



WAYFARERS

A Mystical Journey through the Lower Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi

Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.



Wayfarers: A Mystical Journey through the Lower Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi

Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

Copyright © 2026 Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition, copyright © 1989, 1993 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

This book is available online free of charge in PDF format at the Resource page of FranciscanVoice.org.

You may download and share this PDF for personal, educational, or pastoral use, provided it is shared in full and without alteration, and not sold or used for commercial purposes.

Photo Credits:

Cover photograph is by Patrick Malone.

Photographs of frescoes © Archivio fotografico del Sacro Convento di S. Francesco in Assisi, Italia and additional photographs by Andrei Ciobanu, OFM Conv.

Digitized renditions of the missing fragments (Master of Saint Francis) are from: De Marchi, Andrea, Veruska Picchiarelli, and Emanuele Zappasodi, eds. *L'enigma del Maestro di San Francesco: Lo stil novo del Duecento umbro*. Exhibition catalog, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia, March 10–June 9, 2024.

Photographs remain the property of their respective copyright holders and are used with permission.

First edition: January 2026. Printed in Italy.

Second edition: August 2026. Printed in the United States.

Dedicated to the friars
of yesterday, today, and tomorrow:
who guide wayfarers through mystical places.



CONTENTS

Timeline.....	ii
Preface.....	v
Introduction: People and Buildings.....	vi

Part I — DISHES and TOAST

Lower Basilica: Sailing into Eternity

Welcome to the Hill of Paradise.....	3
The Holy Land via Alexandria in Assisi.....	4
The Master of Saint Francis: Parallel Lives of Jesus and Francis.....	5
The Spirituality of Architecture: Come Sail Away.....	14

Ladies Poverty, Chastity, Obedience — with Francis in Glory

The Master of the Vele: A Meditation on Consecration.....	17
Lady Poverty.....	18
Lady Chastity.....	21
Lady Obedience.....	27
Francis in Glory and the Book of Revelation.....	33

The Transepts of the Lower Basilica

The New Accents of Franciscan Spirituality.....	39
Preaching with Pictures.....	39
The Heart of Franciscan Spirituality: The Crib & The Cross.....	40
The Scourging at the Pillar: A Moral Allegory.....	43
The Last Supper: Dishes and Toast.....	44
Despair or Mercy: Death as Light.....	49
Francis with his Mother of Mercy.....	50
Our Lady of the Sunset.....	51
The Choir and Calvary.....	52
A Note for Curious Wayfarers.....	55

Part II — The EIGHTH DAY

Upper Basilica: Roots Woven Wide & Branches Soaring High

The Cloister & The Cure.....	57
Not Seeing the Forest for the Trees.....	57

TIMELINE

1226

- 3 October: Death of Francis of Assisi at Saint Mary of the Angels, the Porziuncola
- Francis is buried temporarily in the Chapel of San Giorgio, currently the Chapel of the Crucifix in the Basilica of Saint Clare

1228

- 30 March: Simone di Pucciarello donates the building site for Francis' new burial place — a plot of land known as the *Collis Inferni*, the “Hill of Hell”
- 29 April: Pope Gregory IX issues the bull *Recolentes qualiter*, announcing his intention to build a special church to house the relics of Francis
- 16 July: Saint Francis of Assisi is canonized by Pope Gregory IX
- 17 July: Foundation stone of the Basilica is laid the day after the canonization and Brother Elias of Cortona appointed as head of the project
- Construction begins almost immediately on the Lower Basilica

1228–1230: Construction of the Lower Basilica

- Built rapidly in a Romanesque style
- Includes the nave, transepts, and apse
- Serves as a place of pilgrimage and worship
- Crypt area prepared beneath the main altar of the Lower Basilica

1230

- 22 April: The “Hill of Hell” upon which the Basilica was being built is renamed the “Hill of Paradise”
- 25 May: The body of Saint Francis is secretly transferred to the Lower Basilica and entombed in the crypt
- Tomb is sealed and hidden to prevent relic theft

1230–1253: Construction of the Upper Basilica

- Construction begins on the Upper Basilica after completion of the Lower Basilica
- Built in an Italian Gothic style, with soaring arches and a lighter structure
- Completed under Pope Innocent IV and Brother Elias

1253

- 24 May: Pope Innocent IV consecrates the entire Basilica
- 11 August: Death of Saint Clare at San Damiano
- 17 September: Saint Stanislaus of Krakow — Bishop & Martyr — is canonized by Pope Innocent IV in the Lower Basilica

1259

- Saint Bonaventure writes *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* – *The Journey of the Mind into God*, a seminal work that formed the Franciscan theology which would find expression in the art of the Basilica

1263

- Saint Bonaventure writes the *Legenda Maior* – *Major Life of Saint Francis*, a definitive biography upon which the Upper Basilica frescoes of the life cycle of Saint Francis are based



1260s–1300s: Artistic decoration of both Basilicas

Lower Basilica:

- Master of Saint Francis (c.1260): Pioneered the use of narrative fresco cycles to depict the life of Saint Francis, helping bridge Byzantine iconography and emerging Gothic naturalism in western art
- Cimabue (c.1280s): Pioneering Florentine painter who brought greater emotional expression and naturalism to Italian art, marking the transition from Byzantine to early Renaissance style
- Giotto (c.1290–1295): The father of modern pictorial art, a Florentine painter who transformed religious art through his vivid frescoes, pioneering naturalism, human emotion, and spatial depth in western painting
- Pietro Lorenzetti (c.1315–1330): Sienese painter, whose fresco style introduced a new depth of realism, emotion, and spatial complexity, greatly advancing narrative sacred art
- Master of the Vele — possibly Puccio Capanna (c.1330–1335): Student of Giotto

Upper Basilica:

- Cimabue and workshop (c.1280): Frescoed the sanctuary, choir, and transepts
- Giotto and workshop (c.1290–1300): Frescoed the Life of Saint Francis cycle
- Florentine and Roman artists including Friar Jacopo Torriti: Frescoes of Old and New Testament scenes in the upper walls and apse
- Friar–Cardinal and former Minister General Matthew of Acquasparta: Designing of the scenes from Sacred Scripture and the life of Saint Francis, based on the writings of Saint Bonaventure and other Franciscan literary sources

1270s–1980s: Lower Basilica artists of the chapels

- Saint Sebastian: Girolamo Martelli, 1646
- Saint Catherine of Alexandria: Andrea Bartoli, 1368
- Saint Martin of Tours: Simone Martini, 1312–1320
- Saint Louis of Toulouse: Simone Martini, 1312–1320
- Saint Peter of Alcántara: Tommaso Gismondi, 1986
- Saint Stephen: Dono Doni, 1575
- Saint Lawrence: Andrea Bartoli, 1368
- Saint Anthony of Padua: Cesare Sermei, 1610
- Saint Mary Magdalene: Giotto and his workshop, 1320
- Saint Nicholas: Giotto and his workshop, 1297–1300



1754: Pope Benedict XIV designates the Basilica a *Patriarchal Basilica and Papal Chapel*

1818: Rediscovery of the tomb crypt

- Tomb of Saint Francis is rediscovered during Pope Pius VII's papacy, after centuries of obscurity
- Excavation carried out to make a tomb chapel for pilgrims, baroque style

1932: Construction of the modern tomb crypt

Designed by Ugo Tarchi in the elegant simplicity of a neo-Romanesque style

- Includes the tombs of Francis' friend, Roman noblewoman Jacoba de Settesoli (Brother Jacoba) and his early companions: Friars Leo, Rufino, Angelo, and Masseo

1997: Earthquake damage and restoration

- Two major earthquakes in September cause severe damage, especially in the Upper Basilica
- Extensive restoration undertaken through the late 1990s and early 2000s

2026: The Easter of Saint Francis — 800th Anniversary of his Transitus

- First public display of the relics (bones) of Saint Francis from his tomb in the crypt

PREFACE

Dear Reader,

I first visited Assisi in October 1989, for the Feast of Saint Francis. Remembering back to the Mass in the Upper Basilica, some feelings remain with me to this day. As my eyes wandered here and there, taking in the scenes from the life of Saint Francis, the pastel colors of the frescoes enfolded me within the gentleness of their tone and the strength of their message. Having recently been graduated from a Franciscan high school and entered a Jesuit university, I felt as if the Lord was offering me a feeling of hope for the future. Two years later I would return to the friars and continue my Franciscan journey of discipleship. That first visit to Assisi left a lasting impression on me, which has led to years of my studying and sharing the gentleness and strength of a mystical place where heaven touches earth.

There is a story told about Saint Francis, wherein he is said to have often picked up scraps of paper that he found on the ground, for fear of them being trampled underfoot.¹ His thought was that the words written upon the scraps might either contain a passage from Scripture or that the letters might somehow be rearranged to speak the words of the Gospel. In the spirit of this tale, I offer these words of mine in the hope that in your picking them up, the Lord might speak something beautiful to your heart. Perhaps the Lord will even rearrange my words in your mind, so that you may be inspired to take the spirit within them and share the Good News in your own way.

These thoughts of mine are intended to be no more than a sincere attempt to have the brilliance of those who built and decorated the Basilica come and bear upon the lives of people today. What I have written comes from my having considered the signs of the times, in the light of a Franciscan reading and living of the Gospel. For it is my belief that the elegant beauty of the Basilica serves one primary purpose, to immerse wayfarers into the mercy and peace of Christ Jesus, by way of the goodness of Saint Francis.

I offer thanks to my parents, who have kept the candle of my baptism burning brightly these many years, raising me in and accompanying me to many mystical places. I am also indebted to the friars and friends who have shared with me their wisdom and insights about Saint Francis and the Basilica in Assisi that bears his name, especially: +Friar Gerhard Ruf, +Friar Claude Jarmak, +Friar George Sandor, Friar Wayne Hellmann, Friar Joseph Wood, Friar Daniel Geary, Friar Carlo Bottero, Friar Martin Kobos, and Michael Toczek. Finally, to the one who encouraged me to put my thoughts in print and helped me to see this project through to the end, Friar Emanuele Rimoli, I would like to say —*Fare di necessità, virtù!*

Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

¹ Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 82, 251.

INTRODUCTION

People and Buildings

In 1259, Saint Bonaventure wrote *The Journey of the Mind into God*, in which he discusses the use of the five bodily senses to begin our ascent into God. In our time, Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça is uncovering this Franciscan tradition of using our senses to deepen prayer and thereby draw closer to God and one another.² For many believe that if Bonaventure's positive vision of the bodily senses had prevailed in western philosophy and theology, our history would have been profoundly different.³

Cardinal Mendonça does not see spirituality and mysticism as something reserved for a special few. Instead, he defines a mystic as someone who cannot stop walking.⁴ The Cardinal finds God in the “mundane and ordinary, along the roadside and in the workplace or in the midst of our busy family lives, and not merely in the rarefied realm of monasteries and hermitages.”⁵ He understands mysticism as living in the present moment, through relationships. With others, we engage our senses to pull ourselves out of self-centered tendencies that cut us off from God, one another, and creation. In this way, our bodies open us up to all that God hopes to give us in each and every moment.⁶

The Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi is a medieval example of a mystical church, not only because it is in constant motion, but because it stands as a symbol of the mystical itself. As such, it remains as attractive and relevant today as it was 800 years ago.



Originally comprised of two churches (lower and upper), the Basilica was built during a period of significant artistic and architectural innovation. The frescoed walls and ceilings introduce everyday actions into mystical spaces, such as sailing on a boat toward heaven and doing the dishes at the Last Supper. This mystical space is truly a feast for the senses!

The Lower Church serves as the burial place for Saint Francis, whose earthly remains are entombed under the main altar. The Romanesque style of the church features rounded arches and low ceilings, lending to a movement from the natural shadows of the space into the golden light of the frescoes above the altar. This movement serves as a meditation

² Theologian, poet, and intellectual, Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça has served as the Prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education since September 2022.

³ Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment: Embodied Spirituality*, trans. Daniel P. Horan (New York: Paulist Press, 2021), 33–34.

⁴ Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*, 25.

⁵ Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*, viii.

⁶ Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*, 7.

on the Christian journey through the shadowlands of this world into the heavenly glory of the world to come. Within this mystical space, we can hear echoes of a young Francis of Assisi praying,

“Most High and Glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart. Give me true faith, certain hope, perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command.”⁷

Through catechetical enchantment, the frescoes in the Lower Basilica offer an answer to this prayer.

The Upper Church, one of the first Gothic-style buildings in Italy, is an explosion of light and comforting energy that embraces the entirety of the human person within the mystical space. The ribbed vaults and pointed arches rise like the great redwood trees of California, which reach their soaring heights because of an elaborate root system that spreads outward rather than deep into the soil. Just as the intertwining roots stabilize a whole redwood grove, in Assisi the spiritual roots of the frescoes soaring above, intertwine to stabilize a vision of our all being woven within the web of life.

This interconnectedness then forms a support structure that offers enough stability for us to enter the scenes themselves. It is as if the paintings have jumped off the pages of books, telling the stories of how we, Franciscan-hearted wayfarers, might become “inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened, and inflamed by the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ Here, in this Basilica, we join Francis and the early friars, accompanying them on the way that leads to peace and the joy of heaven.

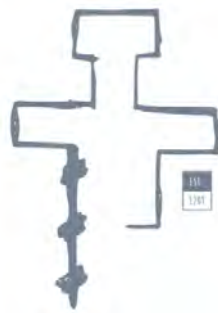
It is the hope of the Franciscan friars at the Basilica that everyone feel equally welcome while in Assisi, from pilgrims making a religious journey to people on bus tours between Florence and Rome. Yet, it is difficult to capture everyone who crosses the threshold of the doors with one word. Because Cardinal Mendonça shares these feelings, he describes a mystic as — one who cannot stop walking — in hopes of excluding no one.

Since there is always some walking involved in reaching the Basilica of Saint Francis, throughout this text the descriptor *wayfarer* will be used. A wayfarer is best described as a traveler, especially one who travels by foot.⁹ Thus, by walking through the ever-moving mystical space of the Basilica of Saint Francis, wayfarers are afforded the opportunity to fully engage all their senses and be transformed into mystics, those who walk with God.

⁷ Francis of Assisi, "The Prayer Before the Crucifix," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 40.

⁸ Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 116.

