



The Cell Frescoes
of San Marco

FRA ANGELICO

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FRA ANGELICO

THE CELL FRESCOES

OF

SAN MARCO

DAVID COOKE

I N T R O D U C T I O N

There is an interest to-day in new forms of meditation from T.M. to Zen. The rich tradition of Christian meditation has been, due to the compartmentalisation of Western civilization, all too often confined to a particular group within Christianity, the specialists of religion, the religious orders.

The cell frescoes of San Marco, Florence, painted in the early 15th century have clearly to do with a form of meditation, as would be seen in this thesis, and Fra Angelico, their author, was a member of a religious order, the Dominicans.

The most widely known system of meditation among religious orders to-day is The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit order. Fra Angelico pre-dates St. Ignatius by a century, but the ideas one finds in Ignatius of a retreatant using his imagination and his senses to become present to a scene in the bible is something we find in Fra Angelico. However, the Dominicans do not have a system or a school of prayer. What then are the sources of the work of Fra Angelico in the frescoes at San Marco? This is the subject of this thesis.

The spirituality of both Ignatius and Fra Angelico are based on the New Testament but we owe their particular form to developments in the early Middle Ages. The form of meditation we are discussing is highly visual, and hence there is a relationship between the developments of spirituality and art through the Middle Ages, at least until the time of Fra Angelico and the Renaissance.



St. Dominic Detail Illus. XVI

FRA ANGELICO: THE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDTHE CITY OF FLORENCE

Illus. I

Sometime around 1439 Brother John, a Dominican friar from the convent of Fiesole, came down to the city of Florence to take charge of the fresco decorations of the convent of San Marco (St. Mark). The convent had recently been taken over by the Dominicans and was being restored. It had formerly belonged to the Silvestrine Order and was in bad repair. Although it was not common to decorate convents like this, there were some other contemporary projects of this nature but none so extensive and well preserved.¹

Fiesole is situated on the hills to the east of Florence. From there Bro. John, or Fra Angelico as we now know him, would have looked down over the city of Florence and over the plain that stretches west towards the low hills, through which meanders the Arno west towards Pisa and the sea.

The region of Tuscany by now had recovered faster than other parts of Europe from the devastations of the Black Plague of the previous century. Besides the wool industry local agriculture flourished. Many Florentine citizens had land outside the walls of the town, to grow food but also to escape the squalor of the medieval city. The population of this centre of the city state of Tuscany was about 70,000 during Fra Angelico's time. Of its citizens one percent of the population owned 25% of the wealth; 31% were so poor they did not pay tax. To cross the city would have taken about three quarters of an hour and the walker would have known a high proportion of his fellow inhabitants by sight and would probably have known most of his peer group by name.

Florence was a young man's society. Half of the male population was between 14 and 35 years. Most of them were unmarried; late marriage was the custom. The young men would meet in the Piazza between the great Duomo (Cathedral) and the Baptistery. Overhead was the great dome of Brunelleschi and the tower of Giotto. The Piazza was a favourite meeting place and forum for discussion, a place for the evening amusements of Florentine youth, enjoying the coolness given off by the marble.² Perhaps the young Fra Angelico too witnessed this scene as a visitor from the village of Mugello, his birthplace.

Florence was, by European standards, flourishing. In 1406 she had captured Pisa on the coast, but there were still dangers from powerful neighbours.

¹ Wackernagel p 125/6. ² For above, see Wackernagel p 120ff.

Her citizens were encouraged to uphold their independence and take as full a role in the state as their class allowed. The years of the great schism left Florentines unafraid of Papal authority in Rome.

TRADITIONAL VALUES IN RELIGION.

In the early 15th century Florence was still a city full of medieval traditional values, including the fields of religion and art, which concerns us here. Friars, Franciscans and Dominicans, were conspicuous on the streets by their numbers and dress. Crowds flocked to hear the great makers of sermons like Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444), who filled the square in front of Santa Croce, the Franciscan church. He had encouraged his listeners that they "should let the Mass go rather than the sermons" if they had to choose between them.¹ The 'saints' of the late Middle Ages are evidence that holiness was both practised and revered. During the 14th and 15th centuries some 200 individuals lived who were accorded beatification or sanctification of which many were Italian and a significant number were female.² One who exerted great influence on Fra Angelico was St. Antoninus (Antonino Pierozzo) prior of Fiesole 1422-6 and later prior of San Marco and eventually Archbishop of Florence.

