



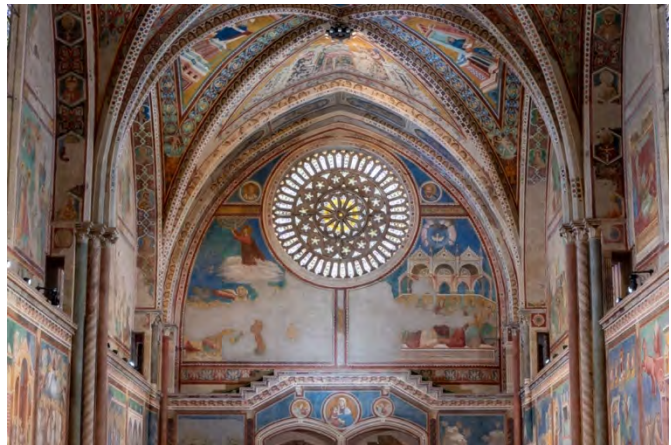
MOTHER OF MERCY
Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

**“Have *mercy* on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant *mercy* blot out my offence.”
(Psalm 51:1)**

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 transept, she caught my eye and made her way to where I was waiting behind the altar. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she 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!"

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' life speak of how God continues to be impelled by his mercy, his promise to love us all completely. As they wrap around the basilica they are only interrupted by the back doors of the church. But a closer look reveals a keystone fresco which forms an arch above the door serving as a conduit of mercy.



This often-overlooked painting draws to itself the raw emotions of strife and doubt that the Lord had transformed into peace and goodness in all the other fresco stories. As the scriptural keystone, rejected by the builders, becomes the cornerstone, so here this painting is the keystone arch that supports and pulls a common thread through the stories painted on the walls of the church.

For here we find a painting of the mother and child, accompanied by angels, which becomes the image of Franciscan Divine Mercy. Our Lady of the Angels, Mother of Mercy, is the last fresco seen by pilgrims departing the church, if they think to look up one last time.

There is no coincidence that this painting is pointing pilgrims to continue their journey down in the valley at St. Mary of the Angels. At the same time, the fresco also draws us into a deeper theological reflection about God's mercy.

The little chapel that Francis called home, St. Mary of the Angels, is 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 August 2nd. Henceforth, 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 intrinsically 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 footsteps of Jesus and thereby become vessels of Christ's Divine Mercy in our world today. We open ourselves to the light of Christ casting herself 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