⁹ The term also carries a liturgical resonance. In the Easter sequence *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, sung just before the Gospel on Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene is asked to declare what she saw "wayfaring" on the way from the tomb — rendering the Latin *quid vidisti in via*? This framing of her eyewitness testimony as that of a wayfarer links her own encounter with the Risen Christ to the figure of the pilgrim as one who travels toward, and returns bearing witness from, a sacred encounter.



FRANCISCAN
VOICE...

Part I

DISHES and TOAST



LOWER BASILICA: SAILING INTO ETERNITY

Welcome to the Hill of Paradise



On 30 March 1228, Brother Elias of Cortona secured for Pope Gregory IX a piece of land, outside the city walls of Assisi. The place was known locally as the *Hill of Hell*, because it was both a place of criminal executions and a place where much of the water-waste of the city would run down onto this western slope of Mount Subasio. On 17 July 1228, the day after the canonization of Saint Francis, Pope Gregory laid the

foundation stone for the Lower Basilica. On 22 April 1230, just one month before the interment of the body of Saint Francis under the altar, the hill was renamed the *Hill of Paradise*.

Medieval churches with a double door entrance, such as that of the Lower Basilica,



typically had pilgrims enter through the right side. Biblically the right was associated with favor and righteousness. In some churches the right door was reserved for the living while the left door was used for exiting or funeral processions that symbolize the human person's transition from this

life, through death, and into eternal life. To make apparent these thoughts, two carved wooden statues sit at the top of the doors of the Basilica. To the right is Saint Francis, inviting wayfarers to cross the threshold into God's house, built in his memory. Above the left doorway is the Risen Jesus ascending¹⁰ symbolizing exiting wayfarers having had a mystical experience of Christ Jesus through the intercession of Saint Francis.¹¹



¹⁰ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005). Corbon offers a theological reflection on the image of the ascending Christ as expressing the Church's own outward, missionary movement into the world.

¹¹ The entering and exiting of the Basilica today has been reversed, to better facilitate the flow of 21st century foot traffic.

Upon entering the church, Saint Francis welcomes wayfarers. For, frescoed into the first arch is the image of Francis with an unfurled Latin inscription that translates in part,

“Slow down your step and be joyful, oh pilgrim, you have already reached the hill of paradise. Ever resonant with praise and gladdened with holy choirs, this church is a true paradise of *spiritual* joys. Enter, you will see *great things*...”¹²



The Holy Land via Alexandria in Assisi

In the Middle Ages the most popular of pilgrimage destinations was the Holy Land. Alexandria in Egypt was a common final stopping point before reaching the Holy City of Jerusalem by ship. Many Christians could not make the long journey to the Holy Land. For this reason, other places of pilgrimage emerged throughout the Christian world, such as the tombs of: Saints Peter and Paul in Rome, Saint Martin in Tours, Saint James in Compostela, Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury, and Saint Francis in Assisi. To connect Assisi with the Holy Land, or perhaps to declare it a new holy land, the Chapel of Saint Catherine of Alexandria was placed at the entrance of the Lower Basilica. It serves as a place where arriving wayfarers might put themselves into harbor and collect themselves in private prayer, before journeying through the Basilica.



The frescoes within the chapel tell the story of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a revered 4th century virgin and martyr of the early Church. According to her legend, she was a noble woman and scholar who debated a group of 50 pagan philosophers. As a result of their spirited exchange, the philosophers all became Christian. Enraged, the Roman Emperor Maxentius had the philosophers burned alive, while Catherine was imprisoned and tortured. She was soon sentenced to death and placed on a spiked wheel, but it was miraculously shattered. She then suffered martyrdom by beheading with a sword.



¹² The descriptor “pilgrim” is maintained here because the word is used in the inscription and church was built as a destination of pilgrimage. Today, wayfarers feeling this word does not accurately describe them, might choose to substitute it with “friend” or “neighbor”. Today with the modern entrance, installed to assist with climate control, it is difficult to see the arch. To best view the image, immediately upon entering the door and turning right, one needs to look up and to the right.



Saint Catherine is often depicted in art with the broken wheel, as she continues to offer herself as a model for those seeking spiritual enlightenment through discussion and debate. While journeying through the Basilica of Saint Francis, wayfarers may find questions about life and faith rising up within them. Saint Catherine encourages such curiosity of mind and heart and serves as a reminder to wayfarers that it is a good thing to slow the motion of the turning wheels of the mind and heart, so as to hear and understand better what the Lord has to share. Inspired by Saint Catherine may wayfarers slowly make their way through the Basilica, savoring all it has to offer by way of sight, smell, sound, feel, and taste. With the senses fully engaged, wayfarers are also making themselves ready to share holy

conversations with those encountered along the way.

The Master of Saint Francis: Parallel Lives of Jesus and Francis

Turning into the nave, where the congregation is normally seated, wayfarers will encounter some of the earliest images painted in the church, frescoed by an artist known as the Master of Saint Francis. Five scenes from the *passion* of Christ Jesus run the length of the northern wall to the right, while parallel scenes depicting the *compassion* of Francis run the length of the opposite wall.¹³ The innovation of these parallel life stories, speaking to one another across the aisle, was a watershed in the history of Christian art.

For the first time in art, the life of a human being was depicted as paralleling the life of Christ Jesus. The boldness of these paintings proclaims Francis as an *alter Christus*, Latin for *another Christ*. In the Christian tradition, Francis is often seen as the ultimate *alter Christus*, having completely conformed his life to that of Christ Jesus' through poverty and suffering. Casting his cares completely upon the Lord,¹⁴ Francis' life was a continual response to Jesus' command to:



“Put out into the deep water...”¹⁵ (Luke 5:4)

¹³ Parts of these frescoes are missing due to the later construction of the side chapels in the late 13th–early 14th centuries. Digitized renditions of the missing fragments are from *L'enigma del Maestro di San Francesco: Lo stil novo del Duecento umbro*, exh. cat., Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, March 10–June 9, 2024, ed. Andrea De Marchi, Veruska Picchiarelli, and Emanuele Zappasodi.

¹⁴ Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 191.

¹⁵ The floor of the Lower Basilica slopes down, seaward toward the altar. When read with Ezekiel 47:3–5, this passage from Luke frames a scriptural meditation on spatial progression within the nave.

The heart of Francis was like a tidal estuary where freshwater from rivers mixes with the saltwater of the ocean, and where the tides regularly rise and fall. As a man of brackish water, a little salty and a little fresh, Francis was highly adaptable in the same way that aquatic and terrestrial life in an estuary learn to cope with a constant change of environment due to the rise and fall of the tides.



At times the heart of Francis felt full of God's salty ocean-like presence, calling him to bring the flavor of the Gospel to a waiting world, often with the force of high tide. At other times Francis felt the ebb of the ocean tide as his heart would settle into a meditative silence. In these times of withdrawal, Francis was fed by the fresh rivers of grace that would wash away the silt of his sinfulness and help him to see God's plan more clearly.

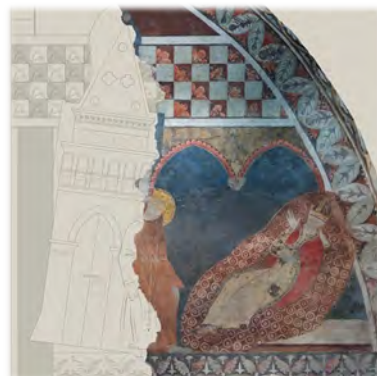
Fathers

Walking ankle deep into the brackish water of the nave in the Lower Basilica, the very first story wayfarers encounter is that of young Francis stripping himself in the piazza of the bishop's house. With his conversion process well-underway, Francis had become the embodiment of merciful waves of saltwater rising out of the valley and crashing against the indifferent walls of the city of Assisi. As earthly salt, Francis desired to preserve the dignity of lepers by ministering directly to them and flavoring their lives by his living among them as a friend and brother. As heavenly salt, Francis also repaired chapels scattered throughout the countryside, which served the outcasts and vulnerable. Thus, Francis' conversion opened a mystical space in the valley of Assisi, where the poor and marginalized who lived outside the safety of the city wall might taste and savor the comfort and protection of a God, who forever desires to draw close to those who suffer.

While the will of God the Father filled the heart of Francis, his earthly father had other plans for his wayward son. As a successful cloth merchant — the devil, one might say, preferring to wear Prada — Pietro di Bernardone was fixated on Francis' being a part of the successful family business. One day, frustrated beyond reason, Pietro grabbed his son by the scruff of his neck and dragged him through the city streets to the house of Bishop Guido. Wearied by Francis' obstinacy, Pietro demanded that Bishop Guido talk some sense into Francis. It seems the phrase, "be careful what you ask for" had not yet come into fashion.

Before the bishop could say a word, the dam around Francis' heart finally broke, and the ocean waters of God filled the square. With complete trust in God the Father, Francis stripped himself bare and declared:

MASTER OF SAINT FRANCIS



“Until now I have called Pietro di Bernardone my father. But, because I have proposed to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so upset, and also the clothing, which is his, wanting to say from now on — Our Father who art in heaven, and not — My father, Pietro di Bernardone.”¹⁶



The bishop then quickly enfolded Francis with his cope, thus bringing him into the family of the church.

Painted on the opposite wall is the image of Jesus standing before the cross as He strips Himself of His clothing, and hands it to the soldiers. Here He is not stripped but willingly chooses to do so Himself. Hours before, in the Garden, Jesus prayed to His heavenly Father:

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (Matthew 26:39)

Jesus’ prayer, mirrored in the stripping of Francis, speaks of complete trust in the will of



God the Father. Their unitive act of stripping, therefore, shows how their trust had reached the spiritual heights of “holding back nothing of themselves for themselves so that the Father who has given Himself completely to them might receive them completely.”¹⁷

A healthy father–son relationship cultivates the kind of trust that helps people to navigate better the stormy seas of life. For those missing this trust in their own lives these images offer salty waters of healing. Although the interaction might sting a little at first, in time past hurts may be soothed and healed, thereby offering

wayfarers a new way of learning to trust a loving God.

¹⁶ *The Legend of the Three Companions*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, *The Founder* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 80.

¹⁷ Francis of Assisi, “A Letter to the Entire Order,” in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 118. A paraphrase of Francis’ prayer within the text of the letter.

Mothers

Wading knee deep into the brackish water of the nave, wayfarers look up to see the image of Pope Innocent III taking a nap, while Francis is holding up the Cathedral–Basilica of Rome, Saint John Lateran. This is the story of how Francis and the friars became sons of Mother Church.

Shortly after rebuilding the scattered chapels outside of Assisi, the waters in Francis' heart ebbed a bit. He needed guidance. So, with his early followers, he made pilgrimage to Rome, where Cardinal John of Saint Paul took up his cause. It was John who returned again and again to press the matter, patient and unrelenting as a tide that will not stay out, until Innocent finally agreed to receive the ragged little band at Saint John Lateran. The pope listened and then sent Francis away — perhaps because other cardinals thought the proposal too austere to be practical, perhaps because the affairs of church and state pressed in on him like a rising current, or perhaps only because the smell of the midday meal had begun to drift in from the kitchen below.



Imagine that meal through Innocent's own senses: the scent of fish poached in wine curling under the door, the low murmur of broth stirred in a kitchen pot, the salt taste of the sea still clinging to the catch, the sight of the surface trembling in its bowl as his own tired thoughts stirred beneath it. Full and drowsy, Innocent drifted into his afternoon nap, and in his dream those same waters rose to swallow the walls of his own cathedral, until Saint John Lateran groaned, cracked, and began to list like a ship taking on the sea. Then a little poor man waded into the flood and put his shoulder beneath the church, holding it fast above the waves. Recognizing Francis as that little poor man, Innocent recalled him and gave his permission for the lesser brothers of Assisi to live the Gospel in poverty, chastity, and obedience. With his visit to Rome now blessed, Francis and his companions were drawn at last into the safe harbor of Holy Mother Church, embraced by her care and protection.

Back in Assisi, across the aisle from this scene is the fresco of the crucifixion of Jesus, with Mary and John below and to the left. Jesus speaks to His mother, Mary, saying:

“‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’”
(John 19:26–27)

Just after this, Jesus bowed His head and died. Scripture goes on to tell us:

“...one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.” (John 19:34)

With this pouring out of water and blood the Church was born.



In the painted scene, Mary and John lean on one another, signifying how they would care for one another as family, as Church. In the same way, a river of desire poured into Francis' heart as he discerned next steps for the fledgling fraternity. The ebbing of the ocean tide in his heart gave way to a freshwater path from Assisi to Rome, where he flowed into the arms and care of Mother Church. Both paintings speak to the same human need — to be cared for with motherly affection — even as each gives birth to something new.

Preaching

Wading waist deep into the nave, wayfarers find a familiar image of Francis preaching to the birds.¹⁸ While Pope John Paul II named Francis the patron saint of ecology in 1979, this fresco has nothing to do with that distinction. Looking closely, wayfarers can distinguish between the various flocks of birds listening to Francis' preaching peace and repentance. This is a medieval way of indicating that Francis is preaching to the many nations of the world. Like the prophets, Francis preaches to wayfarers, imploring them to listen to God so that they might find that:

“[Peace and] prosperity would have been like a river, and your success like the waves of the sea...” (Isaiah 48:18)

This message preached by Francis finds an even deeper context in the fresco opposite. Here we find the lifeless body of Jesus, reverently being taken down from the cross. With this image in mind, we recall the words in Jesus' farewell to his disciples the night before:

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (John 15:13)

Such acts of sacrificial love, for the sake of genuine friendship, are what Jesus and Francis used to be salt for the earth and light for the world. This is the message that Francis is preaching in the mirroring fresco. Like Francis, all missionary disciples are driven by the Great Commission of Jesus to:

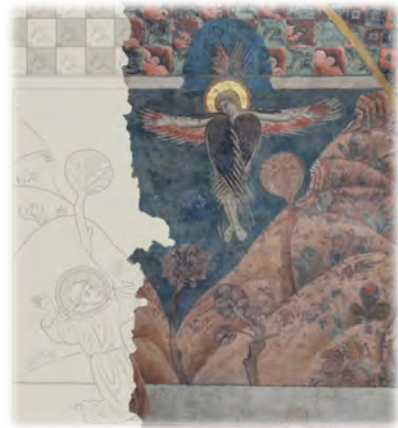
“Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” (Mark 16:15)



¹⁸ Some may think this painting is out of sequence because Francis bears the marks of the stigmata, while the scene of his receiving the stigmata follows. The scene is in correct order of the life of Francis; the addition of the stigmata can be considered zealous Franciscan fervor (a bit of foreshadowing) on the part of the artist.

