

Franciscan Rome
Basilica of Saint Mary Major
The Canticle of Creation & Assumption of Mary
Rooted in the Mystery of the Incarnation
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The Canticle of Creation as a Setting for Franciscan Mariology

After the reconstruction of the apse mosaic in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, Friar-Pope Nicholas IV turned his attention to Saint Mary Major, where he decided to add a choir in the apse. To do this the wall was moved back several meters, thereby creating a blank canvas for Friar Jacopo Torriti to pictorially share a Franciscan understanding of Creation and Mariology.

Many people misunderstand Mariology in the same way they misunderstand Saint Francis' *Canticle of Creation*. The canticle is not a celebration of creation. Rather, it is a celebration of God, by creation. In his poem, Francis has sinful humanity withdrawing from the scene, to have creation then step forward and fill the world with the praises of God. Only later does humanity return to the poem, to praise God as part of creation. In the same manner, Mariology is not about Mary. Rather it is about Christ and how Mary praises Christ throughout her life, always pointing to Him as our Brother, Lord, and Savior.

Traditional mosaics, like the one in the apse of John Lateran, tend to have a solid gold background representing the heavenly light of God. In this 13th century mosaic, however, creation bursts forth

filling the space completely with the praises of God. Brother Sun and Sister Moon appear under the throne giving praise to God. Sister Stars shine brightly around Jesus and Mary. Sister Water praises God joyfully with sea creatures and at the same time nourishes our Sister, Mother Earth. She then grows from the bottom sides of the mosaic, reaching



upward to spiral through the skies with Sister Flowers, Brother Plants, and our Sister & Brother Birds, all of who are singing God's praises. Here we find a Franciscan understanding of creation as flowing from God to reflect the beauty of God's own nature.

Our Lady of the Angels & Seat of Mercy

Friar Jacopo brought with him to Rome a love and devotion for Mary that was fostered at Saint Mary of the Angels, the Porziuncola, in Assisi. This was the one place in the world that Francis called home. He once told the friars that if anyone ever tried to throw the brothers out the door of the small chapel, they should hurriedly return through the window. This story describes well the Franciscan approach to Mary, which is both practical and insistent.

Through the large groups of angels gathered around the heavenly throne in the mosaic in Saint Mary Major, Friar Jacopo would create a second home for the friars. With the help of the angelic hosts, this regal scene of Mary's coronation is brought back down to earth in its evident connection to Porziuncola chapel in Assisi, known for pardoning sinners. In 1216 Francis had a vision of Christ Jesus, Mary, and the angels. Jesus asked Francis his desires for God's People. Francis replied that he wanted people to seek repentance and find forgiveness of sins. Soon after the Pope granted the Porziuncola the honor of offering an indulgence (pardon) on its feast day of 2 August. Here we begin to see the fruit of a Franciscan understanding of Mary that is intricately tied to Jesus' gift of mercy.

Saint Bonaventure calls the Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy, an expression taken from an 11th century hymn to Mary. Within the mosaic above, Jesus is holding a book which says, *"Come, my chosen one and I will put you on my throne."* His throne is the seat of mercy, from which the seated Mary points, directing our attention to Christ. In the same moment, Jesus crowns her with His overflowing love, because she made the savior of the world our brother and obtained mercy for us. Having first willingly chosen poverty through the Incarnation, Jesus and Mary now radiate unbridled mercy to help us to let go of the things that tie us down and bring us safely into the next world. Be you praised, O Lord, for our Sister, Mother Mary, who in practical and insistent ways, showers us with Your mercy.