ANXIETY FOR REFORM.

But in the late Middle Ages there was also a sense of unease in religion, a dissatisfaction with religious structures. The enthusiasm for poverty of the early Franciscans and Dominicans had waned, as had the ideals of the monastic orders before them. Criticism of the church came from zealous priests and regular clergy and the more literate laity, attacking episcopal rapacity, luxury among prelates, ignorance and scandal among priests and nuns.³ Councils and bishops reiterated demands for the regulations of the church to be observed with such monotonous frequency that one can only suppose admonitions had little effect.⁴ The 14th century had seen the beginnings of this first great age of anticlericalism evidenced by the literature of Langland's Piers Plowman, of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales or the Decameron of Bocaccio.⁵

This was an age when the laity were beginning to insist on their spiritual needs more than in previous centuries though the forms of expression were not as obvious in Italy as in Northern Europe where lay-religious movements developed, such as the Brethren of the common life, the Beguines and other offshoots of the Devotio Moderna.

1 Hay p 321. 2 Hay p 316. 3 Hay p 301. 4 Hay p 305.

5 Hay p 47.

FRA ANGELICO'S PLACE IN RELIGION

We have sketched the background against which to view Fra Angelico, the friar. He was a member of the Order of Preachers, though his medium was paint. Though a member of an established order he was in the Observance movement that was concerned with the decline in religious standards and strove for reform. The Observance had a stricter and more literal interpretation of the Dominican rule. Founded by Raymond of Capua, the confessor of Catherine of Siena, it had been vigorously spread by John Dominici, the founder of Fiesole.

TRADITIONAL VALUES IN ART.

Art was part of this world of traditional religion. The Franciscan church of Santa Croce or the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella were highly decorated with murals, designed as the books of the illiterate where they might absorb the teachings and traditions of their religion. In the convents and monasteries, friars and monks continued the medieval practice of illuminating manuscripts. Fra Angelico and his brother, Benedetto, a Dominican friar also, practised this art. Secular artists in general were not free thinkers, like the literati of the enlightenment whom we shall discuss presently. Rather there were signs among the artists of a greater than average piety. Many artists, like scholars, did not marry.¹ And even into the sixteenth century, despite new renaissance ideas about "the artist", for many patrons he remained no more than another manual employee.²

THE FLORENTINE ENLIGHTENMENT.

These aspects of medieval life in 15th century Florence that were discussed in the previous section are found elsewhere in Europe, but in Florence we also find the beginnings of what we call the Renaissance. Between 1380 and 1440 the cultural world of Florence was transformed. Scholars and leading statesmen were challenging traditional values through the discovery of classical literature. These developments challenged old ways of looking at the Bible and urged a more practical approach to philosophy. Florentine youth enjoyed a comparatively good standard of education. Among the wealthier classes the humanities were taught to bring out the full potentialities of students for life in public service. Public service is now seen on a par with the renunciation of the monk and friar, thought of as the highest ideal of the medieval man. Wealth was not to be despised, rather to be sought after "to avoid furtive measures, the liability to

¹ Wackernagel p 355. ² Ibid. p 291

corruption and the practical certainty of moral ugliness, of poverty ... to be rich enabled one to glorify the creator and make life more gracious and comfortable for one's fellow men".¹ A gap is emerging between exponents of these new values like Alberti who wrote that "men themselves are the source of their own good luck and misfortune",² and Fra Angelico whose religious formation taught him to do everything in terms of God's providence and his own life in trying to conform to God's will.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ART.

The enlightenment also effected the arts. There was a revolution in art closely connected with the intellectual innovations of the literary humanists. The works produced in Florence in the first 40 years of the 15th century represented a break with the past as remarkable as that achieved in the field of moral values at the same time.³ The characteristics of these new works were that "they portrayed human beings and the natural space in which they lived more nearly as they appeared to the common sense observer, with more regard for the human emotions and less for their symbolic significance, or for patterns of abstract form which could be created out of them than ever before".⁴ As classical literature was admired by the literati so artists like Brunelleschi, Donatello, the della Robbias and Masaccio were praised by Alberti as having a genius for every admirable thing equal to those who were famous in the arts in ancient times.⁵ And Alberti was beginning to portray a new image for the artist for now "painting is a literal art like poetry or rhetoric, proper for educated men, not an activity for unlettered artisans".⁶