Union

Pulled into the deeper waters of suffering and grief, wayfarers will find themselves swimming through the emotions of the next two paintings. The first shows Francis receiving the Sacred Stigmata of Christ Jesus. Two years before his death, Francis withdrew to Mount La Verna for a retreat. There he was drawn into a mystical experience, an intimate encounter with the divine, in which the crucified Christ appeared to him in the form of a seraph, the six-winged angel of love. From this intimate moment with God, Francis bore the stigmata ever after, the wounds of Christ marked into his hands, feet, and side.



Francis would go to mountaintop places of holy solitude when his heart ebbed, seeking consolation. Imagine what he must have experienced during this mystical union with the crucified Christ. The thin mountain air would have carried the scent of pine and stone, the wind cutting cold against his skin even as inner fire rose to meet it. Before his eyes, light gathered into wings — six of them, burning gold and searing white, resolving at their center into the face of the Crucified. He would have heard nothing but his own breath and the silence of the mountain holding still around him, and then, wound by wound, felt the piercing itself: a pain sharp as nails, sweet as any love he had known. All of Francis' senses were engaged as he admitted his own unworthiness yet radically remained open and trusting of God's intent to transform him, quite literally, into an *alter Christus*. Waves of pain and love washed over him, pulling him deeper into the embrace of the divine. That



same undertow of love and suffering carries across the aisle, where Jesus is being laid in the stone-cold tomb. Angels above the body of the Lord seem to have inspired the tune *Cry Me a River*¹⁹ as the stormy waves of grief crash over Mary, a mother who has lost her only son.

Wayfarers feeling drenched by the storm of feelings and emotions might now find irony in the welcoming words of Francis upon entering the Basilica. Pilgrims, wayfarers, had been promised *spiritual joys and great things*

within the Basilica. So, to find our bearings, we might do well to recall the words of the psalmist:

“Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.” (Psalm 107:28–30)

¹⁹ The idiom “cry me a river” originates from the title and lyrics of a song written by Arthur Hamilton for the 1955 film *Pete Kelly's Blues*.

Sight

Just past the paintings of suffering and grief, through which wayfarers pass as Francis did, into mystical union with God, there was once an iron gate dividing the main part of the nave from the beginning of the sanctuary of the church. Passing just beyond the now-imaginary open gate, wayfarers find themselves no longer swimming the treacherous currents but floating in tranquil, brackish, water, for the Lord:

“...leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” (Psalm 23)

The final painting of Francis shows his death, or as he might have called it — the embrace of Sister Death. Francis held the firm belief in the resurrection of Jesus, which opens the way for humanity to journey back to the Father. As Saint Paul said:

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (2 Corinthians 5:1)



In this fresco we find a serene Francis, who with eyes closed rests in the peace of *spiritual joy*. Yet those closed eyes hold within them a hidden brightness, for Francis believed they would open again, not into darkness but into the dazzling light of the resurrection, the *great thing* of eternal life he had spent his whole journey longing for. His complete trust in the Lord and participation in his passion, death, and resurrection have prepared him for this *great thing*, the *spiritual joy* that has no end.

Wayfarers now draw close to the Risen Jesus, who reveals Himself on the opposite wall. There He is seated at table, breaking bread with the two wayfarers He had walked beside on the road to Emmaus. It is as though Francis' closed eyes find their answer here, for just as his own eyes await their mystical opening into resurrection brightness, so too were the eyes of the Emmaus disciples opened, at the breaking of the bread, to see the Risen Lord standing before them all along.

These wayfaring disciples were leaving Jerusalem, distraught with confusion and grief, their hearts still raw from the crucifixion and death they had just witnessed. They did not recognize Him. How could they? Yet Christ Jesus quietly chose to walk beside them anyway, a stranger keeping pace with their sorrow. As they walked, he opened the Scriptures for them, gently helping them see how all that had taken place, even their grief, was held within God's saving plan.

Their walk becomes the pattern of every wayfarer's path that moves through darkness, weariness, and unanswered questions, yet is never abandoned by Jesus. The disciples' inability to recognize Him mirrors our own moments of unawareness, when the Lord is present in ways we do not immediately perceive. The mysterious stranger on the road is

familiar but unknown. This reminds us that the Risen Lord often approaches quietly and then awakens memory and hope step by step.

When the sojourning wayfarers stopped to share a meal, Christ Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. In that moment their eyes were opened, and he vanished from their sight. Only then did they understand what had been happening deep within them. Their hearts had been burning as He spoke, as the Lord shared His Easter understanding. Now that He is in His glory, radiant and unclouded, nothing stands between His human mind and the shining truth of the Father's word. Through the Spirit, that same light is communicated to the Church, a lamp passed from hand to hand. What He once saw with perfect clarity, He now longs to illuminate for every wayfarer who walks with Him.



For the Emmaus wayfarers, this revelation transformed their sorrowful journey into one of remembered mercy and renewed purpose. Compelled by *spiritual joy*, they turned around and rushed back to Jerusalem to proclaim the *great things* of the Lord's resurrection and all He shared with them along the way. Inspired by the story of this fresco, wayfarers of today might more readily perceive how God has been guiding, forgiving, and gently reshaping their stories from within. Every step becomes part of a larger path where the creative Word, who made the world, seeks to recreate it through wayfarers and mystics, those who dare to walk with Him.

Contemplating these mystical moments while floating in the quiet pool of brackish water, lingering wayfarers might notice twinkles of light coming from the ceiling vaults. The length of the nave is painted as a night sky with little rounded mirrors attached everywhere, reflecting the flickering beauty of the candlelight below. Architecturally, the Lower Basilica was built to resemble a sailboat that glides through the waters of the nave and into the sanctuary, under a "starry, starry night."²⁰

²⁰ This refers to Don McLean's 1971 song "Vincent," track 2 on the album *American Pie* (United Artists Records, 1971). Its imagery can echo Francis of Assisi's misunderstood "madness," but unlike Francis, Vincent



The Spirituality of Architecture: Come Sail Away



The word “nave” comes from the Latin word *navis* meaning *ship*. Church architecture teases out this metaphor using the teachings of the early Church Fathers, who would refer to ships bearing the faithful through difficult waters, while sailing towards the shore of eternal life.²¹ This imagery has helped wayfarers throughout the centuries to realize that they are meant to be united in purpose, rather than isolated individuals visiting a church or moving through life. For we are all sailing together, bound toward the same heavenly glory. On board, we endure hardships together and are sustained by the presence of Christ Jesus in our midst.²²

succumbs to despair. In the Lower Basilica, listening to this song with Christian ears may serve as a caution, while kindling hope for weary wayfarers.

²¹ See Tertullian, *On Baptism (De Baptismo)*, trans. S. Thelwall, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885); Cyprian, “To Magnus, on Baptizing the Novatians,” trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886); and Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, ed. Cynthia White, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 105 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

²² At this point in the journey, a helpful meditation might be Enya’s song, “May It Be”, written for *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The song’s blessing, “Believe and you will find your way...” echoes J.R.R. Tolkien’s vision of companions who endure darkness, not alone but together. As with Frodo’s burden shared by the Fellowship and Arwen’s costly hope, the light that guides through hardship points beyond itself, sustaining wayfarers through both companionship and the abiding presence of the evening star, Christ our light.

“And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (Mark 4:36–41)



In the Lower Basilica the captain of the ship is the priest, acting *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, leading the faithful in worship.²³ He steers the ship from the altar, guided by the compass of Scripture, proclaimed by the pulpit’s navigation desk. The cross is the mast of the ship.²⁴ Above it, the vault over the altar serves as sails. In Assisi, we find four triangle shaped paintings in the vault, commonly called the *vele*, the Italian word for *sails*. The sails of the ship of the Lower Basilica are filled with the breath of our prayerful words and actions, thus moving everyone aboard, forward into God’s kingdom. This metaphor also serves to remind wayfarers that if we focus on our own private destinations, the wind of our collective life of faith grows weaker, as the sails go slack.

²³ Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*), no. 2.

²⁴ The current cross, from the Porziano/Spoleto workshop, dates to the 13th century. The original cross, meant to hang in this mystical space, is the Blue Cross, commissioned for the Lower Basilica c. 1250 by the Maestro dei Crocifissi Blu (Master of the Blue Crucifix). It can be seen in the museum of the Sacro Convento in Assisi. On the front side is the crucified Christ with Mary and John. On the opposite side there is an inscription, *Rex Glorie* — "King of Glory." The spelling reflects standard medieval Latin orthographic convention, in which the classical genitive *gloriae* is contracted to *glorie*; the same phrase appears in its classical form as *Tu Rex gloriae, Christe* in the *Te Deum*, the ancient Latin hymn of praise sung in the Divine Office. For centuries the inscription *Rex Glorie* would have been seen by friars chanting the *Te Deum* from the choir.

Wayfarers still in the water, floating toward the altar, will find a strong yet gentle friar is always reaching over the edge of the ship, to pull them aboard. Once there, all eyes are drawn to the golden sails in the sanctuary, where the center sail, *vela*, depicts the image of *Francis in Glory*. Seeing Francis painted into the glory of heaven, the story of the nave comes to its climax in the vision of the Letter to the Hebrews:

“You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.” Hebrews 12: 18–19)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...” (Hebrews 12:22–24)

Continuing their journey, all wayfarers receive an invitation from the Basilica, to consider the possibility of becoming Franciscan disciples of Christ Jesus. In this mystical place, one realizes that there waits for us the heavenly Jerusalem itself. The path has opened for wayfarers, for mystics, to approach.



LADIES POVERTY, CHASTITY, OBEDIENCE — WITH FRANCIS IN GLORY

The Master of the Vele: A Meditation on Consecration

The Master of the Vele is believed to be Puccio Capanna, a pupil of Giotto. Regardless of who painted the *vele*, these frescoes are among the most significant in the Basilica, positioned directly above the tomb of Saint Francis and the altar of sacrifice.

Along with the sail known as *Francis in Glory* three noble women appear, each offering her own frescoed meditation — *Lady Poverty*, *Lady Chastity*, and *Lady Obedience*. These figures bear the names of the three vows professed by Franciscans, promises symbolized by the iconic three-knotted cord of the Franciscan habit.

Yet, these vows are more than symbols or spoken promises. They are prophetic acts, signposts for wayfarers, that proclaim within this sacred and mystical space a deeper invitation. The sails, through their vibrant colors, gilded light, and gestures caught mid-motion, speak to the very heart of the Christian life and touch upon what is most essential to our shared humanity. This visual theology prepares us to see how the vows, intimately tied to the Eucharist, are not only depicted in art but embodied at the altar in the most profound way.



There is no such thing as a coincidence in medieval art. It was intentional to depict the vows of consecrated religious above the altar where bread and wine are consecrated to become the Body and Blood of Christ. At a religious profession, consecrated religious make the Eucharist visible when they promise to live prophetically in a manner that says, “This is my body, which is given up for you. This is my blood... poured out for you and for many.”²⁵

To deepen these vows, reception of the Body and Blood of Christ is not only a sacred act. It is a transformation as one becomes what one receives. This intimacy is so profound that it draws the soul into a silence as deep as the sea itself. It is from this quiet, mystical place that those consecrated for prophetic mission rise each day to proclaim the Gospel with their lives.²⁶

The ladies of the *vele* offer us a richer, more faithful understanding of Franciscan vowed life. Through them, we come to see poverty, chastity, and obedience not as restrictions, but as virtues to be embraced by all of humanity, especially wayfarers journeying through the Basilica. Just as the sails of a ship catch the wind and move it forward, so too do these virtues catch the Spirit’s breath and carry the whole Church toward her heavenly harbor.

²⁵ *The Roman Missal*, English translation according to the Third Typical Edition (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Eucharistic Prayer II, Institution Narrative.

²⁶ Edward J. Farrell, *Disciples and Other Strangers* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1974), 29–31, 89–94.

Lady Poverty

A spiritual allegory called the *Sacrum commercium* was written shortly after Francis' death.²⁷ It is a courtly romance that portrays poverty as a noble lady and Francis as her devoted suitor. Seeing in her the path to Christ Jesus, Francis falls in love with Lady Poverty.

Together with his companions, Francis searches for her in the wilderness, where she agrees to stay with them because of their faithfulness to the Gospel. In time, Francis declares, that he had taken a spouse more noble, more beautiful, and more rich than anyone could ever imagine.²⁸

In her *vela*, we see the mystical marriage of Francis and Lady Poverty. Christ Jesus stands between them and blesses their union as Francis places a ring on the finger of his bride. Lady Hope, dressed in green, serves as the ring bearer, while Lady Charity, in rose, offers a heart of love. These ladies not only witness the wedding but, as virtues, they become essential to a healthy and holy marriage.



"Hope," Saint Augustine wrote, "has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger that the world is the way it is, and courage to see that it does not remain that way."²⁹ With Lady Hope as the ring bearer, Francis and Lady Poverty are reminded that courage will be needed in their marriage, to channel in a positive and righteous manner the anger that will eventually rise up within them, because they will be raising their family in a sometimes hostile and often indifferent world. Lady Charity, for her part, offers

²⁷ *The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999).

²⁸ A variation of this story is also recorded in *The Legend of the Three Companions*, ch. 3.

²⁹ Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 136.

the vulnerability of a beating heart that will unite the couple in their purpose of sharing God's love in a world that has grown cold and violent.



Lady Poverty knows the chill of want in her life. Clothed in threadbare rags, she stands with brambles at her feet that bloom into roses around her head. This fragrant transformation only occurs when, like Francis, we live spiritual poverty. By putting God and others before us, by refusing to let our possessions, status, or ideas rule us, we become holy. Thus, by speaking the promise of a popular Franciscan phrase, *sine proprio*,³⁰ we open ourselves to discovering concrete expressions of a living faith in Christ Jesus. In this way new life is found not only in the roses but also in the arch below the fresco, where tiny portraits of the early friars are painted. These friars are the offspring of the mystical union between Francis and Lady Poverty, as are the faithful gathered in the nave below the arch.

It is often said that at a wedding, couples remember when they first fell in love. This is depicted in the bottom left corner of the fresco, where an angel draws our attention to a young Francis removing his cloak to give it to a poor beggar. This was Francis' first stripping, and likely one of the first times in his life when he genuinely put another's needs before his own comfort. It marks the moment when he first lovingly cared for and embraced Lady Poverty.