Sinful Humanity Returns to the Scene

In Francis' Canticle of Creation, humanity eventually returns to the scene repentant, full of God's mercy and ready to praise the Lord. The same dynamic is taking place within the mosaic. To the left



we find Peter who betrayed Jesus and Paul who persecuted Christians. To the right are John the Baptist a sinner who preached repentance and John the Evangelist who was often critical of others doing good. These figures from sacred scripture have walked into this mosaic, coming from their own respective Major Basilicas in Rome. The Johns walked down the street from the Lateran, Peter from the Vatican, and Paul from outside the walls. Each carries a scroll confessing, in their own words, the divinity of Christ the Lord. They too join the chorus of creation: *Be you Praised, O Lord, through our repentance and our receiving of your mercy.* They come here to praise Christ who is their Brother, Lord, and Savior; so that they

might return to their own basilicas and better reveal the mercy of God to the pilgrims within their churches, in the same practical and insistent manner of Mary.

Unlike the mosaic in Saint John Lateran, in this mosaic Francis and Anthony have found a proper place. No longer squeezed into the scene, they are a natural part of the procession. Only slightly shorter in stature than the forerunner and apostles before them, the two friars minor confidently point to Christ, from whom all mercy flows. They have found their place within the Church. Bonaventure attests to this having described the friars as being members of a new community that personify the apostolic life of the early Christians who held all things in common as an expression of the holy poverty inherently manifest through the Incarnation. Eventually growing to full stature, these two friar saints would become Apostles in their own right. Francis would be named the Apostle of the Gospel of Peace and Anthony the Apostle of Conversion and Forgiveness (pardon).



Franciscan Promotion of the Assumption



Below the major mosaic of the apse are five scenes from the life of Mary. The annunciation, the nativity, the dormition, the adoration of the Maji, and the presentation at the temple. The only mosaic out of chronological order is the dormition of Mary, which is centrally focused thereby highlighting its importance. There lies Mary having fallen asleep in her old age, while Jesus tenderly rests her head on the pillow of a rainbow. Be you praised, O Lord, for Sister Death (or Sister Sleep for Mary). Here we find artistically expressed the

translation of Mary, the God-Bearer, taken body and soul into heaven. Looking just above, we find the culmination of the story with Mary being crowned as Queen.

The presence of Anthony of Padua within the apse is no coincidence, as Anthony belonged to Mary from the beginning. He was born on the day of the Assumption, baptized in Saint Mary's church in Lisbon, and died at the church of St. Mary near Padua while singing a hymn about Mary as a "Glorious Queen, exalted above the stars." Anthony taught that Mary's Assumption was due to both her motherhood and her littleness, as the one who together with Jesus willingly chose poverty. In his preaching, Anthony would refer to Mary as the Queen of Angels and also our Mother who would never run away from a sinner. For Anthony and those who heard him preach, Mary is the Mother of Mercy who in a practical and insistent manner offers solace of the afflicted and hope for the despairing.

Since 1045 people living near the Porziuncola in Assisi had been hearing angels singing all around the chapel, bringing to their minds Mary and her Assumption. Francis and Anthony surely heard the angelic chorus when the friars would gather there for Chapter and I imagine Pope Nicholas and Friar Jacopo may have heard them as well. Perhaps their angelic tune was what inspired the 11th century hymn about Mary the Mother of God and Mother of Mercy. Gratefully that hymn is still sung from time to time in the choir at Saint Mary Major. In this basilica, the message of mercy may come to us carried on the notes of music, the words of forgiveness in the confessional, or in the genuineness of a contrite heart. Regardless of how it comes, it come to us so insistently that our gaze inevitably turns to the figure of Mary surrounded by the canticle of creation in the apse. She in turn, with the help of the saints, mercifully corrects our gaze by pointing us to Christ Jesus, our Brother, Lord, and Savior.

Personal Meditation

Jesus and Mary chose to be poor and were close to the poor and the outcast. Simply put, the message of Jesus is mercy. Francis tells us in the Legend of the Three Companions, "*This is our vocation: to heal wounds, to bind what is broken, to bring home those who are lost.*"

How does Mary encourage us to do this in *practical and insistent* ways, with Jesus our *Brother, Lord, and Savior*?