FRA ANGELICO AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The religious thinkers who had direct influence on Fra Angelico, Antoninus and John Dominici, opposed the ideas of the humanist scholars for they feared that the study of the classics would undermine the bible as the basis for human action. It was not mere conservatism, but as religious reformers their inclinations lay in a very different direction to that of the humanist scholars. Pope Hennessy suggests that Fra Angelico himself was a man of no mean intellect from Vasari's story that the Pope wished to make him archbishop of Florence, the vacancy to which Antoninus was appointed to fill.

1 Hay p 350. 2 Graef p 200. 3 Hay p 350. 4 Homes p 202

5 Homes p 223. 6 Homes p 224.

In art we find Angelico fully aware of the new developments. "Both in action and articulation he made great progress on his precursors, so great that, but for Masaccio, who completely surpassed him, we should value him as an innovator".¹ If we compare his early and late altar pieces the differences between them prove to be greater than those between the early and late works of any other early Renaissance painter. Angelico used perspective which was the key to accurately portraying human beings in the space surrounding them and which was of fundamental importance to a more humanist art. But his emphasis is in his development on the religious significance of his paintings rather than moving towards an art influenced by perspective that makes man the measure of all things. So a parallel can be drawn between Antoninus and Dominici, both learned men, in their opposition to the humanist scholars and Fra Angelico who, in his painting, is concerned with traditional religious values from which his contemporaries are beginning to move.

