

WAYFARERS

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

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Decorative images feature geometric designs found throughout the Basilica and details of the fifteenth-century carved wooden choir stalls in the Lower Basilica.

Images of the missing fragments by the Master of Saint Francis are from the 2024 exhibition *L'enigma del Maestro di San Francesco. Lo stil novo del Duecento umbro*, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia. Digital images supplied by the Galleria and photographs by the author.

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



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TIMELINE

1226

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

1228

- March 30: On behalf of Pope Gregory IX, Brother Elias of Cortona receives from Simone di Pucciarello a donation of the building site for Francis' burial place, a plot outside the city walls named in the notarial act the *Collis Inferni*, the Hill of Hell
- April 29: Gregory IX issues the bull *Recolentes qualiter*, calling on Christians throughout the world to help raise a *specialis ecclesia*, a special church, to house Francis' relics
- July 16: Gregory IX canonizes Saint Francis of Assisi
- July 17: Gregory IX blesses and ceremonially places the first stone of the Basilica, and Brother Elias oversees construction
- October 22: Gregory IX places the church and its surrounding buildings under the ownership of the Apostolic See and declares them directly subject to the Holy See

1228–1230: Construction of the Lower Basilica

- Built rapidly in a Romanesque-Gothic style; originally included the nave, transepts, apse, and a burial vault beneath the main altar; a small iron grate in the top altar step reveals the lamp-lit chamber known as the *buca delle lampade*, the hole of the lamps



1230

- April 22: Gregory IX issues the bull *Is qui Ecclesiam suam*, declaring the Basilica *caput et mater Ordinis*, Head and Mother of the Order of Friars Minor, placing it directly under papal authority, entrusting its perpetual service to the friars, and referring to the former *Collis Inferni* by its new name, *Collis Paradisi*, the Hill of Paradise

- May 25: The body of Francis is solemnly translated from San Giorgio and entombed beneath the high altar of the Lower Basilica

- Construction on the Upper Basilica begins; the church is built in an Italian Gothic style with soaring arches and a lighter structure

1253

- May 25: Pope Innocent IV consecrates the entire Basilica, placing a relic of Saint John the Baptist in the altar of the Lower Basilica and relics of Saint James the Greater and Saint Lawrence in the altar of the Upper Basilica

- June 13: Innocent IV issues the letter *Si populus Israeliticus*, granting indulgences to the faithful who visit the Basilica with devotion

- August 9: While in Assisi, Innocent IV confirms Saint Clare's Rule with the bull *Solet annuere*, preserving her commitment to the highest poverty

- August 11: Clare dies at San Damiano

- Innocent IV presides at Clare's funeral rites and accompanies her body to San Giorgio, where Francis had first been buried

- September 17: Innocent IV canonizes Saint Stanislaus of Krakow, Bishop and Martyr, in the Lower Basilica

1259

- Saint Bonaventure writes *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, a seminal work that gave mature expression to a Franciscan theology later echoed in the art of the Basilica

1263

- Saint Bonaventure writes the *Legenda maior*, *Major Life of Saint Francis*, his definitive biography and the principal literary source for the Upper Basilica fresco cycle of the life of Saint Francis



1260s–1360s: Artistic decoration of both Basilicas

Lower Basilica:

- Master of Saint Francis (c. 1260): Painted the paired nave cycles of the Passion of Christ and the Compassion of Francis, giving monumental form to the visual comparison of Francis with Christ
- Cimabue (c. 1280s): Painted the Madonna and Child with Saint Francis in the right transept, bringing greater emotional presence and naturalism to the Byzantine tradition
- Giotto and workshop (c. 1307–1320): Painted major portions of the right transept, advancing naturalistic gesture, human emotion, and convincing pictorial space
- Pietro Lorenzetti (c. 1315–1330): Painted the Passion cycle, including the Last Supper in the left transept, developing complex narrative space and a more intimate human realism
- Master of the Vele (c. 1315–1320): Painted the allegories of Poverty, Chastity, Obedience, and Francis in Glory above the papal altar, turning theology into a unified monumental allegorical program
- Puccio Capanna (c. 1330): Painted the Coronation of the Virgin and scenes of Saint Stanislaus above the Gothic tribune, extending Giotto's naturalism into the next generation of Assisi painting
- Andrea de' Bartoli (c. 1368): Painted the Chapel of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, bringing Bolognese Gothic refinement and courtly narrative detail into the Lower Basilica

Upper Basilica:

- Cimabue and workshop (c. 1280s): Painted the sanctuary, choir, and transepts
- Pope Nicholas IV (1288–1292): First Franciscan pope, renewed papal support for the Basilica and gave new impetus to the decoration of the Upper Basilica nave
- Franciscan Cardinal and former Minister General Matthew of Acquasparta (c. 1288–1292): Proposed by some scholars as a contributor to the iconographic program, which relates scenes from Scripture to the life of Saint Francis
- Florentine and Roman artists, including Friar Jacopo Torriti (c. 1280s–1290s): Painted the Old and New Testament scenes in the upper walls and apse, joining Roman monumental tradition with the developing Franciscan program
- Giotto and workshop (c. 1290–1300): Painted the Life of Saint Francis Cycle

1290s–1360s: Expansion of the Lower Basilica

- Side chapels and entrance spaces are added and developed, substantially enlarging the original thirteenth-century church

1623: Lower Basilica apse renewed

- Cesare Sermei paints the present Last Judgment in the apse, replacing an unfinished Giottesque Gloria celeste, Heavenly Glory, of the early fourteenth century, traditionally attributed to Stefano Fiorentino

1754: Basilica raised in dignity

- March 25: Pope Benedict XIV issues the apostolic constitution *Fidelis Dominus*, raising the Basilica to the dignity of Patriarchal Basilica and Papal Chapel



1818: Rediscovery of Francis' tomb

- December 12–13: The burial place and mortal remains of Saint Francis are rediscovered beneath the high altar after months of excavation

1820: Recognition of the remains and opening of the tomb

- September 5: Pope Pius VII formally recognizes the remains as those of Saint Francis, orders that they remain in their original burial place, and directs that an accessible crypt be created for pilgrims

1925–1932: Remodeling of the modern tomb crypt

- Ugo Tarchi remodels the crypt in the elegant simplicity of a neo-Romanesque style

1932: The tomb crypt is completed and the Franciscan family is gathered around Francis

- August 13: The remains of Lady Jacopa de' Settesoli, formerly buried in the Lower Basilica, are solemnly translated to the crypt and placed at the junction of the two stairways facing the tomb of Saint Francis

- October 3: The remodeled crypt is inaugurated, and the remains of Friars Leo, Masseo, Rufino, and Angelo, formerly buried in the left transept of the Lower Basilica, are solemnly transferred to four niches surrounding the tomb of Saint Francis

1997: Earthquake damage and restoration

- Two September earthquakes cause severe damage, especially in the Upper Basilica

- Extensive restoration follows; the Upper Basilica reopens and its papal altar is reconsecrated in 1999, the Saint Jerome vault is restored in 2002, and the Saint Matthew and starry vaults are restored in 2006

2000: UNESCO World Heritage designation

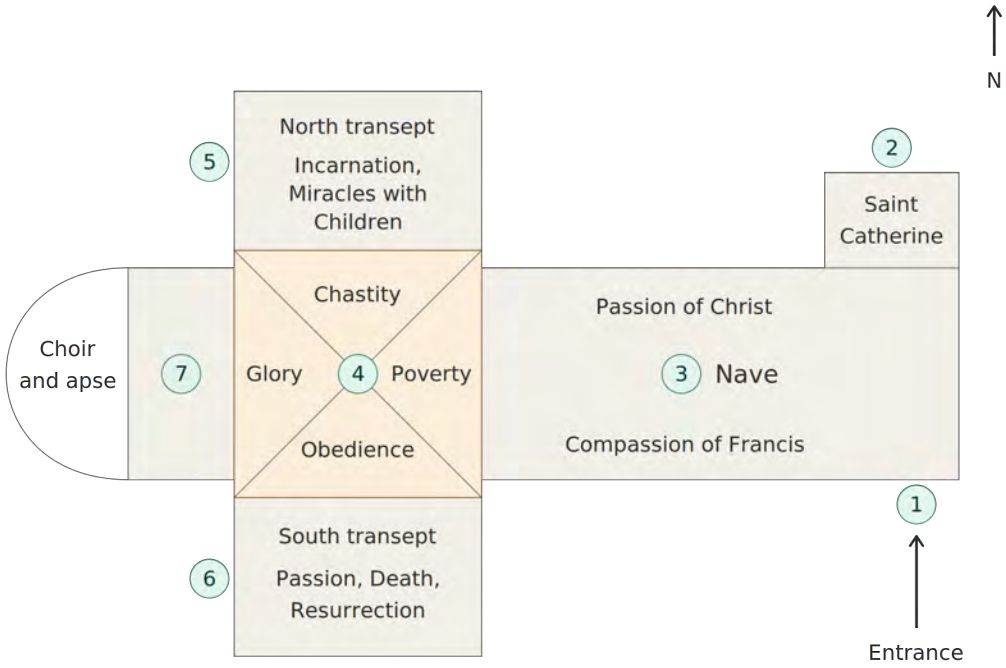
- Assisi, the Basilica of Saint Francis, and other Franciscan sites are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for their exceptional artistic, architectural, and spiritual significance

2026: The Easter of Saint Francis — Eighth Centenary of His Transitus

- February 21–March 22: First public and extended exposition and veneration of the mortal remains of Saint Francis; his body is moved from the crypt and placed at the foot of the papal altar in the Lower Basilica



LOWER BASILICA FLOOR PLAN



Wayfarer's Walk

1. Lower Basilica doors and the welcome wayfarers' arch
2. Chapel of Saint Catherine of Alexandria
3. Nave with the frescoes of the Master of Saint Francis
4. Allegories of the Vows with Francis in Glory and the keystone
   Tomb of Saint Francis beneath the altar
5. North transept of the Giotto Workshop
6. South transept of Pietro Lorenzetti
7. Choir and apse

PREFACE

Dear Reader,

After my ordination to the priesthood in the Jubilee Year 2000, I was assigned to our Franciscan friary at Saint Francis High School in Hamburg, New York. Teaching religion to seniors is not an easy task when the word *love* covers God, family, significant others, pets, movies, pizza and wings. Added to that was the normal growing up of young men whose thoughts and emotions changed as often as the winds off Lake Erie.

Searching for a way to talk with them about what it means to be a human being, a disciple, and one loved by a God who calls Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life, I turned to the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. There, frescoed virtues preached by way of action and symbol. In our conversations we gave them words, and those words taught what it means to be loved and to love in return. Together we built a vocabulary in which everything meant something. Guided by Lady Virtues in medieval dress, we stayed grounded in tradition yet able to bend in the winds of the world around us.

Twenty-five years later, I was in the Upper Basilica finishing an explanation of the frescoes when a Buddhist monk quietly joined the group. We eventually shared a few words, and she continued on her way. An hour later, making my way through the Lower Basilica, I glimpsed a robe of orange at the foot of the altar. Taking the chair next to her, I asked how she was enjoying her visit. She smiled and said she felt comfortable, because she was sitting under frescoes full of women. We sat for some time talking about those Lady Virtues.

From young men in a high school classroom to a Buddhist monk on a journey, these frescoes leave lasting impressions on those who gaze, consider, contemplate, and strive to imitate what is found within.[1] For me personally, these experiences and others like them have led to years of studying and sharing the gentleness and strength of a mystical place where heaven touches earth. There is something decidedly Franciscan in learning not to pass too quickly over what is before us.

A story of Saint Francis tells how he picked up scraps of paper from the ground, fearing they would be trampled underfoot.[2] His thought was either that the words written upon the scraps might 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, as you pick 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.

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[1] Clare of Assisi gives this fourfold movement to Agnes of Prague in her Second Letter: gaze, consider, contemplate, and desire to imitate. See Clare of Assisi, "The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague," 19–22, in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents: The Lady*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong (New York: New City Press, 2006), 49. For a meditation on Clare's way of prayer, see Ilia Delio, *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 60.

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

Simply put, this book is nothing more than a sincere attempt to have the brilliance of those who built and decorated the Basilica bear upon the lives of people today. What I have written comes from considering the signs of the times in 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 in the mercy and peace of Christ Jesus, by way of the goodness of Saint Francis.

What follows is a walk. It begins at the door of the Lower Basilica and moves the way a wayfarer moves: into the narthex, down the nave, in under the golden sails above the altar and tomb, then out into the two transepts and behind the altar into the choir, stopping wherever the Lord speaks through something beautiful.

Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book was written for three people, and you are probably one of them.

If you are standing in the Lower Basilica, the headings follow your journey through the church, though the building will sometimes ask you to turn, look back, or look across the crossing before moving on. Every titled section is a place to stand. Let the section title tell you where to look, then let your eyes wander until you have seen the fresco. Use the pews, as your legs will give out long before the pages do.

If you are reading at home, and may never make the journey, the photographs are your feet. Go to the picture first and stay a while before the words begin explaining. Francis asked that the Rule be kept *sine glossa*, without gloss, with no commentary laid over the text and nothing standing between the words and those who had to live them. A book like this one is nothing but gloss, and knows it. Its only defense is that the frescoes were there before it and will still be there when the explaining stops. Nearly everything a wayfarer in Assisi sees by walking, you can see by looking, and a few things you will see better, because no one is standing behind you waiting to move.

If you are a Franciscan, are in faith formation, or want the ground underneath the claims, the footnotes are a second book running below the first. Read the body straight through, then mine the notes. The footnotes carry the sources, the arguments, and my reasons for writing. I wanted the social teaching of the Church and the Franciscan tradition, spiritual and intellectual, on the same page, close enough to see that they are not two subjects but one. In these pages, Saint Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus keep company with the popes from Leo XIII to Leo XIV. The Church's teaching about the poor, the dignity of labor, peacebuilding, and our common home has deep roots in what the friars had painted on these walls and have been preaching on this hill for centuries.[3] In the appendix, you will also find a companion formation guide. It gathers the material into guided sessions, thematic pathways, and suggestions for reflection and preaching.

To my Franciscan brothers and sisters, one thing more. The early friars preached by borrowing whatever the world had ready to hand them, including the vernacular, the town square, a song, a joke, and the fashions of the day. Follow their instinct. Do not repeat the material, but take this indispensable method again. Unpack the Gospel through what your

[3] Franciscan art asks more of the senses than simple looking. Flora describes the Basilica itself as a place where sight, sound, smell, taste, and bodily presence draw the worshiper toward contemplation. Flanigan carries that movement into compassion: what the eyes receive passes through imagination and memory, allowing repeated attention to the suffering of another to train the viewer in a compassionate response. Neff widens the circle further, showing the senses, imagination, memory, and intellect participating together in the re-formation of the person. Seen this way, the movement in these pages from fresco to the social teaching of the Church is not something laid over medieval Franciscan art from outside. The wayfarer learns to see differently, and a changed way of seeing eventually asks for a changed way of living with God, neighbor, and creation. Holly Flora, "Sensory Engagement and Contemplative Transformation in Cimabue's Assisi Transepts," 49–50; Theresa Flanigan, "Likeness and Compassion in Franciscan Art: A Late Medieval Theory of Compassion and Naturalism in Frescoes in the Lower Church of San Francesco at Assisi," 83; Amy Neff, "The Senses and the Soul's Re-Formation in the *Supplicationes Variae*," 120–21; all in Xavier Seubert and Oleg Bychkov, eds., *Aesthetic Theology in the Franciscan Tradition: The Senses and the Experience of God in Art* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

listeners already love. At one moment, this journey delights in the design portfolio of medieval fashion. Later, Duns Scotus explains why the Child was willed before the world was made. That is not carelessness. The Basilica has a way of doing this to everyone who walks through it. A friar's humor painted on plaster, with the Crucified hanging just below.

So, whichever of the three you are, questions wait at the back. *Conversations along the Way* offers five for each section, drawn from the text and the notes beneath it. Each section then turns from the wall toward the life you return to. Use them alone in prayer, with others at home, in a study group, or while having a gelato in a café after visiting the Basilica. A question that opens a conversation will often open a homily, though the questions are for anyone willing to be asked and to answer in words and deeds.



INTRODUCTION

People and Buildings

In 1259, Bonaventure wrote *The Journey of the Mind to God*. He begins with what is tangible, with the five bodily senses. We see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the world before we begin to make sense of it. For Bonaventure, the senses are not something to leave behind as prayer deepens. They are part of the way creation first enters us and begins to lead us toward God.[4]

Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça takes up that same conviction in our own time.[5] He does not reserve mysticism for monks, hermits, or people who have unusual experiences. His mystic is simply someone who cannot stop walking.[6] God is found "along the roadside and in the workplace or in the midst of our busy family lives,"[7] and our bodies help open us to what God is already giving in the present moment.[8]

The Basilica of Saint Francis is a good place to learn this because it does not ask us to leave our bodies at the door. We have to walk, turn, look up, listen, sometimes sit down, and begin again. The Lower Basilica is also the burial place of Saint Francis, whose body rests beneath the main altar. Its rounded Romanesque arches and low ceilings draw the eye through shadow toward the painted light above. Before explaining anything, the building asks us to pay attention.

Medieval builders expected matter itself to help. Stone, glass, color, plants, animals, and light could carry the eye beyond themselves without ceasing to be what they were. A wall remained a wall, but in skilled hands it could begin speaking. The material world of the Basilica could therefore participate in the same movement as the senses, drawing what is seen and touched into memory, prayer, and contemplation.[9]

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[4] Bonaventure begins with what enters through the body. The world passes through the five senses and is carried inward, where memory and the other powers of the soul receive and work upon what has been seen. Neff shows how this Franciscan understanding allows bodily perception to open toward the spiritual senses rather than being left behind. A fresco can therefore remain with the wayfarer after the eyes have moved elsewhere, carried into memory, prayer, and later recognition. Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God (Itinerarium mentis in Deum)*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, ed. Stephen F. Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 2–3; Neff, "Senses and the Soul's Re-Formation," 116–17.

[5] Mendonça brings together theology, biblical scholarship, poetry, and a sustained interest in culture, an unusually fitting conversation partner for a book that asks frescoes to speak to contemporary life. He has served as Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education since September 26, 2022. Holy See Press Office, "Resignations and Appointments," September 26, 2022.

[6] Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment: Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2021), 25.

[7] Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*, viii.

[8] Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*, 7.

[9] Magro describes this medieval artistic instinct as *materia spirituale*, matter capable of bearing spiritual meaning. The material world is not discarded on the way to God. Light, color, stone, vegetation, animals, and ornament can become part of the language by which Christian art makes spiritual realities perceptible. Matter remains matter, yet under a Christian imagination it can be made transparent to something more. Pasquale M. Magro, *La basilica sepolcrale di San Francesco in Assisi: Percorsi storico-artistici, quadri concettuali* (Assisi: Casa Editrice Francescana, 1991), 134–35.

Francis himself once prayed:

> "Most High, 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."[10]

The frescoes seem to answer that prayer in color, gesture, and story as they show how a person might become "inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened, and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit."[11] The journey begins at the door.



The Franciscan friars at the Basilica hope that everyone who enters feels welcome, from pilgrims making a religious journey to people stopping in Assisi on the road between Florence and Rome. That welcome rests on an older Franciscan conviction that Francis does not belong only to friars. His way of following Christ has long been held before the whole Church as a way of living the Gospel in the world.[12]

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[10] Francis of Assisi, "The Prayer Before the Crucifix," *FA:ED* 1, 40.

[11] Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," *FA:ED* 1, 120.

[12] Leo XIII did not present Francis as a spirituality reserved for friars. For the seventh centenary of Francis' birth, he said it had long been his desire that everyone, according to his or her ability, should seek to imitate him. The following year he adapted the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order to changed circumstances while insisting that its essential character remain intact. The Franciscan way was being offered to Christians living ordinary lives before Leo turned directly to the modern social question in *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Auspicato Concessum* (September 17, 1882), no. 25; Pope Leo XIII, Apostolic Constitution *Misericors Dei Filius* (May 30, 1883); Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891).

So, one word has to stretch wide enough to hold everyone who makes their way to Assisi physically or virtually. This book calls that person a *wayfarer*, a traveler, especially one who travels on foot.[13] The word fits this place. We come here walking, and if the Basilica does its work, we leave still walking, a little more awake to God, to one another, and to the world around us.[14]



[13] The term also carries a liturgical resonance. In the Easter sequence *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, sung before the Gospel on Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene is asked what she saw "wayfaring," rendering the Latin *quid vidisti in via?* Medieval theology gave *viator* a further meaning: a person journeying toward heavenly blessedness, not yet enjoying its fullness. Vatican II retains the word in its Latin text of *Lumen Gentium*, speaking of the *viatorum*, the wayfarers, whose communion with those already in Christ's glory remains unbroken. The distinction is not between two separate communities, but between those still making the journey and those who have reached its destination. The Church remains one communion, with the living praying toward heaven and the saints accompanying them in prayer. *The Roman Missal*, English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Sequence for Easter Sunday; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), III, q. 15, a. 10; Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), no. 49, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

[14] Halík describes faith not as a possession secured once and for all but as a living journey in which what has been received must continually be understood anew and allowed to transform the believer. He is especially wary of reducing faith to propositions detached from the person who believes them. Faith has an interior history. It develops through encounter, interpretation, conversion, and the changing circumstances through which a person continues to seek God. This way of speaking is especially at home beside the wayfarer of these pages, whose faith is not measured by having arrived but by remaining willing to walk. Tomáš Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*, trans. Gerald Turner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024), 2–5, 12–17.

LOWER BASILICA
SAILING INTO ETERNITY

Welcome to the Hill of Paradise



The hill where wayfarers now arrive is called the Hill of Paradise, but it was once the Hill of Hell, the western slope beyond Assisi's walls where the condemned were executed. On this hill, Francis' old friend and protector, Gregory IX, resolved to raise a church in his honor. Two and a half months before canonizing Francis, the pope called upon all Christians to help build it. The day after he declared Francis a saint, Gregory blessed the foundation stone, and the place became known as the Hill of Paradise. In a short time, on Assisi's calvary, Francis would be laid to rest.
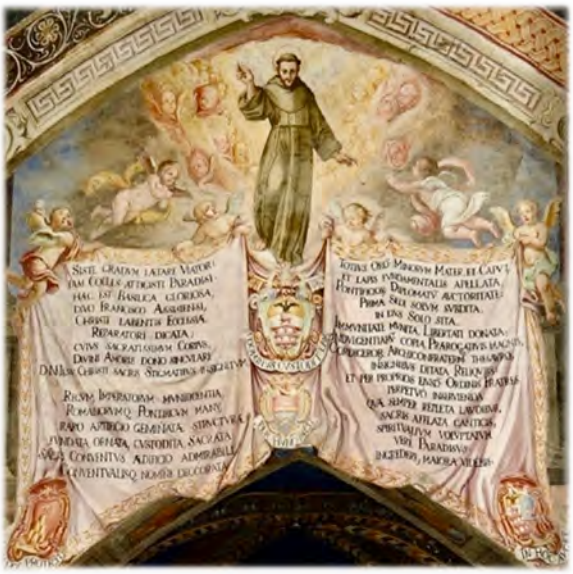
Such is the threshold of the Basilica, a place where God has turned death into life and shame into glory. The doors may belong to the sixteenth century, but their imagery speaks directly of the passage through death into new life. On one side Christ Jesus appears among the apostles, ascending on a cloud. He holds in His hand the cross, no longer an instrument of death but a sign of victory.[15] Opposite, Francis follows on his own cloud, as his band of brothers gathers below. Wayfarers pass beneath these images as they enter and leave the Basilica, walking under a visual proclamation of the Christian promise that death does not have the final word and paradise awaits us all.



[15] Corbon treats the Ascension not as Jesus disappearing from the world, but as the beginning of a new way of His being present. The risen Lord enters the "last times," drawing creation and the Church toward the fullness already opened in Him. That makes the image over the Basilica door more than a farewell scene. The wayfarer passes beneath the One whose Ascension has opened the journey toward glory. Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 58–62.

Inside, *il Poverello*, the little poor man, welcomes all wayfarers. Frescoed into the first arch,[16] Francis appears among cherub angels, accompanied by an unfurled scroll whose Latin inscription translates, in part:

"Halt your step and be joyful,[17] O wayfarer,
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*…"[18]



The word the inscription uses to address those crossing the threshold is *viator*, wayfarer, someone who is always on the way. Gabriel Marcel, the French philosopher who entered the Catholic Church in 1929, took *viator* for the title of his own book on hope. He argues that hope is the proper condition of a creature who is neither settled nor lost but still walking.[19] Cardinal Mendonça never uses the word, but it is exactly how he understands his mystic, one who cannot stop walking.

[16] The entrance arch gathers a small papal company around the wayfarer. Beside Gregory IX appear Clement XIV, Honorius III, Sixtus IV, Nicholas III, and Alexander V. Their portraits turn the threshold into a kind of Franciscan memory wall, reminding those who pass beneath it that the Basilica has been prayed in, protected, altered, restored, and entered by generations of the Church before them. Gregory IX receives special attention in the prose because his portrait stands beside a story already being told, but he is not standing there alone. Giorgio Bonsanti, ed., *Assisi: Basilica di San Francesco*, 3 vols., *Mirabilia Italiae* 11 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana; Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2011), 3:116.

[17] The frescoed welcome message anticipates Pope Francis' opening words in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus." The first word offered to the wayfarer at the Basilica is therefore the same word with which Pope Francis begins his call to evangelization: joy. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 1.

[18] Italics are mine. Older renderings often translate *viator* as "pilgrim," fitting for a church built as a destination of pilgrimage. I have kept the more literal translation "wayfarer."

[19] Marcel chose *Homo Viator*, "man the wayfarer," as the title for his meditation on hope because human life is lived on the way rather than in finished possession. Hope belongs to the traveler who has not yet arrived but has not surrendered the road. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), 7–8.

So, wayfarers, mystics, enter the Basilica and mid-step encounter a scroll speaking the word *viator*. Marcel helps us to hear what it means. This is the person for whom these pages are written, someone still on the way and guided by hope, no matter how small or large it might be.

The scroll then suddenly asks, *Halt your step*, but only long enough to rejoice, because the next command is *enter*. In that moment of a breath, hope is born anew in wayfarers, as they receive a promise of encountering *spiritual joys* and seeing *great things* on the Hill of Paradise.







Alexandria, Sinai, and the Holy Land in Assisi

In the Middle Ages, no Christian pilgrimage carried greater longing than the journey to the Holy Land. Yet Jerusalem did not stand alone in the sacred geography of the East. Pilgrims also made their way to Alexandria in Egypt, where Saint Catherine was believed to have suffered martyrdom. Still further would some travel across the desert to Sinai, where they sought her tomb. These places belonged to a sacred landscape shaped by the memory of Christ Jesus, the saints, and the earliest centuries of the Church. Francis himself desired to travel to the Holy Land, and made his way to Egypt in 1219. There, at the height of the Fifth Crusade, he crossed the battle lines at Damietta to meet the Sultan of Egypt, Malik-al-Kamil. He went unarmed, not to conquer but to converse, seeking a brother where his age saw only an enemy.[20]



Tomb of an Emperor of Constantinople

Many Christians could not make the long and difficult journey to the Holy Land or continue onward to Alexandria and Sinai. So, across Europe other places of pilgrimage emerged around 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. Here, just beyond the entrance to the Lower Basilica, a chapel was dedicated to Saint Catherine long before Cardinal Albornoz chose it as his burial place and his heirs commissioned the frescoes on its walls. While it is well known that Catherine's name carried a sacred geography that intentionally joined her memory to the Holy Land, we cannot know whether the friars at the Basilica intended to make Assisi another Holy Land in the naming of this chapel.[21] Still, its dedication invites the imagination to wonder.

[20] Pope Francis presents the meeting with Sultan Malik-al-Kamil as a glimpse of a heart "without borders." He recalls Francis' instruction that friars among those who did not share their faith should not engage in disputes, but live humbly and fraternally among them. The encounter at Damietta thus becomes more than an episode from the Crusades. It becomes a Franciscan lesson in how the Gospel crosses a boundary without first turning the other person into an enemy. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), no. 3.

[21] The tomb just inside the Basilica has carried more than one name. Since 1418 it has been remembered as the tomb of an Emperor of Constantinople and is often associated with John of Brienne, King of Jerusalem and later Latin Emperor. Franciscan tradition drew John even closer to Francis, remembering him as one who encountered the world of Damietta and later belonged to the Third Order. The identification, however, is not secure. The heraldry points instead toward his grandson Philip of Courtenay, while older accounts proposed an Empress of Constantinople or a Queen of Cyprus. What remains striking is that every candidate belongs to the world of the Crusades and the Christian East. At the threshold of Francis' tomb-church, that

We continue to make journeys like this today, traveling both short and great distances to reach a place where love, a memory, or grief has left its mark on us. Having entered the Basilica of Saint Francis, the Saint Catherine Chapel directly ahead becomes a kind of harbor, where arriving wayfarers may collect themselves in private prayer and remember their loved ones before continuing along the way.



Within the chapel, the frescoes tell the story of Catherine's legend. She appears as a noblewoman and scholar who confronted the pagan emperor Maxentius and defended her faith in a great debate against fifty philosophers.[22] Persuaded by her arguments, the philosophers professed Christianity and were then burned alive at the emperor's command. Catherine was imprisoned and tortured, but the spiked wheel prepared for her execution shattered miraculously. She was finally beheaded, and angels carried her body from Alexandria to Mount Sinai.[23]



Catherine, often depicted with the broken wheel, remains a companion for those seeking spiritual understanding through curiosity, discussion, and debate. Questions about life and faith may arise as wayfarers journey through the Basilica. Catherine's broken wheel invites the restless mind to slow, allowing questions to become a part of prayer. Inspired by her, wayfarers are encouraged to wander unhurried through the Basilica, attentive to what they see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. Such heightened awareness of the senses serves to open the mind and the heart so as not to miss graced opportunities for conversation along the way.

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world has somehow come to Assisi. Gert Kreytenberg, "La Tomba dell'Imperatore Latino di Costantinopoli," *Studi di Storia dell'Arte* 8 (1997): 9–48.

[22] Andrea de' Bartoli's Disputation of Saint Catherine with the Philosophers includes scholars using reading lenses and spectacles, a striking detail in a cycle painted in 1368. Cros Gutiérrez connects Andrea's careful rendering of these optical aids with Tommaso da Modena's Dominican frescoes at Treviso of 1352, among the earliest painted representations of reading glasses. Almudena Cros Gutiérrez, *The Artistic Patronage of Gil de Albornoz (1302–1367), a Cardinal in Context* (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2008), 182.

[23] Catherine's story reached medieval Christians through collections of saints' lives that were read, preached, and translated into images. The *Golden Legend* became one of the great storehouses of that shared imagination, carrying the scholar, the debate, the broken wheel, martyrdom, and the journey from Alexandria to Sinai into churches across Europe. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, intro. Eamon Duffy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 720–27.

The Master of Saint Francis: Passion and Compassion

Turning into the nave, wayfarers encounter some of the earliest paintings in the Basilica, frescoed in the 1260s by the artist known as the Master of Saint Francis.[24] Five scenes from the Passion of Christ unfold along the northern wall to the right, while five scenes from the Compassion of Francis answer them from the wall opposite.[25] Portions were lost when the side chapels were opened, but the original intention remains clear. The two stories were made to speak across the nave.[26]

This was the first monumental painted cycle devoted to Francis, and its placement beside the Passion made an audacious visual claim.[27] He was being presented as *alter Christus*, another Christ.[28] The words do not make him another savior. They name a disciple whose life had become so conformed to Christ Jesus that, in Francis, something of the life of Christ could readily be seen.[29] In Francis, passion became compassion as he learned to suffer with Christ Jesus for a wounded world.



[24] Digitized renditions of the missing fragments are from Andrea De Marchi, Veruska Picchiarelli, and Emanuele Zappasodi, eds., *L'enigma del Maestro di San Francesco. Lo stil novo del Duecento umbro*, exh. cat., Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, March 10–June 9, 2024 (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2024).

[25] *Compassion* comes from Latin *com* (with) + *pati* (to suffer), via the late Latin *compassio*, "a suffering with."

[26] A friar could preach from a wall much as he preached from a text. Bonaventure's own method could begin with an image, attend to its parts, and unfold them toward theology and the conversion of life. The Basilica works in much the same way. One gesture, one wound, one figure across the nave can become the beginning of a sermon. Smith has shown how Bonaventure used imagery this way in structuring theological reflection. See Randall Smith, *Bonaventure's 'Journey of the Soul into God': Context and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 208–10.

[27] Renner argues that the audacity of the Lower Church program lies precisely in placing Francis' life in dialogue with the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. He reads Francis' renunciation opposite Christ's voluntary stripping as a visual defense of evangelical poverty, the Stigmatization opposite the Lamentation through the relationship of *passio* and *compassio*, and the Death of Francis opposite Emmaus as opening toward resurrection and apostolic mission. John Renner, "Bonaventure and the Maestro di San Francesco," in *Aesthetic Theology in the Franciscan Tradition: The Senses and the Experience of God in Art*, ed. Xavier Seubert and Oleg Bychkov (New York: Routledge, 2020), 23–28, 31, 37–42.

[28] Flanigan gives this movement a remarkably concrete medieval framework. Naturalistic likeness, gesture, wounds, imagined touch, and memory could train a viewer to recognize another's suffering and respond in compassion. She reads Francis' stigmata as the culminating Franciscan example. Contemplation of Christ's Passion transforms Francis into compassionate likeness. Flanigan, "Likeness and Compassion," 81–87. On the terminology, Renner notes that *alter Christus* is later than Bonaventure, who speaks more characteristically of Francis' conformity to Christ. Renner, "Bonaventure and the Maestro di San Francesco," 45–46, note 49.

[29] A similar thought stands at the heart of the Second Vatican Council's teaching. Only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of the human person become clear. Christ, in revealing the Father and His love, "fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling." Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), no. 22, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

Casting his cares upon the Lord,[30] Francis lived in continual response to Jesus' command:

> "Put out into the deep water…"[31] (Luke 5:4)

In this way, Francis' heart became like the brackish water of an estuary, where fresh river and salt sea mingle and each is changed by the other. As the tide came in, God's ocean-like presence drew him into contemplative silence. As the waters flowed out again, that presence carried him out into the world with the Gospel. Francis lived in the mingling of the waters, receiving stillness and movement, prayer and mission.[32]



Fresco in the Magdalene Chapel, Lower Basilica

[30] Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* 5, *FA:ED* 1, 191.

[31] 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.

[32] The rise and fall of Francis' heart echoes a deeper rhythm. Jean Corbon describes the liturgy itself as a tide: the living water of the Trinity welling up from the Father, poured out upon creation, and returning to Him as praise, in an ever-new ebb and flow of divine communion. What moves in one soul at prayer is a small share in that great worship of heaven. Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, 64–67. John V. Fleming notes Bonaventure's repeated use of water imagery in scriptural exegesis: rivulets become rivers, waters widen through salvation history, and water is repeatedly joined to light. The waterborne imagery used here is not a claim that the Basilica's nave program derives from those passages, but it moves within a genuinely Bonaventurian exegetical imagination. John V. Fleming, "Images of Gospel Life: The Letter Visualized," in *Aesthetic Theology in the Franciscan Tradition: The Senses and the Experience of God in Art*, ed. Xavier Seubert and Oleg Bychkov (New York: Routledge, 2020), 6–7.

Master of Saint Francis












Fathers

Walking ankle-deep into the brackish water of the nave, wayfarers meet a young Francis choosing between two fathers. His conversion had already drawn him beyond the city walls and into the company of lepers. The boundary that once protected him from those he feared became the boundary he crossed to meet them as friends.

> "I have called you friends." (John 15:15)

He had also begun seeking to repair San Damiano, making visible his desire to help rebuild the Church one stone at a time. Thus, between the city and the valley, Francis' conversion opened a mystical space. There, among those pushed beyond the protection of the walls, the poor and suffering began to taste the nearness of a God who forever desires to draw close.[33]

While the will of God the Father filled Francis' heart, his earthly father had other plans for his wayward son. Pietro di Bernardone was a prosperous cloth merchant who expected Francis to take his place in the family business. Their conflict had already become bitter. Pietro had dragged Francis home, confined him, and attempted to bring him before the city's consuls. But Francis now understood himself to be under the protection of the Church. The dispute therefore came before the bishop of Assisi. There, Pietro demanded the return of his property and the surrender of Francis' inheritance. It seems the phrase *careful what you ask for* had not yet come into fashion.



When the bishop instructed Francis to return the money, the dam around Francis' heart broke, and the waters of God filled the square. Francis neither delayed nor defended himself. He removed his clothes and returned them to Pietro along with the money that had caused their dispute. Standing naked before the bishop and the gathered crowd, he declared: "'Our Father who art in heaven,' and not 'My father, Pietro di Bernardone.'"[34] The bishop rose, wrapped Francis in his cope, and received him into the protection of the Church. In this Christlike stripping, Francis surrendered not only property and inheritance but the security of his former identity. He chose to stand with the poor, whose vulnerability he now made his own.

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[33] On Francis' conversion among the lepers: the Order's own constitutions recall how the Lord "led [Francis] among them," and how, in showing them mercy, he left the world to begin a life of penance. *Testament* (1226), cited in *Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual* (Rome: Curia Generalis OFM Conv., 2019), ch. 2, Spiritual Introduction; hereafter *Constitutions OFM Conv.* See also *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 27, on those left "outside the ancient town walls."

[34] *The Legend of the Three Companions*, *FA:ED* 2, 80.

Painted on the opposite wall is the Preparation for the Crucifixion. Jesus stands before the cross and extends His garment toward the soldiers. The Gospels tell us that the soldiers took and divided His clothing, but the painter makes the moment appear less like something seized than something surrendered. What Francis enacted before the bishop of Assisi, Jesus had already embraced on the way to the cross:

> "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." (John 10:18)

Earlier, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had 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 speaks of complete trust in the will of God the Father. The two acts of stripping are not equal, but the frescoes draw them into relationship. Francis' renunciation receives its meaning from Jesus' self-offering. The disciple learns the pattern from his Lord. Together they call wayfarers toward Francis' appeal to the friars: "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally."[35]

A healthy relationship between a father and his son or daughter builds the kind of trust a person can stand on. For those who have not experienced this foundation in their own lives, these images offer salty waters of healing. The salt stings before it heals, but in time old hurts can give way, opening a new path toward trusting the love of God the Father, Who offers Himself to all His children.



[35] Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," *FA:ED* 1, 118.