Looking up to the top part of the fresco, we find an angel taking the cloak Francis gave to the beggar and offering it to God, whose arms reach down from heaven. Another angel presents a villa and vegetable garden. These images call to mind the words of Jesus:



"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25)

Here, Lady Poverty challenges us to detachment, so that we might strip ourselves of anxiety and trust completely in God. At the bottom of the scene, two small figures dressed in red and blue offer a stark contrast to the gifts of the angels. Small in stature and in character, they represent the rising merchant class. Having fostered a false love of wealth, they attempt to drive Lady Poverty away, poking her with sticks and throwing stones, hoping to chase her out of their lives.

Francis resists these protests as he offers his whole self to the marriage. Though he came from a wealthy merchant family, where cloth and coin defined his identity, he freely

³⁰ *Sine proprio* is literally translated as "nothing of my own" in the sense of being freed to put others before one's self, a foundational principle of Franciscan poverty.

rejected that life in favor of God's call. He certainly renounced luxury and riches, yet his understanding of Lady Poverty went deeper. In her, he found a virtue that taught him never to let his possessions possess him. She showed him that everything he had received was a gift from God, meant to be shared for the good of all.

In the bottom right corner of the fresco, we see an angel inviting three men to the wedding celebration. These men represent the medieval social structure of the time, yet each turns away, too preoccupied with personal concerns. From left to right, they are a nobleman with a falcon on his wrist, symbolizing the pride of the ruling class; a tonsured clergyman clutching a book, which represents how culture and learning are firmly held within the hands of a few; and finally, there is a merchant, grasping a money bag that represents greed and avarice. Dressed in a richly colored yellow tunic, this final figure also represents a betrayal of human dignity and the common good.³¹



How often in our own world do we see similar dynamics? Children argue over phones, clothing, or toys, thereby valuing things more than people. Adults may prioritize a job title, personal success, or self-care over family and community. Also, there are ideas that we tend to possess. How often do we get frustrated when our brilliant suggestion is reshaped by others? Lady Poverty reminds us that our ideas are often given by God, not solely for ourselves, but to be shaped by the community into different goods God desires for all.

Within the bottom of the arch there is a Latin inscription that translates,

So, Poverty is scorned, for she casts aside the world's delights; wrapped in a garment rough and poor, she longs instead for Heaven's consoling joy. Though pierced by bitter thorns and stripped of earthly wealth, she blooms with living roses, radiant with celestial gladness. Divine Hope and holy Charity are ever at Francis' side, and angels labor with him that Poverty herself may be found pleasing. For Christ bestowed this bride upon Francis that he might guard her well, the bride whom all the world rejects.

Wayfarers sailing beneath this arch, are faced with a choice: to embrace Lady Poverty and her elegant simplicity or to consider abandoning ship. The Franciscans invite all who gaze upward to welcome Lady Poverty into their everyday lives. She is a faithful spouse, and like any true marriage, hers asks for fidelity in return, a willingness to let go of privilege, entitlement, and selfishness for her sake. Wayfarers are invited to join Francis in embracing Lady Poverty and renew with her a love and devotion for the common good.³²

³¹ The color of mustard yellow is often associated with betrayal. Elsewhere in the Basilica, Judas Iscariot is shown wearing this color.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1906. The common good is the sum total of social conditions that allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily.

Lady Chastity

Returning to the chivalric tale of the *Sacrum commercium*, we find Francis' romance with Lady Poverty intertwined with another virtue, Lady Chastity. In her *vela*, Lady Chastity is portrayed as a paragon of purity, with a white flag waving atop her citadel of purity. Two angels bring her gifts in the form of a crown of salvation and a palm tree of victory. While these gifts were typically bestowed upon Christian martyrs in honor of their suffering and sacrifice, in the medieval spirituality of consecrated religious, these symbols became metaphors for interior struggle and spiritual fidelity.



Properly defined, chastity does not necessarily involve sexual abstinence. Lady Chastity wishes to be the companion of everyone. She is the virtue that orders one's body and spirit toward self-giving love, rooted in the dignity of the person and the call to communion, a shared life with God and neighbor.³³

Below the tower and outside the castle walls, the fresco centers on a medieval vigil of arms that embodies a defense of the ideals of love and fidelity.³⁴ Two angels ritually bathe a young Francis, before his knightly investiture. Just to the right, two additional angels stand ready to clothe Francis in the religious habit of a lesser brother. Here in the *vela*'s central scene, the investiture would have spoken directly to the friars gathered in the choir below, who professed their religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience at the altar directly beneath this fresco. Like them, the young hero of this scene is made a *miles Christi*, a knight

³³ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, §§21–23; Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §48.

³⁴ Lady Chastity's tower is strikingly similar to the Florentine tower in the Palazzo dei Priori, which was likely completed just before the painting of the *vela*. Below this tower, the investiture of knights by the Commune would have taken place on a constructed platform called a *ringhiera*. See: Robert Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze* (Florence: Sansoni, 1956–68), vol. 5 (IV, pt. 1), 386. The *ringhiera* no longer exists.

of Christ, dedicating himself to a lifetime of struggle in the service of his Order.³⁵ Here, wayfarers are invited to pause and contemplate a young Francis, the first to embody what might be called a Franciscan *Knight of the Round Table*, a champion whose chivalry is measured not by conquest, but by self-giving love.³⁶

As Francis' investiture reaches its culmination, two virtues reach over the wall to offer Francis a standard and a shield, with which the new knight will defend both himself and others. Lady Purity, *Munditia*, offers a standard, for it is purity itself she embodies and holds out to him. Biblically, purity is not merely the avoidance of sin, but a matter of the heart. Being pure of heart is what makes kindness, mercy, and love possible.³⁷

“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.” (Matthew 5:8)

Lady Strength, *Fortitudo*, then offers the young Francis a shield because it says in Scripture:

“Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” (Ephesians 6:14–16)



Here we find the standard of purity coupled with the shield of faith working together to provide Francis with the spiritual disposition needed to defend against wickedness. For the words of Scripture call out to both newly cleansed knights and gazing wayfarers:

“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8)

To the bottom right of the fresco are four prowling demons, dark reflections of fractured souls. They lurk about in their desire to corrupt this *Franciscan Camelot*. Before their damage could be inflicted, a bell of warning rings from the top of Lady Chastity's tower. Her voice can be heard, carried below on the notes of the resounding chimes.

³⁵ John Renner, "Chastity's Knight: Allegory and Chivalry in Assisi." *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 42, no. 1 (2022): 7–9.

³⁶ Gratien de Paris, O.F.M. Cap., *I Know Christ: The Personality and Spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Paul Oligny, O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1957), 32–33.

³⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2518.

Flee now, beasts of broken vow, for Lady Virtues rise not in violence but in chastity.
Where Hope stands, cruelty stumbles. Where Love weeps, even fire remembers purity.
Where Faith speaks, the grave grows quiet. Where Penance walks, shame flees.³⁸



At the very bottom right corner of the fresco is the demon *Inmunditia*, the boar headed tyrant with broken wings, tumbling backward. His body carries the weight of soulless obedience and cruel order. Well above him stands Lady Hope, clad in green.³⁹ She holds close her shield, not to be blindsided by a devilish Loki,⁴⁰ and reaches out with her wooden cross that speaks of true strength. Confronted with the power of the cross, *Inmunditia* stumbles, powerless against the courage that hope inspires and the anger she transforms.

Just above him is *Ardor*, who has dropped his torch. A furry demon below and a burning man above, flames are roaring from his shoulders and head. His wings churn smoke and fire that are wild and destructive. He is met by Lady Charity, robed in the color blue that represents chaste love. She sprinkles holy water like a gentle rain, which softens *Ardor*'s wrath, and even his raging fire remembers purity as he recoils.

³⁸ This original verse, describing the scene within the fresco, was informed by the writings of John Cassian, *Conferences*, bk. 11, ch. 6.

³⁹ Hope clad in green, Charity in red, and Faith in white derives from the 12th century French theologian Peter the Chanter. In the case of Charity as courtly, chivalric, and chaste love, this virtue was also known to be represented in the color blue, as seen in this fresco. This is explored in depth in the following sources: Meg Bogin, *The Women Troubadours* (New York: Paddington Press, 1976); and C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

⁴⁰ The trickster Norse god of mischief, reinterpreted today in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films and television series (2011–present), drawing on Norse mythological sources while adding the dimension of a complex, often sympathetic antagonist — a figure whose mischief conceals deeper alienation and a hunger to belong. In the fresco, the vice figure shares this quality of misdirected desire: energy that could have served the good, turned instead toward disruption.

Then there is Mors, the black skeletal reaper, silent and cold, his scythe ready to claim life's end. He turns away from Lady Faith, dressed in white, holding a slender *ferula*.⁴¹ Her quiet strength counters the finality in Mors's scythe and calms the graves chilled by despair, with the light of trust beyond sight.⁴²

Finally, there is *Eros the Bound*, naked and blindfolded, fleeing on feet clawed like a rooster's. He is *Amor*, love that has torn itself loose from sight and from God, his bow broken and useless at his side.⁴³ He flees from Lady Penance, wrapped in rose-colored robes of wisdom. She wields a scourge not of wrath but of cleansing sorrow.⁴⁴ Where she walks, shame flees, and *Eros*' twisted desire dissolves into the shadows.

One by one the demons flee, not through force, but through the steady vigilance of these Lady Virtues.⁴⁵ For chastity heals the brokenhearted as sin is banished into darkness. This part of the fresco testifies that choosing a life of chastity always involves struggle, which is — "Not might makes right, but might for right."⁴⁶ Furthermore, the figure of Lady Penance, which Saint Francis understood as *a willingness to start over again*, forever serves as a reminder to wayfarers that spiritual and bodily fidelity are not measured by perfection, but by endurance.



Fittingly, a Madonna lily, *Lilium candidum*, blooms at the edge of this very struggle, a flower that had, by the Middle Ages, become one

⁴¹ The penitentiary *ferula* — also called the *virga penitentiaria* or *bacchetta penitenziale* ("penitential wand" or "rod") — was used by confessors, especially major and minor penitentiaries holding wider jurisdiction than an ordinary priest, to offer blessings of comfort and solace to penitents in papal basilicas. A penitent seeking absolution or an indulgence would kneel before the confessor, who would tap the rod lightly upon the penitent's head or shoulders — a gesture drawn from Psalm 23:4, "Your rod and your staff — they comfort me." The practice endured for centuries, remaining in use as late as the pontificate of Paul VI. With the penitential wand in hand, Lady Faith counters Mors, the silent reaper who with his scythe is poised to reap souls without mercy or word. His presence was finality itself, a harbinger of despair that silenced hope before it could kindle. With the *ferula*, Lady Faith breaks that silence.

⁴² See, for example, Prudentius, *Psychomachia*, in Prudentius, vol. 1, trans. H. J. Thomson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949); and, on the broader iconographic tradition of Faith and the virtues confronting death in medieval allegory and illuminated manuscripts, Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

⁴³ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), 169–70. The figure inscribed Amor in the Allegory of Chastity is depicted winged, blindfolded, and clawed-footed, expelled from the castle of Chastity. I name him Eros the Bound, reading the figure through Lewis's claim that "Eros, honoured without reservation and obeyed unconditionally, becomes a demon." For Lewis, Eros does not cease to be love (*Amor*) when corrupted; rather, unbound from submission to God, it becomes a tyrant to those it claims. The fresco's blindfold and talons are my own visual confirmation of that argument, not Lewis's commentary on the fresco itself.

⁴⁴ A whip with multiple cords, called a flail, was used to inflict pain as an act of self-discipline and repentance.

⁴⁵ Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, ch. 8. This triad — faith, hope, love (charity) — is presented as the basis of interior transformation, and thus implicitly as defense/preparation for trials, temptations, and, in a theological sense, demonic influences. See also José María Salvador González, "Ascensio in Deum per vestigia et in vestigiis: St. Bonaventure's Immanent Aesthetics and Its Possible Reflections in the Iconography of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi," *Mirabilia: Electronic Journal of Antiquity & Middle Ages*, no. 16 (2013): 79–119.

⁴⁶ Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, *Camelot*, act 1 (New York: Random House, 1961).

of the most recognized symbols of purity in Christian art.⁴⁷ Saint Anthony of Padua, Francis' own contemporary, drew out this same meaning in his sermons, teaching that the lily holds three properties, medicine, whiteness, and fragrance, and that each represents the penitent soul who crucifies the flesh's vices and lusts, guards humility against pride, and keeps the candor of chastity in the body.⁴⁸ Planted at the very threshold where Lady Virtues cast the vices into darkness, the lily becomes more than decoration. It stands as the fresco's own quiet witness that struggle, and not an innocence never tested, is what purity actually looks like.

On the opposite side of the fresco, Francis uses both his purity and strength to pull into this blessed scene of chastity three individuals representing the entirety of the Franciscan family, which is comprised of three Orders.⁴⁹ The friar, whose hand Francis is grasping, represents the First Order of Friars Minor. To his left, reaching for the cross being offered by a saintly attendant, is a veiled nun. She represents the Second Order of the cloistered Poor Ladies, later known as the Poor Clares. The subtle artistic detail of rendering most of the nun's face obscured by the friar, speaks to the nun's life of enclosure. The third figure represents the members of the Third Order of lay penitents, known today as Secular Franciscans. As models of virtue themselves, these figures are welcomed into the self-giving love of chastity, rooted in the dignity of the human person and the sign of sacrificial love embodied by the cross that is presented to them.



An often-overlooked aspect of the virtuous Lady Chastity is how her self-giving love is also rooted in the call to communion with God and others. This raises a question for every wayfarer. *How do you want to be loved?* The answer to this very human question then reveals how we must love others, thereby leading to the further consideration that “my neighbor is my unknown self.”⁵⁰ Looking back at the fresco, wayfarers may want to linger

⁴⁷ Riklef Kandeler and Wolfram R. Ullrich, "Symbolism of Plants: Examples from European-Mediterranean Culture Presented with Biology and History of Art: Lily," *Journal of Experimental Botany* 60, no. 7 (May 2009): 1893–95.

⁴⁸ Anthony of Padua, "Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost," in *Sermons for Sundays and Festivals*, vol. 3, trans. Paul Spilsbury (Padua: Edizioni Messaggero Padova / Centro Studi Antoniani, 1979), sec. 12.

