

Franciscan Rome

Basilica of Saint Mary Major

The Popes Still Speak to Us from their Tombs

fra Michael Lasky

Saint Mary Major

Friar-Cardinal Felice Peretti's motto was, "*Panis et aqua, vita beata*" (Bread and water is contentment); after becoming Pope Sixtus V, he changed his motto to, "*Aqua et panis, vita canis*" (Water and bread is a dog's life). The reversal of the words water and bread, to emphasize the Latin rhyme scheme, gives testimony to the subtle humor of Sixtus, whose name Felice means *happy*. As a follower of Saint Francis, the *Jongleur de Dieu* or *Fool for Christ*, Sixtus V cultivated within himself a determination for the good that was forever marked with a touch of humor, which others saw as foolishness.

When Sixtus was elected pope, the cardinals expected a short and quiet papacy. With his wry smile, he quickly tossed aside his walking cane and got to work. In five short years he founded the Vatican Library and reorganized the entire Roman Curia into the basic form that exists today. He also undertook redesigning and rebuilding Rome in a Franciscan manner that was practical and insistent. Sixtus was told it would take ten years to finish building and decorating the dome over Saint Peter's Basilica. He completed it in two years. At the same time he rebuilt the Lateran Palace and redesigned the entire road system of Rome, transforming a meandering medieval maze into bold baroque boulevards.

Sixtus also had a mindfulness of the poor. He was told it would take decades to bring fresh water to Rome in new aqueducts. He did it with a wave of his hand and named the aqueduct after himself, Felice, because it brought happiness and relief to so many people. He also fixed the ever-rising cost of bread at a low price that was affordable for the poor, while at the same time providing from his own coffers the resources to improve the quality of bread.

From his personal mottos to his concern for the poor, bread was at the heart of Sixtus' Franciscan spirituality. For this reason, among his many other frenzied projects, Sixtus turned his attention to the Basilica of St. Mary Major, the Bethlehem – House of Bread – in Rome.



One of his first alterations within the basilica was to build a monument and tomb for his predecessor, Nicholas IV, whose epitaph simply reads: "*Here lies Nicolas IV son of St. Francis.*" The figure of Nicholas is flanked by the allegories of religion on the left and justice on the right. Originally this tomb was placed in the front of the church in the left transept, near the apse mosaic Nicholas had commissioned. Two hundred years later it was moved to the back of the church by the door. Such a move may seem a slight to the Franciscan Pope, but the relocation can provide a Franciscan meditation for those who take a moment to pray at the tomb and also remember the back door of the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi.

In the cycle of frescos that tell the story of the life of Saint Francis in Assisi, there is one painting out of order. This depiction of Francis preaching to the birds was deliberately placed by the back door, in about

the same location we find Nicholas' tomb in Saint Mary Major. The Assisi fresco is an allegory of Francis preaching not to the birds, but rather the many nations of peoples in the world. So, the message of the painting, seen by pilgrims departing the church after Mass, is: *Be the Eucharist that you have received here in this church, be bread broken and shared for the many, while preaching that Jesus is Lord to all you meet.*



In the same manner Nicholas' relocated tomb provides an opportunity for visiting Franciscan pilgrims to reflect upon the allegories of religion and justice when they leave Saint Mary Major: *Remember the insights of religion that you have meditated on in this church, how Mary points to Christ. Nourished by the Bread from Heaven, go and preach the justice of God, Who gives the hungry good things and sends the rich away hungry, while casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly.*



Sixtus V is also buried here at Saint Mary Major. His tomb is in the Sistine Chapel, not to be confused with the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican named after another Franciscan Pope, Sixtus IV. In this chapel Sixtus had built a smaller dome in the same design of the dome at Saint Peter's Basilica. Directly under this dome Sixtus had built a Franciscan meditation in marble, of the Poverty of Christ found in the Incarnation and the Eucharist. The bottom part of the structure was built to resemble the Edicule in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the tomb of Jesus and the place of His Resurrection. In this structure, Sixtus had placed the relic of the poor and simple crib of Jesus Christ from Bethlehem. Just above the Edicule, rests a tabernacle for the reservation of the Eucharist, the presence of the Risen Christ dwelling among us in the little form of bread. To the right, against the wall kneels a likeness of Sixtus above his tomb. He has been kneeling there, in adoration of this mystery of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus, for the last 500 years.

Sadly, today both the crib of Jesus and the Eucharist have been relocated elsewhere in the church. Nevertheless, the Sistine Chapel and the tomb of Pope Nicholas in Saint Mary Major, offer us an opportunity to reflect upon the Franciscan understanding of the Incarnation and its connection to the Eucharist. For these Franciscan Popes prayed the same prayer of Saint Francis that we Franciscans pray today:

*Let the whole of mankind tremble the whole world shake and the heavens exult
when Christ, the Son of the living God,
is on the altar in the hands of a priest.*

*O admirable heights and sublime lowliness!
O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!*

*That the Lord of the universe,
God and the Son of God,
so humbles Himself that for our salvation
He hides Himself under the little form of bread!*

*Look, brothers, at the humility of God
and pour out your hearts before Him!
Humble yourselves, as well, that you may be exalted by Him.*

*Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves so that
He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally.*