Mothers

Wading knee-deep into the brackish water of the nave, wayfarers look up to see Pope Innocent III asleep while Francis holds up Rome's cathedral, the Basilica of 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 a pilgrimage to Rome. There, Cardinal John of Saint Paul continued to press their cause, patient and unrelenting as a tide that will not stay out, until Innocent III finally agreed to receive the ragged band of brothers at Saint John Lateran. The pope listened but initially hesitated. It may have been because other cardinals thought the proposal too austere to be practical, or perhaps it was that the affairs of Church and state pressed in upon him like a rising current. Then again, it might simply have been because the smell of the midday meal had begun to drift from the kitchen below.

Imagine the meal that might have waited for Innocent. Fish poached in wine, its scent curling under the door while the broth was still being stirred. The catch had come up from the coast that morning and still tasted of the sea. In its bowl, the surface trembled a little, like the tired thoughts of a pope with too much on his mind. Soon enough, 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 water. Then a little poor man waded into the flood and put his shoulder beneath the Church, holding it fast above the waves.[36]

Recognizing Francis as that little poor man, Innocent recalled him and gave oral approval for Francis and the lesser brothers to follow their proposed form of life. 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 encouragement.



[36] This sensory imagining of Innocent's meal and dream is my own narrative embellishment, not drawn from any historical account. The dream itself belongs to the early Franciscan tradition. *The Legend of the Three Companions* describes Innocent seeing the church of Saint John Lateran threatening to collapse while "a religious, small and of shabby appearance" supported it on his shoulders. After meeting Francis, the pope recognized him as the man of the vision. See *The Legend of the Three Companions* 51, *FA:ED* 2, 97–98.

Back in Assisi, across the aisle from this scene is the fresco of the Crucifixion, 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)

Soon afterward, Jesus bowed His head and died. After Jesus' death, Scripture tells us:

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

In the painted scene, Mary and John lean toward one another. Mary, the mother of Jesus and now entrusted to John as his mother, receives the beloved disciple as her son, and John receives her as his mother. At the foot of the cross, as blood and water flow from Jesus' side and the Church is born, Mary appears as Mother of the Church.[37]



Francis would later call the earth "Sister Mother Earth," because she sustains life and brings forth fruit.[38] This title helps us hear what *Mother* means here. Mother Church is more than an institution that admits Francis and his brothers. She is a mother who receives, shelters, nourishes, and sends life outward. That maternal river flows, in the imagination, from across the nave. There, Mary receives John as her son within the newborn Church. Supported by Mother Mary, who is the first disciple, John and his brother apostles would be sent out to bring forth the fruit of faith in a waiting world. Together, both frescoes reveal a mother's sustaining love encouraging something new.

[37] Christian tradition has long looked upon the blood and water flowing from Jesus' pierced side and seen the Church being born. Vatican II calls the Church coming from His sleeping side "the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church," while the *Catechism* recalls the ancient parallel with Eve formed from the side of Adam. Mary's title Mother of the Church belongs within this same maternal imagination. Paul VI solemnly proclaimed the title during Vatican II, and in 2018 the Church placed the Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, on the Monday after Pentecost. Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), no. 5; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 766; Pope Paul VI, "Address at the Closing of the Third Session of the Second Vatican Council," November 21, 1964; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Decree on the Celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Church in the General Roman Calendar," February 11, 2018.

[38] Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of the Creatures," *FA:ED* 1, 113.

Preaching

Wading waist-deep into the nave, wayfarers find a familiar image of Francis preaching to the birds. Pope John Paul II declared Francis the heavenly patron of those who promote ecology in 1979, and the scene certainly reveals Francis' tenderness toward creation. Yet the fresco was painted six centuries before the word *ecology* was coined.[39] So, while the fresco speaks of Francis' care for creation, it is more fundamentally about his mission to carry the Gospel to all people.



Look closely at the congregation gathered before him. These are not birds of a single flock. They are birds of different kinds, just as Thomas of Celano described them: doves, crows, and daws gathered together to hear Francis preach.[40] Within the medieval imagination, their variety could evoke more than the natural world. Different kinds of birds could stand for different kinds of people, while Scripture repeatedly imagined a great tree sheltering birds of every kind. Christ Jesus took up the image when He compared the kingdom of God to the mustard seed that grows until the birds can make their nests in its branches (Matthew 13:31–32). The varied flock before Francis becomes the world in miniature, gathering different birds and different peoples around one Gospel.[41]

The scene also recalls the command of Christ Jesus to carry the Gospel into all the world and proclaim it to the whole of creation. Francis' sermon to the birds therefore carries him back into the human world and becomes an image of his mission to it. The painter has given the nations wings and gathered them before Francis, who preaches peace and repentance and calls them to the attentive obedience of which Isaiah spoke:

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[39] John Paul II declared Saint Francis the heavenly patron of those who promote ecology. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Inter Sanctos*, November 29, 1979.

[40] Although the sermon to the birds preceded Francis' reception of the stigmata, the painter depicts him bearing the wounds here, identifying the figure unmistakably and allowing the later mystery of his life to appear within the earlier event. Celano continues the chapter with another scene of preaching. At Alviano, Francis asks noisy swallows to remain silent while he speaks. When they obey, the astonished people recognize him as "holy, and a friend of the Most High." Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* 21, *FA:ED* 1, 234–35.

[41] Medieval birds could carry human company with them. Frugoni notes that different species in images of Francis preaching could evoke different kinds of people, from the poor to nobles and churchmen. In the Upper Basilica the same preaching scene sits beneath Ascension and Pentecost, allowing the varied flock to be seen within the Church's missionary sending. Pius XII later spoke in remarkably similar terms, describing Francis' voice as reaching different peoples, the Sultan, and even "the birds of the forest." The further application of this missionary symbolism to the varied flock in the earlier Lower Basilica fresco is my own reading. Chiara Frugoni, "Francesco d'Assisi, santo," in *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1995); Elvio Lunghi, "La Basilica di San Francesco è la Bibbia per i poveri. Le immagini esclusive dal drone," *San Francesco* (May 2016): 54–55; Pope Pius XII, "Ammirevole spettacolo," May 5, 1940.

"O that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your prosperity would have been like a river, and your success like the waves of the sea…" (Isaiah 48:18)



Francis' preaching receives an even deeper meaning from the fresco opposite. There, the lifeless body of Jesus is reverently taken down from the cross. Looking upon it, wayfarers may recall the words Jesus spoke 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 sacrificial love, such compassion, allows the light of Christ to shine through His disciples, making them salt for the earth and light for the world.[42] This is the message that Francis proclaims in the mirroring fresco. Like Francis, all missionary disciples are sent by the Great Commission of Christ Jesus:

[42] Such acts are not merely consequences of preaching. They are part of the preaching itself. The bishops gathered for the 1971 Synod described action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world as a "constitutive dimension" of proclaiming the Gospel, not an optional addition to it. Saint Anthony of Padua expressed the same union of word and deed when he preached: "When actions speak, words come alive. Let words cease, I beg you, and let your works give utterance!" What Francis proclaimed in one fresco he had already proclaimed by his deeds. Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* (1971), no. 6; Anthony of Padua, "Pentecost Sunday," in *Sermons for Sundays and Festivals*, vol. 1, trans. Paul Spilsbury (Padua: Edizioni Messaggero Padova / Centro Studi Antoniani, 2007), sec. 16. This passage from Anthony's sermon is also used as the second reading in the Office of Readings for June 13.

"Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."[43] (Mark 16:15)



Union

Pulled into the deeper waters of suffering and grief, wayfarers may find themselves swimming through the emotions of the next two paintings. The first shows Francis receiving the sacred stigmata, the wounds of Christ Jesus appearing in his own flesh.

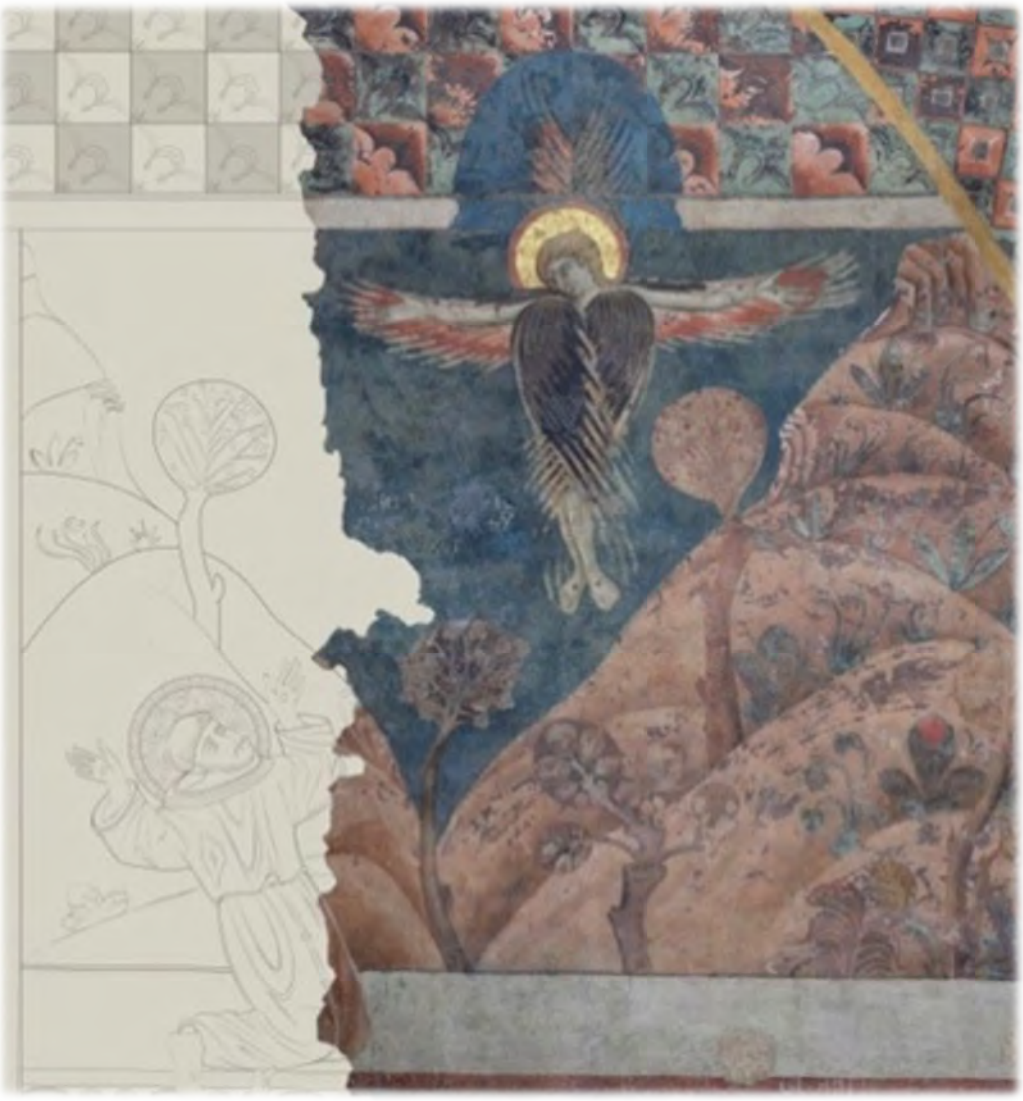
Two years before his death, Francis withdrew to Mount La Verna for a retreat, seeking in its mountaintop solitude a silence that itself became a kind of consolation. There, the figure of a crucified man appeared to him within the six wings of a seraph. Francis could not understand how the glory of the seraph and the suffering of the cross could inhabit the same vision. According to Bonaventure, he was filled at once with joy at the graciousness of the apparition and grief at the sight of its crucified body. When the vision disappeared, the wounds of Christ Jesus appeared in his hands, feet, and side.[44]

[43] Pope Francis repeatedly uses the phrase "missionary disciples" in *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120. At no. 181, he quotes the same commission from Mark 16:15 and explains that "the whole creation" encompasses every aspect of human life and gives the Gospel a universal destination.

[44] Bonaventure describes the six-winged seraph, the crucified figure, Francis' mingled joy and grief, and the marks left upon his body. Bonaventure, *Major Legend*, *FA:ED* 2, 632–33. The Order reads the stigmata as this

Imagine what Francis might have experienced during this mystical union with the crucified Christ. The mountain air was thin, carrying the scent of pine and cold stone, while the wind pressed against his skin. Then the light began to gather itself into wings, six of them, gold that burned and white that seared. At their center appeared the Crucified. Joy and grief, wonder and pain, entered the same moment. Francis remained before the mystery until the vision that had met his eyes was written upon his body.[45]

The stigmata did not make Francis another savior. They revealed what a lifetime of being conformed to Christ Jesus had made of him. Compassion, suffering with Christ, had entered his flesh.



That same compassion carries across the nave into the facing Lamentation over the Dead Christ. Mary bends toward the lifeless body of her Son, while John and the holy women gather around her. Angels fill the air above them, grieving until the heavens themselves

fresco does, saying how Francis' contemplation of the Passion "caused him to participate physically in the sufferings of the crucified Christ." *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, ch. 2, Spiritual Introduction.

[45] This sensory imagining of Francis' reception of the sacred stigmata is my own narrative imagination, not drawn from any historical account.

seem to weep. The stormy waves of sorrow that have risen around Francis now break over Mary, whose compassion reaches toward the body of Jesus.

Neither fresco pretends that suffering is beautiful merely because it hurts. The beauty lies in love refusing to abandon the wounded body. Francis remains before the Crucified until Christ's wounds are written upon him. Mary remains beside her Son when those wounds have carried Him into death. Their compassion does not explain suffering. It stays, touches, and bears what cannot yet be healed.[46]

Wayfarers drenched by this storm of emotion might now remember the welcoming words of Francis upon entering the Basilica. They had been promised *spiritual joys* and *great things*. Yet the vision at La Verna reveals that *spiritual joy* does not require the absence of suffering. In Francis, joy and grief had entered the same mystery. To find our bearings within it, we might recall the compassionate words of the psalmist:

> "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from 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)



[46] Varden cautions against treating suffering as though it were ennobling in itself. Its Christian meaning arises through union with the wounded Christ, whose apparent defeat becomes the source of freedom and life: "Victory is won through defeat; a crucified body frees us." Erik Varden, *Healing Wounds* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2024), 168.

Sight

Wayfarers pass through the images of suffering and grief and, following Francis, are drawn toward mystical union with God. Just beyond, there was once an iron gate dividing the nave from the beginning of the sanctuary. Crossing that now-imaginary threshold, wayfarers find themselves no longer swimming the treacherous currents but floating in tranquil water, contemplating how the Lord:

> "…leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." (Psalm 23:2–3)

The final painting of Francis shows his dead body resting in peace, or as he might have called it: meeting Sister Death. Francis firmly believed in the Resurrection of Christ Jesus, which opens the way for humanity to journey back to the Father. Saint Paul gives voice to that wayfaring hope:

> "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 the fresco, Francis lies with his eyes closed, resting in the peace of *spiritual joy*. Yet those closed eyes hold within them a hidden brightness. He trusted that they would open again, not into darkness but into the dazzling light of the Resurrection, the *great thing* of eternal life toward which his whole journey had been leading. A life spent suffering with Christ Jesus now opens quietly into a life sharing His glory. Francis' trust in God's promises, and his participation in Christ's Passion and Death, carry him toward 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 accompanied on the road to Emmaus. It is as though Francis' closed eyes find their answer here. The eyes of the disciples, closed by sorrow and confusion, are opened in the breaking of the bread:

> "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." (Luke 24:31)

These wayfaring disciples had been leaving Jerusalem, distraught and confused, their hearts still raw from the Crucifixion and Death that had shattered their hopes. They did not recognize Him. How could they? Yet 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 is every wayfarer's walk. It passes through darkness and weariness, carrying questions whose answers cannot yet be seen, and still Jesus does not abandon them. That the disciples failed to recognize Him should not surprise us. We fail in the same way most days, when the Lord is present in forms we never think to look for: a stranger on the road, someone familiar and yet unknown. This is how the risen Lord comes, helping us remember what we have forgotten and recognize what we have failed to see, awakening hope one step at a time.



When the Emmaus wayfarers urged Jesus to remain with them and sat down to take a meal, He 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. The risen Lord had been opening the Scriptures while their hearts quietly burned along the road:

> "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32)

The same risen Lord continues to open the Scriptures for the Church today. Through the Holy Spirit, the light of the Father's Word passes from heart to heart, illuminating the road already traveled and the path still lying ahead. Christ Jesus does not merely give wayfarers an explanation for their suffering. He gives them Himself, first as a companion upon the road, and then in the explaining of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread.

For the Emmaus wayfarers, this revelation transformed a sorrowful departure into a journey of remembered mercy and renewed purpose. Compelled by *spiritual joy*, they turned around and hurried back to Jerusalem to proclaim the *great things* of the Lord's Resurrection and all He had shared with them along the way. Inspired by the story of this fresco, wayfarers today might more readily perceive how God has been guiding, forgiving, and gently reshaping their own stories from within.[47] Every step becomes part of a larger path upon which the creative Word, through wayfarers and mystics who dare to walk with Him, continues His work of making all things new.[48]

Lingering in the quiet pool of brackish water, wayfarers contemplating these mystical moments of Passion and Compassion might notice points of light flickering within the vaults overhead. The blue-painted ceiling is scattered with stars and what were long ago innumerable convex discs covered in reflective metal. Light would catch the little discs and set the painted ceiling shimmering like a night sky over open waters.[49] Today, most of the discs are gone, but the modern lights of the Lower Basilica show the painted stars, and at times can cause an unexpected glimmer above that awakens something of the original wonder.



[47] The Latin American bishops made this same Emmaus scene the frame of their 2007 concluding document at Aparecida, opening and closing it with the disciples' prayer, "Stay with us" (Luke 24:29), and reading their return to proclaim the Resurrection as the pattern of the missionary disciple. See Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *Aparecida Concluding Document* (Bogotá: CELAM, 2007), no. 554; see also Pope Benedict XVI, "Inaugural Address of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean" (Aparecida, May 13, 2007), no. 4.

[48] Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), nos. 83, 99–100, where the risen Christ holds all creation and directs it toward fullness (Colossians 1:19–20 and 1 Corinthians 15:28).

[49] Gerard Manley Hopkins would later give flashing divine presence through matter one of its finest poetic images. In "God's Grandeur," the world is "charged with the grandeur of God" and flashes "like shining from shook foil." Hopkins, of course, was not describing this ceiling. Yet the comparison is wonderfully apt: the medieval discs were reflective metal, catching ordinary light and returning it as something newly visible. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918).

The Spirituality of Architecture: Into the Mystic

Within the waterborne journey of this book, the nave begins to feel like a vessel. Wayfarers have passed through rivers, tides, storms, and still waters. Looking ahead toward the great painted sails above the altar, they find themselves aboard the ancient ship of the Church, sailing beneath a starlit sky. The building itself pulls the wayfarer in two directions. Its Romanesque weight carries us forward through the nave toward altar and tomb, the long movement of a pilgrimage. At the same time, Gothic forms begin to lift that journey upward. The road toward Francis' grave and the ascent toward heaven occupy the same space. We are drawn forward and find ourselves looking up.[50]



The resemblance is more than poetic. The word *nave* comes through Medieval Latin from *navis*, meaning ship. The image reaches back into the early Church, whose writers imagined the Church as a vessel carrying the faithful through dangerous waters toward the shore of eternal life.[51] One ancient church order even instructed the bishop to assemble the people like the commander of a great ship, with the deacons serving as mariners and the faithful gathered as passengers. This imagery has helped wayfarers throughout the passing centuries understand that the church around them is also an image of the Church they belong to, a people moving through history together rather than isolated travelers passing

[50] Magro reads the Basilica's mixed Romanesque-Gothic architecture through these complementary movements. The Romanesque nave develops horizontally as a pilgrimage toward the altar, the Holy Land and paradise, while in the sanctuary the Gothic language increasingly emphasizes vertical ascent toward heaven. He treats the two movements as belonging together within the symbolic experience of the Basilica. Magro, *La basilica sepolcrale*, 105–09.

[51] The ancient image of the Church as a ship carries a social lesson as well as a spiritual one. No passenger reaches the destination alone. Christian life is lived among others, with responsibilities for the safety, dignity, and flourishing of the whole company. The Church's social doctrine gives this shared voyage the language of solidarity and the common good. Solidarity begins by recognizing that human beings are bound to one another and travel a common path, while the common good asks each person to contribute, according to his or her possibilities, to the good shared by all. The old ship therefore becomes more than an image of surviving the storm. It is an image of Christian cooperation, each person receiving a place in the vessel and accepting responsibility for the others aboard. *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.57; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 167, 192. The section's subtitle also echoes Van Morrison, "Into the Mystic," on *Moondance* (Warner Bros., 1970), whose imagery of sailing and homecoming offers a contemporary companion to the ancient Christian image.

through life alone.[52] We are sailing together, bound toward the same heavenly glory. Aboard this vessel, we endure hardship side by side, sustained by Christ Jesus, Who is in our midst.[53]

> "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)



Within this ancient image, Christ Jesus is the true captain of the ship. At the altar, the priest serves *in persona Christi Capitis*, in the person of Christ the Head, making visible the One who gathers and leads His people.[54] Scripture, proclaimed from the ambo, becomes the compass by which the Church navigates. The cross rises like the mast, and above it the four triangular paintings over the altar open like sails.[55] They are commonly called the *vele*, the Italian word for sails.[56]

Within this ancient Christian image, the Holy Spirit is the wind filling the sails and carrying the Church

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[52] Magro likewise reads the Basilica ecclesiologically, as architecture giving visible form to the Church as a people moving through history toward fulfillment in Christ. He sees the building's spatial and symbolic organization as belonging to the life of the ecclesial community rather than functioning merely as decoration around it. Magro, *La basilica sepolcrale*, 112–15.

[53] At this point in the journey, a helpful meditation might be Enya, "May It Be," on *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Reprise Records, 2001). Its blessing and promise that those who continue believing will find their way echo Tolkien's vision of companions who endure darkness together. Heard with Christian ears, its guiding star may call to mind Christ, "the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16), whose light sustains wayfarers through hardship.

[54] Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*), no. 2, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

[55] The cross over the altar has had a predecessor. An earlier two-sided painted cross made for the Lower Basilica survives from the Franciscan artistic world of the thirteenth century. On its reverse appears the proclamation *Rex Glorie*, "King of Glory," words that echo the Church's ancient hymn, *Tu Rex gloriae, Christe*. Above Francis' tomb, even the cross once carried a title of kingship into the heart of the voyage. Emanuele Zappasodi, "Maestro dei Crocifissi Francescani. Croce dipinta a due facce," in *Dal visibile all'indicibile. Crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno*, ed. Marina Bassetti and Bruno Toscano (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2012), 147–58.

[56] The four *vele* were not a reusable decorative formula carried from one church to another. Schönau emphasizes how specifically they belong to this crossing, this altar, and above all this tomb. Their meaning grows from the place beneath them. The sails are therefore not simply paintings suspended overhead; they are part of the architecture of Francis' burial and the worship gathered around it. D. W. Schönau, "A New Hypothesis on the Vel in the Lower Church of San Francesco in Assisi," *Franziskanische Studien* 67 (1985): 326–47, esp. 327.

toward the kingdom of God. The prayers and actions of the faithful do not create that wind, but open the whole vessel to its movement. When each person seeks only a private destination, the common voyage is forgotten and the sails seem to slacken. When the Church prays and sings with one heart, wayfarers discover that they are being carried together.



All of this sailing has a destination, and its name is worship. The Basilica was raised over the tomb of *il Poverello* to be a house of prayer, where the People of God gather to give praise to the Father. Here the water through which we have been traveling can be given its truest name, the liturgy, the living water of the Trinity, flowing from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit and gathering creation into one song of praise.[57]

Thus, the promise made at the door continues to unfold, for the scroll at the entrance called this church "a true paradise of *spiritual joys*," ever "resonant with praise and gladdened with holy choirs." Those holy choirs are already singing. When wayfarers sail toward the altar, they are being drawn into the worship of heaven, into the *great things* they were promised they would see, where angels and living creatures stand before the face of God and sing:

> "Holy, holy, holy." (Revelation 4:8)

Wayfarers still in the water, floating toward the altar, may look beyond it to the Last Judgment painted across the apse. There, a strong yet gentle friar leans down from heaven, lowering his cord to pull others upward. Within our shipboard meditation, his gesture feels like an arm reaching over the side of the vessel to draw struggling wayfarers aboard.

Following the friar's cord upward, their eyes are drawn toward the four golden *vele* of the sanctuary, and especially toward the sail depicting Francis in Glory. Directly beneath them stand the papal altar and the tomb of Francis. Above them, at the center where the painted ribs converge, Christ Jesus reigns within the keystone. Gazing at *il Poverello*, appearing within the glory of heaven, the story of the nave reaches its climax in the vision of the Letter to the Hebrews:

[57] For Corbon, the eternal liturgy is the ceaseless movement of Trinitarian communion: life flowing from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit and creation returning in praise. The water imagery of this chapter finds its deepest current here, in worship itself. Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, 64–67.

> "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… 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 12:18–19, 22–24)

In this mystical place, we realize that the heavenly Jerusalem itself awaits us. The path has opened for wayfarers, for mystics, to approach the altar as the journey continues.[58]



[58] Gustafson proposes a particularly useful Bonaventurian way of understanding Franciscan architectural space through the *perscrutator*, the searcher who probes hidden depths. Drawing upon Bonaventure's language of spiritual searching, he reads screens, thresholds, choirs, passages, visible and concealed spaces, and bodily movement through the church as spatial analogues of a journey from what is immediately perceptible toward what must be sought. In such a reading, architecture does not merely house the pilgrimage. Rather, it helps train the wayfarer to search. Erik Gustafson, "The *Perscrutator* in the Hidden Depths of Franciscan Architectural Space," in *Aesthetic Theology in the Franciscan Tradition: The Senses and the Experience of God in Art*, ed. Xavier Seubert and Oleg Bychkov (New York: Routledge, 2020), 148–49.



LADIES POVERTY, CHASTITY, OBEDIENCE
WITH FRANCIS IN GLORY

S PAUPERES

S. AUGUSTIN SPIRITUDO
penitentia

The Master of the Vele: A Meditation on Consecration

The name of the artist responsible for the *vele* has not come down to us with certainty. We do know that he worked within the artistic world shaped by Giotto.[59] Whatever hand painted them, the *vele* are among the most significant frescoes in the Basilica, positioned directly above the papal altar and Francis' tomb.[60]

Along with the sail known as Francis in Glory, three noblewomen appear, each offering her own frescoed meditation: Lady Poverty, Lady Chastity, and Lady Obedience. Bonaventure tells of another meeting with three ladies. Traveling near Siena, Francis encountered three poor women so alike in age, stature, and appearance that his companions sensed a mystery in them. They greeted Francis together and then disappeared from sight. Bonaventure understood them as Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, the threefold beauty of Gospel perfection shining together in Francis.[61] Here above his tomb, the three sisters appear again.



[59] The name of the painter has shifted with the history of attribution. Schönau notes that Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), Renaissance painter and author of *Lives of the Artists*, attributed the *vele* to Giotto, a judgment repeated for generations. Once that attribution was questioned, several of Giotto's followers were proposed, including Puccio Capanna, but no identification became secure. The uncertainty is useful here. These frescoes belong first to the Franciscan program of this particular place, not to the biography of a painter whose name we can confidently recover. Schönau, "A New Hypothesis," 328–29.

[60] Robson argues that the complex allegories of the *vele*, depicting the vows above the friars' reserved area, were intended primarily for them. Yet the friar beneath the vaults and the wayfarer looking up need not receive different lessons. Janet Robson, "The Pilgrim's Progress: Reinterpreting the Trecento Fresco Programme in the Lower Church at Assisi," in *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, ed. William R. Cook, The Medieval Franciscans 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 46.

[61] Bonaventure, *Major Legend* VII.6, *FA:ED* 2, 580–81.

The ladies bear the names of the three vows professed by Franciscan religious, promises symbolized by the familiar cord of the Franciscan habit.[62] In France the friars were called *Cordeliers*, the cord-wearers. This book calls them *Cordbearers*, representing those who wear the three knots and all who carry within what the knots promise.[63]

A religious vow is not a rule imposed from outside. It is a public promise made to God, a freely given response to the love that first called the person making it. Through poverty, chastity, and obedience, friars, sisters, and others in consecrated life offer themselves to God and enter more deeply into loving communion with Him and their neighbors. The vows are prophetic acts, signs raised before the Church and the world to proclaim that another way of living is possible. So every morning religious rise to live them anew.[64]

The frescoes make that daily work visible. Here theology takes flesh and gesture. Strong color, gilded light, and three women caught in the act of giving, receiving, guarding, and surrendering show what a vowed life looks like. Their polygonal haloes mark them as personified virtues.[65] A wayfarer standing before the altar has all three directly overhead.

Looking toward the edges of the three *vele*, another shared feature appears. Each of the three virtues inhabits a mountain landscape. Poverty's garden, Chastity's castle, and Obedience's chapter house all rise above visible ledges of earth and stone, yet each is flooded with a golden sheen. These are earthly scenes illuminated as though by the light of Tabor, the mountain upon which Christ Jesus was transfigured.

The light does not erase the world below but teaches the eye to see it differently. So too the vows do not remove those who profess them from the world, but teach another way of living in the world. On Mount Tabor, Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, appeared beside Christ Jesus and bore witness to Him as their fulfillment. Bathed in that same light, religious life points beyond the vows themselves to Christ Jesus, in whom every promise finds its completion. Such a life begins by learning how to see.

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[62] By religious profession the friars commit themselves to follow Christ "in obedience, without anything of their own, and in chastity." *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, arts. 1 §1 and 4 §1.

[63] The cord itself gathered a family around Francis. Sixtus V established the Archconfraternity of the Cord of Saint Francis at Assisi in 1585, and two years later extended the practice more widely through the Franciscan family. Friars, sisters, and laypeople could all wear the cord as a visible sign of belonging. The French name *Cordeliers*, "cord-wearers," grew from the same image. Pope Sixtus V, *Ex supernae dispositionis* (1585); *Divinae caritatis* (1587); Ferdinand Heckmann, "Confraternities of the Cord," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al. (New York: Robert Appleton, 1908), 357–58.

[64] A vow is made once publicly and then lived repeatedly. Scripture speaks of paying one's vows "in the presence of all his people," while the Order describes consecrated life as prophetic witness to the living action of the Holy Spirit. David of Augsburg wrote for precisely this daily formation of religious. His three books move from beginners through those progressing toward maturity, and Pansters identifies growth in virtue as the thread connecting the whole journey, a continuous work requiring "unremitting effort." Psalm 116:14, 18; *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, art. 35 §2; Krijn Pansters, "The Powers of the Soul in David of Augsburg's '*De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione*,'" *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval* 31, no. 1 (2024): 79.

[65] The polygonal haloes help the eye distinguish these women as personified virtues rather than historical saints. Medieval artists used the nimbus not only for holy persons but also for allegorical beings, and polygonal forms became a familiar way of marking such personifications. Didron treats the nimbus of allegorical beings and virtues specifically in this context. A. N. Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages*, trans. E. J. Millington (London: George Bell, 1896), 1:81–89.

The American poet Mary Oliver distills a contemplative way of seeing into three simple instructions: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."[66] None of the three is finished with the making of promises. All wayfarers wake each morning to pay attention again, to be astonished again, and to discover where and how promises take flesh that day. Within religious consecration, that movement becomes the rhythm of an entire life. Attention ripens into astonishment, astonishment into praise, and praise into a life offered wholly to God in the proclamation of the Good News.

The placement of the vows above the altar is no coincidence. Poverty, chastity, and obedience surround the place where bread and wine are consecrated, becoming the Body and Blood of Christ. The visual relationship allows religious consecration to be understood according to a Eucharistic paradigm.[67] At their profession, consecrated religious place their whole lives upon the altar. Through grace, those promises take flesh in lives given to God and poured out in love for others. Their vows echo the words heard at every Eucharist: "This is my Body, which will be given up for you," and "the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many."[68]

This Eucharistic movement deepens in the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharist is not only something received but a transforming communion in which the faithful are called to become what they receive. The words and actions of the liturgy open into the ordinary silence after Communion, when words themselves may rest. From this quiet, mystical place, those consecrated for prophetic mission rise each day to proclaim the Gospel with their lives.[69] While the vows belong by profession to consecrated religious, the evangelical counsels they embody speak to every Christian.[70] The Basilica gives each of the three a story of her own.



[66] Mary Oliver, "Sometimes," in *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 37.

[67] The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the entire liturgy and life of the Church," and the friars' common table itself expresses a love "akin to that of the Eucharistic banquet." *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, arts. 37 and 65 §2.

[68] *The Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer II, Institution Narrative.

[69] Farrell describes the Eucharist as more than something received from Christ. In the sacrament, Christ gives Himself and draws the disciple into His own life of self-gift. Elsewhere Farrell develops the same movement through prayer: Christ's indwelling presence gradually reshapes the person from within, until prayer becomes less an isolated act and more a life being conformed to Him. Read beneath the vows, this helps explain the movement from altar to life. The consecrated person receives the One who gives Himself and rises from Communion to become, by grace, a life given in return. Edward J. Farrell, *Disciples and Other Strangers* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1974), 29–31, 88–95.

[70] The evangelical counsels are not restricted to religious profession. The Catechism distinguishes the counsels from the commandments and teaches that they foster the growth of charity. They are to be practiced according to each person's vocation. Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1973–74.

Lady Poverty



Before Francis understood where his conversion would lead, and while he still moved among the companions of his former life, he spoke of taking a bride "nobler and richer and fairer" than any they had ever seen. In time, the early Franciscan imagination would give this mysterious bride a name and a face. She was Lady Poverty.[71]

A spiritual allegory called the *Sacrum Commercium*, *The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty*, emerged in the thirteenth century.[72] Drawing upon the language of courtly romance, it 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 her. Together with his companions, Francis searches for her in the wilderness and climbs the mountain upon which she dwells. There, Lady Poverty receives them because of their faithfulness to the Gospel and agrees to share their life. Later, when Lady Poverty asks to see their cloister, the brothers lead her to a height and gesture toward the world spread out before them: "Lady, this is our cloister."[73]

Wedding

In her *vela*, we see the mystical marriage of Francis and Lady Poverty. The Lord of Glory[74] stands between them and blesses their union as Francis places a ring upon the finger of

[71] Francis' bridal language appears before the *Sacrum Commercium*. Celano remembers him telling his companions that he would take a bride nobler, richer, and more beautiful than any they had seen, and the *Legend of the Three Companions* preserves the same early memory. Bollati therefore cautions against treating the *Sacrum Commercium* as the direct literary source for the wedding painted above the altar; the nuptial imagination was already alive within the earliest Franciscan tradition. Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* 3, *FA:ED* 1, 188; *The Legend of the Three Companions*, *FA:ED* 2, 72; Milvia Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus: Un'immagine di Francesco tra agiografia e storia* (Padua: Editrici Francescane, 2012), 62–65.

[72] *Sacrum Commercium* is a merchant's phrase: exchange, trade, commerce. The early Franciscan imagination takes the vocabulary of Francis' father's world and turns it toward another economy, where what is received becomes gift rather than possession. The allegory belongs to the same imaginative world as the fresco and places Lady Poverty on a mountaintop. Benedict XVI later gives that old Franciscan reversal a striking social resonance, insisting that gratuitousness and the logic of gift belong within economic life itself rather than being added after business is finished. *The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty*, *FA:ED* 1, 529–54; Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), nos. 34–36.

[73] The Order describes this same outward movement. All the friars are called to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world, first by the witness of a prayerful, poor, simple, joyful, and fraternal life. *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, arts. 91 §3 and 92.

[74] The title "Lord of Glory" was deliberately chosen here. In the facing *vela* Francis is titled "Francis in Glory" and his eyes look directly toward this scene. Beneath that *vela* there once hung the Blue Cross identifying Christ Jesus as the King of Glory. Schönau argues that this scene is without parallel in Western art. Lady Poverty, the bride of Christ, is given to Francis by Christ Himself, as the verse beneath the fresco states, and no other image renders the relation between Francis and Christ so directly. He adds that its placement immediately above the tomb of Francis is essential to its meaning. Schönau, "A New Hypothesis," 335.

his bride.[75] Lady Hope, dressed in green, reaches toward the ring exchange, while Lady Charity, with a red cloak at her shoulders, offers a heart of love.[76] These ladies witness the wedding, and as virtues they are what make a marriage healthy and holy. A closer look reveals that Poverty and Hope raise their hands in an identical gesture: thumb touching middle finger, the other fingers lifted skyward. This is the ancient orator's sign for a proclamation about to be made.[77] Lady Poverty and Lady Hope, bride and witness, are shown speaking together, proclaiming an invitation that reaches beyond the wedding itself: *Come, be poor, be free*.



Christ Jesus stands at the center of this wedding because Francis' love for Lady Poverty begins with Him. Poverty accompanied Jesus at Bethlehem, walked beside Him through the villages of Galilee, and remained with Him when He was stripped upon the cross. Francis does not marry Lady Poverty because suffering or deprivation is good in itself. He loves her because Jesus loved her, and because she helps him to follow the poor and humble Jesus without anything standing between them. The ring Francis offers is therefore also a promise of imitation, a promise to choose what He chose and to remain

[75] Bollati identifies the ring exchange as the central nuptial act of the scene. Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 56. Dante, whose funeral was celebrated in the Franciscan church of San Francesco in Ravenna and whose tomb stands beside it, set the same wedding in verse at roughly the time this *vela* was painted. In the *Paradiso*, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas tells it as a love story. Poverty, widowed after the death of Christ, remained despised and unwooed for more than eleven hundred years, until Francis sought her as his bride. The wedding company differs. In the poem, Francis joins himself to Poverty *coram patre*, before his father and the spiritual court. In the fresco, the Lord of Glory gives the bride to Francis. The poem and painting then turn together toward the first friars. Bernard bares his feet and runs, thinking himself too slow, as Giles and Sylvester also go barefoot behind the bridegroom, so pleasing is the bride. After them comes the family already bound by the humble cord, the first Cordbearers, echoed in the faces painted in the arch below the *vela*. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Italian text ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Digital Dante*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2014), *Paradiso* XI, 43–117; the marriage at 58–75 and the companions at 79–87.

[76] Bollati identifies Hope and Charity within the wedding scene. Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 52, 56.