⁴⁹ While scholars agree on this symbolism, the particular identities of the three figures cannot be established with confidence. The veiled woman is conventionally identified as Saint Clare. The friar beside her is commonly identified as John of Morrovalle the Minister General who inspired this artistic cycle and eventually became the Cardinal Protector of the Franciscan Order. (He is also believed to be depicted in the Allegory of Lady Obedience). The final figure, a layman is often, though not definitively, identified as Count Orlando Cattani of Chiusi, the charitable knight who donated to Francis the mountain of La Verna. Some have maintained that this third figure is the famous Secular Franciscan poet, Dante Alighieri, but the strong facial features typical in representations of Dante are not present.

⁵⁰ Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fitch (London: Macmillan, 1921).

and consider how much of the action takes place outside the castle walls. For location may prove to be the key in an authentic love of neighbor, which ideally includes everyone and is centered in a safeguarding of human dignity that is mindful of a *preferential option for the poor*.⁵¹

A contemporary reflection of this painting can be found in a letter Pope Francis sent to the Bishops of the United States. In it, he directly addressed the theological concept of *ordo amoris*, the order of love, in response to public remarks made by the vice president suggesting a fixed hierarchical approach to love in which one always prioritizes family first, then community, and then nation (America First) over all others in the world. Pope Francis firmly countered this by saying:

“The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ (Luke 10:25–27) that is by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception.”⁵²

Pope Francis was clarifying how love must not be viewed as concentric circles expanding from the individual outward but should instead center on the inherent dignity of every person, especially the poor, suffering, and marginalized. For the Gospel admits no borders. Wherever a wounded person lies in need, Christ Jesus is waiting to be loved.

Returning to the *Camelot* theme, wayfarers would do well to take to heart the words of Merlin to King Arthur, which were spoken to inspire both purity and strength within him as a person and a leader, for the sake of the common good.

“You have become the king of a domain in which the popular agitators hate each other for racial reasons, while the nobility fight each other for fun, and neither the racial maniac nor the overlord stops to consider the lot of the common soldier, who is the one person that gets hurt. ... Unless you can make the world wag better than it does at present, King, your reign will be an endless series of petty battles ... in which the poor man will be the only one who dies.”⁵³

Within the bottom of the arch there is a Latin inscription that translates:

To Chastity, who prays for the triumph of her crown, the veil is given as her jeweled sign. Whoever desires to reach her must wrap himself in honesty; and entrance to her realm is granted only when Fortitude offers protection. For Chastity is guarded by the gifts of virtue, and against her enemies she is shielded by the sacred wounds of the suffering Christ. Penance keeps her defense through repeated acts of discipline, while the memory of death presses upon the mind ever more often. Francis calls the brothers and the sisters to her, and he beckons all committed to holy chastity to walk in her way.

⁵¹ Pope Leo XIV, Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te: On Love for the Poor*, October 4, 2025, no. 16; and Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 132.

⁵² Pope Francis, Letter to the Bishops of the United States of America, February 10, 2025, no. 6.

⁵³ T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), bk. 2, ch. 4.

Lady Obedience

While Lady Obedience does not appear in the *Sacrum commercium*, she is present in Francis' *Salutation of the Virtues*.⁵⁴ Here in this *vela*, Lady Obedience sits within a monastic Chapter House, a place where consecrated religious gather to discern collectively the will of God and make decisions for the good of the community. Just behind Lady Obedience, sketched onto the back wall of the room, is a scene of the crucifixion, bringing to mind the words of Saint Paul:

“... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8)

Lady Obedience, dressed in the monastic robes of an abbot, draws her finger to her lips, quieting Francis, because in Latin the word for obedience is *oboedire*, meaning to listen to. The Chapter House holds its breath in that instant — even the wooden bench seems to still its creaking — as she places the yoke of obedience on Francis, recalling the Scripture passage:

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”⁵⁵ (Matthew 11:28–30)

Here we must recall that yokes were always made for two beasts of burden. The implication is that the yoked Francis must be quiet in order to listen to Christ Jesus walking beside him, on his own Emmaus journey.

Observant wayfarers will notice that the figure of Francis bears a skull in place of a head. This detail serves as a reminder that taking on the yoke of obedience and walking with Christ Jesus, implies making a journey from death into life. In the corners of the fresco, kneeling angels point toward the ultimate destination of that journey. The first angel on the left and the last on the right each hold a horn called a *rhyton*, a vessel of sacred oil used to anoint the kings of Israel. This symbol foretells that whoever accepts the yoke of obedience and passes through suffering and death, will then share in Christ Jesus' kingship, thereby becoming a sovereign in the Kingdom of Heaven.⁵⁶

The drama of this fresco unfolds in a Chapter House, where Lady Obedience, Francis, and many others are gathered. This is a mystical space in the sense that, in the Chapter House, God's will is discerned through conversation and listening. In today's Church, there is much talk about synodality and its meaning. Franciscans simply shrug and



⁵⁴ Francis of Assisi, “A Salutation of the Virtues,” in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 164.

⁵⁵ This is part of the Gospel passage used during the Mass for the Feast of Saint Francis. Matthew 11:25–30.

⁵⁶ See *Francis in Glory* in the final *vela*, seated upon a throne holding symbols of a Christian sovereign (a Book of the Gospels for an orb and a Cross for a scepter).

say, “OK, you're talking about a House Chapter, a Provincial Chapter, or a General Chapter.” Franciscans, being the most democratic of religious Orders in the Church, view synodality as something that we have been doing, quite naturally, for over 800 years.⁵⁷



At its core, synodality is more than just listening. The process begins with *looking together*. In a manner wherein we gather to gaze upon Christ Jesus, the Eucharist, the Church, the poor, and the world around us. Then, having looked together, we begin to discern the promptings of the Spirit in relation to the will of the Father for the community. This happens through mindful, reflective listening that considers our experiences in light of Scripture and the tradition of the Church, the kind of listening that asks a room to fall quiet before it dares to speak. As members of the community, we then act according to the wisdom of the group.⁵⁸ This process leads to the communal realization that in the One, we are one.⁵⁹

To master the delicate combination of listening, discernment, and action within a gathered community, Franciscan wayfarers would do well to foster two virtues within themselves. Shifting our focus in the fresco, we find Lady Humility within the arch to the right. As a virtue, humility is traditionally defined as knowing who you are before God, *nothing more and nothing less*. This description comes alive in the fresco when an angel, standing at Lady Humility's side, casts a centaur out of the scene. A creature from Greek mythology, the

⁵⁷ Pope Leo XIV, Address to the Italian Bishops' Conference, Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels, Assisi, November 20, 2025. "Dear Brothers, in this place Saint Francis and the first friars fully lived what we would call today a 'synodal style.'" See also International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), §33.

⁵⁸ An expression of this found in the theological reflection of the Church in Latin America is the Pastoral Cycle: 1. See – Observe and analyze the reality, particularly the suffering and oppression of the poor. 2. Judge – Reflect on this reality in light of Scripture, the social doctrine of the Church, and theological principles. 3. Act – Respond with concrete actions to transform unjust structures and live out the Gospel.

⁵⁹ Reference to the motto of Pope Leo XIV, taken from the writings of Augustine, Exposition on Psalm 127 [Enarrationes in Psalmos]. The literal expression of the Bishop of Hippo, from which the motto is derived, reads: "These Christians, with their Head who ascended to heaven, are one Christ; it is not he one and we many, but being many in that One, we are one."

centaur personifies arrogant pride and serves as a reminder that we should not think too highly of ourselves.

A contemporary example can be found in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. During detention in the Forbidden Forest, a centaur named Firenze saves Harry from the cloaked evil figure, Voldemort. Firenze chooses to defy centaur customs by directly intervening in human affairs and carrying Harry on his back, an act considered beneath centaurs and seen as a betrayal by his kind. Firenze is scorned and later exiled from the herd for helping humans. In the scene with Lady Humility, Firenze would have been welcomed (as he was in Hogwarts), while the frescoed angel below casts out a representative member of the arrogant herd that had ostracized him.⁶⁰

If we stop at casting out arrogance, we are left with only half of the virtue of humility. The equally important part is knowing who we are before God, and *nothing less*. To help us remember the importance of healthy self-esteem, Lady Humility holds a lit candle in her hand as a reminder of baptism, whereby Christians become the light of Christ. Here we are reminded of the inherent dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of Christ Jesus.

Most Christians are baptized as infants. During the ceremony, a baptismal candle is lit from the Easter Candle and entrusted to the parents and godparents. They are exhorted to keep the flame, representing the light of Christ, burning brightly within the child. A problem arises when the family returns home and the baptismal candle is relegated to a special place, eventually forgotten, and never lit again. Forgotten too are the words of Christ Jesus:

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” (Matthew 5:15)

Families more mindful of the importance of interacting with Christian symbols relight baptismal candles in their homes on baptism anniversaries and the Sundays of Easter. Some families even teach children that in the moment they blow out the flame, the light of Christ grows brighter within them. This simple image of a candle in the hand of Lady Humility is a poignant reminder that to be humble, we must have a healthy self-esteem



⁶⁰ Bartholomaeus Anglicus (an English Greyfriar), *De proprietatibus animalium* (from *De proprietatibus rerum*), ca. 1240–50. A preaching manual, combining natural science with allegorical and spiritual interpretations of animals; in this and similar texts, preachers were encouraged to draw on widely circulating tales of marvels and mythology to communicate Gospel teachings. This resonates in United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2012), urging a preacher's immersion in music, literature, movies, and plays as a means of better linking Scripture to daily life and realizing hopes for justice and peace.

rooted in Christ Jesus. This will help wayfarers to become the insightful listeners God hopes for everyone to be.

In the arch on the opposite side of Lady Obedience, we find Lady Prudence. She is a complicated figure with two faces. She could probably land a side job in a contemporary



science fiction or fantasy series.⁶¹ The face of an older woman looking backward signifies how a prudent person reflects on the past and learns from mistakes. The other face, that of a young woman, tells us that the prudent person, while mindful of the past, lives in the present. Equally important is having a sense of direction in life. So, Lady Prudence holds a compass and other instruments in her hands, used to chart the future.

Contemplating this image, wayfarers might call to mind older family members who tend to begin stories with, “I remember when...” These are folks who live in the past. On the other side of the spectrum are those who are constantly staring at the instrument of a cellphone, living in the future of “likes” and the latest trend or headline. Both of these types of people fail to listen well, as they lack the skills needed for collective discernment. Lady Prudence reminds us of the importance of being present to others, to the world around us, and equally important, to ourselves. She becomes the embodiment of mysticism, of living in the present moment. This last point is emphasized in the fresco, as Lady Prudence holds a mirror up to Francis, asking him to be self-reflective and introspective enough to cultivate both prudence and humility in his life.

Just below Lady Prudence, we see an angel welcoming two figures into the painting: a man in red and, beside him, a younger man in blue. The elder figure is traditionally identified as the former Minister General, Friar John of Morrovalle, dressed here in his role as the Cardinal Protector of the Franciscan Order from 1307 to 1312, and the younger man is Saint Louis of Toulouse, a prince of the royal house of Anjou who renounced his claim to the throne of Naples to become a Franciscan and, within the same year, a bishop.⁶² The two men were not strangers to one another, for it was John himself who received Louis into the Order, clothing him in the Franciscan habit in Rome on Christmas Eve, 1296.

⁶¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*: “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” (late 14th century). This is an instance of a chivalric tale about the transformation of an old woman into that of a young woman; a contemporary parallel appears in *Doctor Who* (2015–), in the character Ashildr (“Me”), whose long life and shifting appearances (young and old across time) echo Lady Prudence’s twofold gaze of the memory of the past held alongside the demands of the present.

⁶² Igino Supino first proposed this identification; it was subsequently examined and refined by Diederik Schönau. See I. Supino, *Giotto* (Florence, 1920); and D. Schönau, “A New Hypothesis on the Vele in the Lower Church of San Francesco in Assisi,” *Franziskanische Studien* 67 (1985): 326–47.

Seen together, these two lesser brothers embody a creative tension at the very heart of obedience as the friars understood it. John had spent his life listening while leading. As a theologian in Paris, he was called upon to weigh disputed teaching with a discerning ear rather than a heavy hand. As Minister General he held a fracturing Order together, favoring institutional stability over the rigorist demands of the Spirituals, and easing, if not fully resolving, the Order's tensions over poverty and property. Finally, as the Cardinal Protector of the Order he continued listening to the friars and offering his sage and prudent advice.⁶³ For his part, Louis had spent his short life unmaking his own power. He was a king's son who gave away a crown and wore the Franciscan habit beneath his episcopal vestments. Louis also kept a friar at his side with standing permission to correct him in public, as a means of keeping him humble.⁶⁴

In this fresco, both bow their heads beneath the angel's welcome. Together they come to learn the same lesson, that obedience is not first a matter of command and submission, but of listening. It is a listening that a cardinal must do as much as a cleric, that a bishop must do as much as a beggar. Pope Francis has described this same posture as the very shape of a synodal Church. In his address marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, he spoke of the Church as a people "journeying together," a dynamism of mutual listening meant to run through every level of ecclesial life, in which, as he put it, everyone has something to learn.⁶⁵ To place a cardinal and a king's son side by side, both bent toward the same threshold, suggests something of what the Franciscan family has always practiced, synodality before it had that name. This is a Church that moves forward not by silencing some voices in favor of others, but by training every voice, however different in standing, to listen first.

This fresco leaves wayfarers looking into an uncomfortable mirror and asking: *How often do we mistake obedience for everyone else's task but our own?* Perhaps the Franciscan instinct, the one this fresco asks of a cardinal and a king's son, is not to demand a hearing but to offer one, with the same prudence John showed in his patient governance and the same humility Louis showed in keeping a corrective voice always within earshot. It is this same listening, carried toward its fulfillment, that we see rising above the Chapter House itself.

The final image in the *vela* of Lady Obedience is the yoked Francis rising above the Chapter House. In his left hand is a papal *ferula* with a crucifix affixed to the top,⁶⁶ symbolizing how

⁶³ Annamaria Emili, "Minio, Giovanni" [Giovanni da Morrovalle, known in English as John of Morrovalle], *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 74 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2010).

⁶⁴ *Processus Canonizationis et Legendae variae Sancti Ludovici O.F.M. Episcopi Tolosani*, *Analecta Franciscana* 7, ed. Patribus Collegii S. Bonaventurae (Quaracchi: Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1951).