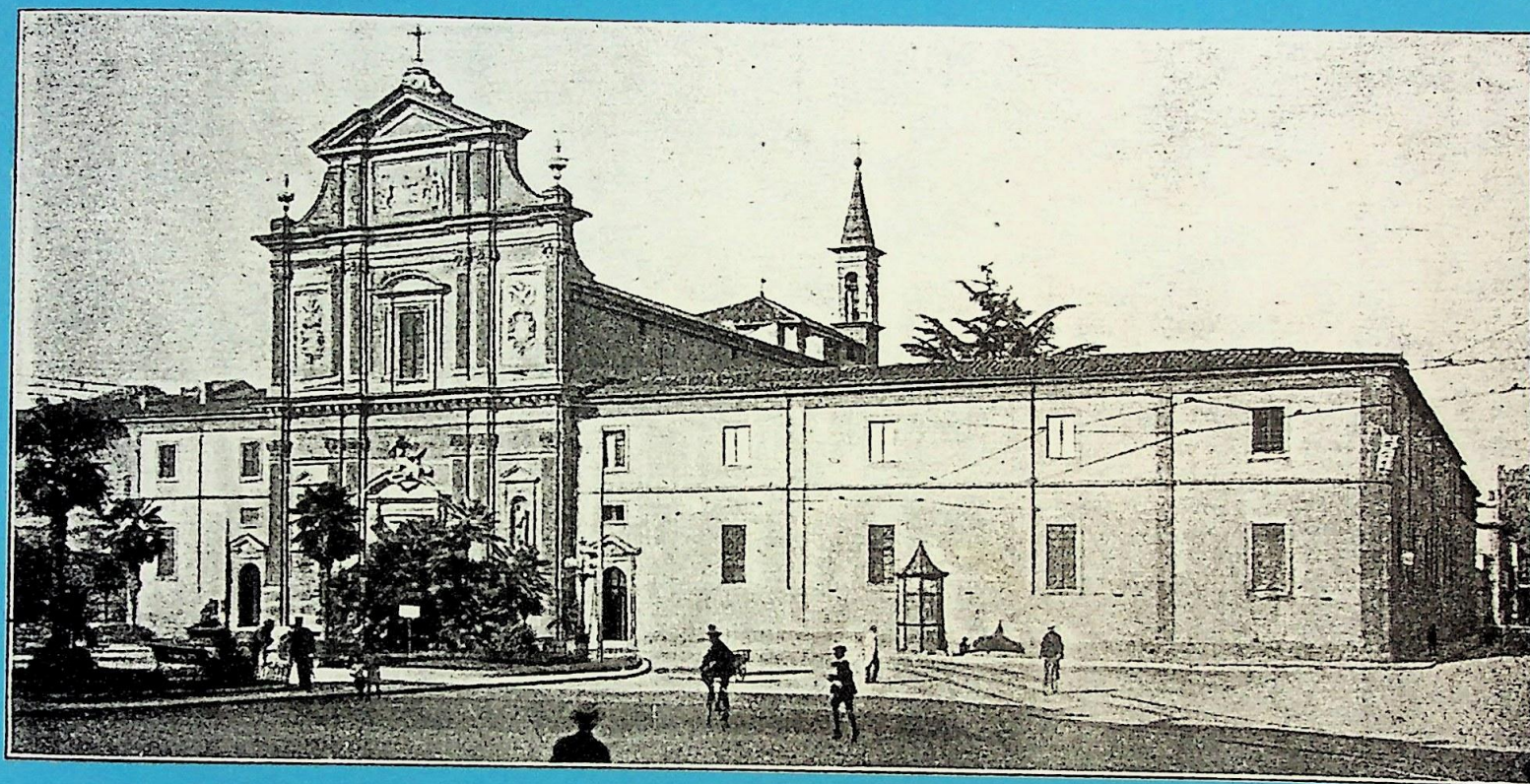
PATRONAGE

Between the worlds of church and artist and establishing the relationship between them are the patrons. Wealthy and enlightened patrons, both religious and lay, were ready to spend large sums on art. Their motivation was still religious devotion but now also there was a quest for fame. In Florence most attention was given to the Duomo and the Baptistry, the centre of religious devotion and civic self-consciousness, followed by the churches, Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella. Fra Angelico had been commissioned in Fiesole to carry out some works for the latter.²

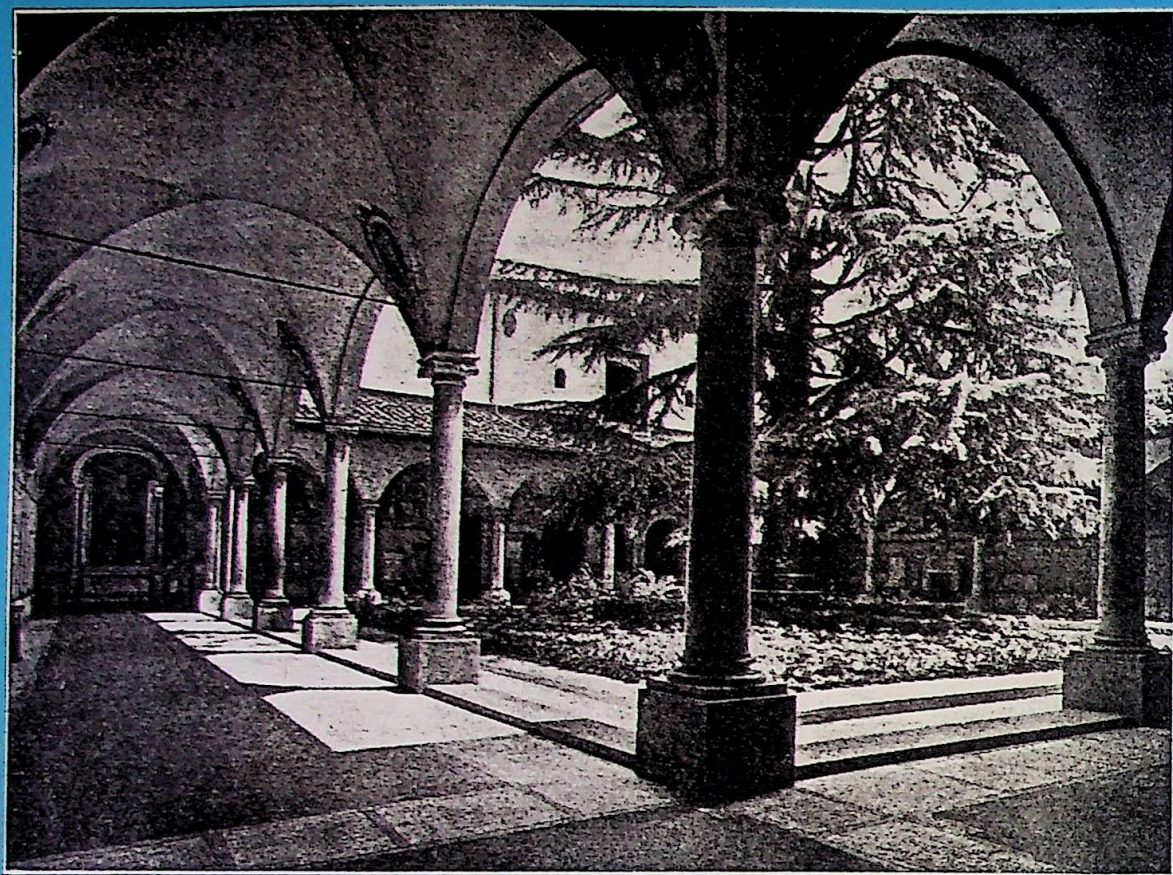
One of the leading patrons was Cosimo de Medici under whom Florence was well on the way to changing from medieval commune to duchy. Cosimo contributed heavily to the reconstruction of San Marco. To ease the burden of conscience that Cosimo felt on account of many political acts of violence, Pope Eugene had given him the confessional penance of donating 10,000 florins to the San Marco restoration. But he was a willing patron. He loaned his own architect, Michelozzo and in the end spent 40,000 florins.