[77] This hand shape, with the thumb joined to the middle finger and the remaining fingers extended, is the ancient rhetorical gesture described by Quintilian as suited to the *exordium*, the opening address of a speech. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education (Institutio Oratoria)*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11.3.92. Early Christian art adapted the orator's gesture as a sign of speaking or teaching. This is often read today as a blessing. See James Hall, *A History of Ideas and Images in Italian Art* (London: John Murray, 1983), 92–93.

beside those whom the world leaves poor and alone. In that fidelity, Lady Poverty becomes inseparable from solidarity with those whose poverty is not chosen.[78]

No one enters a marriage knowing what the future will bring. The ring is given in the present as a sign of a promise meant to endure whatever lies ahead. Lady Hope carries that promise. She enables Francis and Lady Poverty to trust that what appears to be loss will open into life with God. Without Hope, poverty can close in upon itself and become deprivation or despair. Hope keeps the emptied hands open, refusing to let loss have the final word and trusting that God can still place something within them. Lady Hope cannot see everything the marriage will ask of them, but she knows in Whom its promise rests.

Beside Hope stands Lady Charity, who gives that promise its life. She offers a heart, vulnerable enough for Francis and Lady Poverty to give themselves to God and to one another, and generous enough to carry God's love into a world grown cold and violent.[79]

Behind Hope and Charity, a company of unnamed ladies-in-waiting gathers for the marriage. Imagine that among them are two daughters of Lady Hope, Anger and Courage: anger that the world is the way it is, and courage to act so that it does not remain that way. Francis and Lady Poverty will need both, for the family born from their union must learn to love a world that is sometimes hostile and indifferent, without surrendering the courage to change it.[80]

Observant wayfarers will notice that Lady Poverty has wings. She is the first of three winged women they will encounter among the *vele*, a quiet visual thread that will return with Lady Penance and Lady Obedience. For now, it is enough to notice that Poverty is not fixed in deprivation. There is movement in her, a freedom already beginning to take flight. Knowing the chill of want, she is clothed in threadbare rags and stands among thorny brambles that rise from her feet and flower around her head in roses and white lilies.[81] This

[78] A ring can bind a promise to the hand that wears it. In Brazil, the *anel de tucum*, fashioned from the dark wood of an Amazonian palm, came to carry a promise of solidarity with Indigenous peoples, the poor, and popular struggles. Pedro Casaldáliga chose one instead of a conventional episcopal ring, making visible the causes to which he had bound himself. Lady Poverty's ring belongs to another time and story, but both rings ask the same uncomfortable question: what promise does the hand intend to keep? Lucas Emanuel, C.Ss.R., "Qual o significado do anel de tucum?," A12, November 17, 2016, updated February 28, 2023; Conrado Berning, dir., *O Anel de Tucum* (Verbo Filmes, 1994).

[79] Giotto had painted his own *Caritas* offering her heart to Christ in the Arena Chapel at Padua, completed in the opening years of the fourteenth century. The heart as a token of love was older. One of its earliest known appearances outside anatomical illustration is a miniature of about 1255 in the *Roman de la poire*. Giotto's *Caritas* gave the image a new theological form, which passed into later representations by Taddeo Gaddi, Andrea Pisano, and Ambrogio Lorenzetti. R. Freyhan, "The Evolution of the Caritas Figure in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 11 (1948): 79–82; Pierre Vinken, "How the Heart Was Held in Medieval Art," *The Lancet* 358, no. 9299 (2001): 2155–57.

[80] The women standing behind Lady Hope and Lady Charity are unlabeled. Their identification here as Anger and Courage is my own imaginative addition. The formulation that Hope has two daughters, Anger and Courage, is commonly attributed to Saint Augustine, but I have found no reliable source for that attribution in Augustine's works. I retain the image because the thought is true and because the fresco gives the imagination room to receive it.

[81] The rose and lily also belong to the biblical language of love. In the Song of Songs, the beloved declares, "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" (Song of Songs 2:1). The flowers crowning Lady Poverty invite a nuptial reading of the fresco, while the lilies also recall Jesus' teaching about freedom from anxiety:

is the transformation promised by spiritual poverty. Pain and deprivation are not made good in themselves, and they are also not allowed to have the final word.

To live poverty as *sine proprio*, "without anything of my own," means more than possessing nothing. It means refusing to let possessions, status, or even cherished ideas possess us. By placing God and others before ourselves, we open our lives to the freedom and holiness of Christ Jesus.[82] That new life flowers in the roses and lilies and then appears again in the arch beneath the fresco, where tiny portraits of the early friars are painted.

Franciscan poverty was never meant to be a solitary achievement. Francis did not empty his hands so that he could stand apart from others, admiring his own renunciation. The Lord gave him brothers. Together they learned to receive what they needed, share what they had been given, and allow a gift to remain a gift rather than turning it into a possession. Living *sine proprio* made them dependent upon God and also responsible for one another. Poverty did not leave Francis alone. She made him a better father and brother to others. This is why the circular friar portraits painted in the arch beneath the wedding are perfectly placed. As Francis' first followers, they are witnesses to the marriage and some of its first children.



Francis gave his brothers words for the life Lady Poverty opened for them: "Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence."[83] Living without anything of their own would leave them with nothing to defend and therefore free to receive one another and strangers as gift.



Cloak

It is often said that at a wedding, a couple remembers when they first fell in love. In the bottom left corner of the fresco, an angel draws our attention to a young man removing his cloak to give it to a poor man.[84] The gesture

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin" (Matthew 6:28). The bride who wears the roughest clothing is crowned with flowers that neither toil nor spin.

[82] Francis recalls that after the Lord gave him brothers, no one showed him what he should do, but the Most High revealed that they should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel. Francis of Assisi, *Testament* 14, *FA:ED* 1, 125. On *sine proprio* as a communal practice of receiving, sharing, and allowing a gift to remain a gift, see Willem Marie Speelman, "The Franciscan *Usus Pauper*: Using Poverty to Put Life in the Perspective of Plenitude," *Palgrave Communications* 4 (2018), article 77. The Order carries *sine proprio* into the friars' present life: by profession they live "without anything of their own," are called to "divest themselves of all things," and resist the consumer mentality that measures life through possession. *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, arts. 4 §1, 9 §1, and 14 §6.

[83] Francis of Assisi, *The Later Rule* VI.1–3, *FA:ED* 1, 103.

[84] The episode recalls an early story of Francis giving his fine clothing to an impoverished knight. See *The Legend of the Three Companions* 6, *FA:ED* 2, 71; see also Bonaventure, *Major Legend* I.2, *FA:ED* 2, 530–31. Cole

unmistakably recalls Francis, who gave his cloak to a poor knight during the early years of his conversion. Yet the image need not stop with Francis. The young man can carry his story and, at the same time, become every wayfarer who walks the same road.[85] What began as one gesture in Francis' conversion becomes a question placed before each generation: Whose need is asking me to loosen my hold on what I would rather keep?

Looking toward the upper part of the fresco, we find an angel taking the cloak Francis gave away 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, loosening the anxiety that gathers around what we possess and what we fear we may lack, so that we can trust more completely in God.

For the early friars, this living of the Gospel found a vocabulary in the Fathers of the Church, including voices from the Christian East. Around 1270, the English Franciscan John of Peckham reached for Isaac of Nineveh while defending evangelical poverty. Isaac was not writing about property. He was asking who can receive the deeper consolations of God, and answered that they are those who have gone out after Him naked, expecting no help from visible things.[86]

Isaac meant nakedness before God with no soft edges. His monks are alone in the desert, hungry, sick, and near death. Peckham brings that sentence into another world altogether, the world of a friar and his cloak. How may a brother use what he needs without letting it become his own? That is where Franciscan poverty begins to mature. The first standard is not property. It is surrender. The question is no longer simply whether the friar has a cloak, but whether the cloak has him.[87]

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describes the figure in the *vela* as a young man imitating one of Francis' celebrated deeds by giving his cloak to a beggar. Michael Cole, "Arti povere, 1300–1650," in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250–1750*, ed. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 246.

[85] Medieval allegorical art often works by accumulation rather than exclusion. A figure may recall a particular life, embody a virtue, and at the same time invite moral or spiritual identification. The reading followed here is intentionally multivalent: Francis remains the originating pattern while the image opens his way of life to all friars and to every wayfarer looking upward.

[86] John of Peckham, *Tractatus pauperis* 5, ed. A. Van den Wyngaert (Paris: France franciscaine, 1925), 64. Peckham, an English Franciscan who served as regent master at Paris from 1269 and later became Archbishop of Canterbury, is among the earliest known Franciscan witnesses to the reception of Isaac of Nineveh in the Latin West. A looser form of the same citation appears again in chapter 6 of Peckham's treatise, and the passage later reappears in Peter John Olivi's *Questio octava de perfectione evangelica* and Ubertino da Casale's *Tractatus de altissima paupertate*. See Lorenzo Arcese, "Appendice a *Isacco di Ninive e gli Spirituali francescani: un'analisi storico-teologica*," *Picenum Seraphicum* 39 (2025): 181–89; and Sabino Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 295–96.

[87] Later Franciscans pressed Francis' evangelical practice into a precise theological and juridical claim: that Christ and the apostles possessed nothing, either individually or in common, and had no proprietary right in



Returning to the fresco, notice that the angel does not pass the cloak to another beggar, but hands it upward, out of sight. The villa and the vegetable garden go the same way. Nothing here is redistributed within the scene. Instead, everything is offered up. The painter is concerned first with surrender, with releasing the claim that these things are ours alone. To be stripped of anxiety is to expect no help from visible things, not because we have emptied our hands well, but because nothing is left in them to hope in. Francis had already done this literally, laying his clothes at his father's feet in the square at Assisi. Still, surrender cannot become an excuse for leaving the poor unaided.

At the bottom of the scene, two small figures dressed in red and blue offer a stark contrast to the gifts of the angels. While their size reflects their being on the other side of a ravine, a friar preaching beneath the fresco might have pointed upward and called them little men, made smaller by what they possess. Their wealth has not enlarged their world. It has narrowed it until there is room for neither Lady Poverty nor the poor. They attempt to drive her away, poking her with sticks and throwing stones, hoping to chase her out of their lives with the help of their dog.

The fresco does not ask us to pretend that forced poverty is beautiful. The stones, sticks, and barking dog reveal what happens when the poor are treated as a problem to be driven from sight rather than as neighbors whose dignity must be defended. Notice how Francis does not stand at a safe distance and praise the deprivation of the poor. He crosses the boundaries of class and status that separated him from them, no longer content simply to be for the poor, but choosing to live with them and increasingly to see the world with their eyes.[88] This is what the social doctrine of the Church calls the preferential option for the

what they used. John XXII declared this persistent assertion erroneous and heretical in *Cum inter nonnullos* (1323). See *Bullarium Franciscanum*, vol. 5, ed. Konrad Eubel (Rome: Typis Vaticanis, 1898), no. 518, 256–59. The vow professed beneath these vaults is *sine proprio*, "without anything of one's own." Isaac's ascetical language and Peckham's use of it belong to an earlier and more fundamental understanding, where poverty is first a surrender of reliance upon visible things before it becomes a juridical argument about ownership and use.

[88] Leonardo Boff distinguishes between several ways of relating to the poor. One may remain *for* the poor while still viewing them from the outside, as recipients of charity. A deeper solidarity requires being *with* the poor, sharing something of their life, culture, faith, and struggle. For Boff, Francis went further still. His greatness consisted in learning to "see the poor with the eyes of the poor," allowing proximity to change not only what he did for them but how he saw the world. Boff describes this as a movement away from the security of Francis' former social position and toward identification with those pushed to the margins. Leonardo Boff, *Francis of Assisi: A Model for Human Liberation*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 43–52, esp. 46, 48–50.

poor. It is not a preference for poverty, but a decision to see society from the side of those who bear its heaviest burdens. The fresco also points toward the universal destination of goods, the teaching that God created the goods of the earth for the good of everyone. Lady Poverty becomes evangelical when voluntary simplicity frees us to stand in solidarity with the poor and to share those goods more justly for the common good.[89]

Francis answers these assaults against the poor by offering his whole self in the marriage. Coming from a wealthy merchant family, where cloth and coin had shaped his identity, he freely left that life behind to answer God's call. Although he renounced luxury and riches, his understanding of Poverty went deeper. In her, he found a virtue that accompanied him every day of his life. She showed him that everything he received was a gift from God, meant to be shared for the good of all, not as charity but by right.[90]

Refusal

In the bottom right corner, three men are called by the words that Poverty and Hope have just proclaimed: *Come, be poor, be free*. The invitation goes beyond attending the wedding and opens into the freedom the marriage makes visible. Together these men represent the ranks of medieval society, but each turns away, preoccupied with what he already holds. A falcon rides the nobleman's wrist, as he concerns himself with the privilege of wealth. The tonsured clergyman clutches his book, as he clings to the power knowledge brings to a few. Finally, the merchant grips his money bag. Like Judas in Lorenzetti's Passion cycle nearby, the merchant allows what he possesses to



[89] The social teachings gathered here belong together. The universal destination of goods begins with the conviction that creation is given for all. The common good asks society to make that shared good genuinely accessible; solidarity turns our interdependence into responsibility; the preferential option for the poor teaches us where to stand when the burdens are not shared equally. Francis adds something still more personal: proximity changes the eyes with which the world is seen. Magro finds that same social movement within the Poverty *vela*, where privilege, wealth, and exclusion are set against the young Francis loosening his cloak for a poor man and against a Franciscan ideal of fraternity and shared goods. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 164–84, 192–96; Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 198–99; Magro, *La basilica sepolcrale*, 175–76.

[90] De Benedictis reads Bonaventure as affirming the goodness and legitimate use of material goods while ordering their use toward human need. He further articulates Bonaventure's teaching that superfluous goods are owed to the poor. This is a medieval formulation and should be understood as Bonaventure's social theology, not as a complete modern economic program. Matthew M. De Benedictis, OFM, *The Social Thought of Saint Bonaventure: A Study in Social Philosophy*, Catholic University of America Philosophical Studies 93 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1946), 208–13.

possess him.[91] All three figures have hands that are full. None of them will let go to free a hand to receive a ring.

This last figure has a modern cousin in Mr. Potter, the villain of Frank Capra's beloved Christmas film *It's a Wonderful Life*.[92] Potter is a wealthy, miserly banker who tries to buy up the entire town and evict its struggling residents rather than show any mercy. His single-minded pursuit of wealth blinds him to the dignity of his neighbors, the same temptation to which Lady Poverty's medieval merchant succumbed seven centuries earlier.

How often do we see similar dynamics in our own world? Children argue over phones, clothing, or toys, valuing things more than people. Adults may prioritize a job title, personal success, or even their own comfort over family and community. We also turn away from the people right in front of us, reaching for a phone mid-conversation. This is the same refusal of the nobleman, the clergyman, and the merchant, just dressed in modern clothes.[93] There are ideas, too, that we tend to possess. How often do we get frustrated when our brilliant suggestion is reshaped by others? Lady Poverty reminds us that ideas are given to be handed round, and that the community will make of them something we could not have made alone.

The fresco has been teaching the eye to notice what fills the hands, what narrows the heart, and what freedom looks like when something is finally let go. Now the Latin inscription painted along the arch beneath it gives those lessons words:[94]

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.



[91] Robson gives Judas unusual prominence within Lorenzetti's Passion cycle and reads him specifically for a Franciscan audience, placing his betrayal within the Order's concerns over avarice, poverty, obedience, and the danger of falling from grace. Lorenzetti consistently identifies Judas across the cycle by his red cloak over a green tunic, together with his distinctive profile and hair. Janet Robson, "Judas and the Franciscans: Perfidy Pictured in Lorenzetti's Passion Cycle at Assisi," *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 1 (2004): 31–57.

[92] Frank Capra, dir., *It's a Wonderful Life* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1946).

[93] The turn from persons to devices echoes Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 42–50, where he warns that digital communication can have only "the appearance of sociability" (no. 43).

[94] The English renderings of the Latin inscriptions accompanying the four *vele*, Lady Poverty, Lady Chastity, Lady Obedience, and Francis in Glory, were prepared for this book from the Latin texts and Italian translations reproduced in Bonsanti, ed., *Assisi: Basilica di San Francesco*, 3:395–97.

Lady Chastity



Returning to the chivalric tale of the *Sacrum Commercium*, we find that Francis' romance with Lady Poverty ends in a final blessing, one that praises the brothers whose way of life leads others to shine with chastity.[95] That blessing now takes visible form in the *vela*, where Lady Chastity appears as a figure of radiant purity.

A white flag waves atop her citadel as two angels approach bearing a crown of salvation and a palm of victory. The crown and palm carry the old Christian memory of martyrdom, of a life given wholly to Christ and carried through suffering into victory. That memory also entered the long ascetical life of the Church. Christians learned to speak of a bloodless, or white, martyrdom, where the offering of a life unfolded through renunciation and fidelity rather than the shedding of blood.[96] Medieval theology placed virginity within this same world of struggle and reward. Bonaventure writes that "the crown is owed to the one who struggles," and speaks of chastity itself as a victory worthy of its own crown.[97]

Centuries later, Saint Óscar Romero gave that older language the quiet rhythm of ordinary life. He told his people that giving one's life does not always mean being killed. The spirit of martyrdom can be lived "in duty, in silence, in prayer," through the faithful offering of daily life. A whole life may be offered in one terrible hour or laid down quietly across many

[95] *The Sacred Exchange*, *FA:ED* 1, 553–54.

[96] An older ascetical tradition extended the vocabulary of martyrdom beyond death itself. The early medieval *Cambrai Homily* distinguishes red martyrdom, suffering or death for Christ, from white martyrdom, the renunciation of what one loves for God's sake. I do not suggest the homily as a source for the Assisi fresco. It shows how readily Christian asceticism could inherit the language of martyrdom. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, eds. and trans., *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose, and Verse*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 247.

[97] Bonaventure treats virginity within the theology of the *aureola*, asking whether it receives a special reward and arguing that "the crown is owed to the one who struggles." He considers virginity alongside martyrdom as a distinct form of victorious Christian witness. Bollati likewise places the crown and palm within the martyrial and virginal imagery of the Chastity *vela*. Bonaventure, *Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, IV, Dist. 33, Art. 2, q. 3, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 4 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1889); Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 78.

years.[98] Chastity belongs to that daily gift of the self, body and spirit gathered into a love that remains faithful to God and free for others. The crown points beyond struggle too, toward the love for which chastity is meant.[99]

Today, chastity is often mistaken for celibacy. Lady Chastity wishes to be the companion of everyone. The Church speaks of chastity as an integration of the person, gathering body and spirit into an inner unity, freeing us to love without possessing or using another.[100] Chastity therefore orders 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. Consecrated religious live this common calling through celibacy, giving their lives wholly to God so that their love may remain free for others.[101]

Vigil

Below the tower and outside the castle walls, the fresco centers on a medieval vigil of arms, where knighthood is consecrated to the defense of love, fidelity, and the vulnerable.[102] Two angels ritually bathe a young man before his knightly investiture.[103] Just to the right, two additional angels stand ready to clothe him in the religious habit of a

[98] Preaching on May 15, 1977, Romero said that the "spirit of martyrdom" is lived in duty, silence, prayer, and the faithful fulfillment of ordinary obligations, "giving one's life little by little." Óscar A. Romero, "María y la Iglesia: 6° Domingo de Pascua," homily, Planes de Renderos, May 15, 1977, in *Monseñor Óscar A. Romero, su pensamiento*, vols. I–II (San Salvador: Publicaciones Pastorales del Arzobispado, 2000), 45.

[99] In Christian rites of crowning, particularly in the Byzantine tradition, the crown signifies the restoration of human dignity through a committed communion that points beyond itself toward the Marriage of the Lamb. This does not establish the painter's intended meaning here, but it allows the crown offered to Lady Chastity to speak to both consecrated celibacy and Christian marriage. Erik Varden, *Chastity: Reconciliation of the Senses* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2023), 102–5.

[100] Varden describes trust as the primary asceticism, the surrender of imagined self-sufficiency that allows God to gather the disparate parts of our history and personality into unity. He stresses that this integration is neither automatic nor easy, especially where human beings have been wounded, and compares the action of grace to the seed that grows secretly while the sower sleeps (Mark 4:26–29). Varden, *Chastity*, 120–21.

[101] The Order frames chastity in the same terms: the friars embrace continence "as an expression of their love for God and others," a pledge of the treasure to come, made fruitful in Trinitarian love. *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, art. 24 §1. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2337 and 2346–48; and Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1968), no. 21, on self-mastery as a discipline that gives love a more truly human character. Varden similarly describes chastity as freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of life. Chaste love allows another person the freedom to become fully themselves; its opposite confines and constricts. "The logic of love," he concludes, "is always the logic of freedom." Varden, *Chastity*, 112.

[102] Knightly investiture was a recognized ceremony in medieval Florence and throughout Italy. From the thirteenth century, its rituals included bathing, a vigil of arms, and dubbing with the sword of justice. Such ceremonies were also celebrated publicly, sometimes outdoors in civic squares and on battlefields. Pope Francis' image of the Church as "a field hospital after battle," tending the wounded and drawing near to those who suffer, offers a contemporary expression of the love represented outside Lady Chastity's castle walls. Trevor Dean, "Knighthood in Later Medieval Italy," in *Europa e Italia: Studi in onore di Giorgio Chittolini*, ed. Paola Guglielmotti, Isabella Lazzarini, and Gian Maria Varanini (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2011), 144, 146–47, 150; Pope Francis, interview by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis," *America*, September 30, 2013.

[103] Bollati describes the figure as a young man undergoing a ceremony of purification while another pair of angels waits with his garments. Renner reads the central scene through the ritual bathing and investiture of a novice knight. Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 78; John Renner, "Chastity's Knight: Allegory and Chivalry in Assisi," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 42, no. 1 (2022): 5–13.

lesser brother. The scene naturally recalls Francis' own dream of knighthood and its conversion after Spoleto.[104] What he once imagined as earthly chivalry became service to Christ Jesus. Yet the image need not end with Francis. It opens to every wayfarer whose desire, ambition, and strength must be turned toward another kind of life.

For the friars gathered for prayer in the choir below, such aspirations would have been especially meaningful. For centuries they have professed poverty, chastity, and obedience before the papal altar directly beneath this fresco. The young man being washed, clothed, and invested above them becomes a *miles Christi*, a knight of Christ, dedicating himself to a lifetime of struggle in the service of Christ and the brothers and sisters God would give him. This was already the language of the earliest Franciscan stories. Thomas of Celano called Francis the most valiant knight of Christ as he went through towns and villages preaching peace. Bonaventure later hailed him as the most vigorous knight of Christ, bearing the arms of an unconquered Captain and the standard of the Most High King.[105]



Francis' dream of knighthood had not been destroyed. It had been converted. The battlefield was now the human heart, the virtues became his armor, and victory would be measured by fidelity to Christ. Here, wayfarers may pause before 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.

As Francis' investiture reaches its culmination, two virtues lean over the wall to offer him a standard and a shield, with which the new knight will defend both himself and others. Lady Purity, *Munditia*, offers him the staff of purity with a white *pennon* flying atop as the outward sign of the purity they embody. In Scripture, purity begins in the heart, not in a list of things to avoid. Purity of heart frees kindness, mercy, and love from the desire to possess or control another.[106]

[104] Bonaventure, *Major Legend* I.3, *FA:ED* 2, 532–33.
[105] Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* 4, *FA:ED* 1, 189 and 15, *FA:ED* 1, 214–15; Bonaventure, *Major Legend* XIII.9, *FA:ED* 2, 637; Renner, "Chastity's Knight," 5–13. Some translations use the more modern term: soldier.
[106] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2518.

Francis describes what such purity makes possible: "The truly clean of heart are those who look down upon earthly things, seek those of heaven, and, with a clean heart and soul, never cease adoring and seeing the Lord God living and true."[107] Chastity clears the heart's vision. It does not teach a person to despise the body or withdraw from love, but to see God, oneself, and one's neighbor without the distortions of possessiveness or selfish desire.



Chastity teaches the eyes as well as the heart. The unchaste gaze reduces another person to something useful, desirable, or ours to control. A chaste gaze receives the other as someone to be met, respected, and loved. Standing beneath these frescoes, the wayfarer begins to learn a different kind of seeing, marked by genuine tenderness.[108]

Sight is only the beginning. Chastity gathers the other senses too, not by silencing them but by freeing them from the need to seize and possess. Once gathered into the unity of the person, sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and desire can become ways of receiving what God gives. The senses through which temptation comes are also the senses through which grace is encountered.

> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5:8)

Lady Fortitude, *Fortitudo*, then offers the young Francis a shield. Bonaventure gives the gesture its Franciscan meaning. Writing about the gift of fortitude, he says that the soul is prepared for it "through the impregnable shield of faith."[109] Fortitude does not remove

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[107] Francis of Assisi, *The Admonitions* XVI.2, *FA:ED* 1, 134.

[108] Varden distinguishes between a gaze directed inward toward one's own appetite and a chaste gaze that receives what it sees with reverence, free from the need to possess. Reflecting on Matthew 6:22, he understands the "sound" eye as simple and integral, capable of filling the whole person with light. He later cites the medieval maxim *Ubi amor, ibi oculus*: "Where there is love, there will be an eye that sees." Varden, *Chastity*, 148–51. This modern formulation belongs within the older Christian tradition of the spiritual senses, developed with particular richness by Bonaventure, for whom the restored senses of the soul enable the human person to perceive the divine presence through creation and within the interior life. See also Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God* 4.3–5.

[109] Writing of the gift of fortitude, Bonaventure says that the soul is disposed to receive it *per inexpugnabile fidei scutum*, "through the impregnable shield of faith," and immediately cites Ephesians 6:16. He opens the same conference with the image of the bride as a tower hung with shields and the armor of the strong (Song

struggle. She teaches the knight how to stand strong within it. Saint Peter then offers the warning, the first sounding of the alarm bell:

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

The knight does not enter that struggle empty-handed. Purity has taught him how to see. Fortitude places the shield in his hands, which faith makes strong enough to withstand what is coming. Saint Paul completes the image:

> "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." (Ephesians 6:14–15)

Bell

At the bottom right of the fresco are four prowling demons, dark reflections of fractured souls. They lurk there, intent on corrupting this Franciscan Camelot. Before they can do harm, a bell rings from the top of Lady Chastity's tower. Her warning sounds from above, carried down on the resounding chimes.



Flee now, beasts of broken vow, for Lady Virtues rise not in violence but in chastity.
Where Hope stands, cruelty stumbles.
Where Charity weeps, even fire remembers purity.
Where Faith speaks, the grave grows quiet.
Where Penance walks, shame flees.[110]

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of Songs 4:4). Bonaventure, *Collationes de septem donis Spiritus Sancti* V.10, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 5 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1891), 481.

[110] This original verse, describing the scene within the fresco, was informed by John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers 57 (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), bk. 11, chap. 6.

At the very bottom right corner of the fresco is the demon *Immunditia*, Impurity, the boar-headed tyrant with broken wings, tumbling backward. His body bears the corruption of desire when it has lost both dignity and direction. Well above him stands Lady Hope, clad in green.[111] She holds her shield close against the devil before her and reaches out with the wooden cross that speaks of true strength. Before the cross, *Immunditia* stumbles, unable to withstand the courage that Hope inspires and the anger she transforms for goodness.

Just above him is *Ardor*, Burning Passion, who has dropped his torch. He is furred below and burning flesh above, flames roaring from his shoulders and head. His wings churn wild and destructive smoke and fire. He is met by Lady Charity, robed in blue that represents chaste love. She sprinkles holy water, gentle as rain, and *Ardor* recoils. Even his raging fire remembers purity.



Then there is *Mors*, Death, the black skeletal reaper, silent and cold, his scythe ready to claim life's end. He turns away from Lady Faith, who is dressed in white and holds a slender penitential rod.[112] Her quiet strength answers *Mors* with a trust that sees beyond what the

[111] Dante gives the three theological virtues their colors in the pageant of the Earthly Paradise: one dancer so red she would barely show in fire, one of flawless emerald, and one like newly fallen snow. Dante, *Purgatorio* XXIX, 121–29. Charity's blue here reflects another convention. Blue ascended from a second-rate color to a first-rate one across the eleventh and twelfth centuries, becoming the color of the Virgin and of royalty, and with them of love and fidelity. Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, trans. Markus I. Cruse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 80–81.

[112] The penitential rod, properly the *virgula poenitentiaria*, in Italian the *bacchetta penitenziale*, belonged to confessors delegated by a bishop to absolve reserved sins. With it the confessor touched the head of the kneeling penitent in connection with the sacrament of penance. In a building that teaches almost everything by sight, this was mercy one could feel. The gesture may have derived from the Roman *manumissio vindicta*, in which a slave was set free by the touch of a rod, allowing the Christian rite to be understood as liberation from enslavement by sin. Moroni also sets beside this the shepherd's language of the psalm, "your rod and

eye can see. The scythe works by distance and force, cutting down what stands before it. The rod works by nearness. It meets the bowed head, touches it, and turns that contact toward mercy. Seeing death only as an ending, *Mors* flees Faith's offering of a way through the shadow of death.[113]

Finally, there is *Amor*, Love, naked and blindfolded, fleeing on feet clawed like a rooster's talons.[114] He is love that has torn itself loose from sight and from God, his bow broken and useless at his side. He flees from Lady Penance, *Penitentia*, a hooded, winged figure carrying the *disciplina,* a penitential scourge. The fresco is unsparing. Between her wings, her back is bare and marked by the discipline she bears.[115] The point is not the instrument itself but the movement it makes visible. Penance begins with oneself and then comes to the aid of sister virtues under attack.

One by one the demons flee. The Lady Virtues do not stand aside, and they do not answer violence on its own terms. Hope bears a cross. Charity responds with cleansing water. Faith faces death with another way called peace (Luke 1:79). Penance's discipline drives *Amor* from the field.[116] What deforms human life is resisted without being imitated. The ones who confront evil refuse to become its mirror.[117]

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your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4), explaining the touch not merely as correction but as a sign intended to drive fear from the person who bowed beneath it. Gaetano Moroni, *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica da S. Pietro sino ai nostri giorni* (Venice: Tipografia Emiliana, 1840–1861), vol. 16, s.v. "Confessore," and vol. 52, s.v. "Penitenziere."

[113] The confrontation of Lady Faith and *Mors* does not appear to follow a standard iconographic pairing, but its theology belongs to an older Christian imagination. Augustine treats the overcoming of death's fear as part of "the struggle of faith itself," while the Syriac writer Aphrahat praises Faith as the power that "raised the dead, and brought them up from Sheol." Medieval allegory then gave such convictions visible form, arming virtues for spiritual combat and sending the Christian pilgrim onward toward an eventual encounter with Death. Augustine, *On the Merit and Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants*, II.50–52, trans. Peter Holmes, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887); Aphrahat, *Demonstration* I, 18–19, trans. A. Edward Johnston, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 13, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1898); Julie Féougier, "L'image au service du texte : un éloge de la vie monastique à travers les enluminures d'un manuscrit du Pèlerinage de vie humaine," in *Images, textes et concepts* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2012), 65–72.

[114] *Amor* is the Latin and Roman name for the god the Greeks called *Eros*, more familiar to modern readers by his other Roman name, *Cupid*. The interpretation offered here is informed by C. S. Lewis' account of *Eros* when separated from submission to God. Lewis does not discuss the Assisi fresco itself. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), chap. 5, "Eros."

[115] Chen identifies Lady Penance, whose bloodied back shows that she has already used the *disciplina* upon herself. She then turns it against *Amor*, driving him away. Such bodily mortification belonged to medieval penitential practice, but it could become excessive and harmful. Near the end of his life, Francis himself recognized this. When a brother reminded him how faithfully his body, which he affectionately called Brother Ass, had served him, Francis asked Brother Body for forgiveness and agreed to give it the care it needed. Penance seeks the conversion of the heart, not the punishment of the body. Andrew H. Chen, *Flagellant Confraternities and Italian Art, 1260–1610: Ritual and Experience* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 33–34; Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 211, *FA:ED* 2, 382–83.

[116] Here the soul's ascent proceeds through its reformation by grace and the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. Reading those virtues as defenders against the demons in this *vela* is my application, supported by the medieval symbolism of their colors discussed above. Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God* 4.

[117] Gospel nonviolence is not passivity, surrender, or avoidance of conflict. It is the active resistance of evil without taking on the logic of evil itself. Pope Francis taught that it does not mean "succumbing to evil," but

When the struggle quiets, Lady Penance can be considered more carefully. For Francis, penance was *metanoia*, a turning back toward God, a willingness to begin again. He had lived that turning himself. The lepers he once found bitter became the place where bitterness gave way to sweetness.[118] Penance changed more than what Francis did. It changed what he was able to see. The face he once turned from became a place where mercy could be recognized. Something in Francis had become lighter. The bitterness had not simply vanished. Grace had taught him to receive differently what still stood before him.

Lady Penance's wings give that change a visible form. At the same time, they pull memory back to Lady Poverty, whose own wings first suggested the freedom that comes when the grasp loosens and the heart begins to rise. Together, Poverty loosens our grasp on what we possess, while Penance opens room to turn again when love has gone astray.



With Lady Penance beside her, Chastity is no longer presented as a virtue lost forever when love is wounded. Penance makes that return possible. The assaults do not disappear, but neither do they have the final word. Arthur's correction in *Camelot* names the difference as not *might is right, but might for right*.[119] Lady Penance reminds wayfarers that spiritual and bodily fidelity is measured not by never falling, but by the constant willingness to turn again toward God and neighbor, cooperating with grace that sets things right. Within that possibility of return, Chastity remains in her tower as the image of love rightly ordered,

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responding to evil with good and thereby breaking the chain of injustice. He points to Jesus, who faced violence without reproducing it and commanded Peter to put away his sword. Pope Francis, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace," Message for the Fiftieth World Day of Peace (January 1, 2017), nos. 3–4, 6. Leo XIV has carried this teaching forward, describing nonviolent resistance as a deeply evangelical way of inhabiting history: it does not renounce conflict or remain passive before evil, but confronts it without reproducing its logic, refusing to turn the other into an enemy and beginning instead by disarming oneself. Pope Leo XIV, "Address at the Conclusion of the Extraordinary Consistory," June 27, 2026. The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative of Pax Christi International names this same Gospel path as the transformative power of love in action and resistance, a courageous way of confronting violence rather than merely the absence of violence. See also Pax Christi International, Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, *Gospel Nonviolence for a Laudato Si' Future: An Initial Proposal for the Laudato Si' Action Plan*, by Marie Dennis and Ken Butigan (2022).

[118] Maranesi reads Francis' *facere poenitentiam*, "to do penance," as evangelical *metanoia*. It is a movement of the heart and gaze away from the self toward another. In Francis' encounter with the lepers, this new orientation changed not only what he did but what he was able to see. What had previously seemed bitter and without beauty became sweetness, opening a new way of perceiving the world around him. Pietro Maranesi, "Facere misericordiam. La conversione di Francesco secondo il Testamento," *Frate Francesco* 69, n.s. (2003): 97–101. Bonaventure gives the movement theological precision. While the other virtues act *in formando*, by forming, Penance acts *in reformando*, by re-forming what sin has deformed. Bonaventure, *Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, IV, dist. 14, pars I, art. I, q. 2, ad 1.

[119] Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, *Camelot* (New York: Random House, 1961), act 1, the scene in which Arthur conceives the Round Table. The words recur in the 1967 film adaptation.

while the winged thread running through Poverty and Penance turns to Obedience, where this movement toward God and neighbor continues.[120]

Roses

At the edge of this struggle, white and red blossoms rise together from the same flowering growth. Medieval Christians would have been familiar with the symbolism carried by both colors. White flowering forms evoke chaste purity, while red roses carry the memory of charity, Jesus' Passion, and the martyrs. They also recall the garden already flowering behind Lady Poverty, where roses and lilies rise above the thorns. Together, they gather into one the blood of those who willingly gave their lives in acts of sacrifice, and the pure offering of lives given to God across the years.[121]



Conrad of Saxony, a thirteenth-century Franciscan preacher, wrote of the white brightness of virgins and the redness of martyrs, then brought both colors into dialogue with the Virgin Mary, speaking of the whiteness of virginity and the redness of charity. Elsewhere he compared chastity to the lily and the Passion to the rose. The white and red flowers in Lady Chastity's *vela* seem to gather those meanings into one small corner of the fresco as a counter to the demons who surround the small plant.[122]

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[120] Bollati identifies Poverty, Penance, and Obedience as the three winged women of the cycle. I propose that their wings need not signify a fixed medieval rank or a single iconographic source. They belong naturally to an older Christian ascetical language in which virtue gives the soul the capacity to rise. Gregory the Great, interpreting Ezekiel's winged creatures, says that virtues are signified by wings and specifically associates penitence with them. Elsewhere he calls love of God and love of neighbor the wings by which the Church rises above earthly things. John Climacus comes still closer to the movement painted here: detachment and obedience carry the soul heavenward "as upon golden wings," and his next step is repentance, where he writes that "obedience precedes repentance." In the Syriac tradition, Isaac of Nineveh says that "the mind's wings sprout up in the womb of chastity," and on them the mind ascends to divine love. These parallels do not establish a direct literary or iconographic source for the Assisi fresco, but they place its winged women within a broad Christian language of ascetical transformation and ascent. See Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 51, 74, 78–79; Gregory the Great, *The Homilies of Saint Gregory the Great on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson, 2nd ed. (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), I.4; Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, trans. John R. C. Martyn, 3 vols., Mediaeval Sources in Translation 40 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004), VIII.2; John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, intro. Kallistos Ware (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), Steps 4.1 and 5.1; Isaac of Nineveh, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery, rev. 2nd ed. (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), Homily 34, 282–83.

[121] Saint Maximilian Kolbe offers a modern expression of the same theology of color. As a boy he understood the Virgin Mary to offer him two crowns, white for purity and red for martyrdom, and he chose both. Pope John Paul II, "Homily for the Canonization of Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe," October 10, 1982, no. 4.

[122] Conrad of Saxony, a German Friar Minor known for popular preaching, gives a close thirteenth-century parallel. In a sermon preserved in Houghton Library MS Lat 5, he writes that Saint John flowers "like a lily because of chastity, like a rose because of the Passion." T. S. Eliot sharpens the question of motive in *Murder in the Cathedral*, where Thomas Becket recognizes that even martyrdom may become a temptation: "the last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason." Here purity of heart accompanies the martyr's self-offering. Conrad of Saxony, *Sermones*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Lat 5, fol. 1v; T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), part 1.

On the opposite side of the fresco, the movement initiated by Lady Purity and Lady Fortitude continues as Francis draws three individuals into this scene of chastity. Together they represent the three original branches of the Franciscan family.[123] The friar, whose hand Francis clasps, 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 friar obscures most of the nun's face, a detail that may suggest the hidden life of enclosure. The third figure represents the lay penitents of the Third Order, ancestors of today's Secular Franciscan Order.[124]



They are being drawn into the same chastity the flowers have just named, a life healed, made clear, and fragrant in the way it is lived. Each will give that love a different expression. For the friar, it will take shape in fraternity; for the sister, within enclosure; and for the lay penitent, in the household and marketplace. In each, chaste love will ask something different, but it will ask for the same fidelity.

