen-Liedekerke and served as heir after the death of his father. The canon eschewed the ecclesiastical lifestyle...
in other respects too. For example, he was involved in gambling, hardly an acceptable activity for a clergyman, and thereby found himself in financial difficulty.  

Such problems were temporary, however, due to Van Zwavenarde’s numerous and lucrative clerical positions. In addition to serving as chaplain of the Holy Blood Chapel and canon at Saint Donatian’s, he was chaplain of the parish church of Westkapelle (1455), chaplain in the Hallehove chapel near Harelbeke (1455–61), chaplain in the Hospital of Saint Aubert in Bruges (1466), sexton of the parish church of Diksmuide (1467), and scholaster of the parish church of Herentals (1467). Occasionally he also functioned as a public notary with imperial authorization (see Figure 3).  

All of these activities positioned Van Zwavenarde to give generously and to invest in a funerary monument at the Church of Saint Donatian. He took the first steps on February 17, 1477, when he acquired a burial plot near the altar of Saints Victor and Livinus; the precise location of the altar in the nave of the church is unknown. In exchange, he was required to contribute at least 40 shilling Parisis (or 40 groats) each year. Van Zwavenarde must have amply exceeded this minimum, because when the chapter examined its oblations on July 26, 1481, they totaled 5 pounds Groats (or 1,200 groats) per year. Undoubtedly, the bestowal of a yearly mass on May 7 was included in the
cost, as were his gifts for the feasts of Saint Anna and of the Blessed Sacrament.15

The charitable and burial arrangements made by Van Zwavenarde were possibly motivated by declining health. In 1474 he informed the chapter for the first time of his illness, and in 1480 and 1481 he was frequently absent from choir service due to sickness, at least once from gout.16

On November 6, 1481, the suffering canon had his will drawn up by the chapter clerk and notary, Balduinus Mijs. He died at three o’clock in the morning on December 25. That same day he was buried in his plot by the altar of Saints Victor and Livinus, his will was read, and Mijs along with the executor, Canon Burchardus Keddekin, compiled an inventory of the deceased’s home.

Unfortunately, neither the will nor the inventory of the home has survived.17 Therefore, specific references to the painting from which the two Metropolitan fragments derive do not exist, disallowing attempts to date the work precisely. As mentioned, the Master of the Saint Ursula Legend was active between 1475 and 1504, and until now it was agreed that the painting must date to about 1490. The details of Van Zwavenarde’s life, however, are a basis for changing the date to several years earlier. The commission must have occurred by 1481, the year of the canon’s death, at the latest, and 1477, the year Van Zwavenarde acquired the burial plot, is a possible datum ante quem. We must also consider the possibility that the painting was finished only after the death of its patron. For instance, the donor’s face is notably lacking specificity and demonstrates a strong resemblance to that of Saint Victor. The explanation for this effect must not be sought in the lesser talents of the painter, but rather in the contingency that the artist’s model was already deceased.

The identification of the donor in the Metropolitan fragments expands our knowledge of secular clerics as patrons of early Netherlandish painting.18 As demonstrated, it is now possible to speak of a significant tradition having developed in relation to the Church of Saint Donatian beginning with the aforementioned Joris van der Paele’s patronage of Jan van Eyck in 1436. In addition to Victor van Zwavenarde’s patronage of the Master of the Saint Ursula Legend, for the painting suggested here as dating from about 1477 to about 1481, followers of the precedent set by Van der Paele included Canon Gilles Joye (Hans Memling, The Canon Gilles Joye), Canon Bernardinus de Salviatis (Gerard David, Canon Bernardijn Salviati and Three Saints), and Richard de Visch, called van der Capelle (Gerard David, The Virgin and Child with Saints and Donor).19 These paintings were commissioned by canons of the Church of Saint Donatian, who were wealthy members of the high clergy. Strikingly, all of these patrons appear to have been of illegitimate birth.20 Bastards among the canons may have been more motivated to set up opulent foundations before they died, to avoid having the chapter confiscate their possessions after death.21 There were various ways in which these Bruges clerics may have come into contact with painters such as Van Eyck, Memling, and David. Gilles Joye and Richard van der Capelle, for instance, were for some time employed at the court of the Burgundian duke, where other patrons also could be found. Moreover, numerous canons of Saint Donatian’s were also courtiers, and as such, their colleagues enjoyed indirect access to courtly circles. Membership in religious confraternities offered the clerics yet another opportunity to convene with artists. The commissioning of portraits, such as that by Victor van Zwavenarde, provided a way for the clerics to illustrate their piety and promote an elite identity, as compensation for the stigma of humble or illegitimate descent.22

NOTES

2. D. Martens 1999, pp. 217–21; 2000a, pp. 48, 66; and 2000b, pp. 132–33. The Master of the Saint Ursula Legend possibly may be identified as Pieter Casenbroot, a painter born in 1436. He was an apprentice of the Bruges painter Arnoud de Mol between 1453 and 1456, and in 1459–60 he became a master painter. He died in 1504 or 1505. See Janssens 2004.
5. The date range of Van Zwavenarde’s ordainment, between 1438 and 1446, is determined based on the following facts: he reached the minimum age of twenty-five about 1438, and he is mentioned as a priest in 1446. RAB “Découvertes,” no. 10, fol. 19r; BAB A. 51, fol. 177r.
6. In 1446, Antonius and Victor “exchanged” their clerical positions in Bruges and Ghent. BAB, A. 51, fol. 177r.
8. Reusens 1865, p. 225; Reusens 1903a, p. 265.
9. “Ire ad studium ultra montes et ad curiam Romanam” (Going to study over the mountains [Italy] and to the Roman curia). BAB, A. 51, fol. 223v.
11. In 1444, Antonius and Victor “exchanged” their clerical positions in Bruges and Ghent. BAB, A. 51, fol. 177r.
12. Reusens 1865, p. 225; Reusens 1903a, p. 265.
13. “Ire ad studium ultra montes et ad curiam Romanam” (Going to study over the mountains [Italy] and to the Roman curia). BAB, A. 51, fol. 223v.
15. There is no further mention of Johannes in the capitular acts.
16. According to a chapter deed dated August 7, 1448, Van Zwavenarde played dice in the home of Jacobus Monachi, chaplain of the Church of Saint Donatian. BAB, A. 51, fol. 291v. The Saint Donatian’s chapter frequently required him to pay his debts, including in 1455, 1467, and 1469. BAB, A. 53, fols. 222r, 251r, 318r.
18. The document shown in Figure 3 is the only one of its kind that is known. Dated August 22, 1460. RAB, “Oorkonden met blauw nummer,” no. 4977.
19. BAB, A. 54, fol. 111v.
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