⁶⁵ Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 107 (2015).

⁶⁶ The medieval papal *ferula* (cross-staff) expressed the Pope's authority coming from the Cross, not under a shepherd's crook. See Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an Iconography of Medieval Architecture," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 1–33. N.B. At the time of the painting of this fresco, the friars did not exercise their ministry of preaching under the authority of local bishops. Instead, they preached peace and reconciliation under the universal authority of the pope. So here we see a Christ-centered papal symbol being associated with Francis and, by extension, the friars in future generations. It should be noted that this type of medieval *ferula* was usually carried in front of the pope during processions.

the stigmatized Francis at the time of his *transitus*⁶⁷ had perfectly conformed himself to Christ Jesus. As one who had personally received mercy and forgiveness during his lifetime, at the end of his life, Francis becomes the Christlike example who says in complete freedom, in words that had shaped his whole life since the piazza of the bishop's house, "not as I will, but as you will."⁶⁸



Reaching down from heaven are the hands of God grasping a loose rope attached to the yoke of Francis. The loose rope symbolizes free will. By reaching out of the heavens and holding one end of the rope, God is helping Francis get to where he has chosen to go, into the great place of joy about which the psalmist says to the Lord:

"You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16:11)

Two angels flank Francis, each holding a scroll that reads:

*Take upon yourselves the yoke of obedience.
Imitate this man through the cross of penance.*

The choice is laid bare for wayfarers. All who gaze are to choose whether or not to come and sail away with the Cordbearers.⁶⁹

In this sense Francis could be imagined as a papal standard-bearer. Its modern personal-papal usage was revived by Pope Paul VI during the Second Vatican Council and continues to the present.

⁶⁷ The term *Transitus* is used liturgically in the Franciscan tradition to describe the passing of Francis on the evening of 3 October 1226. The *Transitus* of Saint Francis is celebrated annually with a special prayer service on that date.

⁶⁸ The Franciscans often turned to the Church Fathers for commentary on the Scriptures. Isaac of Nineveh was a favorite of the friars. He says in Homily 2, in *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery, rev. 2nd ed. (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), "Do not demand that things happen as you wish, but wish for them as they happen, and you will find rest." This insight resonates well with the fresco of Francis and Lady Obedience, in that surrender to the will of God is not seen as resignation, but as freedom from anxiety, since the soul rests in God's providence.

⁶⁹ Cordbearers (Lat. *Cordigeri*, "cord-wearers") is a traditional nickname of Franciscan friars, referring to the rope cord worn around the waist of the Franciscan habit. In France, the friars were commonly called *Cordeliers*.

At its core, it is a simple journey of listening, caring, and sharing. Francis listened and obeyed God's will, holding back nothing of himself for himself. He was made free to love God and others with all the strength and purity he possessed. Now, inspired by his example, wayfarers might better grasp an understanding of how Francis' way of living the joy of the Gospel makes it truly accessible to people from every walk of life.

Within the bottom of the arch there is a Latin inscription that translates:

The virtue of Obedience is shaped and completed beneath the yoke of Christ, and all who take up His yoke are made steady and willing in their obedience. It bears the semblance of dying, yet its works are full of life; silence refines the tongue, and the heart watches over every deed. Prudence walks beside her, able to look toward what is coming, to see the present clearly, and even to set the past before her mind. She measures all that must be done, as by the arc of a compass, and through the mirror of virtue she guides and moderates Obedience. Humility bends low, untouched by presumption, and in her hands lies the bright clarity of the virtues she carries.



Francis in Glory and the Book of Revelation

Wayfarers now recall the image of *Francis in Glory*, first glimpsed from the deck of the ship sailing from the nave into the sanctuary of the Basilica. Looking more closely at the figure of Francis, he is seen wearing a glorified tunic with the iconic cord of three knots draped down the center.⁷⁰ While Francis' clothing in this world was simple and poor, here he is transformed to reflect the heavenly beauty of God.⁷¹ Seated on a royal throne, he holds in his hands the Cross as a scepter and the Book of the Gospels as an orb. Surrounded by angels, Francis has entered into celestial glory as the *alter Christus*.⁷²

"And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I make all things new.' Also, he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'" (Revelation 21:5)

⁷⁰ It had been believed by many that Saint Francis was robed as deacon, since he had been ordained to the diaconate. This belief about his vesture has been recently debunked with the cleaning of the *vele* frescoes in 2022. The restoration revealed a cord with three knots running down the front of the garment. The cord, as a part of a religious habit and considered a non-liturgical accessory, would not have been worn on top of a vestment for liturgy. So, here we see Francis in a glorified habit of a consecrated religious.

⁷¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, 20.7. Irenaeus uses a phrase that may well be applied here: "*Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei*" — "For the glory of God is a living human being, and the life of the human being is the vision of God."

⁷² Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, *The Founder* (New York: New City Press, 2000). Some equate this image of Francis with the "angel of the sixth seal" (angelus...sexti sigilli) mentioned in Revelation 7:2, following Bonaventure's identification of Francis, "I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea..."

The words, which are trustworthy and true, are the feminine personifications of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They in turn are supported by hope, faith, charity, purity, strength, penance, humility, and prudence. Within the bottom of the arch there is a Latin inscription that translates:



Francis now restores the Gospel way and opens for all the road that leads to heavenly life. By renewing holy poverty and keeping the chaste pattern of the angels, he shapes through obedience a reflection of the very Trinity. Clothed in these virtues he rises toward his reign; filled with their fruits he walks securely on, moving in the company of angels toward Christ who awaits him. And the model he entrusts to his brothers and sisters, may everyone follow it.

Binding these four *vele* together are the arches of the vault. They are frescoed with images of angels, people, and animals rushing upward, “further up and further in”⁷³ toward the keystone at the center.

“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’” (Revelation 5:13)

The eyes of wayfarers then follow the lines of biblical creatures and angels to contemplate the image in the center keystone where Christ Jesus is holding a key in one hand and the *Book of Life* in the other. He also holds in His mouth a sword that symbolizes the penetrating truth of His authority, expressed not through violence but through the life-giving Word of God.⁷⁴

⁷³ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: The Bodley Head, 1956), ch. 15. Lewis' eschatology understands heaven not as static rest but as a deepening movement into a truly mystical reality. Thus, eternal life is continually moving "further up and further in," where fulfillment increases without limit.

⁷⁴ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 149.

We have sailed into the Book of Revelation and caught a glimpse of heaven, not only of what is to come, but of the One who holds the future in His hands. From the deck of our ship, we gaze into a mystical moment of a book lying in the hand of God, waiting to be opened. *But who is worthy to unlock the deep questions of life? Why is there suffering? Where is justice? Who will save us?* Suddenly, the silence of the deep ocean is broken, and we hear it proclaimed:



"See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered..."
(Revelation 5:5)

We expect a fierce and majestic lion, but instead we glimpse a lamb standing, yet slain. Wayfarers might blink for just a moment and see, "its snowy white flushed into tawny gold..."⁷⁵

Then this same Lamb, crucified and risen, says to us wayfarers:

"These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one can shut, who shuts and no one opens..." (Revelation 3:7)

This is no ordinary key. It is the authority of the King. What he opens is not just a book, it is the path to the fullness of the Kingdom of God. The *Book of Life* is the promise of eternal life and only Christ Jesus holds the key. Here we find the heart of the *spiritual joys* and *great things* offered upon entering the Basilica. Christ Jesus holds in His hands all power, yet He does not hoard it. Rather, He shares it with us. For our names — the names of the Cordbearers — are written in that book, not in ink but in mercy.

⁷⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), ch. 16. Reference to Aslan seen by the children as both a lion and a lamb. This alludes to John 21:1–14, with additional symbolic resonance to Revelation 5:5–6.

Arriving at the Basilica, wayfarers leave behind a world where so much seems forbidden. There are so many locked hearts, locked doors, locked justice, locked hope. So, in the mystical space of the Basilica, the Lamb of God stands before us with key in hand, making all things new once more.

Then gathered around the altar, under the mystical space of the *vele*, we respond saying, *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us and grant us peace.* The priest, the captain of our ship then raises the Eucharist above the altar and proclaims, *Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, blessed are we who are called to the supper of the Lamb.* We wayfarers then respond in one voice, *Lord, I am not worthy to enter under your roof but only say the word and I shall be healed.*

Gathered as community at table, we come to see how mysticism is not something for a select few. It is never about unusual experiences or rare moments of insight. True Christian mysticism is living our everyday and ordinary lives in a way that we are constantly being drawn into the light of Christ Jesus' resurrection.⁷⁶ As Saint Paul prayed:

“So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...” (Ephesians 1:18)

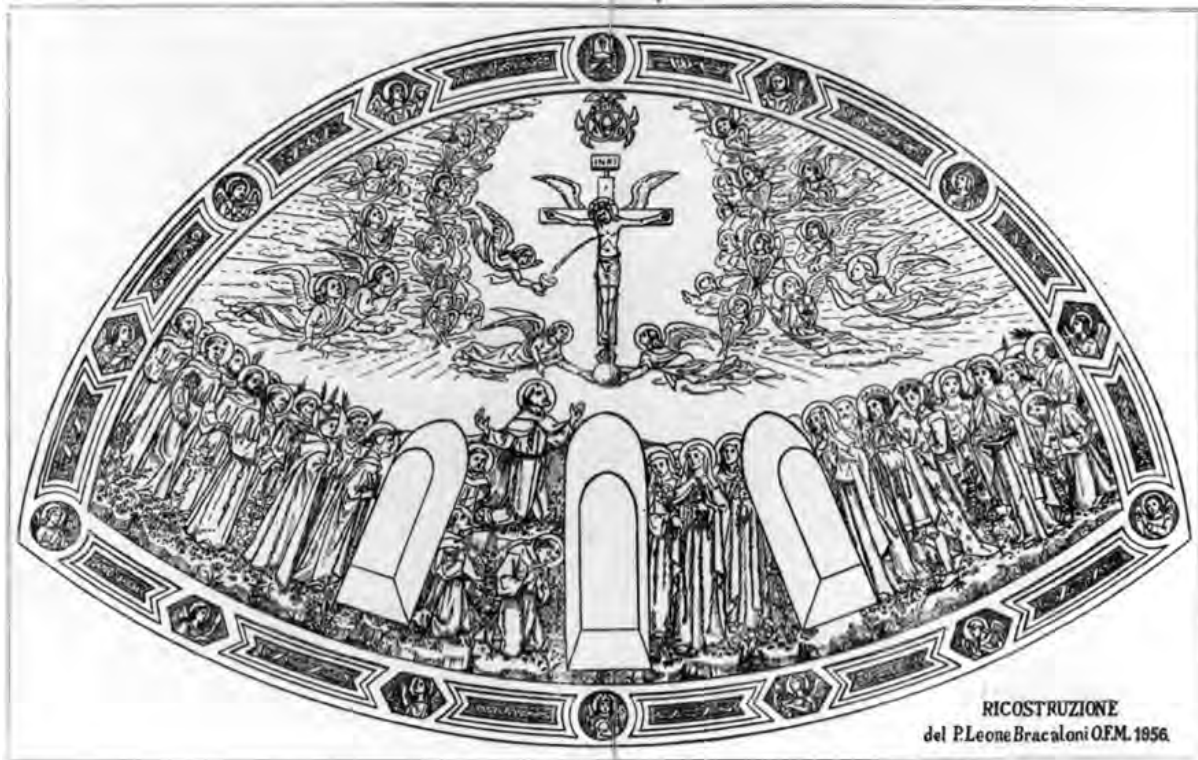
This hope is meant for everyone. It grows as we learn to recognize the Lord in the ordinary moments of our days and by engaging all of our senses in the same way the first disciples did. If we feel unworthy, we remember that the Lamb Himself has opened a way for us. If we hunger and thirst, we look to the Lamb who conquered by giving Himself in love. If we worry that joy or healing is closed to us, we trust and reach out to touch the One who opens what no one can shut.



⁷⁶ Maria Boulding, OSB, *Gateway to Resurrection* (London: Burns & Oates, 2010), 136.

Just beyond the altar, in the apse of the Lower Basilica, the original⁷⁷ fresco of Francis receiving the stigmata displayed this truth of Christian solidarity.⁷⁸ In Francis' own flesh, the Lamb standing yet slain finds one more likeness, wounds that mark a man pierced and yet living still. The early Franciscan saints gather around *Seraphic Love*, much like the great multitude described in the Book of Revelation:

“...from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...” (Revelation 7:9)



They remind us that holiness is not distant or reserved for a few. It is the nearness of a life lived in Christ Jesus, which Franciscans through the ages have found by embracing the *perfect Trinity and simple Unity*⁷⁹ through Ladies Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience.

To join the Cordbearers is to step into this very story, not as perfect people, but as wayfarers, as mystics, who trust God's mercy more than our own strength. We offer Christ Jesus our struggles and our hopes and believe that He can gather even our small stories into His *Book of Life*.

⁷⁷ This is not the apse fresco that one sees today in the Basilica. The original was destroyed and eventually replaced in 1623 with a Franciscan version of the *Final Judgment* by the artist Cesare Sermei (1581–1668).

⁷⁸ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26. "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." This conciliar text, often invoked in Franciscan spirituality, sees this stigmata fresco as a visual "sign of the times," displaying solidarity by joining mysticism with social compassion.

⁷⁹ Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol 1, *The Saint*, 121. "...and by Your grace alone, may we make our way to You, Most High, who live and rule in perfect Trinity and simple Unity..."



So, our ship may have reached the shore, but the invitation continues. We are called to live with what we have seen, to walk in the light we have been given, and to stay open to the quiet ways the Lord comes to us. The disciples discovered this on the beach after Easter, when the Risen Lord stood before them in the morning light and invited them to come and have breakfast. It is the same Lamb we met earlier, standing yet slain, who now asks for nothing more than the disciples' company over a simple meal. C. S. Lewis imagined this same turn at the far edge of the world in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, where the great Lion is met, at breakfast on a distant shore, in the form of a Lamb.⁸⁰ This is where we leave the story, with the same quiet wonder that filled the disciples' hearts, as we recall how:

“... none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.” (John 21:12–13)

⁸⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), chap. 16.