The cross offered to them gives that love its pattern as Francis lifts his habit to receive them, leaving his wounded feet open to view. The family gathered around him is being welcomed into the way of the Crucified. For the wayfarer, Francis' wounded feet may bring to mind the words of the Gospel Canticle of Zechariah, sung every morning in choir:[125]

> "…to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:79)

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[123] The three figures represent the three Franciscan Orders: a friar, a sister, and a lay penitent. Renner identifies them as such and notes that the reading is confirmed by the inscription on the arch below, which calls brothers, sisters, and continent married people to Chastity. Their individual identities remain disputed. The veiled woman is frequently identified as Saint Clare. The friar has been identified as John of Morrovalle, while the layman has been identified variously as Count Orlando Cattani of Chiusi or Dante Alighieri. I remain doubtful of the identification with Dante, since the figure bears little resemblance to the distinctive facial type familiar from his early representations. Renner, "Chastity's Knight," 6, 11 note 3.

[124] These three figures answer to the three original branches of the Franciscan family. The Constitutions compare the family as it later developed (the Friars Minor, the Poor Clares, the Third Order Regular, and the Secular Franciscan Order) to "a luxuriant tree … composed of various branches." *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, ch. 3, Spiritual Introduction.

[125] Bonaventure reads the wounds in Francis' hands and feet as signs of his conformity to Christ crucified. See Bonaventure, *Major Legend* XIII.3, *FA:ED* 2, 632–33. Francis himself remembered that the Lord revealed to him the greeting, "May the Lord give you peace." Francis of Assisi, *Testament* 23, *FA:ED* 1, 126. The association made here between Francis' wounded feet and Luke 1:79 is a theological reading of the fresco rather than a claim about a fixed iconographic program.

Gate

Lady Chastity now directs the wayfarer beyond interior freedom toward the love for which that freedom is given. How do you want to be loved? The answer to this very human question reveals how we are called to love others, and leads to the hoped for recognition that my neighbor is my unknown self.[126] Look again at the fresco. Much of its action takes place outside the castle walls. This is to show that authentic love of neighbor excludes no one, safeguards human dignity, and remains particularly attentive to the poor.[127]



There is an order to love, and the Church has long given it a name, *ordo amoris*. We cannot carry the whole world in our two hands, so love begins with the people and duties nearest to us. Properly understood, it does not rank one person's human worth above another. Saint Augustine begins from the other end. All are to be loved equally, while nearness helps determine whom our two hands can reach.

When the phrase entered a public argument over immigration in early 2025, Pope Francis returned it to a road outside Jerusalem, where a Samaritan stopped for a stranger he had no reason to love. The true *ordo amoris*, he wrote, is the love "that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception."[128] The fresco tells a similar story by placing the action outside

[126] Unamuno writes that he loves his neighbor because the neighbor lives within him and forms part of his consciousness, desiring that the neighbor become "another I," overcoming the division between self and other. "My neighbor is my unknown self" condenses that insight into a single line. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*, trans. J. E. Crawford Flitch (London: Macmillan, 1921), chaps. 3 and 11.

[127] Pope Leo XIV, Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te: On Love for the Poor* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), no. 16; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 182–83.

[128] The phrase had been invoked in January 2025 by the vice president of the United States to defend a hierarchy of obligations beginning with family, community, and nation, in the context of the administration's immigration policies. Pope Francis answered that reading directly. Christian love, he wrote, is not a "concentric expansion of interests" that gradually extends outward to others. The true *ordo amoris* is discovered instead in the Good Samaritan, in a love that builds "a fraternity open to all, without exception." Augustine states the principle only after stating its premise, and compares the choosing to a drawing of lots, which is to say that nearness is a fact about our reach and not a measure of anyone's worth. Thomas Aquinas takes up the same question and immediately limits the rule. It holds only where other things are equal. In extreme necessity one must help a stranger before one's own father, and where nearness and need pull against one another, prudence must judge the particular case. We will encounter Lady Prudence in the next *vela* of Lady Obedience. Pope Francis, "Letter to the Bishops of the United States of America," February 10, 2025, no. 6; Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 62, 80–81; Saint Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina*

the walls of this castle of love. For the love commanded by the Gospel admits no borders. Wherever a wounded person lies in need, Christ Jesus is waiting to be embraced and loved. From her tower, Lady Chastity reminds the wayfarer that purity of heart is never private. It opens the heart outward toward the neighbor at the gate and teaches the eye to see over and beyond the walls.[129]

This promise to serve the common good echoes in the *Camelot* theme, where Merlin counsels the young King Arthur to become the kind of leader who defends the poor rather than presides over them. He describes a kingdom fractured by hatred and self-interest, divided by race and class, while those who hold power remain indifferent to the common soldier who pays the price. Unless Arthur can govern toward something better, Merlin warns, his reign will be nothing but an "endless series of petty battles," with the poor man always the one left to die.[130]

At the foot of the arch's fresco, where stone becomes threshold, the Latin still speaks:

To Chastity, who prays for victory, the veil is given as her crown.
Whoever desires to reach her must clothe themselves 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 chaste spouses to walk in her way.



Fresco on lower north wall of the nave.
Lower Basilica

Christiana), trans. Edmund Hill, OP, The Works of Saint Augustine I/11, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), I.28–29; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 31, a. 3.

[129] This preferential love guides the Order. *Minoritas* is the way of "following the poor and humble Christ," in solidarity with the least and most marginalized of society. *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, art. 1 §4. The neighbor at the gate also recalls the rich man and Lazarus, where a poor man lies covered in sores at the rich man's threshold, longing for scraps from his table and remaining unseen until the great reversal after death (Luke 16:19–31). The neighbor in need is not far away but at the gate, and to look past that particular person is to miss the love that purity of heart is meant to open outward.

[130] T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), bk. 2, "The Queen of Air and Darkness," chap. 4, "Merlyn's Warning to the Young Arthur."

Lady Obedience



While Lady Obedience does not appear in the *Sacrum Commercium*, she is present in Francis' *A Salutation of the Virtues*.[131] Here in this *vela*, Lady Obedience sits within a monastic chapter house, a place where consecrated religious gather to discern the will of God together 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)

Yoke

Lady Obedience, dressed in monastic robes, bears the same wings already seen on Ladies Poverty and Penance. Poverty teaches us to release what we would make our own. Penance turns us back when self-will has drawn us away from God and neighbor. Lady Obedience receives the returning heart and teaches it to listen anew. So, she raises her finger to her lips, quieting a friar kneeling before her. The Latin word for Obedience, *oboedire*, carries the sense of listening toward another, of bending the ear to hear.[132] As she places the yoke of obedience upon him, the chapter house holds its breath, the wooden bench stilling its long creak. All are poised to hear the scriptural invitation addressed to every wayfarer who kneels:

> "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."[133] (Matthew 11:29–30)

A yoke often joined two animals, allowing them to bear together what neither could carry alone. The friar beneath it is therefore not alone. He must become quiet enough to listen

[131] Francis of Assisi, "A Salutation of the Virtues," *FA:ED* 1, 164.
[132] The Order turns this etymology into practice: those in office are to be "docile to God's will" and to listen willingly to their friars. *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, art. 13 §1.
[133] This Gospel passage is proclaimed at Mass for the Feast of Saint Francis, allowing the yoke of Christ to echo liturgically within the Franciscan feast itself.

to Christ Jesus as He walks beside him on his own Emmaus road.[134] Looking more closely at the friar, we notice his head is a skull, symbolically serving as a reminder to wayfarers that Obedience is receiving the contrite, who wish to walk through death into new life.[135]

The journey through the three *vele* now comes quietly into focus. Beneath Poverty, a young man gives away his cloak. Beneath Chastity, another is washed and clothed for a new kind of knighthood. Beneath Obedience, a friar bows beneath the yoke. Each image carries something of Francis' own story, but none need end with him. The friar with the skull can gather within himself every lesser brother, from Francis, who first bent his life beneath the Gospel, to the brother who will kneel beneath the same yoke tomorrow. For every other wayfarer looking up, the invitation is just as real. Everyone is reflected in the *vele*, called to release what we would make our own, to let love be reordered where sin has persisted, and to listen beyond the self. Lady Obedience's wings complete the pattern begun with Lady Poverty and carried through Lady Penance.

Bonaventure gives this movement a story. A brother had acted against obedience through an attachment that struck at the heart of poverty and was brought to Francis for correction. Seeing that the friar was truly sorry, Francis chose mercy. Bonaventure describes him simply as a brother "humbly doing penance." The road back into obedience ran through penance.[136] The wings have carried that relationship through the *vele*, and above the chapter house it will soon be given words. For Penance opens the road home, and Obedience teaches the brother how to walk it again.



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 holds a horn of oil, recalling the vessels used to anoint the kings of Israel. Here the symbol points ahead toward the share in Christ Jesus' kingship awaiting whoever accepts the yoke of obedience and passes through suffering and death.[137]

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[134] John Chrysostom reads Christ's yoke as guidance rather than restraint. It does not bruise the neck, he says, but leads the disciple along the "royal road," guarding against the precipices on either side and helping one walk the narrow way. Augustine, reflecting on Emmaus, describes Christ walking beside the disciples "like a companion" while remaining their leader. Read beneath this *vela*, the two images come together: obedience is learned by walking close enough to Christ to hear Him and allowing His way to order our own. John Chrysostom, "Homily 38 on Matthew," sec. 3, in *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, trans. George Prevost, rev. M. B. Riddle, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888); Augustine, Sermon 235.2, in *Sermons 230–272B on the Liturgical Seasons*, trans. Edmund Hill, OP, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA, vol. III/7 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1993), 41.

[135] Gardner connects the skull-headed friar with Francis' description of the truly obedient person as like a dead body, mute and unmoving. He also reads Lady Obedience's finger to her lips within the same imagery of silence and obedience. Julian Gardner, *Giotto and His Publics: Three Paradigms of Patronage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 97.

[136] Bonaventure, *Major Legend* VI.11, *FA:ED* 2, 576. The brother had acted against obedience, but Francis, seeing that he was truly sorry, showed him mercy. Bonaventure later describes him as a brother humbly doing penance and presents the episode as an example of the virtue and humility of penance. For the Latin text, see Bonaventure, *Legenda maior* VI.11, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 8 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1898).

[137] The horn-shaped vessels have been read in more than one way. Wood describes the outermost kneeling angels as holding cornucopias "signifying the recompense." An Italian interpretation instead reads them as

Chapter



The drama of this fresco unfolds in a monastic chapter house, where Lady Obedience and many others are gathered. At its core, the structure creates a mystical space because God's will is traditionally discerned in such a place through ordinary listening and conversation. Considering the Church's varying methods of discernment, the chapter house offers a natural image for what today's Church calls synodality.[138] Franciscans simply shrug, recognizing in it the familiar shape of their own gatherings, the friary house chapter, the provincial chapter, the general chapter. For an Order long governed through chapters, the habits required by synodality have been part of its way of life for over eight hundred years.[139] Synodality begins with listening, though it does not end there. It is a listening that is willing to be changed, one that turns outward so the friars may gaze together upon

rhyta, horns containing the sacred oil used to anoint the kings of Israel, and understands them as pointing toward the kingship promised to the obedient. I follow the second reading because it coheres with the movement of the *vela* from obedience toward glory, while recognizing that the identification remains disputed. Christopher S. Wood, *The Embedded Portrait: Giotto, Giottino, Angelico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 96; Vittoria Magnoler, "La sala capitolare di Santa Maria Novella. Ricognizioni e nuove proposte per l'interpretazione degli affreschi trecenteschi e la funzione politica dello spazio" (master's thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2022–2023), 44.

[138] 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), no. 33.

[139] The Order understands its own chapters exactly so: they "offer the most fitting occasions for communal discernment of the will of God for the fraternity," where each friar is "to listen … with an open heart" to what others say. *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, arts. 58 §§2, 4.

Christ Jesus, the Eucharist, the Church, the poor, and the world around them.[140] This is the kind of listening that asks a whole room to fall silent before anyone dares to speak.

Francis carries obedience still further. Lady Obedience binds a person "to obedience of the Spirit and obedience to one's brother," making the obedient person "subject and submissive to everyone in the world."[141] A follower of Francis does not listen only upward. Lesser brothers and sisters also listen across the circle of community, attentive to the Spirit who may speak through the person beside them. Out of that silence they begin to discern, weighing what they have heard in the light of Scripture and the Church's tradition, seeking the Spirit's promptings and the Father's will for the community.[142]



[140] The Church has lately turned this listening back on herself. In *Magnifica Humanitas* Leo XIV treats the Church's social teaching as an examination of conscience for the Church before it is a message to anyone else, names synodality as the form the common good takes in ecclesial life, and applies subsidiarity to her own governance. Charisms and competences are to be recognized rather than absorbed, and the share of the baptized in decisions is to be exercised through participatory bodies that are real and not merely nominal. Pope Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2026), nos. 86–87.

[141] Francis joins Obedience directly to Charity, greeting her in "A Salutation of the Virtues" as Charity's sister and describing her as making a person subject to the Lord and to every brother in the world. Bollati accordingly reads the Obedience allegory through *sequela Christi* and *obedientia caritatis*, obedience perfected by charity and modeled upon Christ's obedience to the Father. See Francis of Assisi, "A Salutation of the Virtues," 14–17, *FA:ED* 1, 165; and Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 77.

[142] Isaac reaches the Obedience vault by the road he reached Poverty. He was Bishop of Nineveh, in communion with neither Rome nor Constantinople, and kept the see only five months before leaving for the mountains. What the West took from him here is a language for what happens inside a man who stops defending his own will. For Isaac that surrender is not resignation. It is a soul released from its own anxiety, which becomes possible only once one trusts that Someone else is holding the world. It is also inseparable from mercy. Obedience in his account is not submission to a command but a share in the compassion of God, so that the sign of a man far along is not his discipline but that his heart has begun to burn for everything that breathes. The same themes recur in the letters of Angelo Clareno, who had learned Greek in exile among the Eastern Fathers: God's infinite love even for sinners, the close bond between humility and charity, and the importance of silence and its various modes. The Franciscan world gathered beneath this yoke had already begun receiving this Eastern language of surrender, mercy, and attentive silence. The Church still learns this way. On November 9, 2024, encouraged by the recent Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis entered Isaac of Nineveh in the Roman Martyrology. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, Homilies 2 and 51; on his reception in the West, Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita*, 293–306, with the Clareno themes at 298, note 75; Pope Francis, "To His Holiness Mar Awa III, Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East," November 9, 2024.

Hear the question the Cordbearers bring to bear upon discernment. They ask not first which course is permitted and which is forbidden, but which of them is the more beautiful. For the goodness of an act, like the beauty of a body, lies in the harmony of everything within it. Here the relationships to be held in proportion are those with God, with one another, with the poor, and with the world entrusted to them.[143] Then, together, the community acts on what the Spirit has shown and not merely on the preference of the group.[144] Within this process they discover that in the One, they are one.[145]



Candle

To hold together listening, discernment, and action within a gathered community, the fresco introduces two companion virtues. The first, standing inside the arch to the right, is Lady Humility. As a virtue, humility is traditionally defined as knowing who one is 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 centaur personifies arrogant pride, a warning not to think too highly of ourselves.[146]

Lady Humility's centaur invites a more contemporary comparison. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*,[147]

[143] Duns Scotus makes goodness a matter of proportion. An act is good as a body is beautiful, by the fitting of everything in it: faculty, object, end, time, place, manner. John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, in *Ioannis Duns Scoti Opera Omnia*, ed. Commissio Scotistica (Civitas Vaticana: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950–2013), I, d. 17, pars 1, qq. 1–2, no. 62. For a study of Duns Scotus' moral vision as harmony and beauty, see Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, *The Harmony of Goodness: Mutuality and Moral Living According to John Duns Scotus*, rev. ed. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2012), 183–86.

[144] A kindred movement shapes the Church's reflection in Latin America. Gathered at Aparecida in 2007, the bishops use the see-judge-act method: seeing reality in the light of God's providence, judging it in the light of Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and acting from within the Church for the spread of the Kingdom. Seeing is no neutral survey but a looking with the eyes of faith, and the whole movement, the bishops insist, rests on a "believing, joyful, and trusting adherence to God." The method itself grew from Joseph Cardijn's Young Christian Workers movement and became deeply influential in Latin American pastoral practice, including at Medellín in 1968. *Aparecida Concluding Document*, no. 19; Patricia Kelly, "See, Judge, Act—the Foundation of the Citizens' Project?" in *Everyday Social Justice and Citizenship: Perspectives for the 21st Century*, ed. Ann Marie Mealey et al. (London: Routledge, 2017), 24–31.

[145] Leo XIV's motto *In Illo uno unum* (In the One, we are one) is drawn from Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* [*Enarrationes in Psalmos*] 127.3, where he writes that "although we Christians are many, in the one Christ we are one." See Saint Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 121–150*, vol. III/20 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Maria Boulding, OSB, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004).

[146] Bollati notes the established reading of the centaur as a symbol of pride, citing Kleinschmidt's appeal to Saint Anthony's sermon, "Per centaurum superbus designatur." Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 75, note 100.

[147] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), chap. 15, "The Forbidden Forest." Firenze's rejection by the other centaurs and his later welcome at Hogwarts belong to J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), chaps. 27, "The Centaur and the Sneak," and 30, "Grawp."

the centaur Firenze stoops to carry Harry to safety, accepting the scorn of his own herd for an act of compassion. The angel drives Presumption, the pride that places the self above its true measure, from the chapter house. This leads us to suspect that Firenze, precisely because he lowered himself, would have been welcomed within the scene.[148]

Casting out arrogance leaves us with only half the virtue of humility. Humility also refuses to think too little of what God has made. Healthy self-esteem is not the enemy of humility but its psychological companion, for grace does not ask us to despise what God has called good. To help us remember this dignity, Lady Humility holds a lit candle in her hand. It recalls baptism, through which Christians receive the light of Christ, and also points to the inherent dignity of the human person, made in the image and likeness of God.[149]



Many Catholics 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 put away in a special place, eventually forgotten and never lit again. Forgotten too are the words of Jesus:

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

Families more attentive to these symbols relight baptismal candles at home, on baptism anniversaries and the Sundays of Easter. Some even teach their children how, in the moment they blow out the flame, the light of Christ grows brighter within them. Such a candle, now in the hand of Lady Humility, reminds us that humility requires a truthful knowledge of our dignity, rooted in Christ Jesus. This dignity is what frees wayfarers to become the insightful listeners God hopes each of us to become.

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[148] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, an English Greyfriar, compiled an encyclopedia of the created world that friars could mine for preaching. Animals, marvels, natural phenomena, and familiar stories became ways of carrying a lesson people could recognize and remember. The point was not novelty for its own sake. A preacher began with something already living in the hearer's imagination and let it open toward the Gospel. That instinct still deserves recovering. The bishops of the United States urge preachers to know what people are watching, listening to, and reading, because popular culture often carries more religious meaning than we expect. They place that counsel within John Paul II's vision of the priest as a man of communion, formed for fraternity, service, truth, justice, and peace. Borrowing the world's stories is not a concession to the gathered assembly. It is one of the ways the Gospel reaches the world people are actually living in, and one of the ways the preaching of peace can be heard again. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–1988), bk. 18; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2012), 36–37, quoting Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), no. 18.

[149] Christian teaching does not divide the person into a valuable spirit and an unimportant body. Freedom belongs to the whole embodied person, and the body shares in the dignity of the person. See Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), no. 48; and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2337 and 2347.

Mirror

In the opposite arch stands the second of these companion virtues, Lady Prudence. A figure with two faces, she could probably land a side job in a contemporary science fiction or fantasy series.[150] She also wears a crown, which is not for show, as she is traditionally regarded as the guide of the cardinal virtues, setting rule and measure for the others.[151]

The face of an older woman looking backward signifies how a prudent person remembers the past and learns from it. Her younger face turns forward, toward the decision that must be made in the present and the future that decision will help to shape. Lady Prudence holds a drafting compass in her hand, an instrument used to measure and chart a path forward. Resting on the desk before her is an astrolabe, once used to read the heavens, determine the hour, and locate oneself within the world. Both are instruments of proportion that assist Prudence in her work. She is forever holding the past against the future, the self against the neighbor, and the next step against the whole road, until each and every one stands in its right measure. Prudence does not ask us to live in the past or rush ahead into the future. She brings us back to the present, because before we can know where we are headed, we have to know where we are standing and how we got there.



Contemplating this image, one might call to mind older family members who tend to begin stories with "I remember when…" These are folks who do not just remember the past but live there. On the other side are those who stare constantly into a different instrument, the screen, always awaiting the next "like," trend, or headline. Both habits make listening difficult, because each pulls us away from the present. Lady Prudence reminds us of the importance of being present to others, to the world around us, and equally important, to ourselves. She becomes an embodiment of the mysticism, of living in the present moment. For when we are truly present, we become something of a gift to one another.

[150] Medieval and contemporary stories continue to imagine what it means for youth and age to occupy the same person. In Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," an old woman is transformed into a young one, while in *Doctor Who*, Ashildr, later calling herself "Me," remains outwardly young while carrying centuries of experience and loss. Neither is a precise equivalent of Lady Prudence, whose two faces are simultaneous, but both offer preachers familiar imaginative paths into the virtue's consideration of time. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), "The Wife of Bath's Tale"; *Doctor Who*, "The Girl Who Died," series 9, episode 5, written by Jamie Mathieson and Steven Moffat, BBC One, October 17, 2015; and "The Woman Who Lived," series 9, episode 6, written by Catherine Tregenna, BBC One, October 24, 2015.

[151] The crown reflects the classical view of prudence as the *auriga virtutum*, the "charioteer of the virtues" guiding the other cardinal virtues: justice, fortitude, and temperance. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, q. 47, a. 2; and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806.

Gazing up at the fresco, Lady Prudence has looked into the mirror of the future, and now she turns it toward the friar receiving the yoke. He must turn and see both who he is and who in obedience to the Father's will he may become. What the mirror returns is this one person, a unique individual, a child of God who freely says:

> "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." (Ephesians 3:14)

In the same way, we wear the yoke, gaze into the mirror, and are present in the chapter houses of our lives, where we are needed. The masters who frescoed these vaults each worked with a hand no other could imitate exactly, and so does every wayfarer who walks into a chapter. What each of us carries into a communal discernment is not a vote to be counted, but a particular way of seeing and hearing that exists nowhere else in the room.[152]

Brothers

Just below Lady Prudence, an angel welcomes two figures into the painting, a man in red and, beside him, a much younger man in blue. It is my belief that the two men are Friar John of Morrovalle, former Minister General and later Cardinal Protector of the Franciscan Order, and Saint Louis of Toulouse, the young Angevin prince who gave up his claim to the throne of Naples to become a friar and bishop.[153] Louis turns toward the angel and raises his hand as though answering him. John is a reassuring presence beside him.

The two men had met at a decisive moment in Louis' life. John was Minister General when Louis, already chosen for Toulouse, insisted upon becoming a lesser brother before becoming a bishop. On Christmas Eve, 1296, John received him into the Order.[154] A saying

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[152] Duns Scotus, who died in 1308, within a few years of the painting of these vaults, taught that a common nature such as humanity never exists on its own. It exists only as contracted into this individual by a positive principle proper to it, so that the humanity of one person is not repeatable in another. His school came to call that principle *haecceitas*, thisness. Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, pars 1, qq. 1–6. Ingham reads Duns Scotus' moral agent as a formed artist and the good act as a work of art, an image at home in a Basilica whose masters are known by their hands rather than their names. See Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, *The Harmony of Goodness*, 11.

[153] Supino places the allegories within the Order's history around 1300, recalling Giovanni di Muro (John of Morrovalle), Louis of Anjou, and Guido da Montefeltro as important figures of the period. Yet in describing the Obedience *vela*, he calls the two figures beneath Prudence young novices, a man and a woman, without identifying them by name. Schönau cautiously proposes the two figures as Giovanni di Murro and Louis of Toulouse, while positing that the kneeling friar is Guido da Montefeltro. The older approaching figure is visibly tonsured, while the younger, dressed in blue with a linen coif on his head, is markedly youthful. Both wear clothing far richer than the garments expected of Franciscan novices, and the one in red seems to be in clerical attire. I read them as John and Louis, whose contrasting appearances and historical association fit the allegory's themes of governance, renunciation, humility, and obedience. The tonsure alone cannot establish religious profession, since novices could also receive it. Nor do I identify the skull-headed friar receiving the yoke as Guido. Lacking a distinctive personal attribute, he may represent any brother learning obedience, from Francis to the novice of today. Other interpretations remain possible. Lunghi identifies the approaching figures as Gian Gaetano and Napoleone Orsini. No identifying inscriptions survive. Igino Benvenuto Supino, *Giotto*, 2 vols. (Florence: Istituto di Edizioni Artistiche, 1920), 1:81–83, 98–100; Schönau, "A New Hypothesis," 329–31; Elvio Lunghi, *Giotto e i pittori giotteschi ad Assisi: Guida alle opere di Giotto e dei pittori umbri del Trecento nelle chiese e nei musei di Assisi* (Marsciano: Editrice La Rocca, 2012), 92.

[154] The later *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals* remembers John as receiving Louis and Louis as making profession into the hands of the Minister General. Because the Chronicle was compiled decades after the painting of the *vele,* it cannot establish the identity of these figures. It does show how strongly the Order

remembered of Louis later in life seems ready for the hand he raises here. When a friar told him that he had honored the Order by entering it, Louis answered, "Your Order, on the contrary, has done me great honor by giving me its habit."[155]



The two serve as lenses through which wayfarers might better consider the promise of obedience as understood in the early decades of the Order. John had spent years listening while leading, trying to hold together an Order that could pull hard in different directions. Later, as Cardinal Protector, he remained close enough to the friars to counsel them through their disputes. It is difficult not to notice Lady Prudence directly above him.

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came to remember John and Louis linked together through Franciscan profession. Jacques Paul shows that the earlier canonization tradition moves in the same direction: *Vergente mundi vespere* presents Louis' entrance into the Friars Minor as his choice to follow the footprints of Christ as His true disciple. *Chronica XXIV Generalium Ordinis Minorum*, in *Analecta Franciscana*, vol. 3 (Quaracchi: Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1897), 582–85; Jacques Paul, "Évangélisme et franciscanisme chez Louis d'Anjou," *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 8 (1973): 375.

[155] The saying is preserved in later hagiographical tradition rather than in a contemporary transcript. It is used here as a remembered saying of Louis, not as a claim about the words intended by the painter. Translation mine. Paul Guérin, ed., *Les Petits Bollandistes: Vies des saints de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*, vol. 10 (Paris: Bloud et Barral, 1888), 32.

Louis had spent his short life giving away what others would have fought to keep. A king's son, he surrendered his claim to a crown and accepted the bishopric of Toulouse only after becoming a friar. As bishop, he kept a friar near him with permission to correct him, even in public. Humility for Louis was not thinking little of himself. It was leaving someone close enough to tell him when he was wrong.[156] Perhaps this is why the two figures work so well here. John knew what obedience asked of the one who had to lead. Louis knew what it asked of the one who could have claimed almost anything and chose first to receive.

Obedience begins by listening. A cardinal needs it as much as a cleric, a bishop as much as a beggar. Pope Francis described a synodal Church in much the same way, a people "journeying together," where everyone has something to learn.[157] To place a cardinal and a king's son at the same threshold a novice must cross suggests something the Franciscan family has practiced for centuries, synodality before it had that name. Such a Church moves forward only when people of every rank learn to listen first.

This fresco can wake a conscience by asking: How often do I mistake obedience for everyone else's task but my own? Am I becoming the kind of person others can speak honestly to, and who can still listen when what they say is not what I wanted to hear?

The Franciscan instinct is not to demand a hearing but to offer one first, with the prudence John showed in patient governance and the humility Louis showed in keeping a corrective voice always within earshot. That same kind of listening reaches its fulfillment in the image of Francis rising above the chapter house.

Rope

The final image in the *vela* of Lady Obedience is the yoked Francis above the chapter house. In his left hand is a papal *ferula* with a cross affixed to the top.[158] In the midst of his *transitus*, the stigmatized Francis appears perfectly conformed to Christ Jesus.[159] As one

[156] Later hagiographical tradition remembers Louis traveling with a friar whom he had expressly authorized to correct him without fear, even before others. When bystanders objected to such a public rebuke, Louis defended the friar, saying that correction from friends was more profitable than flattery. The story gives practical form to the humility attributed to him as bishop and friar. Guérin, *Les Petits Bollandistes*, 10:33.

[157] Pope Francis describes a synodal Church as a listening Church in which the faithful, bishops, and Bishop of Rome listen to one another and all listen to the Holy Spirit; "everyone has something to learn." 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): 1140.

[158] The medieval papal *ferula* was a cross-staff rather than a shepherd's crook, signifying the pope's spiritual authority and governance. Rarely used in the liturgy, it was handed to a new pope when he took possession of the Lateran, and was normally carried before him in procession as a papal ensign. Holding a *ferula* does not place Francis above the local Church. It places his mission within the obedience of the universal Church. The modern papal pastoral cross carried by the pope himself began with Paul VI, who first used Lello Scorzelli's silver crucifix staff at the close of the Second Vatican Council on December 8, 1965. His successors continued the practice. See "A New Pastoral Staff for Pope Leo," Vatican News, January 9, 2026. The friars' preaching mission was authorized by the Church, not self-appointed. When Innocent III approved the Order in 1209, he gave the brothers, most of them laymen, permission to preach, on the single condition that they preach penance. Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* 13, *FA:ED* 1, 212; see Robson, "The Pilgrim's Progress," 54, note 51.

[159] The term *transitus* is used liturgically in the Franciscan tradition to describe the passing of Francis on the evening of October 3, 1226. It is celebrated annually with a special prayer service on that date.

who had received mercy and forgiveness, Francis becomes at the end of his life the Christlike figure who says in complete freedom, in words that had shaped his whole life since his stripping in the piazza of the bishop's house, "not as I will, but as you will."[160]



Reaching down from heaven are the hands of God grasping a loose rope attached to the yoke of Francis. The rope remains loose, leaving room for freedom. God does not drag Francis beneath the yoke. By reaching out of the heavens and holding one end of the rope, God helps Francis reach the place he has freely chosen to seek with all his heart, the great place of joy[161] about which the psalmist says to the Lord:

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

Remembering the winged ladies, two angels flank Francis, each holding a scroll.[162] They invite wayfarers to continue on the path Francis had chosen:

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

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[160] Francis himself places these words at the heart of Christ's obedience. In "The Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful," he writes that Christ "placed His will in the will of His Father," praying, "not as I will, but as You will," and then says that Christ left us an example so that we might follow His footprints. Francis of Assisi, "The Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful," 10–13, *FA:ED* 1, 46.

[161] Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* 22, *FA:ED* 1, 201–2. Francis says: "This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart." His freely chosen path finds a parallel in an older monastic tradition. The *Verba seniorum* describes Obedience as the virtue that "opens the heavens and raises human beings from the earth," and calls her the companion of angels. The parallel is suggestive rather than evidence of direct dependence. *Verba seniorum*, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 73, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1849), lib. XIV, *De obedientia*, cols. 952D–953A.

[162] The relationship becomes explicit in the two scrolls flanking Francis. One commands, *Tollite jugum obedientiae*, "Take upon yourselves the yoke of obedience." The other reads, *imitamini istum per crucem poenitentiae*, "Imitate this man through the cross of penance." Bollati reads the second as an invitation to follow Christ through Francis' example and places both scrolls within the *sequela Christi* of the Obedience allegory. Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 77.

The choice is laid bare for wayfarers. Those who gaze upward must decide whether to empty their hands to better take up the yoke, follow the road of penance, and sail on with the Cordbearers. At its core, it is a journey of sharing, caring, and listening. Francis lived that simple pattern until it had shaped his whole life, holding back nothing of himself for himself and becoming free to love God and others with all his strength and purity. Perhaps this is what the wings have been marking all along, those hidden crossings where a life is being changed and we, together with Francis, are being lifted up. Francis passes through them first, as his story keeps opening within the figures of the *vele* being stripped, washed, clothed, and brought beneath the yoke. Yet, they also leave room for every wayfarer, as striving gives way to readiness and hands that, at last, are open to receive.

This arch, too, is a threshold, as its Latin inscription opens the way:

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.



Lorenzetti Crucifixion, Lower Basilica

Francis in Glory and the Book of Revelation

Three sails have carried us here. In the first, Francis married Lady Poverty. In the second, he prepared for the struggle of chaste love. In the third, he bent beneath the yoke of Lady Obedience. Each *vela* shows him being formed. The fourth reveals what that formation has made him ready to receive.[163] Wayfarers now return to Francis in Glory, first glimpsed from the deck of the ship sailing from the nave into the sanctuary. This *vela* is also the fulfillment of a vision. Blessed Francis and Brother Pacifico once stayed the night in the church of Saint Peter in Bovara. Francis was praying in the choir while Brother Pacifico waited just outside it, before the crucifix. There Brother Pacifico saw "many thrones in heaven, one of them higher than the others, glorious, resplendent." As he marveled, a voice told him, "This was Lucifer's throne and blessed Francis will sit on it in his place."[164]



Vision of Brother Pacifico, Life of Saint Francis Cycle – Upper Basilica

The vision has crossed from Bovara into Assisi. Francis again appears just outside the choir, with a crucifix hanging below. Looking more closely, we see him clothed in a glorified Franciscan habit, its familiar cord falling down the center. His bare toes emerge beneath its hem, while the stigmatic wounds shine from his open hands.[165]

[163] Nepi reads the three vow allegories as an earthly movement fulfilled in Francis in Glory, where Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience reach their eschatological completion. The fourth *vela* therefore does not begin another story. It reveals where the formation enacted in the other three was leading. The image also gives visible form to the distinction between the *viator*, still journeying toward heavenly blessedness, and the saint who has attained it. Vatican II teaches that the communion between these wayfarers and those already in Christ's glory remains unbroken. Loredana Nepi, "Franciscus Gloriosus. La vela della Gloria di san Francesco nella Basilica inferiore di Assisi," *Propositum* 16, no. 1 (2013): 5–11; Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 49.

[164] *The Assisi Compilation* 65, *FA:ED* 2, 167–68.

[165] The identification of Francis' golden garment as a dalmatic has a long history. Vasari described him wearing a deacon's white tunicle, and Bollati follows this tradition, drawing upon accounts of Francis appearing in splendid heavenly clothing. Yet Bollati also observes the cord at his waist, falling toward his feet, and recognizes the fourth *vela* as the culmination of the three preceding allegories. Her reading of the whole program offers good reason to reconsider her conclusion about the garment. Bonaventure's three mysterious women, encountered along the road near Siena, have accompanied Francis throughout the *vele*.



Throughout the other *vele*, Francis was clothed in a simple tunic and cord. Here the habit itself has been taken into glory and transformed, its poor cloth becoming rich with gold, as rays of light shine from his person. The glory of God is shown as a human being fully alive.[166]

Seated on the fallen morning star's throne,[167] Francis holds the papal *ferula* first seen as he was being drawn heavenward in Lady Obedience. Here it serves as a scepter, the sign of an authority received rather than seized. In his other hand he carries the Book of the Gospels, the way of life Innocent III approved and Honorius III confirmed, now held like the orb of a Christian sovereign. In royal imagery, the scepter signifies authority, while the orb signifies the world placed beneath Christ's rule. Francis holds neither as his own.

Above him appears the inscription: GLORIOS[US] FRANCISC[US]. Higher still, a banner charged with a cross is surrounded by the seven stars that Revelation identifies as the angels of the seven churches.[168] A six-

Their virtues now adorn the man who welcomed them, and the poor habit he wore on that road has become a garment of gold. The inscription surrounding his throne tells us why: *Ornatus his virtutibus / Ascendit regnaturus*, "Adorned with these virtues, he ascends to reign." It then calls others to follow the form of life Francis handed on to his brothers. Throughout the other *vele*, that calling has embraced friars, Poor Ladies, and lay penitents. Francis was indeed a deacon, but the evangelical life he handed on was never reserved to those who received Holy Orders. Nor does Brother Pacifico's vision associate the throne with ecclesiastical office. It was lost through pride and prepared for Francis through humility. The golden rays surrounding him proclaim the glory he has received, while his bare feet, stigmata, and cord preserve the identity of *il Poverello*, who now occupies that throne. Reading the garment as a dalmatic leaves us to explain why the painter would distinguish Francis by an office that most of those called to follow him could never receive, when the inscriptions and surrounding frescoes direct us toward the evangelical life open to them all. The glorified Franciscan habit seems more faithful to the whole, allowing the cord and golden garment to speak together. Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 95–106; *The Assisi Compilation* 65, *FA:ED* 2, 167–68.

[166] 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 man; and the life of man consists in beholding God." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), IV.20.7.

[167] The throne once belonged to Lucifer, whose fall Christian tradition reads in Isaiah's words: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn" (Isaiah 14:12), the day star who rose in the morning. What the fallen angel lost was a sunrise. Dante hands that same sunrise to Francis. In his *Paradiso,* Thomas Aquinas says a sun was born to the world on the Umbrian slope, and that whoever speaks of the place should not say *Ascesi*, which would say too little, but *Oriente* (the East) if he would name it rightly. *Paradiso*, XI, 49–54. The same sunrise stands behind the angel John sees ascending *ab ortu solis*, from the rising of the sun (Revelation 7:2), whom Bonaventure read as Francis. The morning star fell from the dawn, and the dawn was given to the man who took the lowest place.

[168] Revelation identifies the seven stars as the angels of the seven churches (Revelation 1:20). Another angelic image became particularly important within the Franciscan tradition. Bonaventure identified Francis with the

winged seraph hovers above, as an angel of burning love, showing us how close to Christ Jesus *il Poverello* has been drawn.[169]

Now we consider what Francis is doing in this vault. Nothing. Everywhere else in the Basilica he is at work: preaching to the birds, stripping himself bare before the bishop, putting his shoulder beneath a church, getting married, pulling others higher onto a mountain. Here he sits. He is clothed, filled, accompanied, awaited, and yet not one of these previous action verbs belongs to him on the throne.

