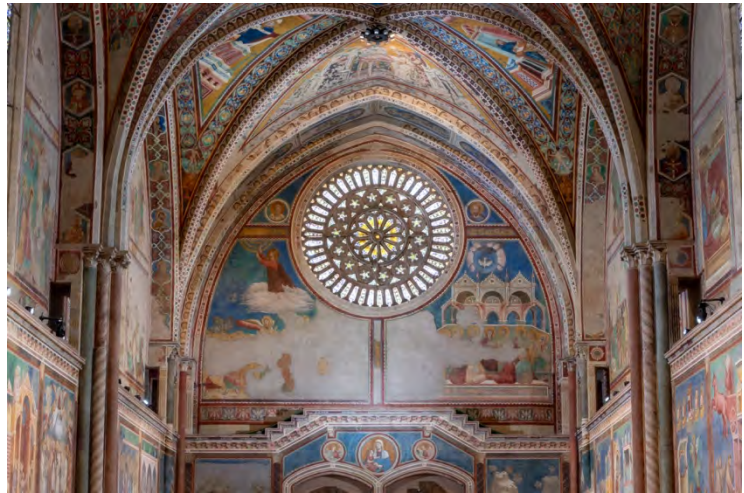




MOTHER OF MERCY
Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

Of the countless pilgrims I've led through the Basilica of St. Francis, there is one that I will never forget. It was a hot summer day, and she had been struggling to climb the back stairs leading to the upper basilica. Emerging from the door in the right transept, she caught my eye and made her way to where I was, waiting behind the altar. Not having taken her eyes off me, she wiped the sweat from her brow, stared me down, and exclaimed, "Have Mercy!" Smiling I gestured to the expanse of the basilica and replied, "Mercy, that's exactly the point of all of this!" She then turned to take in the magnificence of the basilica and spontaneously sang the first line of an American hymn: "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee!"

The magnificent frescos depicting the life of St. Francis wrap around the basilica like a horseshoe, only interrupted by the doors in the back of the church. Yet, above the doorway there is a connecting fresco shaped in the form of an arch that reaches, touches, connects the two stories of St. Francis' life on either side. Within this arch painting, we find the image of Mary with the Christ Child flanked by two angels. At first thought, it seems as if the last fresco seen by pilgrims departing the church directs their steps to the small chapel of Our Lady of the Angels in the valley of Assisi. While this is true, the fresco draws us into a deeper theological reflection about God's mercy.



All the frescos in the upper Basilica of St. Francis are meditations on the mercy of God. Each in their own way tells us how God has forged a relationship with His People, from Adam and Eve, down to Mary and the Apostles, then from Francis, his early followers and the people of his time, and finally all the way down to us.

The frescos about St. Francis speak of how God continues to be impelled by his mercy, his promise to love us all completely. Feeling this central theme running through the scenes of St. Francis' life, the keystone fresco of the arch above the door serves as a conduit of mercy, drawing us into the raw emotions of strife and doubt that the Lord transformed into peace and goodness. In this way the painting of the mother and child, accompanied by the angels, becomes the image of Franciscan Divine Mercy.

Of the many places that were important to Francis in his lifetime, the one missing from this series of frescos is the chapel Francis called home, St. Mary of the Angels, also known as the Porziuncola. In 1216, Francis had a vision of Christ Jesus, Mary, and the angels. Jesus asked Francis about Francis' desires for God's People. He 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 on its feast day of 2 August. Thus, for the Church, St. Mary of the Angels became the chapel of pardon and mercy.

Here we begin to see the fruit of a Franciscan understanding of Mary that is intricately tied to Jesus' gift of mercy. This is why St. Bonaventure teaches us that Mary is our Mother of Mercy, for she made the savior of the world our brother and thereby obtained mercy for us all. Hence, we see in this archway fresco the place Francis considered most dear in his lifetime, not depicted in stone and mortar but in the maternal image of mercy that points to and reconciles us with Christ our brother.

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." Inspired by the example of St. Francis, we learn to better follow in the footprints of Jesus and thereby become vessels of Christ's Divine Mercy in our world today. We open ourselves to the light of Christ cast into the darkness of our hearts. Then through a right faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, we gain the necessary insight and wisdom to discern, as Francis did before us, God's holy and true will.

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee,
Opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!*

*All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Flowery meadow, flashing sea,
Singing bird and flowing fountain,
Call us to rejoice in Thee.*

*Thou art giving and forgiving,
Ever blessing, ever blessed,
Wellspring of the joy of living,
Ocean depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother,
All who live in love are Thine;
Teach us how to love each other,
lift us to the joy divine.*

-Henry Van Dyke