SUMMARY

In this first section I have sketched the religious and artistic world of Florence in the early fifteenth century. Fra Angelico, as a Dominican Observant friar, was rooted in the traditional religion of the Middle Ages, but with an urgency created by the unrest of his times and the inroads of new ideas inimicable to his values. His iconography, which is my main concern, will be rooted in medieval spirituality. But as a painter Fra Angelico is aware of new trends, so we will be looking in his frescoes in San Marco for something of new developments in the history of spirituality.

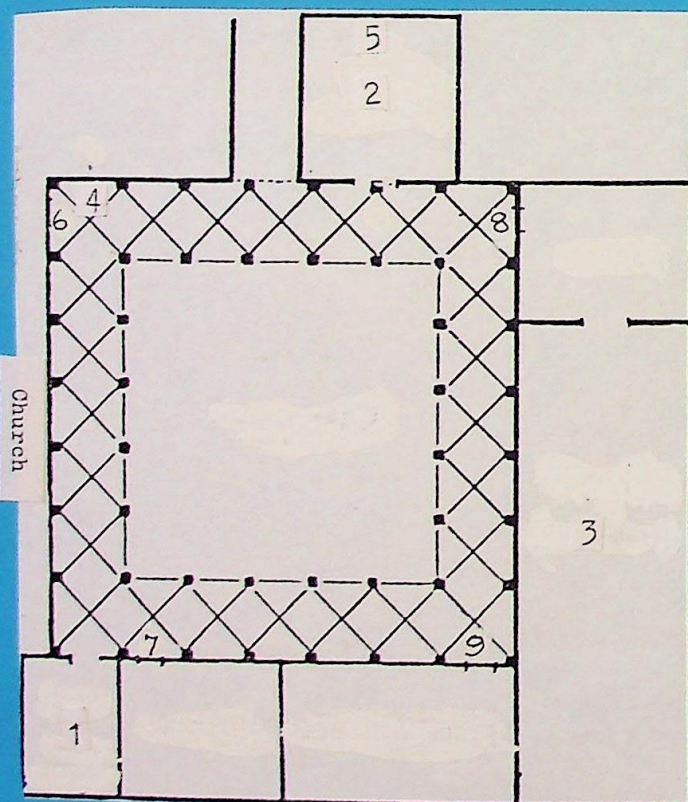


The convent of San Marco, Florence.



San Marco, view of the cloister from the entrance.

Illus. III



1. Entrance.
2. Chapter Room.
3. Refectory.
4. Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic.
5. Crucifixion with attendant saints.
6. St. Peter Martyr (Lunette)
7. St. Thomas Aquinas (Lunette)
8. The Pieta (Lunette)
9. Christ as pilgrim received by two Dominicans (Lunette)

THE CONVENT OF SAN MARCO

THE RESTORATION

Illus. II

The restoration of San Marco, with the assistance of Cosimo de Medici as patron, involved the reconstruction and expansion of the choir chapel and bell tower, the nearly complete reconstruction of the whole convent complex, while only the chapter hall and refectory were retained in their previous state. The library, as a sign of the times, was to be open to all citizens with scholarly interests. Cosimo was to have a cell to which he could retire "on certain days for religious contemplation".¹