His hands are not empty, but what fills them is not of his making. The *ferula* belongs to the Church and the Gospel belongs to Christ Jesus. Both were entrusted to Francis, who had written: "The Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me."[170] Here is the difference the tradition draws between a virtue and a gift. A virtue makes us able to act, while a gift makes us able to be acted upon.[171] Giving asks something of us. Receiving asks us to relinquish control.[172]

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angel rising from the east bearing the seal of the living God (Revelation 7:2). The Franciscan Friar Peter of John Olivi (c. 1248–1298) developed this interpretation in his *Lectura super Apocalipsim*, completed in 1297. Olivi recalled personally hearing Bonaventure preach this identification at a chapter of the friars in Paris. For Olivi, Francis' stigmata were the visible seal of his conformity to the crucified Christ, while his life and Rule announced a renewal of evangelical life within the Church. Revelation was therefore not simply a vision of the world's end, but a way of understanding the Church's unfolding history and the renewal promised through fidelity to the Gospel. This interpretation became especially important to the Spiritual Franciscans and offers a compelling theological context for understanding the imagery of the painted vaults, even as scholars differ over its precise influence upon their program. Schönau argues for the patronage of Cardinal Napoleone Orsini, protector and patron of Ubertino da Casale, whose *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu* developed this Franciscan understanding of history. Bonaventure, *Major Legend* Prologue, *FA:ED* 2, 527; Peter of John Olivi, *Lectura super Apocalipsim*, commentary on Revelation 6:12 and 7:2, Paris, BnF, MS lat. 713, fols. 80va–b, 85vb, reproduced in Alberto Forni, "Pietro di Giovanni Olivi e Dante: un progetto di ricerca," *Collectanea Franciscana* 82 (2012): 126–27; Schönau, "A New Hypothesis," 333, 340–42.

[169] The seraph places the scene within the highest angelic register. In the hierarchy transmitted by Pseudo-Dionysius and adopted by Aquinas, Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones form the first triad. Medieval theology commonly identified the fallen Lucifer as a cherub, associating the cherubic order with fullness of knowledge and the seraphic with the ardor of charity. See Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker, 1897–99), VI.2 and VII; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 63, a. 7, ad 1, and q. 108, a. 6. The fresco does not require Francis to be assigned a precise degree within that hierarchy. Its contrast is more fundamental: pride loses what humility is able to receive.

[170] Francis of Assisi, *Testament* 14–15, *FA:ED* 1, 125.

[171] Aquinas distinguishes the virtues, by which a person acts according to a formed habit, from the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which dispose the person to be moved readily by God's inspiration. The distinction between acting and being acted upon takes on a Eucharistic resonance beneath these vaults. The three vows surround the altar, where the faithful receive the Body and Blood of Christ and are called to become what they receive. Francis gives the same movement words in "A Letter to the Entire Order": "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!" Saint Paul's hymn gives this movement a name, *kenosis*, the self-emptying of Christ. Christ Jesus does not cling to His equality with God but gives Himself in the form of a servant. Francis follows that pattern of self-giving, and in glory receives what he could never claim as his own. The vows form the person for such receptivity, not passivity as inertia, but the freedom to receive what cannot be seized or earned. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 68, aa. 1–2; Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," *FA:ED* 1, 118; Philippians 2:6–11.

[172] George Herbert makes the difficulty of receiving grace the drama of "Love (III)." The guest draws back from Love's welcome in shame and then tries to earn his place by serving. Love refuses the bargain, takes him by the hand, and brings him instead to the table: "You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."

People spend their lives trying to earn approval, affection, or forgiveness. Anyone who has ever been loved at a moment when there was nothing left to offer in return knows how difficult receiving can be. To receive what cannot be earned leaves the hands open.[173] Poverty, chastity, and obedience did not purchase Francis this throne. They made him a man who could be handed something this large and not grasp at it.

Back in Bovara, Francis came out of the choir and Brother Pacifico fell before him begging for mercy, because he was still seeing him as though he were in glory. Francis answered that he was the greatest sinner in the world. In that moment, Brother Pacifico understood the vision: "For as Lucifer was cast down from that throne because of his pride, so blessed Francis will merit to be exalted and sit on it because of humility."[174] Saint John, writing Revelation, hears another voice from the throne:

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

Here, the promise that Christ Jesus is making all things new has taken visible form in Ladies Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. Around them stand Hope, Faith, Charity, Purity, Fortitude, Penance, Humility, and Prudence, the virtues that have accompanied this journey from surrender into glory. Together these women have prepared Francis not to seize a kingdom but to receive one.

Their placement above the altar is no coincidence. The arch gathers all four *vele* and has the final word, its Latin inscription reading:

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.
Adorned in these virtues he ascends to reign;
filled with their fruits he walks securely on,
moving in the company of angels
toward Christ who awaits him.
May everyone follow the pattern he entrusts to his brothers and sisters.

The poem ends simply, "So I did sit and eat." Francis in this vault has reached something of the same stillness. He no longer strips, struggles, preaches, or climbs. He sits in a *vela* above the table of an altar and receives what he could never seize for himself. George Herbert, "Love (III)," in *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (Cambridge: Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel, 1633).

[173] Halík begins his reflection on faith with the disciples standing before Jesus with empty hands and empty nets after a night in which they have caught nothing. Their emptiness becomes not the end of the story but the place from which they are asked to go deeper, try again, and remain open to what they cannot produce for themselves. The image offers a striking contemporary parallel to the movement here. Empty hands are not simply deprived hands. They are hands capable of receiving. Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity*, 1–2.

[174] *The Assisi Compilation* 65, *FA:ED* 2, 167–68. Bollati reads the throne in the same eschatological and moral register, joining the Franciscan throne vision to the promise of Revelation 3:21 that the victor will sit with Christ upon His throne. The image therefore signifies participation in Christ's kingship rather than an independent sovereignty. The throne lost through pride is received through humility. Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 102–6.

Keystone

The painted ribs that form the four sails are filled with imagery from the last book of the Bible. Revelation was written by Saint John for Christians living under pressure. The images within were not meant to frighten them, but to show them the end of the story so they could live faithfully within its troubled middle. It is a book of pictures more than arguments. The friars knew its visions well, and the painters filled the ribs of the vault with them.

Binding the four *vele* together, the painted arches invite wayfarers to enter this world of heavenly visions. They gather the great sails, angels, people, and animals as everything rushes upward, in C. S. Lewis' words, "further up and further in," toward the keystone.[175] Yet the ribs can also be read from the center outward. The architecture gathers as the images unfold, carrying the visions of Revelation from the keystone into the four *vele*.[176]



[175] 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. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: The Bodley Head, 1956), chap. 15.

[176] Monciatti reads the painted ribs and framing bands as an integral part of the program, with the imagery of Revelation unfolding concentrically from Christ at the keystone. The horsemen, Living Creatures, and angelic hierarchies provide the four *vele* with their wider apocalyptic setting. Alessio Monciatti, "'Le facciate di sopra dalle bande dell'altar maggiore'. Riflessioni per le Vele giottesche di Assisi," *Studi di Storia dell'Arte* 26 (2015): 37–50, especially 38–41.



There is a great deal to see, so begin at the outer reaches of the ribs and move slowly toward Christ Jesus directly above the altar. Four angels stand at the four corners of the earth, holding back its winds. Moving inward come angels bearing the Gospel, the key and chain, trumpets, bowls, and a sickle, the messengers and instruments of John's visions.





Nearer the center ride the four horsemen released by the first four seals of a scroll being opened in Revelation. They are named: conquest, war, famine, and death.[177] Above each horseman is one of the four Living Creatures that John tells us are gathered around the heavenly throne: the lion, the ox, the human figure, and the eagle. Medieval Christians also knew them as the symbols of Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John. Here the Evangelists have been returned to the vision from which their symbols originally came, as Gospel opens into Revelation.





The three vows have already introduced us to the language of promises. Scripture gives that language another name, covenant: the sacred bond through which God promises to remain faithful to His people and calls them to live in fidelity to Him. Still higher and closest to Christ Jesus are four signs of that sacred relationship.

[177] In Revelation 5–6, John sees a scroll sealed with seven seals, which only the Lamb, Christ Jesus, is worthy to open. As the first four seals are broken, four horsemen appear. This begins the unfolding of the visions that reveal God's judgment and the final triumph of life over evil. Read the images clockwise, beginning at the upper left side.

The first is the Lamb, Christ Jesus Himself, Who gave His life upon the cross and rose victorious over death (Revelation 5). He recalls the Passover lamb of ancient Israel, whose blood marked the doors of the Hebrew families on the night God delivered them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12). Beside the Lamb is a small golden chest, which some identify as the Ark of the Covenant. In ancient Israel, this sacred chest held the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the words of the covenant given to Moses, and served as a sign of God's presence among His people (Exodus 25, Hebrews 9, Revelation 11).



Another image shows a cloud, recalling how God accompanied His people through the wilderness and made His presence known to them (Exodus 13, 40). In Revelation, Christ Jesus comes with the clouds in glory (Revelation 1, 14). Finally, there is the crystal sea, the shining expanse before God's heavenly throne, where the Living Creatures and the elders gather in unending worship (Revelation 4).[178]

The horsemen carry into the vault powers that still frighten the world. Above them, the Living Creatures announce through their Gospels that Christ Jesus is Lord.[179]

[178] Monciatti identifies the four innermost signs as the Lamb, the Ark of the Covenant, the crystal sea, and the cloud, reading them as a coherent sequence between the central Christ and the great *vele*. Volpe agrees on the Lamb, crystal sea, and cloud, but identifies the golden chest as the golden altar of Revelation 8:3. The placement of the crystal sea on John's rib, with gold above and greenish water below, and therefore of the cloud on Matthew's, follows the author's direct inspection in the Basilica. Alessio Monciatti, "Le facciate di sopra," 38–39; Alessandro Volpe, "[Entries on the Presbytery Vault]," in Bonsanti, ed., *Assisi: Basilica di San Francesco*, 3:397–98.

[179] To confess that Christ Jesus is Lord is already to make a claim about the world. No earthly power, no violence, no hunger, and no death can possess the final word. The Church's social doctrine therefore does not begin beside the Gospel but within it. The *Compendium* roots that doctrine in the lordship of Christ and describes it as part of the Church's work of evangelization, a way of reading social, economic, political, and cultural life in the light of the Gospel. Pope Francis gives the same movement a place within *Evangelii*

Mark places the bow and arrows of conquest beneath the judgment of the Son of Man who says that rulers "lord it over" others, but "it is not so among you." His greatness is service, and the Lamb conquers through self-gift.



Luke places the red horse of war beneath the Gospel that announces peace at Christ's birth, commands love of enemies, and weeps because Jerusalem does not keep the covenant that makes for peace.



Matthew places famine and its scales beneath the cloud of the returning Son of Man, who judges the nations by whether they fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, and clothed the naked.

John places Death beneath the crystal sea, a vision of creation at peace before God, and beneath the Gospel of the Lord who declares Himself Resurrection and Life, then kneels to wash His disciples' feet and commands them to do the same.[180]



To confess that Christ Jesus is Lord is to refuse the last word to conquest, war, hunger, or death. The Gospels have already shown another way: greatness kneels to serve, enemies are loved, the hungry are fed, and death itself opens into life. Christian social teaching begins here, with worship becoming a way of life.[181]



Now follow the painted ribs back down toward the four corners of the earth. The angels we encountered earlier are still holding back the winds, allowing no harm to come to the earth, the sea, or the trees. Destruction has not been undone, but it has been held at bay. Revelation gives the world a pause and therefore gives its people time and responsibility to protect the vulnerable, repair what has been damaged, and mark what is endangered for safekeeping.

Gaudium: after unfolding the *kerygma*, the first proclamation of Christ Jesus, he turns directly to its social consequences, insisting that the Gospel has an inescapably social content and an immediate moral consequence centered on charity. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 3–8, 66–67; Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 176–77.

[180] The four Gospel passages are Mark 10:42–45; Luke 2:14, 6:27–36, and 19:41–42; Matthew 24:30 and 25:31–46; and John 11:25 and 13:13–15. This is offered as a contemplative reading of the fresco's groupings and their ethical resonance, not as a medieval explanation of the individual pairings.

[181] De Benedictis, *Social Thought of Saint Bonaventure*, 240–43, 262–65. De Benedictis presents justice as the rectitude that renders each person what is due and protects human dignity, while arguing that Bonaventure does not regard justice by itself as sufficient for perfect social unity. Charity completes justice by fostering benevolence, mercy, friendship, and mutual aid.

Now, look again at the ribs, between the *vele* of Lady Poverty and Lady Chastity. Two angels catch our attention. Both bear the stigmata, recalling Paul's words:

> "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body." (Galatians 6:17)



One of them reaches beyond the painted frame, pointing down toward Francis' tomb, as though giving voice to the promise of Revelation:

> "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.'" (Revelation 14:13)



The Tomb of Saint Francis, Crypt Chapel.
The angel in the fresco above still points toward Francis' resting place,
once hidden beneath the high altar and now visible in the crypt below.

John's vision now takes us to another angel, rising from the east and carrying the seal of the living God. He calls out to the four angels we have already encountered holding back the winds:

> "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads." (Revelation 7:3)

The opening of the first four seals released the horsemen. Now the image of a seal takes on another meaning. A seal is placed upon a person, marking someone as belonging to God and kept beneath His care, like a sheep known and claimed by its shepherd. Long before Revelation, the Prophet Ezekiel saw a man in linen sent through Jerusalem to mark a *Tau* on the foreheads of those who grieved over what was done there, and the destroyers were told to pass over everyone who bore it. The *Tau* corresponds to the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its form, as medieval Christians knew it, resembled a cross. Francis took that letter for his own, drew it upon walls, and used it in place of his name.[182]



The seal of Revelation now becomes personal. Brother Pacifico was said to have seen such a mark on Francis himself. Years before the morning in Bovara, he had been a court poet and crowned King of Verses. Francis' preaching turned his heart and he became a follower of *il Poverello*. Not long after, looking at the one who had converted him, Brother Pacifico saw a great *Tau* on Francis' forehead, shining with the ringed colors of a peacock.[183]

Twice, Brother Pacifico was shown what no one else could see, a throne standing empty and a mark upon a forehead. In these visions, we begin to recognize what Bonaventure, writing the *Major Legend* of Francis, had found in Revelation. He identified Francis with the angel ascending from the rising of the sun, bearing the seal of the living God. In Brother Pacifico's vision, Francis himself already bore that seal.

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[182] The *Tau* comes from Ezekiel 9:4, where a mark is set on the foreheads of those who grieve over the city. Innocent III preached on that text at the opening of the Fourth Lateran Council on November 11, 1215, setting the *Tau* forth as the sign of penance and renewal in Christ. Francis drew it on walls and signed with it. Bonaventure writes that Francis' whole desire was, according to the prophetic text, to mark with a *Tau* the foreheads of those moaning and grieving, of those truly converted to Jesus Christ. A *Tau* drawn by Francis himself survives on the parchment bearing The Praises of God and the Blessing, preserved in the Saint Nicholas Chapel of the Lower Basilica. Monciatti identifies the two angels between Poverty and Chastity, one displaying the stigmata on both hands and the other pointing toward Francis' tomb. He associates their wounds with the seal of the living God in Revelation 7:2. Bonaventure, *Major Legend* IV.9, *FA:ED* 2, 556; Monciatti, "Le facciate di sopra," 39, 45.

[183] Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 72, *FA:ED* 2, 316–17. Celano glosses Francis' preaching with Hebrews 4:12, where the word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword. The one it pierces is renamed Pacifico, the peaceful one.

From the *Tau* upon Francis' forehead, our eyes return to the painted ribs and follow them upward, until at last we reach the keystone and the One from Whom the whole vision unfolds. At the center sits the "one like a son of man" whom John saw in his opening vision (Revelation 1:13). His hair is white, His face shines, and keys rest in one hand. In the other He holds a book clasped shut and lettered in gold, *liber sapientiae divinae*, the Book of Divine Wisdom.[184] From His mouth comes a sword, not another weapon for a horseman, but the penetrating Word of God that exposes falsehood and calls creation into truth.[185]



[184] Fra Ludovico da Pietralunga, describing the vault about 1575, records two keys in Christ's hand and the inscription on the closed book, *liber sapientie divine*, the Book of Divine Wisdom. The inscription names the book actually painted here. Around it, however, the imagery of Revelation gathers: Christ holds the keys of Death and Hades and the Key of David, while the nearby Lamb recalls the One worthy to approach the sealed book in Revelation 5. The fresco therefore brings several Johannine images into conversation without requiring the Book of Divine Wisdom to be identified simply with John's sealed book. Ludovico da Pietralunga, *Descrizione della basilica di San Francesco d'Assisi*, ed. Pietro Scarpellini (Treviso: Canova, 1982), 62, cited in Monciatti, "Le facciate di sopra," 37, note 5; Revelation 1:18; 3:7; 5:1–6.

[185] The sword from Christ's mouth comes from Revelation 1:16 and 19:15. Augustine, interpreting the two-edged sword of Psalm 149:6 as the Word of the Lord, frames it within a song of peace and charity rather than violence. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 149.1, 8. A small triangular form appears above Christ's head in the keystone. Whether it was intended as a reference to the Trinity remains uncertain. Such a reading would nevertheless be consonant with the Trinitarian theology of Bonaventure, who taught that creation bears traces of God and leads the contemplative soul toward the mystery of the divine Persons. See Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God* 1–2, 6.

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. The Book of Divine Wisdom rests in His hand, still closed. It draws us toward another book in John's vision, a scroll sealed seven times, which no one in heaven or on earth is found worthy to open. We wonder who can unlock the deep questions of life. Why is there suffering? Where is justice? Who will save us?

Suddenly, the silence of the deep sea 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. We remember the Passover and the promise of deliverance, but now the Lamb has passed through death Himself and stands alive before us.



Look closely. Among the images surrounding the keystone, the Lamb alone breaks the painted boundary. His halo crosses the white line and enters the central circle, drawing nearest to the Book of Divine Wisdom. Here the painter gives visible form to John's vision. The Lamb who was slain is worthy to open what no one else can open.

Wayfarers might blink for just a moment and see, "its snowy white flushed into tawny gold…"[186]

[186] The children encounter a Lamb who invites them to breakfast, then watch Him become Aslan the Lion. The scene recalls John 21:1–14 and carries a further resonance with the Lion and Lamb of Revelation 5:5–6. C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), chap. 16.

With that, the whole vault answers:

> "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 angels, people, and animals on the arches are not only rushing. They are singing. Then this same Lamb, crucified and risen, says to wayfarers:

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



David was Israel's great king, and the key of his house signified the authority to open the palace. The Lion of Judah and the Root of David are promises of a king to come. Revelation reveals Him as the Lamb who was slain, now risen and holding the keys of life and death.

The Book of Divine Wisdom speaks of God's purposes for creation and for us, purposes that no human power can finally disclose. John's sealed scroll asks who is worthy to reveal them. The answer is Christ Jesus, the Lamb who was slain and yet lives.

Revelation also speaks of the Book of Life, one that holds names rather than the unfolding purposes of God. Scripture calls it the Lamb's own book, belonging to the One who was slain. The Lamb worthy to reveal God's wisdom is also the One in whose book we hope our names are written. Wisdom and mercy meet in the same pierced hands of Christ Jesus.

Our lives unfold between the wisdom of God and the promise of the Book of Life. Foreheads are marked, names are being gathered, and Francis goes through the world preaching the Gospel and tracing his *Tau*. His brothers and sisters continue along that same road, living in hope that the One who knows the wisdom of God also knows them by name.

Here we find the heart of the *spiritual joys* and *great things* offered upon entering the Basilica. Christ Jesus holds all power, yet does not hoard it. He shares His life with us, and we dare to hope that our names are written within the Book of Life, not in ink but in mercy.

Altar

What has been painted above is spoken aloud below. At every Mass in this church and throughout the whole world, those gathered beneath the mystical space of the *vele* pray:

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

The priest, serving in the person of Christ the Head, raises the Eucharist above the altar and proclaims:



Behold the Lamb of God,
behold him who takes away the sins of the world.
Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.

The faithful then answer together:

Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof,
but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.[187]

Francis wanted the whole world to feel the wonder of this moment: "Let the whole world tremble, and the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!"[188]

Gathered as a community at table, we discover that Christian mysticism is not reserved for a select few or confined to unusual experiences. It is ordinary life drawn steadily into the light of Christ Jesus' Resurrection.[189] 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)

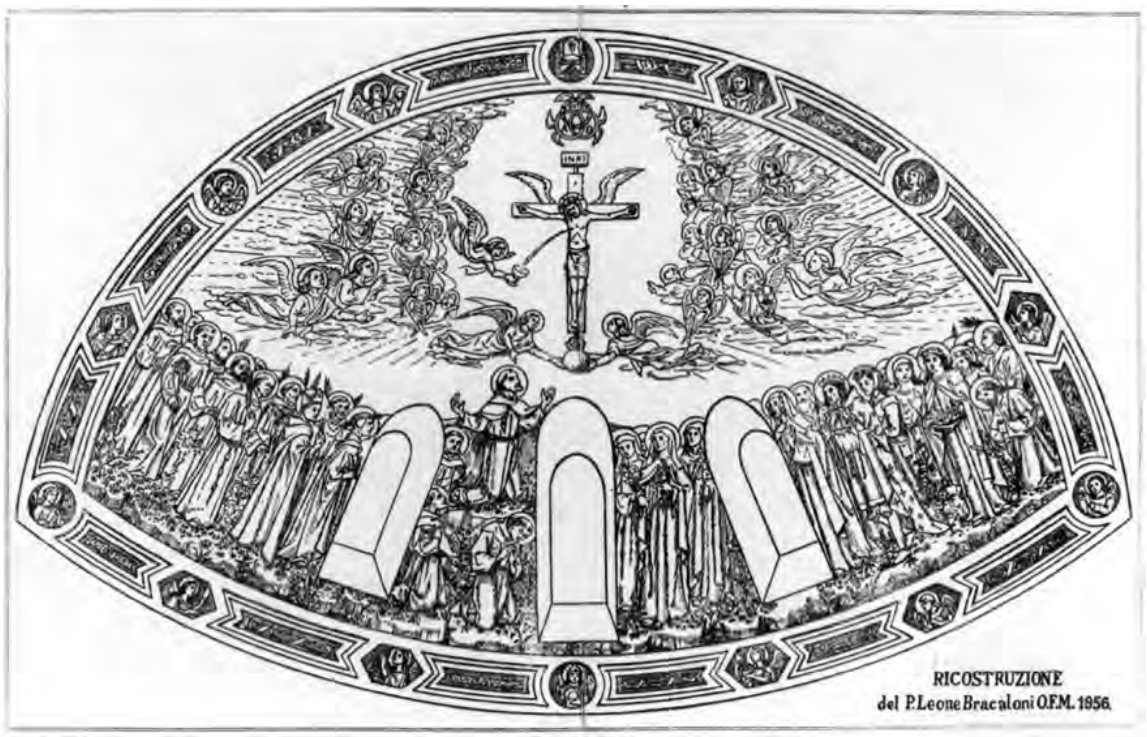
This hope is meant for all wayfarers. It grows as we learn to recognize the Lord in the ordinary moments of our days, engaging our senses as the first disciples who walked with Jesus did. If we feel unworthy, we remember that the Lamb Himself has opened a way for us. If we hunger and thirst, we look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

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[187] *The Roman Missal*, Order of Mass, nos. 131–33.
[188] Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," 26, *FA:ED* 1, 120.
[189] Boulding explains that Christian mysticism is not primarily a matter of unusual experiences or heightened states of consciousness. It is the whole of life being drawn into the mystery of Christ, illuminated by His Cross and Resurrection. She sees this mystery becoming present through the Holy Spirit in Scripture, the Eucharist, Christian community, and the daily lives of believers. Maria Boulding, OSB, *Gateway to Resurrection* (London: Burns & Oates, 2010), 135–36.

Just beyond the altar, in the apse of the Lower Basilica, the original fresco Gloria celeste, Heavenly Glory, carried this vision further, depicting Francis beneath a winged crucifix and the early Franciscan saints gathered around him.[190] The fresco visible there now is Cesare Sermei's Last Judgment. In one unforgettable detail, a friar leans down from heaven and lowers his cord to someone below. Even at the Last Judgment, a lesser brother does not enter heaven alone. He reaches back for another.[191]

> "…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 neither distant nor reserved for a few. It is the nearness of a life lived in Christ Jesus. Through Ladies Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, Franciscans through the ages have sought that life, embracing the perfect Trinity and simple Unity.[192]

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 their own strength. We offer

[190] This is not the apse fresco seen today. The original Gloria celeste, Heavenly Glory, was replaced in 1623 when Cesare Sermei painted his Last Judgment over it. Elvio Lunghi, "Sermei, Cesare," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 92 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2018). Sermei's fresco includes the friar leaning from heaven and lowering his cord toward a figure below.

[191] The friar reaching with his cord offers a vivid image of Christian solidarity. Vatican II begins *Gaudium et Spes* by making the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of humanity, especially of the poor and afflicted, the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of Christ's followers (no. 1). Solidarity is therefore more than passing sympathy. It is a steady commitment to the good of all because each person is responsible for everyone. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), nos. 38–40.

[192] Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," *FA:ED* 1, 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 …"

Christ Jesus our struggles and our hopes and believe that He can gather even our small stories into His Book of Life.

So, our ship may have reached the shore, but the invitation continues. Whatever we have seen here must be recognized again somewhere ordinary, or it was not truly seen. The disciples discovered this on the beach after Easter, when the risen Lord stood in the morning light and invited them to come and have breakfast. The Lamb standing yet slain now asks for nothing more than His friends' company over a simple meal. C. S. Lewis imagined the 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.[193] 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)



Mystic Lamb in the rose window, above the doors of the Lower Basilica, a final glance toward the threshold where wayfarers began their mystical journey.

[193] C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, chap. 16.

THE TRANSEPTS OF THE LOWER BASILICA

At the end of the right transept, the arch unfolds with Gabriel standing on the left and Mary to the right. The angel announces Good News and the young woman of Nazareth receives his message in silence before giving her answer. On the opposite side of the crossing, the arch of the left transept also unfolds in two parts of a whole. On the left, Holy Saturday unfolds in silence as Christ Jesus descends among the dead, taking Adam by the hand, with Eve and the righteous waiting behind him. On the right, He rises from the tomb while the soldiers sleep, unaware of His Resurrection.[194]



An ancient homily, proclaimed each Holy Saturday in the Office of Readings, begins with words that might be spoken before these two pairs of frescoes: "Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today." The King sleeps in the flesh, yet the silence is filled with hidden movement. Christ Jesus has descended into the place of the dead to search for Adam, like a lost sheep. He takes the first human being by the hand and commands him to awaken.[195]

That silence answers the silence surrounding Mary on the opposite wall. Gabriel has spoken, but he does not fill the pause that follows. Heaven waits for Mary's freely given word. Her silence is not uncertainty or emptiness. It is the stillness of someone listening deeply enough to answer with her whole life:

> "…let it be with me according to your word…" (Luke 1:38)

[194] On the programmatic unity of the two transept cycles, running from the Annunciation at the end of the right transept to the Resurrection on the opposing wall of the left, see Schönau, "A New Hypothesis," 335. Janet Robson argues, from crowd movement and the placement of the companions' shrines, that pilgrims moved counterclockwise through the transepts. Robson, "The Pilgrim's Progress," 50–51.

[195] "From an Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday," second reading, Office of Readings for Holy Saturday, in *The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite*, vol. 2 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1976); *PG* 43:439, 451, 462–63.

For Francis, poverty began in that consent. He wrote that the Word received "the flesh of our humanity and frailty" from Mary, and that Christ Jesus and His mother chose poverty in the world. The humility painted here means more than modest surroundings. God entrusts Himself to a young woman's freedom and becomes little within her.[196]

Mary's silence opens into consent. The silence of Holy Saturday opens into Resurrection. In the first, the Word waits at the threshold of human freedom before descending into Mary's womb. In the second, the Word descends into the deepest silence of death and calls the human family to rise. Something strange is happening in both places. This silence is not empty. God is moving the story of salvation toward life.



The ancient homily calls Christ Jesus both God and the son of Eve. That description allows the two arches to continue speaking to one another across the width of the sanctuary. Mary, the new Eve, opens human life to God as her Son then returns to the beginning of the human story to take Adam and Eve by the hand. On one wall, God enters our life. On the other, He brings our life out of death. Facing one another, the two arches reveal a single movement of salvation, God coming to find us and humanity being led home.[197]

Francis prayed that movement as mercy: "On that day the Lord has sent his mercy," and then, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."[198] The

[196] Francis of Assisi, "The Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful," 4–5, *FA:ED* 1, 46.

[197] The Church long read these two moments as one. Augustine records the belief that Christ was conceived on the twenty-fifth of March, the same day on which He also suffered, so that the virgin womb in which He was conceived, where no mortal had ever been begotten, answers to the new grave in which He was laid, where no man had been laid before Him or since. Matthew and John call the tomb new, while Luke tells us that no one had yet been laid there. Both are sealed places, each opened once and for one purpose, and each of them He enters and leaves. The reckoning is older than Augustine and outlasted him. The *Golden Legend*, compiled by the Dominican friar Jacobus de Voragine around 1260 and among the most widely read religious works of the later Middle Ages, still assigns the Creation, the Annunciation, and the Crucifixion to the same day. This calendrical tradition helps explain why the Annunciation is kept on March 25, and why these two walls, facing one another across the crossing, are not two subjects but one. Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*, 2nd ed., vol. I/5 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill, OP, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2015), IV.5.9; Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, "The Annunciation of the Lord," 196–202.

[198] Francis of Assisi, "The Office of the Passion," Psalm IX, *FA:ED* 1, 149. Francis joins mercy, judgment, the nations, and the rejoicing of creation within the Resurrection. Monti explains that Francis composed these psalms by gathering passages from Scripture and the Church's liturgy into a prayer that gives voice to Christ and to the Church sharing in His mystery. In Psalm IX, the Resurrection reveals God's justice in raising the One who had been condemned and God's mercy in the face of human sin and evil. Dominic V. Monti, OFM, "Pray with Francis to Mark the Resurrection of Jesus," Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual-Spiritual Tradition, April 2, 2021.

Resurrection was not escape from the world but God's answer within it, a new day whose mercy reaches creation, history, and every wounded life.[199]

Wayfarers standing between these two silences now stand within the same story. The frescoes show what God has done, and then they wait to hear what we will say. This is the accent the Cordbearers pressed more deeply into Christian imagination, a God not held at a distance, but the One who is born into a household, eats at our tables, dies within our reach, then rises and comes looking for His friends.

Jesus was never careful about the company He kept at those tables. He ate with Levi the tax collector, and with the crowd of collectors Levi invited along. He went into the house of Zacchaeus, who had made himself rich by cheating his neighbors, while the whole town muttered that He had gone in to be the guest of a sinner. He let a woman known through the city as a sinner weep at His feet while He reclined at a Pharisee's table. He ate with the Pharisees themselves, who watched Him through the meal for something they could use against Him. At His last table He sat with disciples still arguing over which of them was greatest, with the friend who would deny Him before the rooster crowed, and with the friend who had already settled on a price. They called Him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He never denied the company He kept. Everything frescoed between these two walls is a part of that one story.

Throughout the two transepts, the arms of this cruciform basilica, Christ Jesus is forever crossing a threshold: womb, stable, road, upper room, garden, grave. He goes down because love goes looking, and wherever He descends, someone is being raised. To take in what these arms hold, wayfarers must sharpen their senses before declaring with the psalmist:

> "O taste and see that the Lord is good…" (Psalm 34:8)

Of the four evangelists, Luke seems especially determined to let us taste the goodness of the Lord. Bonaventure spent years reflecting on the meals in Luke's Gospel, and the friars who preached in this Basilica inherited that way of reading Scripture.[200] One of Luke's

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[199] The Church's social doctrine gives the Resurrection a distinctly historical consequence. Christian hope in "new heavens and a new earth" does not lessen concern for the world as it is. It intensifies it. The *Compendium* teaches that hope in the Resurrection should stimulate care for present realities, and that human dignity, fraternity, freedom, and the good fruits of human work are not simply lost, but purified and transfigured within the Kingdom. Later it returns to the same conviction: Christian hope gives energy to social commitment because the world is not closed in upon evil and a better world can truly be built, even though Christians do not mistake that work for creating paradise on earth. This is the hope proper to a wayfarer, one who has not yet arrived and therefore refuses to treat the road, or any wounded place along it, as finished. The Catholic Committee of Appalachia gives this theology an especially vivid pastoral name: "practicing resurrection in crucified places." Its 2015 People's Pastoral turns toward communities wounded by poverty, exploitation, ecological destruction, and exclusion and insists that new life for the world must be sought precisely there. Resurrection is therefore not an escape from the crucified place. It is the reason Christians enter it expecting that death need not have the final word. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 56–57, 578–79; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, *The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories that Shape Us: A People's Pastoral from the Catholic Committee of Appalachia* (Spencer, WV: Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 2015), 42–44.

[200] This reading of Bonaventure's *Commentary on Luke* follows Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 98.

tables is frescoed in the vault of the left transept, where wayfarers will soon find themselves among the guests.

In these meals, Bonaventure recognizes three virtues at work. In eating with a stranger, Jesus shows His humility. In sitting down in the house of the poor, His poverty. In giving Himself to those at table with Him, His charity. Saint Paul gathers that poverty into one sentence:

> "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."[201] (2 Corinthians 8:9)

The same humility, poverty, and charity are painted throughout these transepts. The Basilica invites wayfarers not simply to look at the frescoes but to enter the story, to walk alongside those whom Jesus knew and loved, and to taste something of His goodness for themselves. Clare's words to Agnes sound almost like directions for the road: "with swift pace, light step, and unswerving feet," going forward "securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness."[202]



[201] Pope Francis grounds the Church's option for the poor in this same verse (2 Corinthians 8:9) in *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 197–98.
[202] Clare of Assisi, "The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague," 12–13, 48.

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 experiences in daily life. This was more than a preaching technique. The friars became collectors of stories, chroniclers, and compilers of short preaching tales known as *exempla*, because the same narratives that carried the Gospel outward also educated new brothers and helped the Order remember the shape of its own life.[203] 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.[204] 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 was spread far and wide.[205]



Fresco in the Saint Martin Chapel, Lower Basilica

What began around Francis as an itinerant and remarkably direct way of preaching soon became one of the great pastoral works of the Order. People could recognize their own lives within it.[206] So, Francis wrote the standard into law. The friars who preached were to speak for the benefit and building up of the people, announcing vice and virtue, punishment and glory, and to keep it brief. The benefit was the hearer's, not the preacher's, and everything else followed from that.[207] Speaking in the vernacular, the friars preached not only in churches but also in places where people gathered most frequently,

[203] The *Liber Exemplorum*, or Book of Examples, was compiled around 1275 by an English Franciscan working in Ireland and is the earliest surviving Franciscan collection of its type. Its preaching tales carried doctrine and moral teaching through memorable stories drawn from ordinary experience, including stories in which animals and the natural world become bearers of religious meaning. See Salvador Ryan and Anthony Shanahan, "How to Communicate Lateran IV in 13th Century Ireland: Lessons from the *Liber Exemplorum* (c.1275)," *Religions* 9, no. 3 (2018): 75; for the standard edition, see A. G. Little, ed., *Liber Exemplorum ad usum praedicantium* (Aberdeen: Typis Academicis, 1908).

[204] The friars are to stay "attentive to historical, social, and cultural changes, which call for new forms of presence and witness," reading the signs of the times; on preaching, the Later Rule bids their words be measured, "announcing … vices and virtues … with brevity." *Constitutions OFM Conv.*, art. 1 §5, and ch. 4, Spiritual Introduction [e] (quoting the Later Rule IX.3).

[205] Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1; and *The Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions III.

[206] Within a generation of Francis, preaching had become increasingly organized through schools, study houses, and the preparation of friars for ministry, yet its popular character remained essential. The language and religious imagination of ordinary people were not obstacles to evangelization but places where the Gospel could take root. Pope Francis later describes popular piety in much the same way, as a genuine work of evangelization already active within a people and their culture. Bert Roest, "Francis and the Pursuit of Learning," in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael J. P. Robson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 159–77; Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 122–26.

[207] Francis of Assisi, *Later Rule* IX, *FA:ED* 1, 104–05.

such as town squares and fields of labor. The setting changed so the same Gospel could be heard far and wide.[208] They joked in their sermons and sang in them. They talked about food and about the week's work, and the sermon met people where the week had left them. Francis called his brothers *joculatores Domini, jongleurs de Dieu* in French. They were jesters of the Lord, God's clowns, the tumblers who came on after the poets had finished being solemn.[209]

Francis meant *joculator* literally. He had done it himself, picking up two sticks in the road and drawing one across the other like a bow on a fiddle, singing in French and dancing as he played. Near the end of his life, having just composed the *Canticle of the Creatures*, he wanted the same thing done in his name. Brothers were to be sent out to preach first and then sing the *Canticle* together. Brother Pacifico was among them. Once a celebrated poet and singer known as the King of Verses, he now put his old talents to work for a new Master. After preaching and singing, he would tell the crowd that the payment they desired was for the people to live in true penance, turning their hearts toward God and their lives toward one another.[210]

Learning came in cautiously. When Anthony of Padua was set to teach theology to the brothers, Francis gave his blessing with one condition: that study not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion.[211] It is a small letter of permission that decided a great deal. The friars would be scholars, but scholarship was to serve the preaching and never replace it.

This is why a master like Bonaventure could later give theological form to the same Franciscan imagination without the *jongleur* ever leaving it. In Bonaventure, this caution became an intellectual vocation. All learning was to enter the service of love. Knowledge reached its Franciscan purpose when it formed character, strengthened faith, and led the

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[208] By the later thirteenth century, collections of *exempla* and preaching aids had become part of a mature mendicant culture, helping friars speak to very different audiences without changing the Gospel they had been sent to proclaim. The Church would later describe this movement as the evangelization of cultures: the Gospel entering the language, signs, values, and daily life of those who hear it. Paul VI insists, however, that adaptation never replaces proclamation. Jesus of Nazareth, His life, teaching, promises, Kingdom, and mystery must still be proclaimed. He identifies this first proclamation as *kerygma*, preaching, or catechesis. Its forms may change with human circumstances. The mystery proclaimed does not change. He also observes that people listen more readily to witnesses than to teachers, and to teachers when they are witnesses. Pope Francis takes up the same conviction when he says that the first proclamation remains "first" in a qualitative sense and must be heard repeatedly throughout Christian formation. Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Recueils franciscains d'"exempla' et perfectionnement des techniques intellectuelles du XIIIe au XVe siècle," *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 135, no. 1 (1977): 5–22; Annette Kehnel, "The Narrative Tradition of the Medieval Franciscan Friars on the British Isles: Introduction to the Sources," *Franciscan Studies* 63 (2005): 462–63; Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975), nos. 18–22, 41–43; Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 164–65.