THE TRANSEPTS OF THE LOWER BASILICA

The New Accents of Franciscan Spirituality

Just when we think the story is finished, another chapter begins. Reaching out from either side of the altar are two transepts adorned with images that encapsulate the essence of Franciscan spirituality. To appreciate fully the wonder of it all, wayfarers must sharpen their senses, all the better to:

“Taste and see that the Lord is good...” (Psalm 34:8)

During the Middle Ages, many people had come to view God as distant, removed from their everyday experiences. The Cordbearers responded by reminding people that God is near. With this in mind, the words of Bonaventure’s commentary on the Gospel of Luke come to life in the frescoes of the transepts:

“In these actions Christ’s wonderful kindness is manifest. It is great in that he was associating with mortal human beings, although he was God... Indeed it was greater in that he was associating with persecutors... but his kindness was greatest, because his association took the form of intimate sharing of food so that Revelation 3:20 may be fulfilled:

‘I stand at the door and knock if anyone... opens the door for me, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me.’

So, through the fact that he entered the strange house, Christ’s humility is commended. Through the fact that he entered the Pharisees house, love. Through the fact that he ate a stranger’s food, the poverty of Christ Himself. And in these is shown the highest kindness, by which the most high wanted to be humbled for us, the most just to associate with the impious, the most rich to become poor among men and women. Wherefore 2 Corinthians 8:9 says:

‘You know the graciousness of our Lord Jesus Christ, although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes that by his poverty we might become rich.’”⁸¹

Preaching with Pictures

In their preaching, the friars used everyday examples drawn from nature or the daily routines of ordinary people to connect the Gospel to the richness of everyday, real, life. The result was a vision of God brought back down to earth, one in which the friars interpreted the signs of the times through the light of faith and dedicated themselves entirely to the Gospel. Attentive to the needs of all, they shared in people’s grief and pain, their joy and hope. In this way, the good news of salvation is spread far and wide.⁸²

⁸¹ Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006).

⁸² Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26; and *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions III.

In the 13th century, the preaching of the friars became both attractive and popular because it was new and engaging. Speaking in the vernacular, the friars preached not only in churches but also in places where people gathered most frequently, such as town squares and fields of labor. They infused their sermons with humor, singing, dancing, eating, and practical applications that resonated with their listeners, often evoking strong emotional responses connected to the joys and struggles of daily life. As new versions of wandering minstrels, like the *Troubadours*, the friars came to be known as *God's Minstrels* or *Jongleurs de Dieu*. Francis was at the forefront of these innovations, encouraging his friars to sing his *Canticle of the Creatures* after delivering sermons.⁸³

This same spirit of innovation extended beyond preaching and into the visual arts. The



artists who decorated the Basilica of Saint Francis, particularly Cimabue and Giotto, played a key role in transforming painting from the traditional Byzantine style into what would become modern art. Giotto, often hailed as the father of modern pictorial art, was one of the first to master the depiction of action, setting, and emotion within painting. His work provided a powerful medium for expressing the evolving spirituality of the Franciscans.

The impact of these visual innovations on medieval pilgrims entering the Basilica might be compared to modern worshipers stepping into a church outfitted with high-definition screens projecting vivid biblical scenes. Of course, this would be complemented with characters in stained glass and murals, dressed in jeans, t-shirts, suits, and cutting-edge fashion. It is striking to consider that the same man who returned all his clothes to his father, the cloth merchant, would one day have a Basilica dedicated to him that became, in effect, the design portfolio of medieval fashion!

The Heart of Franciscan Spirituality: The Crib & The Cross



Francis had a particular love for Christ Jesus in the incarnation and the passion. In these two manifestations of self-giving and sacrificial love, God draws especially close to His people. In this way salvation is brought to the world. In the Incarnation, we find the joy of God becoming one like us. In the passion, death, and resurrection, we find the compassion of the Lord opening the way for us to become one with God for all eternity.⁸⁴

⁸³ Harold Goad, *Greyfriars: The Story of Saint Francis and His Followers* (London: John Westhouse, 1947), 79–92.

⁸⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum 57: In festo Corporis Christi*, lect. 1–4. "Since it was the will of God's only begotten Son that men should share in his divinity, he assumed our nature in order that by becoming man he might make men gods."



For Francis, God so loved the world that He gave us the gift of His only Son, born in Bethlehem. Christ Jesus set aside His privileges of deity to become a servant and was born as a human being (Philippians 2:7). Because the Word was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary in perfect purity (Luke 1:35), the *vela* of Lady Chastity becomes the gateway into the right transept, which speaks to the purity of this divine love and tender care. So, the paintings in this transept are drawn from the infancy narratives of Christ Jesus and a few miracles of Saint Francis involving children.

Giotto frescoed this mystical space, bringing the Holy Land to Assisi. Imagine, it is 1296 and wayfarers arriving at the Basilica gaze up into the ceiling. For the first time they:

“... not only see a holy person, but they also would have seen a tree, or flowers on a balcony, or a landscape — as in the Visitation episode. For the first time in art, the Nativity scene presents ordinary farm animals reverently poised, breathing on the Christ Child. In the same Nativity scene, shepherds are being addressed by angels. Shepherds were poor people — the lower classes had never been portrayed in art



before this time. In the Adoration of the Magi panel, Mary presents Christ to the three Wise Men, who are dressed like medieval nobility from Florence. Mary is seated in a stable that resembles an Italian villa. In the Presentation panel, Mary and Joseph offer their child for a blessing in the Temple of Jerusalem, which looks remarkably like the Upper Basilica [in Assisi].”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Xavier Goulet, Ciaran McNally, and Joseph Wood, *The Basilica of Saint Francis: A Spiritual Pilgrimage* (Assisi: Casa Editrice Franciscana, 1994), 23–24.



In the *Flight into Egypt*, we see two angels flying above Joseph's head. Giotto was attempting to depict the wind in their wake, by using gentle and wispy lines of air trailing behind the heavenly pair. He included a palm tree, leaning hard to the left, emphasizing the displacement of air from the heavenly duo. The only problem is that Giotto was still learning his craft and physics! That windblown palm tree has been leaning in the wrong direction for 700 years!

Because Christ Jesus was obedient to the will of His Father, even to the point of death, death on a cross (Philippians 2:8), the *vela* of Lady Obedience becomes the gateway to the left transept, which features frescoes of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. A final fresco, depicting Francis receiving the Sacred Stigmata speaks to how his continual meditation upon the mystery of Christ Jesus' Passion raised him to the summit of the mystical life.⁸⁶ Thus, the transept traces the movement of evangelical obedience from the obedience of the Son on the cross to the obedience of the friar so united to Him that Christ Jesus' own wounds appear in his flesh. Francis becomes, in effect, a living continuation of the Passion narratives depicted around him.



⁸⁶ Gratien de Paris, O.F.M. Cap., *I Know Christ* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1957), 64–65.

The Scourging at the Pillar: A Moral Allegory

This transept was frescoed by Pietro Lorenzetti, an artist from Siena who built on Giotto's innovations by emphasizing spatial complexity. He brought the depth and breadth of Franciscan spirituality to his frescoes, subtly incorporating insightful humor, natural curiosity, and everyday actions into the sacred stories.



In the scene of *The Scourging at the Pillar*, where Jesus is beaten by Roman soldiers, Lorenzetti adds a touch of whimsy. Our attention is first drawn to the suffering of the innocent Christ Jesus. At the same time, just above Him, carved into the top of the stone pillar to the right, observant wayfarers can spot an angel watching a dog, who is chasing a scurrying rabbit. This serves as a moral allegory. The rabbit represents the vulnerable Christ Jesus, and the dog symbolizes the relentless pursuit of demons, as well as those scourging Him in the courtyard.

Off to the top right corner of the fresco there is a mother and child, oblivious to the scene below (they are believed to be the wife and daughter of Pontius Pilate). The girl is holding a leash attached to a pet monkey, who has wandered along the top of the roof to look at what is happening below, to Jesus. When medieval friars preached, they often used monkeys as symbols of curiosity. So, medieval wayfarers would see in the monkey one

who is always paying attention and then experimenting with various behaviors. They are creatures who never stop trying. So, by expanding the space of scene of *The Scourging at the Pillar*, to include this somewhat humorous diversion, Lorenzetti adds a layer of complexity, not only to the painting itself but more importantly to the Gospel story.



Lorenzetti invites wayfarers to consider whether they are truly curious about Christ Jesus. He asks:

Do you know why this innocent man would subject Himself to such pain and suffering? Do you realize that He is doing it for the oblivious mother and child? Do you understand that He is doing it for you, as He says in silence, “Come, imitate; come and follow Me.”

The Last Supper: Dishes and Toast

In his masterpiece of *The Last Supper*, Pietro Lorenzetti invites gazing wayfarers to consider not one but two upper rooms. He opens a door between Jesus and his apostles sharing a meal (three quarters of the fresco) and the adjacent kitchen (one quarter).⁸⁷ Here in Assisi, Lorenzetti offers a fresh interpretation of this Scripture story. Before the paint was dry, his artwork would have been used by early Franciscan preachers, who naturally connected the Scriptures to people’s everyday life experiences. Such sermons often included commonly known animals, employed as allegories of imagination to assist the listeners in better understanding and remembering moral lessons that flow from the story of the scene.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Such a depiction was more common in the Renaissance; medieval examples are rare. The closest one to Assisi is a Last Supper fresco in the Church of San Ponziano in Spoleto, c.1100 CE.

⁸⁸ The *Liber Exemplorum*, or *Book of Examples*, composed by a Franciscan friar around 1270, contained numerous stories of the life and Passion of Christ, using animals to create moral allegories. See A. G. Little,



To the left of the supper scene is the curiosity of the kitchen. Here servants are doing the dishes in the company of a dog and a cat. While the small dog energetically licks clean a plate, as its tail wags excitedly, the cat sits in stoic indifference. By including both of these animals, Lorenzetti creates a visual allegory, highlighting a far too common tension between worldly temptations and spiritual devotion. The greedy behavior of the dog served as a warning against succumbing to sinful impulses, such as gluttony and greed. At the same time, the cat's indifference symbolizes the danger of becoming disconnected from sacred events through apathy or detachment.

Having entered the scene through the kitchen door and being forewarned by the animals, wayfarers encounter servants washing dishes and two men fretting in the doorway that leads into the dining room. Such a kitchen might best be described as being a mystical space, for the varying dynamics speak seamlessly of living in the present moment. Here mysticism is made manifest in the “mundane and ordinary or in the midst of our busy family lives...”⁸⁹

At the same time, the fretting itself tells its own story. The servants bent over their dishes, the two men anxious in the doorway, are kin to Martha of Bethany, who busied herself with much serving while her sister Mary sat at the feet of Jesus.⁹⁰ Martha was not wrong to serve, for her hospitality was itself a form of love. Nevertheless, her service curdled into worry, and worry pulled her away from the very presence she meant to honor. So too here in this fresco where fretting wayfarers and servants are caught in their many things, while the one thing needed waits patiently just beyond the doorway. Busyness is

not a failure to be corrected so much as an invitation extended, the same invitation Christ once offered Martha, to let go of anxious doing and step, even amid the dishes, into the present moment where God already is.

The room itself carries the same invitation. It is said that the most intimate room in the house is the kitchen or dining room, where family and friends gather to share a meal. With the inclusion of the kitchen related actions, Lorenzetti and the preaching friars were literally connecting *The Last Supper* to the homes of visiting wayfarers. For it is in the sacred action of eating, whether in a church or at home, that we enter into an eternal present and are shaped by the stories we share and the loving trust we build with one another. It is within these dynamics that all are called to listen and respond in love.

ed., *Liber Exemplorum ad usum praedicatorum* (Aberdeen: Typis Academicis, 1908), the standard modern edition.

⁸⁹ Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*, viii.

⁹⁰ Luke 10:38–42.



Entering into the upper room, medieval wayfarers would have been quick to point out that Jesus and His apostles are gathered at a round table. In their imagination, circular tables would have brought to mind stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. At its core, the story of Camelot was a love story of friendship and betrayal. Christ Jesus and His friends are also gathered at a noble table round, as a story of an even greater friendship and betrayal begins to unfold.

Then Jesus says:

“‘Very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’ The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of the disciples, the one whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So, while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him ‘Lord, who is it?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So, when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.” (John 13:21–26)

Faith is about relationships. Life is about friendship and betrayal. This is an important moment for wayfarers journeying through the Basilica. For at this point, all of the virtues

considered thus far must come to bear upon this moment. Questions and insights emerge from within the fresco that need to be engaged.

Has cultivating authentically loving relationships led you to know gentle intimacy in genuine friendship? Has trust that you placed in a friend led to the pain of misunderstanding and betrayal? Jesus knows these things. You are not alone.⁹¹

Turning now to Luke's Gospel, we are called to listen attentively, because Jesus does not identify the person of Judas as his betrayer. Instead, He says of His betrayer:

"Woe to that one [person]." (Luke 22:21-23)

The deliberate choice by Luke, of the word "person," opens a space for wayfarers to wander back into the kitchen and take up washing the dishes to clear their minds while doing a repetitious task. In this mystical space wayfarers ponder the questions being asked of them.



Is that "person" the betrayer, me? Have I betrayed a friend?

In the silent doing of the dishes, in the company of the dog of gluttony and the cat of indifference, wayfarers consider past choices and ask:

Have I betrayed Christ Jesus?

⁹¹ Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 79. "All my brothers: let us pay attention to what the Lord says: Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, for our Lord Jesus Christ, Whose footprints we must follow, called His betrayer a friend and willingly offered Himself to His executioners. Our friends, therefore, are all those who unjustly inflict upon us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martyrdom and death. We must love them greatly for we shall possess eternal life because of what they bring us."

"Jesus got Himself killed because of the way He ate..."⁹² This insight finds an explanation in the fact that Jesus enjoys an inclusive table, be it with toll collectors, sinners, men, women, hostile religious leaders, and even fallible disciples. He shares his last earthly meal with a disciple who will betray Him, with disciples who yearn for positions of power, and with Peter who will deny Him. From this vantage point, including oneself among those in the upper room, honest wayfarers place themselves in the seats of those who would deny and betray.