Some time during the reconstruction of San Marco Fra Angelico, with his assistants, travelled down from Fiesole to undertake the fresco decoration. This would have been about 1439 since 20 of the cells in the upper corridors above the refectory were ready by then, and it is among these that Fra Angelico's hand was certainly at work. All the cells were ready for habitation by 1443, though structural work continued on one part of the building or another until 1452.² Fra Angelico did most of his work sometime between 1439 and 1445 when he was summoned to Rome by Pope Eugenius IV to work in the Vatican but assistants carried on the work in his absence.³

Fra Angelico's openness to new ideas may be suggested by the relationship established between himself and the architect, Michelozzo. There are similarities between architectural details of Fra Angelico's frescoes and of the convent building. Michelozzo is said to appear in the great Santa Trinita altarpiece, dating from this time, as the figure with black head dress assisting in carrying the figure of Christ from the cross.⁴

THE FRESCOES

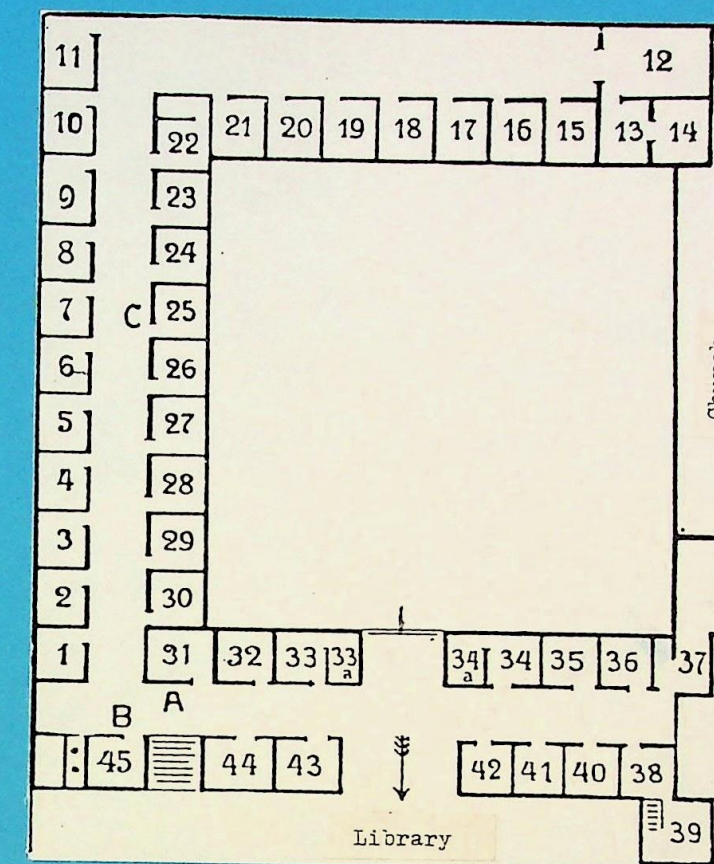
Fra Angelico painted an altarpiece for the public church at San Marco. The works inside the convent buildings fall into four main groups according to their location:

Illus. III

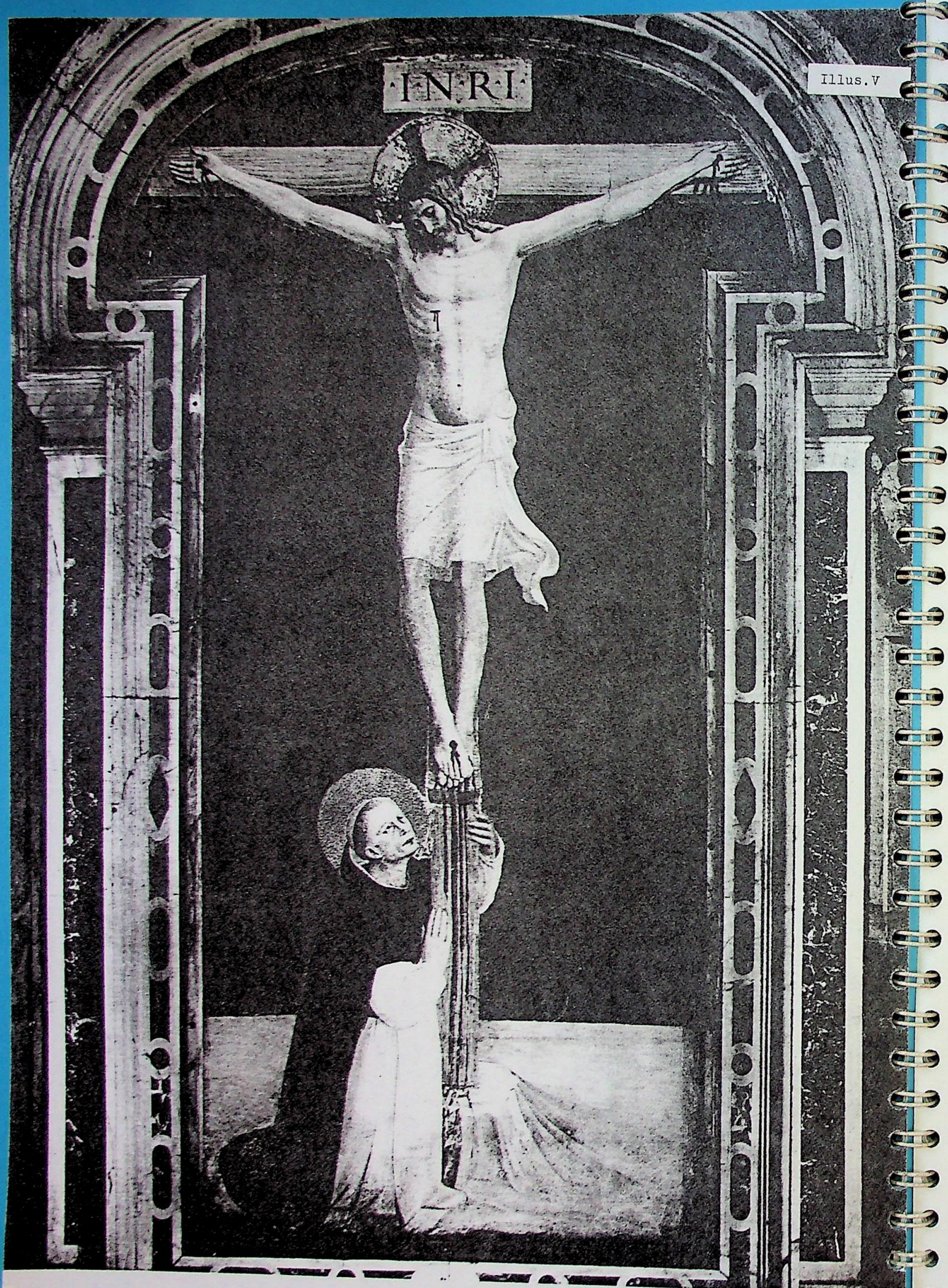
- i) A Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic and five lunettes of St. Dominic, St. Peter Martyr, Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Pieta and Christ as Pilgrim received by two Dominicans. All of these are found in the ground floor cloister, or arcaded walk.
- ii) Crucifixion with attendant Saints in the Chapter Room or meeting room, which opens off the cloister. (A Crucifixion with Mary and John in the refectory was subsequently destroyed).

¹ Wackernagel p 229. ² Pope Hennessy p 19.

³ Pope Hennessy p 6. ⁴ Schiller II p 167.



A. Annunciation.
 B. Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic.
 C. Virgin and child with eight saints.
 Cells nos. 1 - 45.



CHRIST ON THE CROSS ADORED BY SAINT DOMINIC. Cloister, San Marco, Florence.

Illus. IV

iii) a Christ on the Cross adored by Saint Dominic, an Annunciation and a Virgin and Child with eight Saints in the corridor on the upper floor.

iv) 43 frescoes in the 45 cells on the upper floor.