[209] *A Mirror of the Perfection* 100, *FA:ED* 3, 348. See also G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), ch. 5, "Le Jongleur de Dieu," which popularized the French form of the phrase in English.

[210] Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 127, *FA:ED* 2, 331; *The Assisi Compilation* 38 and 83, *FA:ED* 2, 142, 184–86.

[211] Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua," *FA:ED* 1, 107. The letter belongs to a remarkably rapid development within the young Order. Franciscan schools and study houses were already beginning to appear during Francis' final years and expanded quickly after his death, as the brothers increasingly prepared friars for preaching, pastoral ministry, and theological study. See Roest, "Francis and the Pursuit of Learning," 159–77.

learner toward the peace of union with God.[212] What he wrote gave theological form to a spirituality of the senses, and the frescoes belong to that same Franciscan world of thought. The friars who preached beneath them worked with both theology and image. Thus, the painters gave the people something to look at while they listened.[213]

The artists were also changing what painting could do. Without abandoning the Byzantine inheritance that had formed them, Cimabue, Pietro Lorenzetti, and the painters working in Giotto's orbit gave sacred history a new bodily presence. Figures acted within recognizable spaces. Faces registered grief, surprise, fear, tenderness, and delight. A biblical scene no longer seemed to hover beyond the world of the viewer. It opened within it. A friar could preach from such a world. Bodies bend, hands reach, trees are climbed, animals wander through scenes, clothing marks rank and circumstance, grief appears on faces, and ordinary work enters into salvation history. The painted Gospel gave people familiar ways into stories they had heard before, allowing the sacred to be recognized within the mundane moments of human life.[214]



Pietro Lorenzetti even gave the Passion the passing of time. At the Last Supper, a crescent moon hangs high in the night sky. By the time Judas arrives with the soldiers in the Capture of Christ, the moon has fallen toward the rocky horizon, while stars and streaks of light scatter across the darkness. At the Crucifixion, the movement of the heavens comes to a

[212] De Benedictis, *Social Thought of Saint Bonaventure*, 16–17.

[213] Leo XIV writes that authentic culture and art can resist the normalization of evil and even take on a prophetic character. He points to Beethoven's Ninth, Picasso's *Guernica*, and *Schindler's List* as works that preserve memory, expose dehumanization, or awaken a longing for human unity. Seven centuries after these frescoes were painted, the Church still trusts art to help people see what ordinary habits of looking can conceal. Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, no. 122.

[214] Magro, *La basilica sepolcrale*, 180–84.

halt. The stars are gone from the blue-darkened sky, as though the Passion has reached an hour that ordinary time can no longer measure.[215]

Francis had learned to enter the Passion through the hours as well. In his *Office of the Passion*, he gathered verses of Scripture into psalms for Matins, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline, allowing the suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Christ Jesus to accompany the prayer of the day.[216] There is no reason to claim that Lorenzetti painted his sky from Francis' *Office*. Nevertheless, beneath these frescoes, their harmony is difficult to miss. The painter moves the moon across the heavens while Francis' prayer moves through the hours. Beneath them both, the Passion enters the day one hour at a time.

The impact of these visual and liturgical 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, the stained glass and murals would be filled with figures 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.[217]



[215] R. J. M. Olson and J. M. Pasachoff, "Comets, Meteors, and Eclipses: Art and Science in Early Renaissance Italy," *Meteoritics & Planetary Science* 37, no. 11 (2002): 1563–78. Olson and Pasachoff discuss Lorenzetti's Passion frescoes at Assisi and argue that his meteor showers reflect careful observation of astronomical phenomena. See also Luca Liardo, "I Lorenzetti," in *Storia della civiltà europea*, ed. Umberto Eco (Treccani, 2014), on Lorenzetti's use of the changing moon and stars to mark the passage of time through the Passion. Lorenzetti's Crucifixion can be seen at the end of the section on Lady Obedience.

[216] Francis composed the Office of the Passion from biblical verses arranged into psalms for the canonical hours. In this way contemplation of the Passion was joined to the daily rhythm of prayer rather than confined to a single devotional moment. Francis of Assisi, "The Office of the Passion," *FA:ED* 1, 139–57.

[217] The friars' instinct is not a relic of the past. Pushing back in his first encyclical against the despair that the forces of technology are too large for ordinary people to resist, Leo XIV reached for Gandalf: our part is not to master the tides of the world but to do what is in us for the years we are set in, clearing the evil out of the fields we know so that those who come after inherit clean earth to till. These walls dressed their saints in the clothes of the thirteenth century. A pope teaching on artificial intelligence dressed his argument in a novel people have actually read. Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, no. 213, quoting J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955), bk. 5, ch. 9.



Lorenzetti carried this new way of painting beyond the figures themselves. He did not always keep the painted world safely inside a frame. On the lower wall to the right of the great Crucifixion in the left transept, he painted an empty wooden bench covered with fur, complete with light falling across its arms and shadows convincing enough to make it seem as though someone might sit down upon it. Just above and to the left there is a painted niche holding a book and objects used during liturgy.[218] The wall has begun pretending that it is no longer a wall. Sacred history is moving outward into the space of the wayfarer, while the ordinary things of the church are being drawn into the painted world. The Gospel has come close enough to touch. Francis will now lead us to the two places where he found that closeness most clearly, Bethlehem and Calvary.



[218] Both frescoes extend the painted architecture into the real space of the transept and belong to Lorenzetti's experiments with *trompe-l'œil*. Liardo, "I Lorenzetti." See also Klaus Krüger, "Mimesis as Pictoriality of Semblance: On the Fictiveness of Religious Imagery in the Trecento," in *Renaissance Metapainting*, ed. Péter Bokody and Alexander Nagel (London: Harvey Miller, 2020), 13–29, esp. 13–14. Krüger discusses Lorenzetti's fictive bench at Assisi as an especially accomplished example of painted illusion.

The Heart of Franciscan Spirituality: The Crib & The Cross

While the friars borrowed the world's fashions to preach, what they preached never changed its clothes. Francis had a particular love for Christ Jesus in the Incarnation and the Passion. In both, God draws near by giving Himself. In the Incarnation, we find the joy of God becoming one with us. In the Passion, Death, and Resurrection, we find the compassion of the Lord opening the way for us to become one with Him for all eternity, the Word having clothed Himself in our humanity so that we might be clothed in His immortality.[219]



[219] Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum 57: In festo Corporis Christi*, lect. 1–4, in *The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite*, vol. 3 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1975), 610–11: "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." The Fathers of the Church sometimes gave this exchange the language of clothing. Athanasius writes that the Word took a mortal body and, by assuming the nature He shared with us, "clothed us with immortality." Through the Resurrection, the incorruptible Son "clothed all with incorruption." Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 9, trans. Archibald Robertson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 40–41.

Paul gathered both movements into a single breath. Writing to the Philippians, he sang of the One who, though equal with God, emptied Himself: born a servant among us, then obedient even to death, death on a cross (Philippians 2:7–8). The humility of the manger and the obedience of the cross belong to the same self-giving of the Son toward us. It is the same love.

That one hymn, carried across two verses, becomes the two doorways of this holy crossing. The crib on the right and the cross on the left are the two ends of a single self-emptying, one unbroken love that carried Christ Jesus from Bethlehem to Calvary. What begins in the vulnerability of a Child reaches its fullness in the vulnerability of the Crucified, the same love given without reserve in both places.[220]



[220] The Church's newest social teaching ends where this crossing of the transepts begins. Closing his first encyclical, Leo XIV comes back to the Word made flesh and borrows a litany from Bérulle: a God born in a manger, a God who walks about in Judea, a God who dies on a cross, a dead God lying in a tomb. Then he turns the litany outward. The flesh of the Son, poor and easily broken, calls to mind the flesh of everyone stripped of dignity and reduced to silence. Paul's hymn in Philippians, it turns out, is a social doctrine as well as a Christology. Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, nos. 231–32, quoting Pierre de Bérulle, *Discours de l'état et des grandeurs de Jésus*.

Crib



For Francis, God so loved the world that He gave us His only Son, born in Bethlehem. Here we hear the first movement of Paul's hymn. Christ Jesus did not cling to the privileges of His divinity, but took the form of a servant and was born among us (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. The paintings in this transept are drawn from the infancy narratives of Jesus and a few miracles of Saint Francis involving children.

Giotto and his workshop frescoed this mystical space, bringing the Holy Land to Assisi. Imagine it is 1315 and a wayfarer looks up. Mary is already on the road to Elizabeth. In Bethlehem, Jesus is laid among the animals while shepherds are called in from the fields and Magi make their way toward Him.

The story keeps moving.



Then Mary and Joseph carry the Child into the Temple. Simeon takes Him into his arms the way a rabbi receives the Torah scroll, his head tilted, his body beginning to sway. He knows that he is holding the Word of God in his arms. Look now at the building around him. Giotto has given Jerusalem something of the architecture of the Upper Basilica itself. The holy city has come close enough to stand inside Assisi. Then the story turns, and the Holy Family is on the road.



Turning to see the Flight into Egypt, painted toward the top of the vault, 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 angelic 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 over seven hundred years!



Yet Giotto's deeper innovation is not in the physics of that palm tree. Rather than painting the Holy Family as remote icons, he depicts them as a household of five in flight, with a mother managing her child on the

donkey and Joseph keeping a weary pace beside them. Their path leads the eye to the next panel, which tells the reason for their flight. This is the Massacre of the Innocents. Herod's soldiers are at their grim work, mothers clutching children who cannot be saved. Warned in a dream, Joseph takes the child and His mother and escapes by night, as Bethlehem weeps for its sons (Matthew 2:13–18).[221]

There is something unsettling in the way the paintings meet. The Holy Family is fleeing the slaughter, yet Giotto sends them visually toward it. They escape Herod's sword without escaping the wounded world it has made. Christ is carried away from death only to grow toward the day when He will freely walk into it. The painter lets them flee without letting us look away from what they flee.[222]



For those who first gazed up at these scenes, this was no distant horror. Giotto's Italy was a land of warring cities and burning villages, of feuds and sieges that spilled children's blood and drove whole families onto the roads with nothing. They knew what it was to flee. A family that had lost everything could look up and find its own exile painted on the ceiling of God's house and find too that the Lord of Glory had once been carried down that same road as a refugee child.

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[221] This is a flight of refugees. Warned in a dream, Joseph fled by night with the child and His mother into Egypt, beyond the reach of Herod's slaughter (see Matthew 2:13–15). Pius XII saw in them the pattern of all who are so driven, naming the émigré Holy Family of Nazareth "the archetype of every refugee family." Leo XIV carries that recognition further. Migrants and refugees are not only people to be sheltered but brothers and sisters who bring gifts of faith and hope, capable of renewing the very communities that receive them. The Church is called not only to open her doors but to make room for their gifts. Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Exsul Familia Nazarethana* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1952), opening; Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*, nos. 73–75.

[222] The Fathers of the Church did not comment on this particular arrangement of the Assisi frescoes, but they did linger over the paradox of Christ's flight. Athanasius understood the flight into Egypt as part of the Word's full assumption of human vulnerability: having taken our flesh, He accepted hiding and flight just as He accepted hunger, thirst, and suffering. Athanasius, *Apologia de Fuga*, 12, trans. Archibald Robertson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 259. Gregory Nazianzen turns the same mystery toward discipleship. Speaking of Herod's slaughter and the Flight into Egypt, he urges the Christian, "If He flees into Egypt, joyfully become a companion of His exile." He then carries the hearer through the whole life of Christ toward crucifixion, burial, Resurrection, and glory. Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 38, sec. 18, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894).

Here a friar's preaching would begin. He needed only to raise his hand toward the wall and say: Here is your own village, your own road, your own grief. The painted Gospel became a summons. If God's own family knew exile and the sword, then the stranger at the gate and the mother on the road carry something of the Holy Family in them, and to turn them away is to turn away the Jesus who once fled for His life. Here is Giotto's great novelty. He brought sacred history near enough to touch, near enough for the displaced to recognize their own story within it, and near enough for a preacher to press upon every conscience with ears to hear.

One Mercy

Anthony of Padua gathered the mystery into a single phrase, calling Christ Jesus "merciful in his Incarnation, strong-armed in his Passion."[223] The road out of Bethlehem runs toward Calvary. If the crib opened with the first movement of Paul's hymn, the cross opens with its next breath. Because Christ Jesus humbled Himself and became 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 Jesus. So, the one hymn opens two doors: verse seven, the servant born among us, opens the right beneath the *vela* of Lady Chastity; verse eight, that same servant now obedient unto death, opens the left beneath the *vela* of Lady Obedience.[224]

Crib and Cross are not two stories but one. The Child of Bethlehem is Christ Jesus, Son of David, and Bethlehem is the house of bread. The flesh He takes in that house of bread He will give as the Bread of Life in the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and offer for the life of the world upon the Cross, one flesh, born, broken, and given, out of pity for us.

This is why a single cry runs through all the Gospels and belongs equally to both transepts:

> "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 18:38)

It is our own proper prayer as Christians, the beggar's cry we never outgrow, for the name David was long understood to mean *merciful*. The Son of David is merciful in His Incarnation and mighty in His Passion.[225] To pass from the Crib to the Cross is to follow one mercy from Bethlehem's bread to Calvary's blood. The Order's own Subtle Doctor pressed this further than most would dare. He taught that the Child was not God's response to our sin but His first intention, willed before the world was made and for His own sake, so that had no one ever fallen, the Incarnation would still have belonged to God's first intention,

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[223] Anthony of Padua, "General Prologue," in *Sermons for Sundays and Festivals*, vol. 1, no. 3.

[224] In Philippians 2:7, Christ Jesus empties Himself, taking the form of a servant and being born in human likeness. In verse eight, He humbles Himself and becomes obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The two verses belong to the same hymn of Christ's self-emptying, *kenosis* (Philippians 2:6–11).

[225] The reading of David's name as "merciful" is Saint Anthony of Padua's. He notes that the name has been taken to mean merciful, strong-armed, or desirable, and applies all three to Christ: "merciful in his Incarnation, strong-armed in his Passion," and desirable in eternal glory, so that crib and cross are gathered into the one name, and the Gospel cry for the Son of David's mercy becomes the Christian's proper prayer. Anthony of Padua, "General Prologue," no. 3.

since love needs no reason beyond itself. The Crib was always coming. The Cross is what that love cost once it reached a wounded world.[226]

Cross

Here the hand of the Master Painter changes. While the Crib belonged to Giotto, the Florentine; the Passion was given to a Sienese master, Pietro Lorenzetti. He opens on the road, with Jesus entering Jerusalem astride a borrowed donkey, its small colt pressing close behind, just as the prophets had foretold. The city pours out to meet Him. Children climb up the trees for palm branches, one figure spreads a cloak beneath the donkey's hooves, and a crowned king presses forward with the elders. It is a hero's welcome offered to a man who reads the day more truly than the crowd, already hearing beneath the Hosannas the silence that will fall by Friday. To pass through such acclaim with His gaze already fixed on the road's end is prudence itself, the clear sight of past, present, and what is coming.



Just below, the night we have already watched moving through Lorenzetti's Passion settles over the Last Supper. Gold stars fill the deep-blue vault above Jesus and the Twelve, echoing the painted heavens over the wayfarer's own head. The room does not seem very far away. We will take our place at that table shortly. For now, watch the Lord rise and take up the basin.

[226] Duns Scotus held that the Incarnation was not occasioned by sin. Christ was predestined from eternity, willed for His own sake and prior to any foresight of the fall, so that had no one sinned He would have come nonetheless. Franciscans know this as the absolute primacy of Christ, one of the clearest distinctions in the classic Franciscan and Thomistic accounts of the motive of the Incarnation, and a theological reason not to treat Bethlehem chiefly as the road to Calvary. Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, d. 7, q. 3.



Jesus has laid aside His outer garment, knelt on the bare floor, and taken Peter's foot into His hand above the basin. Here is the hymn made flesh. The One who was equal with God is now bent to the work of the lowest servant in the house. Peter recoils, one hand flying to his own head, still protesting even as he yields. He can serve, but he cannot be served.[227] That is the harder half, and Jesus will not let him refuse it:

> "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." (John 13:8)

Bonaventure recognized Jesus' humility in His willingness to sit at table with a stranger. Here that humility brings Him to His knees before Peter, washing his feet. Yet His raised hand and pointed thumb retain the familiar gesture of a teacher speaking to His disciples. The Master has not surrendered His authority. He has shown what it means to exercise it in love. Francis spent his life learning that lesson.

The final fresco in this sequence shows where that learning led. At La Verna, after years of contemplating Christ Jesus and His Passion, Francis received the Sacred Stigmata. The wounds did not create that conformity. They made visible what a lifetime of following Christ Jesus had already formed in Francis. The left transept has carried us from the obedience of Christ Jesus to the obedience of Francis, from the Master kneeling before His friends to the friar bearing the marks of the Crucified. Before we leave this transept, however, two scenes ask us to turn back: the Scourging, where Christ Jesus suffers in silence before a distracted world, and the Last Supper, where He sits among friends whose love is about to be tested. Both deserve a slower look.



[227] George Herbert gives almost the same resistance to the guest in "Love (III)." When Love draws near, the guest's instinct is still to earn his place: "My dear, then I will serve." Love answers, "You must sit down." The difficulty is not service but allowing oneself to be served, fed, and received. Herbert, "Love (III)."

The Scourging at the Pillar: A Moral Allegory

Having watched the Passion leave its marks upon Francis, wayfarers may now turn back to Pietro Lorenzetti and watch the painter at work. He gives the eye a great deal to do. Jesus suffers at the center of this fresco, while life continues around Him in corners, doorways, rooftops, and small details easily missed. The question is no longer simply what happened to Jesus, but what we notice while it is happening.



In The Scourging at the Pillar, Jesus is beaten by Roman soldiers, yet Lorenzetti gives the eye other places to wander. High on the stonework to the right, an angel watches a hound chase a small hare. Even the stone lion beneath them seems to have noticed, lifting its head toward the little drama overhead.[228] It is the sort of corner a preaching friar could hardly leave alone. Since the congregation knew these creatures, he had only to point.

The fleeing hare was too weak to turn and fight. Scripture gave such a creature another wisdom, the instinct to find a cleft in the rock. Augustine knew the psalm and named the Rock as the Lord.[229] A friar standing beneath this wall might have asked only one question.

[228] Whatever the precise division of invention between painter and Franciscan patron, this fresco belonged from the beginning to a church shaped for preaching. Lorenzetti gave the wall its astonishing visual life, while the friars who commissioned, prayed beneath, and preached among these images knew how readily a small painted detail could become the beginning of a sermon. The imaginative conversation developed here does not claim to recover what Lorenzetti or a particular friar intended. It enters the same Franciscan habit of looking at the wall until its creatures and gestures begin to speak. Alessandro Volpe, "Pietro Lorenzetti: Storie della Passione di Cristo," in Giorgio Bonsanti, ed., *La Basilica di San Francesco ad Assisi*, vol. 2, *Schede* (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2002), 401.

[229] Augustine reads the hare as small and timid, unable to reach the lofty places of stronger creatures, yet not abandoned. Its refuge is the rock, and for Augustine that Rock is the Lord, the refuge of the poor. The

What is chasing you?

The hare does not defeat the hound. It runs for the Rock. Following the chase downward, the eye discovers where the sermon was headed. Jesus is there, bound to the pillar and being beaten.



Then look higher still. A mother and child stand apart from the violence below, traditionally remembered as Pilate's wife and daughter.[230] Matthew tells us that Pilate's wife had dreamed of the innocence of Jesus and sent word to her husband. She knew that something was wrong. Lorenzetti places a child beside her, and suddenly the scene becomes more complicated.

The girl holds a leash. At its end, a little monkey has wandered along the roofline and is looking back toward her. He wants to see. Perhaps the child does too.

One can imagine the mother seeing where both sets of eyes are headed and drawing her daughter closer. She says: Do look down.

Of course the little girl asks why.

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image allows the frightened hare in Lorenzetti's fresco to become a small sermon on where weakness may run. Saint Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 99–120*, trans. Maria Boulding, OSB, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA, vol. III/19 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), exposition of Psalm 104, no. 25.

[230] Matthew never gives Pilate's wife a name. Christian memory did. By the late fourth or early fifth century she was known as Claudia Procula, and Eastern Christianity carried her story further, remembering her as one who came to faith in Christ. In the Byzantine tradition she is honored as Saint Claudia Procula on October 27. What begins in Matthew as one unnamed woman speaking for the innocence of Jesus became, in another part of the Church, the memory of a disciple. Ronald H. Van der Bergh, "The Reception of Matthew 27:19b (Pilate's Wife's Dream) in the Early Church," *Journal of Early Christian History* 2, no. 1 (2012): 72–74, 80; Orthodox Church in America, "Saint Claudia Procula," October 27.

What does a mother say? There is a man being beaten below. Men are shouting accusations about Him. Somewhere in that courtyard truth has become tangled in fear, politics, anger, and lies. Pilate's wife has already tried to stop what is happening. Now another instinct takes hold. She cannot protect Jesus, but perhaps she can protect her child from the sight of what is being done to Him.

The monkey pulls the other way.

Curiosity has its own strength.[231] A child wants to know why people are shouting, why soldiers are striking a man who has done nothing wrong, why adults can say things that are untrue and then behave as though the lie has made them innocent. The little monkey has no such caution. He stretches the leash toward the edge and turns to look down.



The preaching friar might have let the congregation look at the monkey for a few heartbeats, and then ask:

What have you come here to see?

Pilate's wife had seen enough to speak. Her daughter may be seeing something her mother wishes she did not yet have to see. The monkey simply wants a better view. Beneath them, Jesus remains at the pillar.

Everyone is looking, but they do not all see in the same way.

The hound pursues. The hare knows where to run. A mother tries to shield her child. The child wants to understand. A monkey strains against the leash. Even the stone lion seems to raise its head.

Jesus remains below them all, bruised and bleeding.

All this time the wayfarer has been looking as well, and begins to ponder:

What does seeing Jesus like this ask of me?

[231] Medieval writers could make the monkey a mirror of unruly human behavior. Because it imitates what it sees, the animal was variously associated with vanity, folly, greed, and curiosity. None of those meanings fixes Lorenzetti's monkey to one allegory. Here curiosity is allowed to become the preacher's way into the scene, just as the friars could turn familiar creatures toward a moral lesson. Bonnie Young, "The Monkeys and the Peddler," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 26, no. 10 (1968): 443.

The Last Supper: Dishes and Toast



Wayfarers leave the courtyard of the Scourging and step into another room of Lorenzetti's Passion, taking a small step backward in the story. Jesus is no longer bound to a pillar. He is seated at table with His friends on the night before He dies. Yet Lorenzetti does not take us straight to Jesus. He leaves the kitchen door open. The work of supper continues beside the holy table, and the wayfarer enters the Gospel almost from the back door, through an ordinary room that other painters had never imagined existing.[232]

Kitchen

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.[233] While the small dog licks a plate clean, tail alive with satisfaction, the cat curls up beside the fire. The kitchen is so ordinary that one can almost hear its little sounds: the scrape of dishes, the crackle of flame, the shuffling of tired servants still at work after the meal. Outside, the crescent moon hangs over the night, but the light within belongs to the room itself. Lorenzetti lets the hearth cast its glow across the walls and floor, so that animals, servants, and household things throw faint shadows into the night.[234]

A friar preaching here would have had no trouble making use of such creatures. The dog becomes gluttony for the length of a sermon, still licking the plate after the table of the Lord has been spread. The cat becomes indifference, asleep by the warmth while the mysteries

[232] Lorenzetti's kitchen is an extraordinary early intrusion of ordinary domestic life into a monumental sacred narrative. Hyman calls it an "unprecedented genre scene," drawing attention to the carefully observed fireplace, shelf, beams, cat, dog, shadows, servants, and washing-up. He reads this everyday intimacy as consonant with a Franciscan attention to humble experience. Timothy Hyman, *Sienese Painting: The Art of a City-Republic, 1278–1477* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 76.

[233] That the scullery earns a place in a fresco of the Last Supper is itself a claim about work. The Church teaches that the dignity of labor is measured not by the task performed but by the one performing it, since the worker is a person. Human work continues, in its own small way, the creative work of God. The servant bent over a dish is no less an image of God than the apostle at table. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981), nos. 6 and 25.

[234] Lorenzetti treats the hearth as an actual source of light within the painted kitchen. The fire illuminates the room and produces cast shadows from the animals, figures, and objects, an unusually early experiment in naturalistic illumination. The Franciscan Friar Roger Bacon (c. 1214–1292) devoted the fifth part of his *Opus majus*, known as *Perspectiva*, to the study of optics, investigating light, vision, reflection, refraction, and the properties of lenses. His fellow Franciscan John Peckham drew upon the English tradition of optics shaped by Robert Grosseteste and Bacon, and especially the scientific work of Ibn al-Haytham, to bring this growing

of heaven and earth unfold in the next room.[235] Yet one can also imagine Lorenzetti himself leaning quietly on his own painted bench in the transept, listening to the friar preaching, and with a half-smile thinking to himself: Sometimes a cat is just a cat, and the dog is Bruno, forever licking the plates in my kitchen back home.[236]

Rather than being a contradiction, this is the freedom of Franciscan preaching. The painter gives the friar a real kitchen, and the friar gives the kitchen back as a sermon. Francis would later sing of Brother Fire, who lights up the night.[237] There is no need to claim that Lorenzetti painted with the *Canticle* in mind. It is enough to see the fire doing what Francis praised Brother Fire for, giving light in the darkness. The light does not fall first upon an altar or a saint. It falls upon dishes, animals, tired servants, and the work still waiting to be done.

Having entered the scene through the kitchen door, with the friar's little sermon still in their ears, wayfarers encounter the servants washing dishes and two men fretting in the doorway that leads into the dining room. This kitchen is a mystical space, precisely because of the dishes, not in spite of them. Here mysticism is found in the "mundane and ordinary or in the midst of our busy family lives…"[238]



At the same time, the fretting itself tells its own story. The servants bent over their dishes and the two men anxious in the doorway are seemingly kin to Martha of Bethany, who busied herself with serving while her sister Mary sat at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:38–42). 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. In this fresco fretting servants are caught in their many

science into the classroom through his *Perspectiva communis*, which became one of the most widely used textbooks on optics in medieval universities. The two friars belonged to an intellectual world in which the scientific study of vision was finding its way into the wider culture, including the arts. We encounter another expression of this interest in the Basilica's Chapel of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, where Andrea de' Bartoli painted philosophers using spectacles and reading lenses (see note 22). Bacon studied how the eye receives light; Lorenzetti painted how light falls upon ordinary creatures; Andrea de' Bartoli depicted scholars using instruments to see more clearly. Together, they remind us how scientific inquiry and artistic imagination were opening new ways of seeing the created world. Luca Liardo, "I Lorenzetti"; David C. Lindberg, "Lines of Influence in Thirteenth-Century Optics: Bacon, Witelo, and Pecham," *Speculum* 46, no. 1 (1971): 66–83; Graziella Federici Vescovini, "Prospettiva," *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1998), especially "I manuali di perspectiva"; Gerd Mathias Micheluzzi, "Der Schlagschatten im Trecento am Beispiel von Taddeo Gaddis Verkündigung an die Hirten," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 180 (2015): 98–120.

[235] The Basilica's own bestiary treats both animals cautiously. It judges that the sleeping cat in Lorenzetti's Last Supper "very probably" has only a realistic meaning, arising from the strong naturalism of contemporary Gothic art, and considers a negative or diabolical interpretation unlikely in this scene. Its treatment of the dog is similarly cautious, allowing that the animal may simply belong to the realism of the kitchen while noting that symbolic readings have also been proposed. *Il Bestiario della Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi*, "Gatto" and "Cane," Basilica e Sacro Convento di San Francesco in Assisi. The allegorical meanings in the prose are therefore offered as homiletic play in keeping with Franciscan preaching, not as certain claims about Lorenzetti's intention.

[236] This imagined moment is my own, not drawn from any historical account.

[237] Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of the Creatures," *FA:ED* 1, 113–14.

[238] Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*, viii.

things, while the one thing needed waits patiently at the table. Busyness is not a failure to be corrected so much as the occasion for an invitation, the one Jesus once offered Martha, to let go of anxious doing and step into the present moment where God already is.

The upper room itself carries the same invitation. Around the tables of our homes, family and friends gather to share food, stories, and the joys and burdens of daily life. By including the ordinary work of the kitchen, Lorenzetti and the preaching friars brought the Last Supper into the familiar world of visiting wayfarers. At these tables, relationships are nourished, trust is built, and sometimes love is tested. The table of the Lord is no different in this respect. There, too, we are called to listen, to love, and to receive what is offered without demanding that it be given on our own terms.

Table



Entering the upper room, medieval wayfarers would have been quick to point out that Jesus and His apostles are gathered at a round table. The disciples had been arguing over which of them was the greatest, and Lorenzetti seats them where the argument cannot be had. In wayfaring imaginations, 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. 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.[239] At

[239] The Round Table first appears in Wace's *Roman de Brut* of 1155, where Arthur has it made so that none of his barons, once seated, could claim precedence over the others. Its importance in the romances that

this table, no one is present as a spectator. They eat from what is shared, receive from the same Lord, and discover that friendship makes every person at the table vulnerable to the others.

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 his 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 son of Simon Iscariot." (John 13:21–26)



followed lay in giving Arthur's knights a name and a common life, so that the fellowship of the Round Table came to be treated as a prototype for the secular orders of chivalry founded across Europe in the later Middle Ages, the world wayfarers have already met at the *vela* of Lady Chastity. Wace, *Roman de Brut: A History of the British*, text and translation by Judith Weiss, 2nd ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), ll. 9747–60. See also Helmut Nickel, "Orders of Chivalry," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 32, no. 4 (1973–74): 102–4.

John names Judas. There is no uncertainty left for the reader about who will betray Jesus. Yet before moving on, the table asks us to remain for a moment with what betrayal means between friends. For faith takes shape in relationships, in the joy of friendship and the pain of betrayal. Here all of the virtues wayfarers have considered thus far must come to bear:

> *Has friendship taught you how to receive another person without possessing them, to listen without first defending yourself, and to remain faithful when love becomes costly?*
>
> *Has trust placed in a friend ever opened into misunderstanding or betrayal?*
>
> *When love has been wounded, have you known the grace to turn again?*

Jesus knows these things. You are not alone.

Luke tells the same supper differently. He does not name Judas. Jesus says:

> "But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table…
> woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" (Luke 22:21–22)

Then the disciples begin asking one another which of them He means. Luke leaves the name unspoken and, for a moment, every place at the table becomes uneasy.

The Greek behind "that one," *tō anthrōpō ekeinō*, means simply "that person." The words do not allow the wayfarer to remain safely across the table from Judas.

> *Am I that person? Have I betrayed a friend?*



In both Gospel accounts, the room has grown uncomfortable. John has named Judas. Luke has left the disciples looking around the table and wondering which of them Jesus means. The meal has moved into that tense place, all too familiar at family tables, when someone says what no one wanted said and suddenly the room feels too small.

A wayfarer might retreat from the table, past the fretting servants, and into the safety of a familiar kitchen. Families have always done this. When dinner becomes strained, someone gets up to clear the plates, another follows with the glasses, and before long the dishes offer a quieter place to be, in the company of the cat and Bruno the dog.

There is warm water and the rhythm of washing and rinsing. The hands have something ordinary to do while the eyes of the heart begin to open and ask:

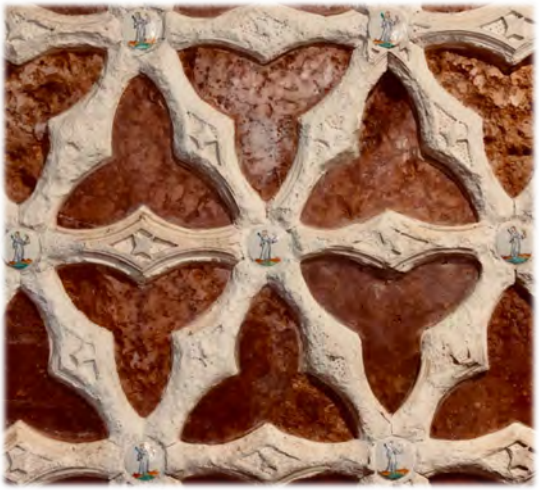
> *Have I betrayed Christ Jesus, and was it with a kiss, with the face of friendship still on?*

"Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate."[240] The sentence reaches beyond Judas. Jesus enjoys an inclusive table, be it with toll collectors, sinners, men, women, hostile religious leaders, and even fallible disciples.[241] 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. Honest wayfarers take the seats of those who would deny and betray.

Lorenzetti allows the Eucharist to emerge from the human table from which it was first given. Jesus has been making the Kingdom visible this way throughout His ministry, sitting down with people others would keep apart, receiving them, feeding them, and allowing Himself to be received by them. Here, on the night before He dies, that way of eating reaches its fullness as He gives Himself. Before our eyes are drawn to bread as sacrament, we are allowed to remain for a moment with the friends who shared it, including those whose friendship would fail before the night was over.

Francis knew such friendship and profound betrayal in his own life. Through this lens he writes to his brothers:

> "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."[242]



[240] Karris' memorable summary places Jesus' death within the wider table ministry that marks Luke's Gospel. Foley develops this liturgically, arguing that a theology of worship, especially of Eucharist, grounded in Jesus' public ministry should begin not only with the Last Supper but with the sustained table fellowship that characterized His public life. Jesus' repeated eating and drinking with sinners became, in Foley's words, a "public theology" enacted through table ministry, challenging boundaries and provoking opposition. Shin carries the table into another register, describing Eucharist and table fellowship as forms of ecclesial resistance to evil, where shared food, memory, stories, and the gaze of another help form a community capable of recognizing and resisting what wounds communion. Read within the wider movement of these pages, the table becomes another school of Gospel Nonviolence: evil is confronted, but its violence is not allowed to dictate the terms of the response. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*, 98; Edward Foley, OFM Cap., "Worship as Public Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8, no. 1 (2004): 1–13, esp. 6–7; Sarah Shin, "Feast as Resistance: Eucharist and Table Fellowship as Ecclesial Resistance to Evil," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 4, no. 1 (2020): 30–52, esp. 30–32, 36–39, 50–51.

[241] On this inclusive table, see Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 47: the Eucharist is "not a prize for the perfect."

[242] Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, *FA:ED* 1, 79. Pope Francis develops this Franciscan love of enemies in *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 241–42.

Bread

Now we return to Judas. He was Jesus' friend. He had just broken bread with Jesus, but something in him still resisted receiving Jesus as He gave Himself. Read through the imagery of this Basilica, Judas' relationship with Jesus begins to look possessive, like that of the merchant gripping his money bag 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.[243] The bread comes to the table as gift, meant to be received rather than claimed. Something inside Judas still resists the communion being offered with it. In the friar's imaginative sermon, bread that is meant to be broken and shared at a common table has become, for Judas, toast, something taken for oneself.



Jesus had spent His ministry giving Himself at tables, receiving people others kept at a distance and allowing them to draw near. Now, on the night before He dies, He gives Himself without holding anything back:

> "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 moves toward death spiritually parched, still trying to receive Jesus on his own terms. The tragedy is deeper than hunger. He has been offered the Bread of Life by a Friend who will give Himself completely, and cannot yet receive the friendship within the gift.

So that which was intended to nourish had, for Judas, become something he could not swallow. Wayfarers are left to ask themselves, in the meditative moments of washing dishes:

> *As I wash what remains from the meal, what have I really received at the tables of my life? Have friendship, forgiveness, bread, and love opened my hands, or have I quietly tried to keep the gifts while holding the giver at a distance?*

[243] Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to the Entire Order," *FA:ED* 1, 118.

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

> "The times of activity are not at all different from the hours of prayer,
> for I possess God as peacefully in the commotion of my kitchen,
> where often enough several people are asking me for different things at the same time,
> as I do when kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament."[244]

Here Martha and Mary finally stop competing for the same room. The commotion of the kitchen and the stillness at Jesus' feet are, in the end, one place and one prayer. Wayfarers never have to choose between kitchen and table. The harder task is learning to receive the same God in both, allowing what He gives to open our hands rather than close them around the gift.



[244] Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *Writings and Conversations on the Practice of the Presence of God*, ed. Conrad De Meester, OCD, trans. Salvatore Sciurba, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2015), 125–26.

Despair and Hope: The Other Side of the Story



The story of Judas does not end in the betrayal of his friendship with 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 many medieval preachers used such images of suicide as warnings against sin and despair, the Franciscan theological world also inherited an older Christian tradition in which Judas' remorse was not treated as meaningless, leaving his final end in the merciful hands of God.[245]

The friars' emphasis had a precise theology supporting it. What the medieval schools feared most in Judas was not only the betrayal but what came after. In despair, he acted as though God's mercy could not reach as far as his sin. Bonaventure speaks of this in *The Tree of Life*. Judas, so filled with self-loathing that he preferred death to life, gave himself up to despair instead of returning to the Source of all mercy. Lady Penance has already shown us another road, one that remains open whenever we turn again toward God.[246]

The great tales, too, know that mercy can change the ending. Pity is the hinge on which a story turns toward its good ending. In the most beloved of them a hobbit says, idly, what a pity his uncle had not killed the wretched Gollum when he had the chance, and a wizard hands the word back to him with a capital letter on it. It was Pity that stayed his hand. Not a feeling Bilbo had, but a Lady who took hold of him, as the ladies overhead confront the vices and drive them out. That same mercy, not the sword, becomes part of what finally unmakes the One Ring, forged not for promise but for possession.[247]

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[245] Origen, commenting on Matthew 27:3–5, regarded Judas' remorse as real repentance overcome by despair and even allowed the possibility that he sought mercy from Christ. Origen, *Commentariorum Series in Evangelium Matthaei* 117, in *Origenes Werke*, vol. 11, ed. Erich Klostermann and Ursula Treu (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976). See also Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 3, on the God who "never tires of forgiving."

[246] Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life* (*Lignum vitae*), in *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 140–43. Bonaventure recognizes the terrible gravity of Judas' betrayal and despair without granting the reader knowledge of his final judgment. On the Franciscan reading of Judas and Francis as opposing images of Despair and Hope, see Robson, "The Pilgrim's Progress," 60–61. Bollati also places these opposed images within a Franciscan contrast between despair and hope. In discussing Judas and Francis, she notes a reading in which Francis' hope is joined to the *via della penitenza*, the way of penance, while Judas embodies despair. Bollati, *Gloriosus Franciscus*, 74, note 97.

[247] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), bk. 1, ch. 2, "The Shadow of the Past." The capitals are Tolkien's.