So, now we must consider why Judas chose betrayal? He was Jesus' friend. He had just broken bread with Jesus, but that was not enough for him. Judas was never satisfied with who Jesus was and how Jesus offered himself to others. So, Judas' relationship with Jesus, for his part, became one of possessiveness (like the merchant in mustard yellow, seen in the *vela* of Lady Poverty). Jesus offered Himself to and for all of His friends. He did this freely in poverty, chastity, and obedience, and under the little form of bread.⁹³ Yet Judas wanted to take that gift of multiplied bread for others and reduce it to toast. Jesus would bless, break, and share Himself as bread from heaven:

"Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

Judas would ultimately die of thirst because he was forever insisting on taking Jesus' gifts on his own terms. Refusing to receive Jesus as the bread of life, he chose instead to feed himself with his own dry toast — brittle, burned, and hoarded in selfishness. So that which was intended to nourish had become something he could not swallow.

Wayfarers are left to ask themselves, in the meditative moments of washing dishes.

Have these plates, used by me and my friends, already been wiped clean with bread that has helped us savor every morsel the Lord has given? Or are we scrubbing dishes soiled with the burnt dust of toast?

In contemplating such thoughts, we find in the wisdom of Brother Lawrence, a 17th century French Carmelite, a mystical path forward:

"For me, the time of action does not differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, I possess God in a great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."⁹⁴

Here, at last, Martha and Mary cease to be rivals for the same room. The clatter of the kitchen and the stillness at Jesus' feet become one and the same place, one and the same prayer. The wayfarer need not choose between the dishes and the doorway; both are already the presence of God, waiting to be noticed.

⁹² Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*, 98.

⁹³ Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 118.

⁹⁴ Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, ed. Conrad De Meester, OCD, trans. Salvatore Sciorba, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1994).

Despair or Mercy: Death as Light

The story of Judas does not end in the betrayal of his friendship with Christ Jesus. Hidden in the shadows of the Basilica at the top of the staircase in the left transept, we find the image of Judas hanging himself. While typical medieval sermons would have focused on this suicide to scare the public into good behavior, the Cordbearers had a more positive spin on the story. Franciscan preaching would have tended to focus more on leaving the end of this story in the merciful hands of a loving and understanding God.⁹⁵



In the opposite transept, in the same location at the top of the stairs, there is an image that tells wayfarers the suicide of Judas is only half the story. Here we find Francis touching the shoulder of the skeleton with his left hand. Francis then raises his stigmatized right hand to call wayfarers closer, that they might notice the crown of power falling from the head of the skeletal symbol of death. Of course, this toppling of death's power is accomplished through the resurrection of Christ Jesus. As it says in Scripture:

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55)



⁹⁵ Origen, an early Christian theologian upon whom the Franciscans leaned heavily in the development of their philosophy and theology, offers a more hopeful perspective. In his comments on Matthew 27:3–5, Origen speculated that Judas might have repented and sought forgiveness from Jesus after the betrayal. Origen's view reflects an openness to the idea that God's mercy could encompass even Judas, depending on his final disposition. See Origen, *Commentariorum Series in Evangelium Matthaei*, in *Origenes Werke*, vol. 11, ed. Erich Klostermann and Ernst Benz (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976), Series 117.

Francis had what many might call a rather interesting relationship with death. In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, he wrote a final verse about Sister Bodily Death just a few months before his own passing from this life. What is striking is that Francis also called this poem the *Canticle of the Sun*. The final stanza of Sister Death brings the song full circle. The canticle begins with Brother Sun's light, and though Francis never says so directly, ending with Sister Death invites us to read her, too, in that same radiance. Francis understood his very self, the greatest of sinners, as being drawn into the light of God even in death. Thus, wayfarers are invited to meditate on how in trusting the resurrection, even death itself can proclaim that no sinner is beyond mercy.

Francis with His Mother of Mercy

In 2024, there was a major restoration of Cimabue's *Maestà di Assisi* — *Majesty in Assisi* — found in the right transept. Dating from around 1285–1288, it holds the distinction of being one of the earliest and most realistic depictions of Saint Francis, based on firsthand descriptions from those who knew him personally. During the restoration, a previously obscured inscription above Francis' head was uncovered.

The inscription reads: HAEC EST VERA FRANCISCI EFFIGIES.

This translates to: *This is the true likeness of Francis.*



To the left of Francis, we find the Madonna and Child enthroned. Because they are surrounded by angels, Franciscans immediately think of Saint Mary of the Angels, the

Porziuncola. This is the place in the valley below Assisi that Francis called “home” and the place where Sister Death came to bring Francis into the eternal light of heaven. It is also the place of the dispensing of Franciscan mercy through the annual *Pardon of Assisi*.⁹⁶ Bonaventure reflects Francis’ understanding of Mary as Mother of Mercy when he writes in his *Legenda Maior*:

"He loved with an unspeakable affection the Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ, forasmuch as that she had made the Lord of glory our brother, and that through her we have obtained mercy."⁹⁷

This passage underscores the belief that Mary's role in the Incarnation, bringing the Savior into the world, was instrumental in making God's mercy accessible to all. By accepting God's will and becoming the Mother of Jesus, Mary participated in facilitating the divine plan of salvation, allowing humanity to receive mercy through her Son.⁹⁸

Our Lady of the Sunset

Wayfarers wanting to spend some time with this fresco in the left transept would do well to arrive during the setting of the sun in the warmer months. When the door at the top of the staircase is open at sunset, the light floods into the Basilica and beautifully illuminates this image. Here we find Mary and the Christ Child in conversation. With His hand raised in benediction, Christ Jesus is asking His mother upon whom He should bestow His blessing. The options are John, Jesus’ best friend and beloved disciple, or the stigmatized Francis, the *alter Christus*. Mary’s pointing thumb offers the answer and at the same time has earned her the more contemporary nickname of *Our Lady of the Hitchhikers*!⁹⁹



⁹⁶ The *Pardon of Assisi* (the *Portiuncula Indulgence*) dates to 1216, when Francis of Assisi obtained from Pope Honorius III a plenary indulgence for all who, with sincere repentance, entered the Portiuncula chapel, confessed their sins, and prayed for the intentions of the Church. Celebrated on August 2, it expresses Francis’ conviction that God’s mercy should be freely accessible to all. In this sense, it stands as a forerunner of later Jubilee Years, anticipating the Church’s formal celebration of extraordinary seasons of universal mercy and reconciliation.

⁹⁷ Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, *The Founder* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 533.

⁹⁸ In *The Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Pseudo-Bonaventure emphasizes Mary's intercessory role being coupled with her compassion, describing her as Mother of Mercy.

⁹⁹ A masterful reproduction of this fresco, by the Russian artist Nicolas Lokhoff (1872–1948), can be seen in the library reading room of the Frick Museum in New York City.

The Choir and Calvary

In both the Lower and the Upper Basilicas there is a choir in the apse, where the friars gather to pray the Divine Office and sing during the Mass. Frescoes of Christ crucified on Calvary are strategically placed on the opposite walls of the choir, in the transepts, so that regardless of where a friar sits in the choir, he would always fix his eyes on the poor and suffering Christ.



Here in Assisi are some of the first popular images of Christ Jesus suffering and dying on the cross. These frescoes speak of the Franciscan devotion to the Christ crucified, who is ever close to his people, and understands the suffering of humanity. Looking at the image in the right transept of the Lower Basilica,¹⁰⁰ Giotto shows Mary, the Mother of God, fainting from fatigue and grief.

To the medieval wayfarer, only familiar with the Byzantine image of Mary in heavenly glory, this rendition of the crucifixion would have been jarring. Yet, at the same time a mother who had just lost a son or husband in a recent battle with neighboring Perugia, would have drawn great consolation from seeing how Mary understands the depths of her own grief.



Before journeying on to the Upper Basilica, wayfarers might take a moment to glimpse over their shoulders at these frescoes and hear the quiet chanting of the Cordbearers in the choir. Echoing down through the centuries, their song is a prayerful invitation to gaze into the depths of the sea and breathe in the mystery, to touch and believe in the wounds of the crucified, drink in the blood of the crucified, gaze upon the face of the crucified, so that through, with, and in Christ Jesus, one may learn through the senses, how to love.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ This scene is the exception to the other images of the infancy stories of Christ Jesus and miracles of Saint Francis with children. The importance of the friars being able to see Christ crucified from all the seats of the choir superseded the overarching theme of the transept. This dynamic is also mirrored in the Upper Basilica.

¹⁰¹ Gratien de Paris, OFM Cap., *I Know Christ* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1957), 74. "... all the Friars really considered themselves men of the Crucified One, and they were known to their contemporaries as preachers of the Cross. Jacques de Vitry ... who had the good fortune to see and converse with St. Francis, said 'Behold, indeed, the Order of the Poor Crucified.'"

Then, looking up into the *vele*, hear the invitation spoken to all wayfarers in the Basilica:

“Since then, we have a great high priest... Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14,16)

Here at last, are the *spiritual joys* and *great things* promised to every wayfarer at the threshold. With these words it is revealed to us, as it was to Francis, that Christ Jesus is more than a wayfarer journeying with us — He is the Way.¹⁰²



¹⁰² Maria Boulding, OSB, *Gateway to Resurrection*, 44.



A Note for Curious Wayfarers

If the Ladies of the *vele* — Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience — have taken hold of your imagination, you may be glad to know they keep good company across the centuries. The 13th century, it turns out, returned again and again to the same figure of thought: virtue rendered as person, the soul's interior life rendered as guarded space. Two other texts from that same age, far from Assisi in setting but close to it in spirit, are worth a wayfarer's attention.

The first is *Sawles Warde* — "Soul's Ward" — an anonymous Middle English homily composed around 1210 for religious women living in solitary devotion. J.R.R. Tolkien, better known to most readers for entirely different pilgrimages, spent decades of scholarly labor on this text and its dialect, and left behind his own translation, *Soul's Ward*, only now reaching print in a critical edition. Tolkien's homily pictures the soul as a house under siege, with Prudence as doorkeeper and Strength as her enforcer — the same two offices, Discernment and Courage, that our own *vele* assigns to Prudence and Fortitude. Where the frescoes clothe these virtues in courtly romance, the homily dresses them in the plainer garments of domestic marriage, Reason and Will standing in for husband and wife. Read side by side, the two works feel like cousins speaking different dialects of a shared native tongue.

Standing between them, almost as a bridge, is Robert Grosseteste's Anglo-Norman poem *Château d'Amour* — the Castle of Love — written within a decade or two of *Sawles Warde*, in that same West Midlands and Oxford world. Grosseteste is no bystander to this comparison: as the first lector to the Oxford Greyfriars, he shaped the minds of England's earliest Franciscan scholars in the very years he was composing his poem of the Four Daughters of God — Mercy, Truth, Justice, and Peace — quarreling over a condemned vassal until Peace and the King's Son resolve their dispute. His castle, like our tower of Lady Chastity, stands as guarded architecture for a soul under siege; his dynasty of sisters, like our Ladies of the *vele*, personify virtue as courtly kin. Through Grosseteste alone, the West Midlands tradition that preserved *Sawles Warde* and the Franciscan mission that would one day fill this Basilica with frescoes are joined not merely by chance and contemporaneity, but by one man's hand in both.

I offer these two companions not as scholarship for its own sake, but as an invitation. Wayfarers who linger before the *vele* may find, in *Soul's Ward* and the *Château d'Amour*, the same guarded house, the same watchful sisters, the same conviction that the soul's ascent is best imagined as a place worth defending and a love worth winning. Three dialects, one 13th century imagination — and perhaps, in reading them together, a wider sense of the good company in which Lady Poverty, Lady Chastity, and Lady Obedience have always kept us.



Part II

The EIGHTH DAY

(A preview...)



UPPER BASILICA: ROOTS WOVEN WIDE & BRANCHES SOARING HIGH

The Cloister & The Cure

Wayfarers sailing out of the Lower Basilica, by way of the staircase on the western wall, alight in the Cloister of Sixtus IV and are afforded the opportunity to take in the fresh air while considering the cloister and the cure.

Jonas Salk, who developed the first effective polio vaccine in the 1950s, was influenced by the ideals of Saint Francis. Salk famously chose not to patent the vaccine, prioritizing the well-being of humanity over personal profit, a decision that echoed the Franciscan commitment to the common good.

During a visit to the Basilica in Assisi, he was profoundly moved by its architectural lines, especially in the Cloister of Sixtus IV. Salk later credited this experience with sparking within his mind a new way of thinking that contributed to his breakthrough with the vaccine. He was also affected by the spiritual presence of Saint Francis that he felt at the Basilica. This served to reinforce his belief that science should serve a higher moral purpose.¹⁰³

Wayfarers then continue their mystical journey on foot, ascending the staircase that leads into the forest of art in the Upper Basilica. Emerging from the staircase into the north transept, wayfarers encounter a massive image of Christ crucified that covers the entire lower part of the wall directly ahead. There is a similar scene in the south transept, replicating the crucifixion scenes in the transepts of the Lower Basilica.¹⁰⁴ Thus, in both churches we are reminded that the entire Basilica exists to honor Christ Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man.¹⁰⁵

Not Seeing the Forest for the Trees

"The church has always been, to the eyes of the poet and the philosopher, a living creature... One might almost say that the stones grow."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ This experience later inspired the design of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, which he envisioned not just as a center for scientific research but as a place for reflection and inspiration. Collaborating with architect Louis Kahn, Salk ensured the institute's design captured the sense of awe and contemplative spirit he felt in Assisi, blending the pursuit of knowledge with a deep reverence for life and the common good. See "Explore Salk: Architecture Guide," Salk Institute for Biological Studies.

¹⁰⁴ The crucifixion scene in the southern transept is the best example of what happened to many of the paintings in this part of the Basilica. In the 16th century, the renowned art historian Giorgio Vasari, in the first edition of his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550), in which he attributed these frescoes to Cimabue, described them as *consumati dal tempo e dalla polvere* — "consumed by time and dust." There is also the added disastrous chemical degeneration of the white lead paint, which in parts of the cycle caused an inversion of the relationship between white and dark colors, rendering the X-ray-like images. The resulting alteration of these frescoes is irreversible.

¹⁰⁵ In Christian theology, the title *Son of God* emphasizes Jesus' divine nature. The term *Son of Man* highlights his humanity and refers to his role as the messianic figure who suffers, dies, and is glorified.

¹⁰⁶ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, trans. Frederic Shoberl (London: Bull, 1833); originally published as *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1831).



This book is available as a PDF at **FranciscanVoice.org** on the Resources page.



Take the wayfarers pilgrimage of the Lower Basilica via ***The Shell***.
This free app is available in the Apple Store & Google Play Store.