What passed between Judas and his Lord, the Son of David, in the final hidden reaches of his life, no one living can know. It is wholly possible that the beggar's cry rose at last within him. Perhaps that is where we should leave him, not beneath the rope, but before the mercy of Christ Jesus.

The same reverent unknowing must surround every person who dies by suicide. Grave psychological suffering can profoundly diminish freedom and personal responsibility, and the Church therefore asks those who mourn not to presume damnation, but to pray in hope, entrusting the one they love to God, who alone knows the suffering of the mind and the final movement of the heart.[248]

In the opposite transept, in the same location at the top of the stairs, another image waits to show wayfarers the other side of the story.[249] 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. 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)

Peter Lombard, whose *Sentences* formed generations of medieval theologians, defined hope as the certain expectation of future blessedness, coming from God's grace and from merits that go before it.[250] That expectation is what this wall makes visible. One crown is falling, and it belongs to Death.

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[248] The Church's pastoral practice gives this instinct a contemporary voice. The Bishops of the Philippines wrote to families grieving a death by suicide, asking forgiveness of any who had been made to feel unwelcome in the Church in the hour of their grief, directing priests to celebrate the funeral rites and to proclaim hope, and recalling that grave psychological suffering can diminish responsibility, so that no one is to despair of the salvation of those who have taken their own lives. To those families the bishops said simply, "Please do not lose hope." Their letter then closes by entrusting all who suffer to Mary, Health of the Sick and Comforter of the Afflicted, which is where this Basilica sends its own wayfarers a few paces further on. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Come to Me, All You Who Labor and Are Burdened: A Pastoral Letter on Mental Health, Compassion, and Hope" (July 13, 2026), under "To Families Who Have Lost Loved Ones Through Suicide"; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2282–83.

[249] The pairing is deliberate. Robson reads the two images as pendants: Francis as an allegory of Hope, Judas as Hope's antithesis, Despair, noting that the Death of Judas occupies the same position at the head of one staircase as Francis and Death occupies at the head of the other. She adds that the Judas image is aimed first at the friars themselves, since it is located where it is best seen by those leaving the choir by that staircase into the cloister, the friars' own daily route. The warning was not abstract for them. Arnald of Sarrant preserves the story of Brother John of Cappella, who left the Order and died by suicide. The medieval chronicle presents his death as a warning to the brothers about their own vulnerability, but it tells us nothing certain about John's final encounter with the mercy of God. Still, the friars did not leave the warning standing alone. They set it at one stairhead and, at the other, Death losing his crown, so that no one climbing out of the choir met the one without knowing the other was there. Robson, "The Pilgrim's Progress," 45, 60–61.

[250] Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, bk. 3, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. Giulio Silano, Mediaeval Sources in Translation 45 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), dist. 26, chap. 1: *Spes est certa exspectatio futurae beatitudinis, veniens ex Dei gratia et meritis praecedentibus*. Robson reads this image as an allegory of Hope and the apse fresco as the fulfillment of Lombard's definition, comparing Giotto's Hope at Padua, who likewise reaches upward toward a crown. Robson, "The Pilgrim's Progress," 56, 69.

Centuries later, John Donne would speak directly to this fallen ruler: "Death, be not proud."[251] He spends the rest of the sonnet stripping Death of the greatness she claims, until even Death must die. The Basilica has already taught the wayfarer how such proud powers fall. Mary sings that the mighty are brought down from their thrones, while Lady Humility carries the baptismal candle, the light of Christ entrusted to us and carried within us. The life of the risen Christ is already at work within us before bodily death arrives. Death's throne was always an illusion. Once brought low, she can be approached differently.



So, Francis gives her a family name. In the *Canticle of the Creatures*, Sister Bodily Death enters the same song as Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the stars, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, and Sister Mother Earth.[252] Here, at the end of this passage through despair and hope, Death no longer stands alone. Because Christ Jesus has risen, Death no longer has the final word. Francis can call even her sister, adding one last voice to the larger hymn in which creation keeps singing toward the mercy of God.

[251] Donne strips Death of its claim to sovereignty: what appears mighty is temporary, and eternal waking renders even Death itself mortal. John Donne, "Holy Sonnet X: Death, be not proud," in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 313.

[252] Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of the Creatures," *FA:ED* 1, 113–14. In the reading I developed elsewhere, purple becomes the color of contrition, the moment when sorrow, repentance, and mercy meet. The movement is not toward shame but restoration: stepping back to listen, recognizing what needs to be healed, asking mercy, and returning to the song. Sister Death enters the *Canticle* within that same hope. See Michael Lasky, "The 'Canticle of the Creatures': In the Color Purple," *Miscellanea Francescana* 125, no. 3/4 (2025): 311–37, esp. 316–17, 326–31.

Francis with His Mother of Mercy

Hope does not leave the wayfarer looking toward the fresco above the staircase. Turning around to face the opposite wall, our eyes fall upon Mary enthroned with the Christ Child in her arms, angels gathered around them, and Francis standing just to the right. This Francis deserves a longer look. Painted within living memory of him, the figure has long been treasured as one of the closest likenesses we possess of *il Poverello*.[253] Here Francis stands beside Mary and her Son with a face that once belonged to a man who walked the streets of Assisi and who sang and danced in its nearby woods.[254]



[253] Cimabue's Maestà di Assisi, painted around 1285–1290, contains one of the earliest and most reliable surviving likenesses of Saint Francis. The fresco underwent a major conservation campaign completed in 2024. The Custody of the Sacred Convent describes the Francis figure as one of the saint's oldest and most trustworthy portraits. Custodia Generale del Sacro Convento di San Francesco, "Il Cimabue restaurato," February 16, 2024.

[254] Thomas of Celano remembers Francis singing in French while using two sticks as though playing a fiddle, accompanying the song with bodily gestures that became a kind of dance. Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 127, *FA:ED* 2, 331.

For a Franciscan, the scene naturally calls to mind Saint Mary of the Angels, the Porziuncola, the little church in the valley below Assisi that Francis loved as home. Bonaventure says that Francis made Mary his Advocate and the Advocate of his brothers. The fraternity gathered beneath her protection there. Clare was received there. Francis returned there at the end of his life, asking to be carried home to meet Sister Death.[255] The Pardon of Assisi would also make the little chapel a place where generations came seeking mercy.[256] Mary and mercy had become part and parcel of what home meant to him.



[255] Bonaventure says that Francis placed his trust in Mary after Christ and made her "the advocate of himself and his brothers," choosing the little church of Saint Mary of the Angels as a place of particular devotion to her. The Porziuncola became inseparable from the beginnings of the fraternity, Clare's entrance into Franciscan life, and Francis' own final return there before his death. Bonaventure, *Major Legend* II.8 and IX.3, *FA:ED* 2, 540–41, 598; Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 214, *FA:ED* 2, 386–87; *The Legend of Saint Clare* 8, in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents: The Lady*, 288–89.

[256] The Pardon of Assisi, the Porziuncola Indulgence, is held by Franciscan tradition to date from 1216, when Francis went to Honorius III at Perugia and asked a plenary indulgence for all who entered the Porziuncola repentant, confessed, and prayed for the intentions of the Church. No document survives from Francis' lifetime. Testimonies concerning the indulgence survive from 1277 onward, while its principal early documentary account is the Diploma issued in 1310 by Teobaldo Pontano, Friar Minor and Bishop of Assisi. Teobaldo Pontano, Bishop of Assisi, *Diploma* (August 10, 1310), in *Fonti Francescane*, nos. 3391–99; Noel Muscat, *In Defence of the Portiuncula Indulgence: The "Tractatus de indulgentia Portiunculæ" by Francis Bartholi of Assisi, and Other Medieval Documents Regarding the Indulgence* (Malta: TAU, 2012); Mario Sensi, *Il Perdono di Assisi* (Santa Maria degli Angeli: Edizioni Porziuncola, 2002). For the Church's theology of indulgences as the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, see Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967), norm 1.

Bonaventure tells us why. Francis "embraced the Mother of the Lord Jesus with an inexpressible love since she made the Lord of Majesty a brother to us and through her, we have obtained mercy."[257] The mercy is always her Son's. Mary receives Him and gives Him to the world. Her life keeps turning attention toward Him.[258] The Order has never let go of that devotion. It runs like a golden thread through the whole of its history.[259]

Mary gives voice to that mercy in a song that still belongs to the Church. Her Magnificat begins in praise, with God and with what she knows to be true of Him. Only then does her song turn toward the world. The powerful will not remain forever upon their thrones. The lowly will be raised, and the hungry will be filled with *good things*. None of this was yet visible in Nazareth. Rome still ruled beneath the celebrated *Pax Romana*. The poor remained poor, and violence was never far away. The *Pax Romana* carried its own illusion, the appearance of peace without the justice that gives peace its truth. Mary's Magnificat sees through that illusion. She sings because she trusts the promises of God before she can see their fulfillment, knowing that what appears permanent is not the same as what God has promised.[260]

The Magnificat becomes, then, a wayfarer's song of hope. To confess Christ Jesus as Lord changes the way the world is seen. Power is no longer absolute, and poverty can never be treated as someone's permanent place. Hunger becomes something that calls for an answer. Praise has awakened the senses, stirring within us a holy restlessness that will not allow us to look away.

With his brothers at the Porziuncola, Francis praised God, received mercy, and learned how to begin again. Like Mary, he offered as a gift to others what he had first received. His place beside Mary and the Christ Child is therefore more than a saint added to a Marian image.

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[257] Bonaventure, *Major Legend* IX.3, *FA:ED* 2, 598.

[258] In *The Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Pseudo-Bonaventure emphasizes Mary's intercessory role, coupling it with her compassion and describing her as Mother of Mercy. Long ascribed to Bonaventure, the work is now attributed to the Franciscan Conrad of Saxony. See Pseudo-Bonaventure [Conrad of Saxony], *The Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Speculum Beatae Mariae Virginis)*, trans. Sr. Mary Emmanuel, OSB (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1932), chap. VI.

[259] Marian devotion is written into the Order's identity. The friars venerate "the Blessed Virgin Mary in the mystery of the Immaculate Conception" as Patroness and Queen, while the Constitutions describe the defense of her Immaculate Conception as "the golden thread" of the Order's history. *Constitutions OFM Conv*., arts. 47 §2 and 1 §6. Pope Francis likewise hails Mary as "Star of the new evangelization" in *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 288.

[260] The Church's social doctrine has repeatedly returned to the Magnificat as a song in which praise of God opens into consequences for history. The *Compendium* presents Mary as heir to Israel's hope and reads her song as proclaiming the coming of the Messiah of the poor, joining God's mercy to the raising of the lowly and the filling of the hungry. Mary sings these words as a young woman from Nazareth in Galilee, far from the centers of imperial power. Rome spoke of the *Pax Romana*, yet the peace of empire did not mean the absence of domination, poverty, or violence for people living under its rule. Mary's song sees through that illusion. Before the structures of her world have changed, she proclaims her hope in God's promises that the mighty will be brought down, the lowly raised up, and the hungry filled with *good things*. Leo XIV reads this same song as a way of looking at history from below, through the eyes of the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the wounded child, the exile, and the fugitive. Pope Francis likewise returns to the Magnificat in his reflection on peace, ending with the God who has "remembered his promise of mercy." Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 59; Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, nos. 243–44; Pope Francis, "Good Politics Is at the Service of Peace," Message for the Fifty-Second World Day of Peace, January 1, 2019.

Francis stands beside the Mother who taught his family where mercy comes from. In her arms is the Son who became our brother, and in Francis we begin to see what living as His brother can look like.

Across the sanctuary, Brother Sun joins this family of mercy. Under the great Crucifixion in the left transept, Lorenzetti's Madonna dei Tramonti, Our Lady of the Sunset, waits for the evening light. Wayfarers wanting to linger before her would do well to arrive near sunset in the warmer months. When the door at the top of the staircase is open, the sinking sun pours into the Basilica and catches the fresco.[261]



Here Mary holds the Christ Child as Francis and John stand nearby. Jesus raises His hand in blessing, while Mary turns toward Him and points with her thumb, over her shoulder, toward Francis. One can almost hear the question passing between Mother and Son: Who receives the blessing? Mary has made her choice clear enough to earn a more contemporary name, Our Lady of the Hitchhikers.

In the first fresco, we heard echoes of Francis joining Mary in singing her Magnificat. In the second, he has become a living expression of the hope she proclaimed. Here Mary points not toward John, the disciple entrusted to her at the foot of the Cross, but toward Francis, whose wounds bear the likeness of her own Son. She presents him to the Christ Child for a blessing, offering her Child a brother who received mercy and spent his life giving away what had been given to him. In Francis, we glimpse the mercy Mary sang of, promised "from generation to generation" (Luke 1:50). She remains his Mother of Mercy, drawing him and all who follow him toward the Son from whom that mercy flows.

[261] A masterful copy of this fresco, painted in 1930 by the Russian artist Nicolas Lokhoff (1872–1948), is embedded in the south wall of the Reading Room of the Frick Art Research Library in New York, where Helen Clay Frick commissioned it. Above it runs a frieze carrying a golden inscription in Italian: *nessuna cosa si vede sanza luce*, nothing can be seen without light. The Madonna named for the light of evening now hangs half a world from her wall, in a room full of readers, beneath a sentence about light, and Bonaventure had already warned those readers that no amount of reading suffices without unction, nor study without the grace of God. Frick Art Reference Library, *A Peek into the Past: The Frick Art Reference Library's 100th Anniversary*, episode 1 (New York: The Frick Collection, 2018); Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Prologue, no. 4.

Rebuild My House

By the door in the right transept, where we watched Francis stand beside the uncrowned skeleton of Death and point past it to the promises of the risen Christ, turn to the left. On the western wall, a posthumous miracle of Francis shows a child falling from a house and surviving. Nearby, on the northern wall to the right, a second miracle unfolds in two scenes, telling the story of a child lost beneath the rubble of a collapsed house.

The two miracles are not quite the same. In one, life is preserved in the fall. In the other, life is restored from the rubble. Together they place Francis among children and grieving families, still bearing witness to the promise that death does not have the final word.



The second miracle unfolds as an agony and an ecstasy on either side of the arched chapel entrance. A house has collapsed and a child lies dead in the rubble, a youth of Suessa who was crushed when a wall gave way. Begged by grieving parents, Francis brings him back to life. The two halves of the miracle lie directly beneath the Annunciation and within the transept of the infancy narratives of Christ Jesus, so the wall begins to read as one story. Above, Gabriel announces the One who comes to bring life. Below, Francis dispenses that same mercy, reaching into the rubble of a broken body and returning the child to his parents.



Now look to the right, at the painting beside the miracle, speaking to it. It is the Crucifixion. Mary watches as her Son dies upon the cross and grief takes the strength from her body. Beside her, the story of Suessa has moved forward. Here the boy has been carried into an upper room, while a funeral company waits below. Then Francis appears within the room and life returns. Quickly, figures descend the stairs to share the news of the *great thing* that just happened.[262] Joined in a corner, these frescoes speak of the same mystery of faith: "Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free."[263]



Beneath the cross, Mary cannot keep her Son from dying, but she remains within the hope of God's promises. In Suessa, a family mourns a child who has already died. When Francis arrives bearing the promise that death has neither victory nor sting. One scene asks us to remain in hope beside suffering that cannot be taken away. The other dares to show life breaking back into a house already mourning. Between them runs the mercy proclaimed throughout these transepts, a mercy that stays with those who suffer and looks toward the *spiritual joys* and *great things* promised.

Amid the joyful sounds of a family reunited, we can almost hear the sound of hammers striking stone as they begin to rebuild. Before Francis had followers or a rule, he knelt before the crucifix at San Damiano and heard the words that turned his life around: rebuild my house, for it is falling into ruin. He answered with his hands, repairing and rebuilding small stone chapels. Francis had come home from the prisons of Perugia a young man

[262] The painted cycle divides the story into two moments. In the first, the collapsed house is shown and the dead child is brought to his grieving mother. In the second, the body has been carried into an upper room while the funeral company gathers below; Francis appears within the room and the child returns to life. No known contemporary source identifies the Suessa scenes and Giotto's *Crucifixion* as an intended pendant. Their conversation here is an imaginative reading grounded in their physical proximity and in the juxtaposition of Christ's death, human mourning, and the restoration of life. Bonaventure recounts the raising of the youth of Suessa in the appendix on Francis' posthumous miracles, *Major Legend*, "Miracles," II.6, *FA:ED* 2, 658.

[263] *The Roman Missal*, Order of Mass, Memorial Acclamation.

marked by war and imprisonment. The slow, humble labor of setting one stone upon another became the very medicine of his conversion. In healing the ruined chapels, he was healing the ruined house of himself, that temple in which the Spirit had come to dwell. Only later did this call expand to include the Church writ large.[264]



The same hand that lifted stones now raises from an upper room the child who died beneath the rubble. In raising the boy, Francis rebuilds a whole house of grief. He gives a mother back her son, a family back its future, a household back its life. Collapsing walls and buried children were no rarity in his age, nor in Giotto's, nor in ours. The names of the disasters change, but the rubble remains.[265] These frescoes keep *il Poverello*, now in glory, at the wall, still lifting the fallen from the wreckage, still rebuilding and handing back life. This Basilica is itself such a house, raised over his tomb and held up, like Saint John Lateran in Innocent's dream, by the little poor man. The wayfarer, the mystic, who has walked its length leaves knowing that the work is not finished, that the rebuilding of the house goes on in every generation and waits, in part, for our hands of mercy.[266]

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[264] The words Francis heard before the crucifix at San Damiano directed him to repair the house which, as he could see, was falling into ruin. *The Legend of the Three Companions* 13, *FA:ED* 2, 76. His companions record that he took the command with his hands first and understood it of the whole Church only later.

[265] The Church names the same summons in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where a community is rebuilt by those who "identify with the vulnerability of others" and lift up the fallen for the common good. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 67.

[266] The charge is now the Church's own. Leo XIV frames his first encyclical as a choice between two building sites: Babel, raised so its builders might make a name for themselves, or the ruined walls of Jerusalem, which Nehemiah rebuilt by gathering the families and giving each a section of wall to repair. Every trade and every generation is given its stretch, and the rejected stones (the poor, the sick, the migrants, the least) are to become the cornerstone. Eight hundred years after a young man at San Damiano took the command with his hands first, it is given to everyone, and still measured in stones. Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, nos. 7–10, 13, 16.

The Choir and Calvary

The hands that rebuild must also learn when to become still in prayer. At the close of his psalm, Moses asks the Lord to bless the work of our hands, and repeats the plea:

> "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!"[267] (Psalm 90:17)

The stones of this Basilica were raised by human hands, just as Francis had once raised the fallen stones of San Damiano. He wrote in his *Testament* that he had worked with them and wished to go on working.[268] The friars have been making that petition of Moses here in the choir, for nearly eight hundred years. In both the Lower and the Upper Basilicas, the choir sits in the apse, where the friars gather to pray the Divine Office and sing during the Mass. The Crucifixions on the opposite walls of the transepts remain within view from every seat in the choir, so that a friar lifting his eyes from the psalter encounters the poor and suffering Christ Jesus.[269]

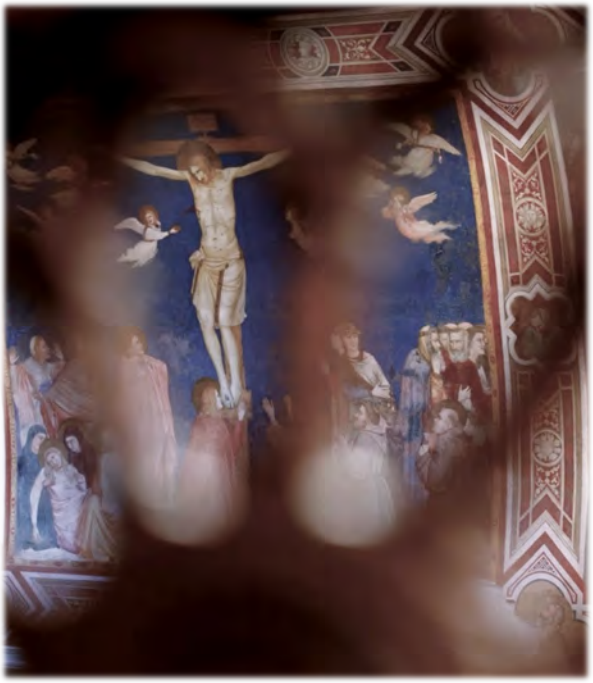


[267] Psalm 90 ends by repeating the prayer over "the work of our hands." Jewish tradition heard more than emphasis in that repetition. Rashi explains that one petition refers to the work of the Tabernacle, where Moses prayed that the divine Presence would rest upon what Israel had built, while the second asks that God's blessing rest upon the ordinary work of their hands. The sacred work of building the dwelling and the daily work that follows are gathered into the same prayer. Rashi, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, trans. and annot. Mayer I. Gruber (Leiden: Brill, 2004), on Psalm 90:17; see also Rashi, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary*, trans. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann (London: Shapiro, Vallentine, 1929–1934), on Exodus 39:43.

[268] The Church has long honored such work. Leo XIII taught that there is no shame in earning one's bread by labor, since Christ Himself "did not disdain to spend a great part of His life as a carpenter Himself." Francis of Assisi, *Testament*, *FA:ED* 1, 125–26; Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, no. 23.

[269] Others have come to add their voices to that gaze. On October 4, 1962, the feast of Saint Francis, John XXIII traveled by train to Loreto and then to Assisi, arriving in the evening one week before he opened the Second Vatican Council. After the annexation of Rome in 1870, no pope had traveled beyond Lazio until this journey. Speaking that night in this Lower Basilica, John XXIII recalled the lighting of a lamp at Francis' tomb during his earlier visit in 1953 and invited those gathered to renew that rite in prayer. He said of Francis that he had wished to be nothing other than a faithful image of the Crucified, who gave His blood to light the path of humanity, to feed it and to heal it. A Secular Franciscan had come to ask Saint Francis for a blessing on the Council. Pope John XXIII, "Address to the Faithful Gathered at the Lower Basilica of Saint Francis," Assisi, October 4, 1962.

Here in Assisi are some of the earliest surviving monumental images to bring the suffering and dying Christ before the gaze of ordinary worshipers, carrying such imagery beyond the monastic settings where it had already taken root. These frescoes speak of the Franciscan devotion to the Christ crucified, ever close to His people and acquainted with human suffering.[270]



From the choir, we look again toward Calvary. Mary is there, overcome by grief and supported by those beside her.[271] Among those gathered beneath the Cross is a company of friars.

Within this group of friars are Francis and Anthony, the two haloed figures. Between them kneel several friars who wear no halos at all. Just above them gathers a company of ordinary people, whose names, like those of the brothers below, have been lost to history. Yet the painter has given each of them a place at Calvary, alongside the saints they knew and loved.[272] Francis had given his brothers words for moments such as this. In his *Testament* he recalled the prayer the Lord had taught him to offer whenever he entered a church:

> "We adore You, Lord Jesus Christ,
> in all Your churches throughout the whole world and we bless You
> because by Your holy cross You have redeemed the world."[273]

[270] The placement of scenes of the Crucifixion in both transepts was likely intentional, allowing the friars in choir to keep Christ crucified within their field of vision. In the right transept, the Crucifixion interrupts the overarching cycle of the Infancy of Christ and the miracles of Saint Francis, yet its position also allows it to speak visually with the neighboring Madonna and Child with Saint Francis and the Raising of the Boy of Suessa. A comparable arrangement appears in the Upper Basilica, where Crucifixions occupy corresponding positions in the transepts. See Robson, "The Pilgrim's Progress," 45–46.

[271] See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 241, where Mary "grieves for the sufferings of the crucified poor" and the wounded world, now Queen of all creation.

[272] No names survive for these friars and the company above them. The master who frescoed the *vele* above them is likewise anonymous. Wayfarers may recall Lady Prudence holding her mirror up to one particular man rather than to a type. What is unrepeatable in a person does not wait upon anyone writing it down. Their names are lost, but the painter has still given these particular people a place at Calvary.

[273] The words were not Francis' invention but the Church's. Beneath them lies a liturgical formula sung on Good Friday and on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, adoring and blessing Christ because by His cross He has redeemed the world. To it Francis made three small additions: he spoke the name Jesus Christ, he called the cross holy, and he opened the prayer outward to every church in the world. The Church's formula adores the cross on the days the Church keeps it. Francis' addition lets the same words be prayed in any church, on any day, by anyone who walks in. Francis of Assisi, *Testament*, *FA:ED* 1, 124–25; Leonhard Lehmann, *Franziskus – Meister des Gebets: Kommentar zu den Gebeten des heiligen Franz von Assisi*, Bücher franziskanischer Geistigkeit 32 (Werl: Dietrich-Coelde-Verlag, 1989), 48–59.

The friars in the fresco kneel at Calvary and pray these words. The friars in the choir, a few paces away, kneel in the Basilica and say it still. The presence of their brothers frescoed into Calvary reminds the psalm-chanting friars that Jesus Himself prayed the psalms from the cross,[274] and that when they take up those same psalms it is Christ Jesus who prays them, their voices harmonizing with the melody He has sung through the ages.[275]

This is not the private prayer of the friars, but the prayer of the entire Church, offered for and with those who cannot raise their own voices. In choir the Cordbearers carry into prayer the poor and marginalized, the grieving, the exhausted, and those who have lost sight of praise. Wayfarers are carried with them in that chanting and may never know that, for a time, someone else has lent a voice to their mystical journey.[276]

Before continuing to the Upper Basilica, wayfarers might take a moment to glance over their shoulders at these frescoes and hear the quiet chanting of the Cordbearers in the choir. Echoing down through the generations, their song becomes a prayerful invitation to put out into the depths of the sea and breathe in the mystery, to touch and believe in His wounds, to drink from the life He pours out, and to gaze upon His face.[277]

Listening to their song, we begin to recognize how much this journey has changed within us. We have learned to see, hear, touch, and taste the goodness of God, yet something

[274] The cry from the cross is the opening line of Psalm 22 (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34), and a psalm was commonly summoned by its first words. This one does not end where it begins. Its second half turns to praise: the sufferer declares that God "did not hide his face" from the afflicted one but heard him when he cried, and the psalm closes by promising that a people yet unborn will be told what the Lord has done. Benedict XVI reads Jesus' cry as His taking the whole psalm upon Himself: a prayer that passes through the experience of abandonment into trust, praise, and deliverance. Pope Benedict XVI, "General Audience," February 8, 2012.

[275] The Council teaches this of the Divine Office: Christ Jesus, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, carried into this earthly exile the hymn sung eternally in heaven, and He joins the whole human community to Himself in that singing, so that when the Office is rightly prayed it is "the very prayer which Christ Himself, together with His body, addresses to the Father." Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 83–84.

[276] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), part 1. Frankl, a psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz, observed that the prisoner who lost his grip on the future lost his grip on life, and that the first collapse came before the second. What the friars in choir hold, for those who cannot pray, is a future held on their behalf, keeping hope alive when others can no longer find it.

[277] Franciscan formation of the senses does not end in heightened perception. It ends in prayer. The eye that has learned to linger before a painted face, the ear that has learned to hear a psalm beneath the noise of the world, the hand that has touched stone, bread, wound, and water, all are being schooled for communion. Franciscan art did not simply decorate sacred space. It trained the body to enter more fully into worship. Images could awaken an interior hearing of heavenly praise, while illuminated antiphonaries joined color, text, musical notation, voice, gesture, liturgical time, and communal memory into a single act of prayer. The senses were gathered rather than scattered. What had been seen and heard became something sung together, and what was sung together was meant to reshape the life of the one singing. This is where the long sensory journey through the Basilica has been leading. The goal is not to leave with more impressions, but with senses made more capable of recognizing Christ Jesus, receiving Him in communion, and loving what He loves in the world beyond the church doors. Roberto Cobianchi, "Cithara Angelica: Experiencing God Through Music in Franciscan Imagery," in *Aesthetic Theology in the Franciscan Tradition: The Senses and the Experience of God in Art*, ed. Xavier Seubert and Oleg Bychkov (New York: Routledge, 2020), 163–67; Trinita Kennedy, "Activating the Senses, Preparing the Soul: Illuminated Antiphonaries for Franciscan Use in Late Medieval Italy," in *Aesthetic Theology in the Franciscan Tradition: The Senses and the Experience of God in Art*, ed. Xavier Seubert and Oleg Bychkov (New York: Routledge, 2020), 186–87, 197–98.

more has been taking place. Through, with, and in Christ Jesus, lives are being drawn into communion with God and neighbor.

Ascending the staircase in the left transept, look just ahead and upward to see the Risen Lord, our Brother, and hear once more the invitation given to every wayfarer:

> "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, we remember the *spiritual joys* and *great things* promised at the threshold. What we have received along the way now asks to be carried into the lives of those who await us.

Throughout this journey, Christ Jesus has walked beside us, sometimes recognized and sometimes unseen. Now, like our brother Francis, we discover that the One who has accompanied us all along is more than a companion on the road. He is the Way.[278]



[278] Boulding, *Gateway to Resurrection*, 44.



PROVISIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

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 thirteenth century often returned to the same figure of thought, with virtue given a woman's face and name and the soul's interior life imagined as a castle. 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 in the early thirteenth century for a religious audience that included anchorites and enclosed women. J. R. R. Tolkien, better known to most readers for entirely different pilgrimages, spent decades of scholarly labor on this text and its dialect. He left behind his own translation, *Soul's Ward*, only now reaching print in a critical edition.[279]

In Tolkien's rendering, the homily pictures the soul as a house under siege, with Prudence keeping the door and Strength beside her to defend it, the same two offices, discernment and courage, that our *vele* distribute between Lady Prudence in the Obedience allegory and Lady Fortitude in the Chastity allegory. Reason governs the household, Will must learn to follow, and the five senses stand at their appointed watchposts. Read beside the frescoes, the kinship is hard to miss. Both imagine the interior life as something seen, guarded, practiced, and learned through the senses.

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*. Grosseteste has a direct claim here. As the first lector to the Oxford Greyfriars, he helped shape England's earliest Franciscan scholars in the same years his theological imagination was giving form to the poem.

Its Four Daughters of God, Mercy, Truth, Justice, and Peace, dispute the fate of fallen humanity until the King's Son enters their quarrel, while Mary herself becomes the Castle of Love, guarded by virtues against the powers that would breach it.[280] Here too theology

[279] Tolkien's engagement with *Sawles Warde* belongs to his scholarly work on early Middle English rather than to the imaginative world of his later fiction. That distinction helps keep the comparison in its proper place. The value here lies in the medieval homily itself and in Tolkien's effort to recover its language for modern readers, not in reading Assisi through Middle-earth. Andoni Cossio and Nelson Goering, "J. R. R. Tolkien's *Soul's Ward*: A Critical Edition of His Unpublished Translation of the Early Middle English Homily *Sawles Warde*," *The Review of English Studies* (2026), https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgag038.

[280] No line of dependence between Grosseteste and the Assisi fresco is being proposed. The comparison belongs instead to a wider medieval symbolic language in which color, architecture, flowers, and personified virtues could make interior and theological realities visible. Grosseteste's castle is vermilion above and white within, joining Charity and virginity in the same imagined structure. The red and white flowers beside Lady Chastity and in Lady Poverty's garden belong to a comparable symbolic world. Such parallels are best used as evidence of a shared visual and devotional grammar rather than of direct borrowing. Virginia Tuttle Clayton, *Gardens on Paper: Prints and Drawings, 1200–1900* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 24; Dana M. Symons, introduction to Robert Grosseteste, *Le chasteau d'amour*, in *The Middle English Castle of Love and Robert Grosseteste's Anglo-Norman Original, Le chasteau d'amour*, ed. and trans. Dana M. Symons (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2025), 15; Robert Grosseteste, *Le chasteau d'amour*, 217, lines 218–35, 617–29.

is given walls, gates, colors, bodies, voices, and senses. Grosseteste's castle is not Lady Chastity's tower, nor are his women the ladies of the *vele*, but they belong to the same medieval instinct to make the spiritual life visible and memorable. He makes salvation something to be seen, heard, smelled, touched, and tasted.

I offer these two companions as an invitation, not a homework assignment. Wayfarers who linger before the *vele* may find, in *Sawles Warde* and the *Château d'Amour*, the same guarded house, the same watchful sisters, and the same conviction that the soul's ascent is best imagined as a place worth defending and a love worth winning. Curious wayfarers may recognize something of Lorenzetti's little monkey here too, still straining at the leash for a better look. Two texts, one painted world, and a shared medieval imagination. Read them together, and you may find, as I have, a wider sense of the good company in which Lady Poverty, Lady Chastity, and Lady Obedience have always kept us.



Conversations along the Way

These conversations follow the order of *Wayfarers*. Each set of five draws upon a section of the book and its footnotes, moving from the frescoes into prayer, daily life, fraternity, and the needs of the world. They are offered as food for the journey, to nourish conversation with the Lord and with those who walk beside you. There is no need to use every question or to reach every answer. As a wayfarer, a mystic, keep walking and share with those you meet the *spiritual joys* and *great things* you have seen, heard, smelled, touched, and tasted along the Way.

These questions may be used for personal reflection or shared conversation in a fraternity, formation house, religious community, parish, classroom, or other gathering. No group needs to address every question. Those guiding the conversation should choose what suits the community's stage of formation, culture, age, and circumstances. Some questions invite personal disclosure; no one should be required to speak beyond what can be shared freely and safely. Silence, too, may be part of the conversation. The purpose is not to arrive at identical answers, but to listen together for how the Gospel is asking to be lived.

Welcome to the Hill of Paradise

1. The place where Assisi once put its outcasts to death became the "Hill of Paradise." Where in your own life, or your community's, has a place or a situation of shame or death been turned by God into ground for new life, and what did that turning cost?

2. Francis greets everyone at the door not with a demand but with an invitation: "Halt your step and be joyful." Why do you think God wants joy, rather than duty or fear, at the very beginning of the road? Where do you tend to rush past such invitations?

3. The inscription's word is *viator*, "wayfarer," one always on the way. How does thinking of yourself as always "on the way" change how you carry yourself through your ordinary days?

4. Gregory IX raised the Basilica for his friend, Francis, turning a hill of shame into a hill of paradise. How do you keep faith with friends you have loved and lost? Is there a "Hill of Paradise," some way of honoring a person's memory, that you have built, or still could build?

5. If you unfurled a scroll over the door of your own home or workplace, welcoming whoever enters, what would it say, and would it sound more like a warning, or like Francis' "you will see *great things*?"

Alexandria, Sinai, and the Holy Land in Assisi

1. The Saint Catherine Chapel invites the imagination to wonder whether distant sacred geography could somehow draw near in Assisi. Where has an ordinary place near you become holy ground because of what God did there?

2. Saint Catherine remains "a companion for those seeking spiritual understanding through questions, discussion, and debate." When has an honest argument or a hard

question actually drawn you closer to God rather than away? Where do you sense the Church is afraid of questions?

3. A footnote follows an old tradition connecting the tomb in the narthex with John of Brienne, King of Jerusalem, who is thought to have encountered Francis in the world of the Fifth Crusade. What does it suggest that memories formed amid crusade and conquest should meet here beside the grave of the poor man who crossed battle lines unarmed?

4. The passage deliberately engages every sense (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste) so as not to miss "graced opportunities for conversation along the way." Which of your senses do you most neglect in prayer, and how might waking it up change the conversations you have with God and with others?

5. Saint Catherine's chapel offers a place to gather oneself before continuing through the Basilica. Every journey needs somewhere to stop. Where do people find such a place in your parish, fraternity, or home? Is there room there for someone who arrives carrying grief or questions they are not yet ready to speak about?

The Master of Saint Francis: Passion and Compassion

1. The whole nave is painted as water you wade into: ankle, knee, waist, then swimming through grief before you surface at the Resurrection. Where are you on that slope right now, paddling at the edge or out in the deep? What keeps you in the shallows?

2. Francis and Jesus are both shown stripping: Francis handing even his clothes back to his father, Jesus handing His to the soldiers. What are you still holding that you sense God is asking you to hand back, and what makes it hard?

3. A footnote reminds us that "compassion" literally means "a suffering with." Francis did not merely help the leper. He entered into the leper's world. Whom are you tempted to help from a safe distance rather than suffer with, and what would closing that distance look like?

4. Francis learned who he was becoming by looking at Christ Jesus. When you look at the Lord in these frescoes, what do you recognize in Him that you would like to see take shape in your own life? Who has already helped that likeness grow in you?

5. Anthony of Padua preached, "When actions speak, words come alive." A footnote also calls action on behalf of justice a "constitutive dimension" of proclaiming the Gospel. Where are you full of words but empty of actions? What is one thing your deeds could say this week that your words cannot?

The Spirituality of Architecture: Into the Mystic

1. Looking toward the apse, the book sees the strong yet gentle friar lowering his cord from heaven "like an arm reaching over the side of the vessel" to draw a struggling wayfarer aboard. Who reached over the edge for you when you were struggling in the water, and whom are you being asked to reach for now?

2. Hebrews contrasts the terror of the mountain of fire with the joy of the heavenly city. Do you experience faith more as the fearful mountain or the festal gathering, and what would move you from one to the other?

3. The book says, "Christ Jesus is the true captain of the ship." Where are you trying to captain the ship yourself rather than entrusting the voyage to Him? What storms have you steered yourself into as a result?

4. The Basilica places poverty, chastity, and obedience directly above the altar. The vows belong by profession to consecrated religious, but the evangelical counsels they embody speak to every Christian. What might simplicity, self-giving love, and attentive listening look like in your own circumstances?

5. The Church is pictured as a ship carrying many people toward the same shore. No one aboard can make the whole voyage alone. What has someone else brought to your journey that you could never have supplied for yourself? How might your community learn to travel more like a crew than a collection of passengers?

The Master of the Vele: A Meditation on Consecration

1. The name of the master who painted these vows has not come down to us with certainty, yet his work still speaks seven centuries later. What good work might you be called to do without needing your name attached to it?

2. The book calls the vows "prophetic acts," public signs that point beyond themselves. Every Christian makes promises. What does your life prophesy to those watching? What future does it point them toward?

3. The three vows surround the altar, where the Eucharist becomes a transforming communion in which the faithful are called to become what they receive. What would change in how you approach Communion if you expected what you receive to reshape the way you live?

4. Poverty, chastity, and obedience can sound like renunciation, yet the book insists they are really about freedom and love. Which of the three most attracts you, and which most unsettles you? What is that reaction telling you?

5. Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience are not presented as abstractions but given women's faces, gestures, relationships, and stories. What changes when a virtue is encountered as someone to know and love rather than merely as a rule to obey?

Lady Poverty

1. The book imagines two daughters of Lady Hope, Anger and Courage: "anger that the world is the way it is, and courage to act so that it does not remain that way." Where does injustice rightly make you angry, and has that anger grown into courage, or is it sitting still?

2. In the fresco, three men have their hands full, while Francis offers a ring to Lady Poverty. Recall a time when letting something go made room for a gift you had not expected. What did you discover about freedom, and what might those three men have understood if they had opened their hands?

3. The book sets Lady Poverty against Mr. Potter, whose single-minded pursuit of wealth blinds him to the dignity of his neighbors. Where do you see that "Mr. Potter" logic, things valued over people, in your own habits or in the systems you take part in?

4. Dante imagines Bernard running barefoot toward the life Francis had chosen, thinking himself too slow, so pleasing had Lady Poverty become. When have you encountered someone whose simplicity appeared not burdensome but free? What had that person ceased needing in order to become joyful?

5. A footnote from Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* teaches that gift and gratuitousness belong inside economic life itself, not as charity added once the business is done. Where, in your work or in the ways you exchange, use, and share material goods, could "the logic of gift" shape the exchange rather than merely follow it?

Lady Chastity

1. The book does not define Chastity as abstinence. Lady Chastity "wishes to be the companion of everyone," the virtue that "orders body and spirit toward self-giving love." By that measure, where is your love well-ordered, and where has it become possessive, using, or fearful?

2. Lady Penance bears the marks of the discipline she has already used upon herself. Only then does she turn toward Amor. What does this suggest about the difference between correcting another person and beginning with our own conversion? Have you known someone whose example invited you to change without their ever having to tell you to do so?

3. Most of the action in Lady Chastity's fresco takes place outside the castle walls. Who is welcomed into the life of your community, and who remains at its gates? What might someone standing outside notice about the way those inside understand love?

4. The order of love does not rank one person's human worth above another. The book insists that nearness is a fact about our reach, not a measure of anyone's worth. Where have you let the limits of your reach harden into a judgment about who counts? What is the difference between admitting you cannot help everyone and quietly ranking people?

5. The young knight receives a standard from Lady Purity and a shield from Lady Fortitude. Love, the book suggests, needs both purity of intention and strength of heart. Where in your relationships do you need more tenderness, and where do you need greater firmness?

Lady Obedience

1. The book roots "obedience" in *oboedire*, "to listen." Before it is ever about doing what you are told, it is about listening deeply. Whose voice has helped you hear something you could not have discovered alone? What does it take to listen when another person's words challenge what you thought you knew?

2. A yoke often joined two animals so that they could bear together what neither could carry alone. The book therefore imagines Christ Jesus walking beside the friar on his own Emmaus road. How does that change what obedience means to you?

3. The fresco stages a chapter house where God's will is found by listening together, and a footnote notes that the Church now asks whether her own councils and committees are real or merely nominal. Think of a group you belong to that is meant to decide things together. Is the listening genuine, or is the outcome settled before the meeting begins? What would it cost to change that?

4. Lady Prudence holds a mirror before the friar receiving the yoke. He must recognize the person he is before he can discern what God is asking him to become. Who has helped you see something true about yourself that you had overlooked? How did that recognition change a decision you made?

5. God's hand holds Francis' rope loosely, honoring free will, never yanking. If obedience is finally a free "yes" rather than a leash, what is one thing you sense God gently drawing you toward that you have been resisting?

Francis in Glory and the Book of Revelation

1. Christ on the throne says, "See, I am making all things new." What in your life feels too broken to be made new, and what would it mean to entrust it to the One seated on the throne?

2. We brace for the Lion of Judah and instead meet "the Lamb standing yet slain." Where do you expect God to show up in power, when He may instead be present in wounded gentleness? Where have you missed Him by looking for the lion?

3. Brother Pacifico saw a throne left empty by pride and reserved for a man who called himself the greatest sinner in the world. What do you make of Francis receiving the very throne that pride had lost? Have you known someone whose humility revealed a greatness that titles or accomplishments could never bestow?

4. A footnote quotes Irenaeus: "For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God." Who is the most fully alive person you know, and what makes them so? What is deadening you, and what would make you more alive?

5. In this vault Francis does nothing at all. He is clothed, filled, accompanied, awaited. "A virtue makes us able to act, while a gift makes us able to be acted upon. Giving asks something of us. Receiving asks us to relinquish control." What are you still trying to

earn from God that He may be asking you simply to receive? What makes it difficult to leave your hands open?

The New Accents of Franciscan Spirituality

1. The Cordbearers brought with particular force the image of a God not held at a distance, but near enough to be born into a household, to eat at our tables, to die within our reach, and to rise and come looking for His friends. Where do you still keep God at a polite distance from your everyday life?

2. "O taste and see that the Lord is good." Faith here is not first an idea but something tasted. Where have you actually tasted God's goodness, and where are you settling for merely thinking about Him?

3. He ate with a man who had grown rich by cheating his neighbors, with a woman the whole village had already labeled, with the friend who would deny Him and the friend who had already settled on a price. They called Him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners, and He never denied the company He kept. Whose company would cost you something? Who is not welcome at your table?

4. The angel speaks, and then waits. Nothing moves until Mary answers, "let it be with me according to your word." What invitation are you, or your community, still discerning? What would help you listen until the answer becomes free, faithful, and possible?

5. "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Where has someone's self-emptying made you richer, and whom might your own becoming poor enrich?

Preaching with Pictures

1. The friars preached with "everyday examples drawn from nature or the daily routines of ordinary people," meeting listeners in a language they already spoke. When has a homily, a book, a film, or a song unlocked the Gospel for you precisely because it met you where you actually live?

2. A footnote calls the friars to stay "attentive to historical, social, and cultural changes, which call for new forms of presence and witness," reading the signs of the times. What are the signs of the times in your world right now that the Gospel most needs to speak to?

3. The friars did not collect stories only to furnish sermons. They used them to educate new brothers and form the Order's shared identity. What stories does your own community tell about itself, whether a friary, parish, family, or another community you belong to? What do those stories teach newcomers to notice, value, and do, and whose experience may still be missing?

4. Francis called his friars jesters of the Lord. Imagine you have three minutes in the town square, with a story, a song, a joke, or something everyone has seen on a screen this week. What would you use to open a conversation about the Gospel, and why?

5. Francis' preaching was credible because people could see something of his friendship with God in the way he lived. What made that friendship visible? What would make your own friendship with God visible to others?

The Heart of Franciscan Spirituality: The Crib & The Cross

1. In the two transepts, the crib and the cross belong to one love. Christ Jesus receives our humanity in Bethlehem and gives Himself completely on Calvary. What changes when we understand the Incarnation not simply as the beginning of a story, but as God's desire to share our life? Where have you recognized that desire in something quite ordinary?

2. Christ "did not cling to the privileges of His divinity, but took the form of a servant and was born among us." What privilege or advantage has life given you that others around you may not share, and how might God be asking you to use it in service rather than as a source of distance?

3. A footnote from Aquinas says the Son "assumed our nature in order that by becoming man he might make men gods." What would it mean to live not merely as someone trying to become a little better, but as someone being drawn by grace into the life of God?

4. At the Last Supper, Christ Jesus kneels before Peter, who finds it difficult to accept His service. Why might receiving another person's care require as much trust as offering our own? When has someone surprised you by allowing you to help them, or by offering help you did not know how to receive?

5. The Flight into Egypt shows the Holy Family as refugees; Pius XII called them "the archetype of every refugee family." Where do you encounter the crib of Christ in the displaced and the fleeing today, and what does that ask of you?

The Scourging at the Pillar: A Moral Allegory

1. High above the violence, Pilate's wife stands with her child. She had spoken up for the innocence of Jesus, but could not stop what followed. Where have you named something as wrong and then found yourself unable, or unwilling, to stay with what came next?

2. Carved high upon the pillar, a hound pursues a hare too weak to turn and fight. Its wisdom is to run toward the Rock beneath it, Jesus bound to the pillar and being beaten. What is chasing you at present, and where are you running?

3. Matthew does not name Pilate's wife, but Eastern Christian tradition gives her back her name, Claudia Procula, and remembers her among the saints. Whose courage do you

remember even when others have forgotten their name? When might one sentence spoken at the right moment be enough to leave a mark on another life?

4. The preaching friar asks, "What have you come here to see?" Everyone in the fresco is looking, but they do not all see in the same way. What drew you to look at Christ Jesus, and what has seeing Him begun to ask of you?

5. The little girl holds the leash while the monkey strains to see what the adults might rather hide. What questions do children ask about injustice that adults find difficult to answer? How can we tell them the truth without teaching them to look away?

The Last Supper: Dishes and Toast

1. Lorenzetti opens the holy room into a kitchen full of dishes, animals, servants, and fretting. Where do you still divide prayer from ordinary life, as though God were easier to receive in chapel than amid the clatter, worry, and work of your day?

2. In this saying, Luke leaves the betrayer unnamed, referring only to "that person," and the book allows that opening to turn toward the wayfarer. Is that person me? Where have you betrayed a friend, or betrayed Christ, even in something small?

3. "Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate." His table fellowship made visible the Kingdom He proclaimed. What does the way your community gathers, celebrates, and shares its resources reveal about who it believes belongs in God's Kingdom?

4. Friar Roger Bacon studied how the eye receives light, while Pietro Lorenzetti painted how light falls upon the ordinary creatures of a kitchen. When has learning how something works deepened, rather than diminished, your sense of wonder? How might paying closer attention to the created world change the way you recognize God within it?

5. A footnote from John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* says the dignity of work is measured not by the task but by the person doing it. The servant bent over a dish is no less an image of God than the apostle at table, and human work continues God's own creating. Whose labor do you quietly rank as "lesser," and how would seeing that worker as an image of God change the way you treat them?

Despair and Hope: The Other Side of the Story

1. The Basilica places Judas' despair and Francis beside defeated Death at corresponding stairheads. The image of Judas is not allowed to stand alone. Across the transept another side of the story waits. Where have you been tempted to believe that your own story was finished when God may still have been opening a future you could not yet see?

2. A footnote turns to Origen, who allowed the possibility that Judas repented and sought forgiveness, leaving his final disposition to God. Is there anyone you have

quietly decided is past mercy? What inside you resists the possibility that God's mercy may reach farther than your judgment does?

3. In July 2026 the Bishops of the Philippines asked forgiveness of families who had been made to feel unwelcome in the Church after a death by suicide, and told them plainly not to lose hope. When has a community you belong to added to someone's grief instead of carrying it? What would it take for your parish, or your family, to be a place where the bereaved are met rather than avoided?

4. Francis called death his Sister and sang to her. What is your honest relationship with death (fear, denial, bargaining, peace), and what would it take to sing even one line toward Sister Death?

5. The crown is falling from Death's head, and Francis points toward the risen Christ. What might a community look like if it lived more confidently in the hope of the Resurrection? How would that hope change the way it accompanies the dying and those who mourn?

Francis with His Mother of Mercy

1. Because they are surrounded by angels, the image naturally calls Franciscan minds to Saint Mary of the Angels, the Porziuncola, the place Francis loved as home. What place, or person, is home for you in the way the Porziuncola was for Francis?

2. Marian devotion is called "the golden thread" running through the whole Order's history. Who is the quiet, faithful "thread," often unnoticed, that has held your own life of faith together?

3. The book suggests that wayfarers who want to linger before the Madonna dei Tramonti would do well to arrive at sunset in the warmer months. What good thing in your life can only be received by waiting for the right time rather than seizing it?

4. Francis learned to receive mercy and begin again, and what he received did not remain with him. What mercy have you received that has changed the way you treat another person? Who helped you recognize that mercy, and how has it found its way into someone else's life through you?

5. Francis is received beside Mary, not as a solitary saint but as a brother welcomed into a communion of mercy. Who has taught you how to receive another person without first requiring that person to prove worthy of belonging?

Rebuild My House

1. Francis heard the command "rebuild my house" and took it with his hands first, beginning with the crumbling chapels before him. What concrete, hands-on work is in front of you right now that you have been tempted to spiritualize instead of simply doing?

2. One child survives a fall, while another is brought back to life from the rubble. One family is spared a funeral; another has already begun preparing one. What might these two families have to teach us about gratitude, grief, and the different ways we recognize mercy?

3. In repairing the ruined chapels, Francis was also repairing "the ruined house of himself," the temple where the Spirit dwells. What part of your own house is falling into ruin, and what would it mean to begin the repair one stone at a time?

4. The Crucifixion and the raising of the youth of Suessa hold death differently. One asks us to remain in hope beside suffering that cannot be taken away; the other dares to show life breaking back into a house already mourning. When have you needed someone simply to remain beside you in suffering, and where have you unexpectedly seen life return after you thought the story was finished?

5. "The names of the disasters change, but the rubble remains," the book says, and the rebuilding "waits, in part, for our hands." A footnote turns to Leo XIV's image of Jerusalem's ruined walls, where each family is given its stretch to rebuild. Name one collapse in your own time, near or far. Which stretch is yours, and what is one stone you could lay this week?

The Choir and Calvary

1. From the choir, Christ crucified remains within view as the friars pray. If someone studied the use of time, space, attention, and resources in your community, what would appear to stand at its center? What might need to be rearranged so that Christ becomes visible from every place?

2. Here ordinary worshipers encountered Jesus visibly suffering and dying on the cross rather than enthroned in distant glory. Why do you think we still prefer the glorious Christ to the suffering one, and what do we lose by looking away from His wounds?

3. Hebrews invites us to "approach the throne of grace with boldness" to "receive mercy." Do you come to God boldly, timidly, or not at all, and what makes boldness before God hard for you?

4. The friars in choir carry into prayer those whose lives are so difficult that they cannot raise their own voices. Who in your life cannot pray right now, from exhaustion, grief, illness, or anger, and what would it mean to carry their prayer for them this week?

5. At the beginning of this journey, the mystic was described as someone who cannot stop walking. Here at the end, the book says that the mystic learns to recognize God in the ordinary world and remain there long enough to love. What have you learned to see differently on this journey, and where is Christ Jesus, the Way, asking you to keep walking now?

A Note for Curious Wayfarers

1. Tolkien spent years studying a medieval text most of his readers had probably never heard of. What obscure book, image, person, or question has unexpectedly opened a new world for you? What first made you curious enough to look?

2. In *Sawles Warde*, the soul becomes a guarded household, with Prudence at the door and Strength ready to defend it. If your soul is a house, who or what is keeping watch at the door right now, and what has been getting in?

3. In the *Château d'Amour*, Mercy, Truth, Justice, and Peace quarrel over a condemned person until Peace and the King's Son bring the dispute toward resolution. Which of those virtues most often pull against one another in you, and what might reconciliation between them look like?

4. These medieval texts, like the frescoes, imagine the spiritual life as an adventure: a castle to defend, a love to win, a journey home. Where has your faith felt more like maintenance than adventure, and what might make it a quest again?

5. The final page does not end the pilgrimage. What practice of prayer, fraternity, service, study, or care for creation will help you continue walking? Name one practice, one companion, and one time when you will begin.



Crucifisso Blu, Museo del Tesoro del Sacro Convento, Assisi
Originally hung in the sanctuary of the Lower Basilica

APPENDIX
USING *WAYFARERS* IN FRANCISCAN FORMATION

A practical guide for Franciscan formators,
faith community leaders, and those who preach or teach

This guide begins with a simple assumption. The person leading a group may be opening *Wayfarers* for the first time along with everyone else. That is fine. The book does not require an art historian, a medievalist, or a professor in the room. People can look at a fresco, listen to the Gospel and Franciscan tradition beneath it, and begin a conversation.

Initial and ongoing Franciscan formation remains a natural home for the book, but the same method can serve a parish group, a religion classroom, a campus ministry gathering, or someone preparing to preach or offer a reflection. Remember, *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipentis recipitur*, that which is received is received in the mode of the receiver.

You do not need to use this entire guide. Begin with one image, one section of the book, or one question. First comes the information. Look carefully, learn what is there, and understand the story the image is saying. Formation begins when we stay with it long enough to hear the Gospel and Franciscan tradition within it and to question our own assumptions, desires, and ways of sensing God and the world around us. Transformation asks what must now become different in the way we live, pray, choose, and encounter others. Cover less if needed. What is received should have time to shape and reshape a life. Return to the same image when needed. The fresco will not have changed. The person looking at it may have. As with watching a movie for the second, third, or fourteenth time, there is always something new waiting to surprise us.

1. Begin with the picture, not the explanation

Whenever possible, begin by looking. If the group is in Assisi, stand before the fresco. If not, use the photograph in the book. Give those gazing a minute or two of silence before anyone explains anything. Ask only: What do you notice? Where does your eye go first? What is happening? What surprises you? This prevents formation from becoming a lecture before it becomes an encounter. The image should be allowed to work before the words tell us what it means. This also levels the playing field.

2. Read the prose straight through

For a first encounter, read the main text without stopping for every footnote. The prose is the journey. It tells the story, connects it to Scripture and Francis, and usually turns the wall toward ordinary life. Let the movement remain whole before taking it apart.

Do not worry if every theological term is not immediately understood. The book normally translates the difficult idea into something concrete before asking the reader to carry the technical vocabulary. *Haecceitas* names the unrepeatability of this person. *Ordo amoris* asks us to begin with the person God has actually placed within reach. The absolute primacy of Christ means that the crib was always coming, and the cross is what that love cost when it entered a wounded world.

3. Mine the footnotes for a second book

The footnotes should not be viewed as scholarly homework. They are there for enrichment. Choose the notes that deepen the formation theme of the day. Some are easy. Others introduce a name, source, controversy, or theological term people may have never met. That is not a problem. Formation should sometimes leave us with something worth looking up.

A useful question after reading a note is: What did this add that the prose did not? Did it give the primary Franciscan source? Did it show that an interpretation is disputed? Did it connect the fresco to a Rule or Constitution? Did it bring Catholic social teaching into the conversation? Did it open a door to the Christian East? Did it distinguish what is painted from what is creatively imagined?

Pay particular attention when a note says that an identification is uncertain, that a parallel does not prove direct dependence, or that an imaginative reading belongs to the author. Those are not scholarly disclaimers to hurry past. They teach a Franciscan discipline. Love the tradition enough not to make things up about it, but to be confident enough to draw conclusions and use one's imagination to color inside the lines of possibility.

4. Let the vows become a school of life

The three *vele* can provide the center of a formation cycle for religious, but they also speak beyond religious profession. Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience are not treated as rules imposed from outside. They are responses to a love already received. The evangelical counsels take one form in religious profession, but the Gospel freedom they teach belongs to every baptized Christian.

Poverty

What am I holding too tightly? What does *sine proprio* ask of the way I receive, use, and share things? How does poverty make us more available to one another, freer within family, community, and work, and more attentive to the poor?

Chastity

How do I want to be loved? Do I look at another person as someone to receive or something to consume? How are the senses being trained for freedom, reverence, fidelity, and self-giving love? The question belongs to celibates and married people alike.

Obedience

Can I listen beyond myself? Can I become quiet before I speak? Do I understand authority, fraternity, family, community, and Church as places of discernment rather than command and compliance?

Some questions will touch places that are too personal for a group. No one should be pressed to speak about relationships, sexuality, family wounds, money, conscience, or failure simply because the discussion has reached them. A good formator/teacher knows when a conversation belongs somewhere quieter, perhaps in spiritual direction, confession, or another private setting.

The book eventually moves to three ordinary verbs: sharing, caring, and listening. Do not rush past their simplicity. These are daily tests of whether Franciscan life is becoming real.

5. Use JPIC as the consequence of conversion, not an extra topic

Do not wait until the end of a program to add a separate justice, peace, and integrity of creation lesson. *Wayfarers* treats Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) as a consequence of learning to see differently. The fresco first forms the gaze. Then the changed gaze recognizes the neighbor, the poor, the wounded, the stranger, and creation.

When Lady Poverty confronts possession, move naturally toward the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, the universal destination of goods, and the common good. When the Holy Family flees Herod, allow the refugee family of the Gospel to stand beside displaced families today. When the horsemen appear, let the Gospels answer domination, war, hunger, and death with service, peacemaking, a shared table, and self-giving love. JPIC then appears where it belongs, within discipleship, not beside it.

6. Keep formation rooted in the Franciscan family's own sources

One of the strengths of the second book of footnotes is that the principal teachers are not modern commentators. Again and again the notes return to Francis and Clare, the early biographies, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, the Rule, the Constitutions, Scripture, and the Church's social teaching. Scholarship helps us read the walls. The Franciscan sources teach us how to live through them.

The Conventual Friars can open their Constitutions when the notes cite them. For other religious, allow the frescoes and material of this book to dialogue with your own Constitutions in the same manner. For Secular Franciscans, bring your Rule and General Constitutions into the conversation. Let the common Franciscan instinct emerge through the form of life actually professed by the people in the room.

7. A rhythm for a formation session, easily adaptable for other circumstances

A ninety-minute session can remain very simple:

- 5 minutes — Begin in silence before the image. No explanation.
- 10 minutes — Let each person say what they notice.
- 15 minutes — Read the selected prose aloud, taking turns.
- 15 minutes — Read the related Scripture and one primary Franciscan source from the footnotes.
- 15 minutes — Mine two or three footnotes. Explain only what the group actually needs.
- 20 minutes — Move from the fresco to fraternity, community, family, ministry, JPIC, or a concrete experience from the week.
- 10 minutes — End with one question from Conversations along the Way, followed by silence or prayer.

8. From fresco to homily or reflection

This book can also serve people who preach, offer reflections, lead retreats, or prepare parish catechesis. The idea is not that the material should be repeated verbatim. Rather, its method should be borrowed. That includes the culture people already carry with them. A song, a film, a novel, a game, a joke, or something that happened that week may become the doorway through which the Gospel is heard. Remember the early friars. They took what people already knew: a bird, a meal, a joke, a song, a market, a family quarrel. Then they let it carry the Gospel. The frescoes work the same way. One visible detail becomes the doorway that will change with the people in front of us. What waits beyond it is the same first announcement: Christ Jesus, crucified and risen, alive beside us. Formation does not leave that announcement behind. It keeps opening it anew.

A simple way to build a reflection

- Point — Name one thing people can actually see: the cloak, the yoke, the roses and lilies, the dog and hare, the empty hands, the table, the rope, the Lamb.
- Open — Connect that visible thing to Scripture, Francis, Clare, or another Franciscan source.
- Turn — Ask what the image reveals about the life people are living now: family, community, money, power, grief, work, migration, violence, care for creation.
- Invite — End with one concrete Gospel invitation, not a summary of the lecture.

A good reflection may be three minutes long. It does not need every source in the footnotes. The scholarship protects the preacher from saying something careless. It does not need to appear in the homily or reflection. The footnote is where the work is done. What is preached should come from that work, not sound like it.

9. A potential path for *Wayfarers* in eight sessions

1. *Wayfarer and the Senses* — Begin with the Preface, How to Use This Book, and Introduction, and let the group learn the book's basic movement: look, remember, and walk with God.

2. *Passion and Compassion* — Stay with the paired walls and ask what it means to suffer with Christ rather than explain suffering away. Let Francis, the stigmata, and the road to Emmaus carry the conversation.

3. *Poverty* — Stay with Lady Poverty and ask what it means to live *sine proprio* when possessions, comfort, and even our own ideas start to possess us. Let fraternity, the poor, and the common good keep the question concrete.

4. *Chastity* — Look up at Lady Chastity and ask how purity of heart trains the senses for freedom and self-giving love. Let the gate, the flowers, Penance, and nonviolence widen the conversation beyond celibacy.

5. *Obedience* — Sit in Lady Obedience's chapter house and practice listening before speaking. Let the yoke, Humility, Prudence, synodality, and authority ask how a community discerns its way home.

6. *Francis in Glory and Revelation* — Follow the three vows into the fourth *vela* and ask what Francis finally receives rather than achieves. Let Revelation open into worship, lordship, and the way Christians live together.

7. *Crib and Cross* — Walk from crib to cross and let the refugee Holy Family, the primacy of Christ, and self-emptying love reveal the one movement of the Incarnation and Passion.

8. *Table, Rebuilding, Choir* — Come finally to the table, the rebuilding of the Church, and the choir. Ask how Eucharist, service, nonviolence, solidarity, prayer, and hope send the wayfarer back into ordinary life.

10. Do not turn every footnote into a class

Some notes are miniature seminars. The note on the three winged women moves through Milvia Bollati, Gregory the Great, John Climacus, Isaac of Nineveh, and the limits of what can be claimed about the Assisi fresco. Choose one thread and follow it well. The rest can wait for the person who wants to go farther.

The same is true of Duns Scotus, medieval canon law, the Franciscan poverty controversies, and disputed artistic identifications. Let the difficult note awaken curiosity rather than anxiety. A good outcome is not that everyone can repeat the note. Better that someone asks, 'Who was John Climacus?' or 'Why did the Franciscans argue about poverty?' and then goes looking for the answer.

11. Let the members of the community teach one another

Do not let the formator or leader become the only voice. Assign one footnote to different participants or students before a session. Ask each person to return with three things: what the source says, how it helps us read the fresco, and what question it raises for Franciscan life today. Five minutes is enough.

Another useful practice is to let someone choose one image from the section and preach or reflect it back to the group in three minutes. No academic language is required. Point to something visible, connect it to Scripture or Francis, and ask one question of the community. This is very close to the way the early friars preached with pictures.

12. Keep the book connected to prayer and common life

If the session ends only with new information, something has gone wrong. Francis blessed Anthony's teaching of theology only if it did not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion. The same safeguard belongs here.

End sometimes in chapel. End sometimes in chapter or fraternity discussion. End sometimes with one concrete act of mercy or justice the group will undertake together. A married Secular Franciscan may carry Lady Chastity home into the way he or she speaks to a spouse. A sister may carry Obedience into a difficult community conversation. A friar may carry Poverty into a budget decision. A preacher may carry the hare at the pillar into Sunday's Gospel. The movement remains the same. See, receive, remember, discern, and act.

13. What the leader does not need to know

You do not need to know every painter, every Latin phrase, or every scholarly dispute before beginning. You do need to be willing to say, 'I do not know. Let us look at the note.' That response may teach more than an improvised answer. The footnotes are there so that neither leader nor participant has to pretend.

The hope is not to produce experts on the Lower Basilica. The hope is to help people acquire Franciscan eyes, eyes trained to look at the Gospel, the tradition, one another, the poor, and the world differently. If they become a little more able to share, care, listen, pray, discern, preach, and act, then the frescoes have done their work again.

14. Thematic pathways through the prose and the second book

The themes in Wayfarers do not stay inside one chapter. They cross the nave, reappear in another vela, return in a footnote, and surface again in the transepts or choir. The chart below gathers some of those threads. The footnote numbers refer to the October 2026 edition and are intended as starting points for further reading, not as an exhaustive index.

The chart that follows is a reference tool, not a series of sections to teach straight through.

Theme	Where the thread appears	Key footnotes	Formation / preaching use
Senses, memory, transformation	Introduction; nave; Chastity's gaze; kitchen; choir	1, 3–4, 9, 26, 28, 108, 234, 277	How seeing, remembering, and attending to the world form the person. Begin with one visible detail.
Wayfarer, pilgrimage, hope	Entrance arch; Emmaus; architecture; final journey	13–15, 18–19, 47, 50, 58, 173, 278	Formation as movement rather than arrival. Useful for retreats, vocation stories, and accompaniment.
Passion becoming compassion	Paired nave cycles; stigmata; Lamentation; Calvary	25, 27–29, 44, 46, 125, 270, 274	Move from looking at suffering to remaining with the sufferer. Especially useful in pastoral care.
The evangelical counsels	Three vele; vows above the altar; Francis in Glory	60–64, 67, 70, 82, 101, 132, 163, 171	Religious profession and its daily renewal; the Gospel counsels in the lives of all Christians.
Poverty, *sine proprio*, gift, fraternity	Lady Poverty; cloak; wedding; merchant; the poor	71–72, 78, 82–84, 86–90	Freedom from possession, common life, gift, and the universal destination of goods.
Chastity, purity of heart, freedom to love	Lady Chastity; vigil; chaste gaze; gate; flowers	96–101, 103, 107–108, 115, 123–124, 128	Chastity beyond celibacy: integration of the person, reverence, fidelity, and love without possession.
Penance, *metanoia*, *kenosis*, beginning again	Lepers; Lady Penance; return to obedience; Crib and Cross	33, 112, 115, 118, 120, 136, 160, 171, 224, 246	Conversion, reformation by grace, self-emptying, and returning to God after failure.

Theme	Where the thread appears	Key footnotes	Formation / preaching use
Mercy	Lepers; penitential rod; Francis correcting a brother; Judas; Mary; rebuilding	33, 112, 118, 136, 142, 198, 245–246, 248, 255–258, 265	A distinct school of mercy: receiving it, showing it, and refusing to declare another beyond its reach.
Obedience, listening, synodality, freedom	Yoke; chapter house; Francis and Louis; rope	132, 134–136, 138–142, 153–157, 160–162	Authority as service, communal discernment, listening across differences, and freely given obedience.
Humility, prudence, dignity, thisness	Humility's candle; Prudence's faces and mirror; John and Louis	143, 145, 149, 151–156, 165–166	Know oneself truthfully, honor the unrepeatable person, and practice humble leadership.
Liturgy, Eucharist, consecration, reception	Ship; altar; three vows; Francis in Glory; Last Supper; choir	32, 54, 57, 67–69, 133, 171–172, 187–189, 240–241, 275	Worship forming daily life; the difficult grace of receiving; prayer as the act of the whole Church.
Preaching, images, ordinary life	Birds; painted virtues; preaching with pictures; Scourging; kitchen	26, 40–43, 77, 148, 203–211, 228, 231–235	Learn the early friars' method: take something familiar, discover its meaning, and let it carry the Gospel.
JPIC and Catholic social teaching	Poverty; Chastity's gate; Revelation; refugee Holy Family; work; rebuilding	12, 42, 51, 78, 88–90, 117, 127–129, 179–181, 191, 199, 221, 233, 260, 265–266	Show how conversion leads to justice, peace, human dignity, solidarity, care for creation, and action.
Gospel nonviolence and peacemaking	Damietta; preaching to the birds; Chastity's demons; enemies; Last Supper	20, 42, 117, 128–129, 179–181, 240, 242, 265	Resist evil without reproducing its violence. Use for conflict, peacemaking, and public witness.
Creation and the integrity of creation	Birds; water; Lady Poverty; Revelation; Canticle; Mary	9, 32, 38–41, 48, 72, 81, 89, 177–180, 237, 252, 271	Move from admiration of creation to praise, solidarity, and responsibility for the common home.
Franciscan East and West	Isaac in Poverty and Obedience; the winged virtues; Franciscan reception of Eastern asceticism	86–87, 99, 113, 120, 134, 142, 161, 169	Follow how Franciscan thinkers received wisdom beyond the Latin West. Useful for ecumenical formation and intellectual humility.
Fathers of the Church	Church as ship; virtues; obedience; Incarnation; Passion; mercy	37, 51, 96, 110, 113, 120, 134, 142, 145, 166, 169, 185, 195, 197, 219, 222, 229, 245	Introduce Eastern and Western patristic voices as living teachers who illuminate Scripture and the frescoes.

Theme	Where the thread appears	Key footnotes	Formation / preaching use
Hope, despair, Resurrection	Emmaus; throne of Francis; Judas and Death; rebuilding; choir	14–15, 46–48, 163–164, 174, 189, 198–199, 245–252, 265	For grief, spiritual discouragement, suicide bereavement, forgiveness, and Easter preaching.
Mary, Mother of Mercy, Mother Church	Nave Crucifixion; Mother Church; Annunciation; Porziuncola; Mother of Mercy	36–37, 52, 196–197, 230, 255–261, 271	Marian formation, ecclesial belonging, intercession, Magnificat, and the Church's welcome.
Work, service, dignity of labor	Kitchen; foot washing; rebuilding chapels; choir	51, 90, 143, 208, 227, 232–234, 244, 264–268	Connect worship with dishes, labor, service, economic responsibility, and ordinary tasks.
Revelation, lordship, and social ethics	Four vele; horsemen; Living Creatures; Lamb; Book of Divine Wisdom	163, 167–169, 174–180, 182–185, 191	Ask what follows when Christ is Lord: domination yields to service, war to peace, hunger to a shared table, and death to life.
Cultural References	Poetry and music; chivalry; literature; fantasy; film; television; medieval allegory	19, 23, 49, 53, 66, 75, 80, 92, 111, 114, 119, 130, 147, 150, 172, 175, 186, 193, 209, 213, 217, 227, 239, 247, 251, 279–280	Find a bridge between the Gospel and stories people already love. Includes classical, medieval, and contemporary culture.
Papal Teaching	Welcome; virtues; chapters; peace; social responsibility; Mary; rebuilding	12, 17, 20, 39, 43, 48, 93, 117, 127–128, 138, 140, 157, 179, 199, 201, 208, 213, 217, 220–221, 241, 260, 266, 269	Follow the teaching of the popes across generations, noting how particular questions and pastoral emphases develop.
Vatican II: The Church, Liturgy, and the Modern World	Human dignity; Church as communion; liturgy; ministry; mission; choir	13, 29, 37, 54, 191, 205, 275	Show how the Council's teaching illuminates the Church, Christ's saving work, worship, and Christian responsibility in the world.

15. Three ways to use the thematic chart

For initial formation

Follow one theme across several sections instead of feeling obliged to finish a chapter at a time. For example, follow listening from Lady Obedience to synodality, then to the choir. Or follow poverty from Francis' stripping to Lady Poverty, the refugee Holy Family, and the

kitchen servants. This helps a wayfarer see that Franciscan formation is not a collection of separate topics. In this way the lessons can be revisited throughout a year.

For continuing Franciscan and faith formation

Begin with whatever is already alive in the community. A fraternity working on family relationships may begin with chastity as freedom to love without possessing. A community discerning a difficult decision may begin with obedience, prudence, and synodality. A group serving migrants may follow the Holy Family, hospitality, solidarity, and the common good.

For preachers and retreat leaders

Begin with the Gospel or pastoral question, then let the chart help you find an image and two or three notes that deepen it. Do not try to preach the chart. Let it lead you to one picture, one scriptural word, one Franciscan source, and one invitation.

16. A final word to the formator, minister, spiritual assistant, or leader

No one has to leave *Wayfarers* knowing everything painted in Assisi. It is enough to have learned to stop before something beautiful, to look long enough for it to ask a question, and then to carry that question back to Francis, the Gospel, the Church, and the life waiting to be lived. That is how information, formation, and transformation work, and how a tradition remains alive.

The aim is to become the kind of person who knows how to keep walking. The rest is learned along the way.



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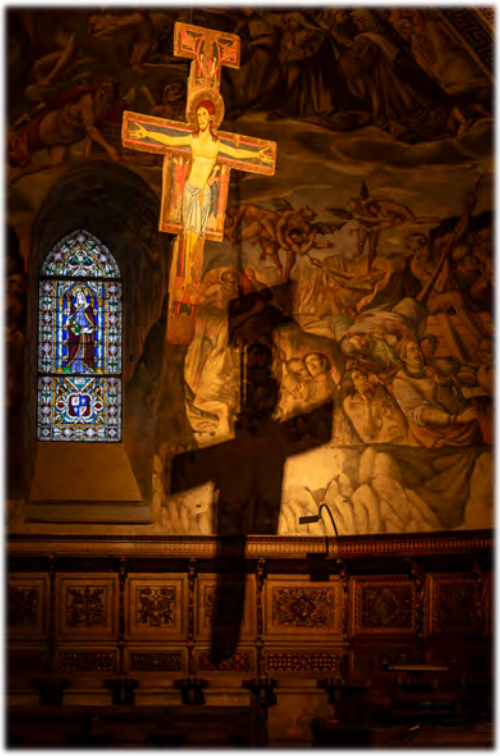
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More friars than I can name read these pages and told me what was not yet right. The translators who have carried this book into other languages asked to remain unnamed, and I have honored that request. They are all in good company. The Master of Saint Francis left no name, and neither did the Master of the Vele. On this hill in Assisi, the work has always offered witness without the laborer's signature on it.









ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Friar Michael Lasky is a friar of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual, the Franciscan Order whose friars have cared for the Basilica of Saint Francis and the Sacro Convento in Assisi since the thirteenth century, even through periods of suppression and expulsion. He first came to Assisi in October 1989, for the Feast of Saint Francis, and entered religious life with the Conventual Friars two years later.

In the summers of 1999 and 2003, he served as an English-speaking guide in the Basilica, leading visitors through the sacred spaces this book walks through. He has returned to the Hill of Paradise regularly ever since. Today, he serves on the board of the Franciscan Pilgrimage Program, which forms and accompanies pilgrims in the Franciscan places of Italy and the Holy Land.

He lives in Rome, where he serves the Conventual Franciscans as General Delegate for Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation. Much of his ministry has involved helping others connect Franciscan spirituality and the social teaching of the Church with ordinary life. Through Franciscan Social Theatre, he has also worked with programs responding to the trauma of war, including the training of Ukrainian actors working with children displaced by war and, more recently, work reaching into Syria.

Among the places closest to his heart is Shamokin, in the coal region of Pennsylvania, where he lived and ministered among people working to rebuild a community marked by the long decline of the coal industry. There he helped establish the Faith Alliance for Revitalization, an unusual coalition that brought together local faith communities, the business association, municipal and county leaders, state government, the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C., and Bucknell University. It was community development done by people who did not usually sit at the same table, but who discovered that they could work together for the good of one place. The experience remained with him, especially the conviction that rebuilding a community begins with the people who already call it home.

Before moving to Rome, he served in campus ministry at Western Connecticut State University, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also directed the New York office and Americas program of Franciscans International at the United Nations. In 2019, he founded Little Portion Farm in Ellicott City, Maryland, which grows organic food for people in need in Baltimore.

He serves on the Advisory Council of Pax Christi International's Catholic Institute for Nonviolence and has been involved for many years with the Franciscan Action Network, including service in the past as president and currently as secretary of its board.

He directs FranciscanVoice.org and helped develop *The Shell*, a free pilgrimage app for Franciscan sacred places. Both grew from the same interest that shaped this book: finding practical ways to share the Franciscan tradition and help people recognize what it might ask of the life they are already living.



Fresco on lower south wall of the nave, Lower Basilica

Lady Jacopa de' Settesoli,
whom Francis affectionately called "Brother Jacopa,"
came to him as he was dying, bringing cloth for his burial
and the sweets she had often prepared for him in Rome.
Today she rests near his tomb.
At the Basilica's threshold, wayfarers were promised
spiritual joys and *great things*.
Here is one of them: a friend who knew when to draw near and remain.

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

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