Illus. V

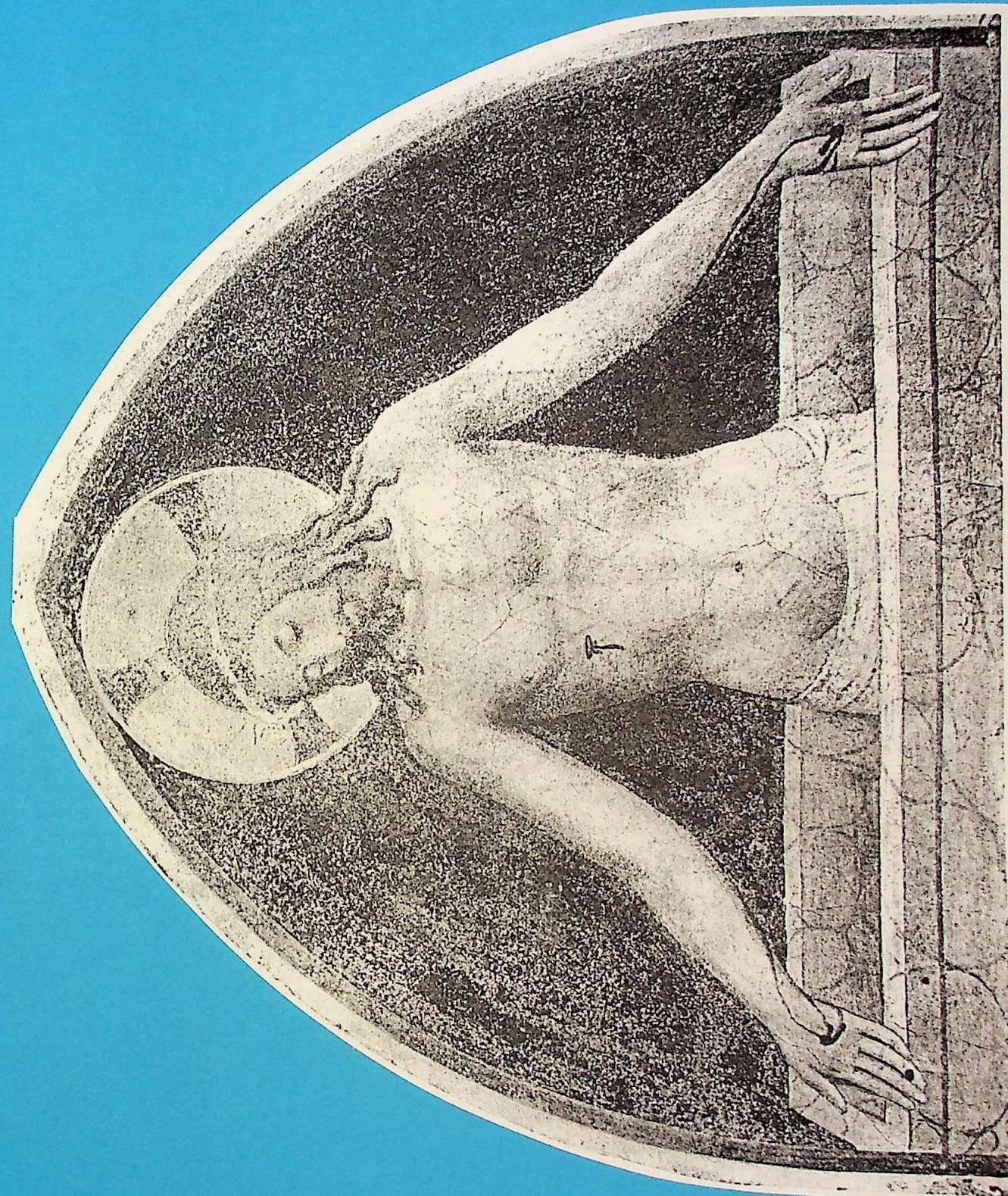
To give an idea of the work of Fra Angelico and his workshop done for the convent of San Marco, let us take an imaginary walk through the convent, trying to see it from the point of view of an Observant Dominican. On entering the convent there is a hallway from which one passes out into the cloister. At the end of the cloister walk facing him the friar, on approaching, will see the figures of Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic. This fresco is a key to all the others. It reminds the friar to follow the example of Dominic in the following of Christ. The large crucifixion in the chapter room and the lost one in the refectory are developments of this theme. The cell paintings take this idea and extend it to other events in the life of Christ. Hence the placing of this crucifix, as the first one to be met by the eye in the convent buildings, is significant.

The lunettes are small frescoes above various doors that lead off the cloister. The lunettes unfold the main theme for the friar, the following of Christ who suffered for men, Pieta, (Illus. VI) as a Dominican following the example of Peter Martyr, (Illus. XVII) Dominic, Thomas Aquinas (Illus. XVIII), or of the two Dominicans who receive Christ as a Pilgrim (Illus. VII).

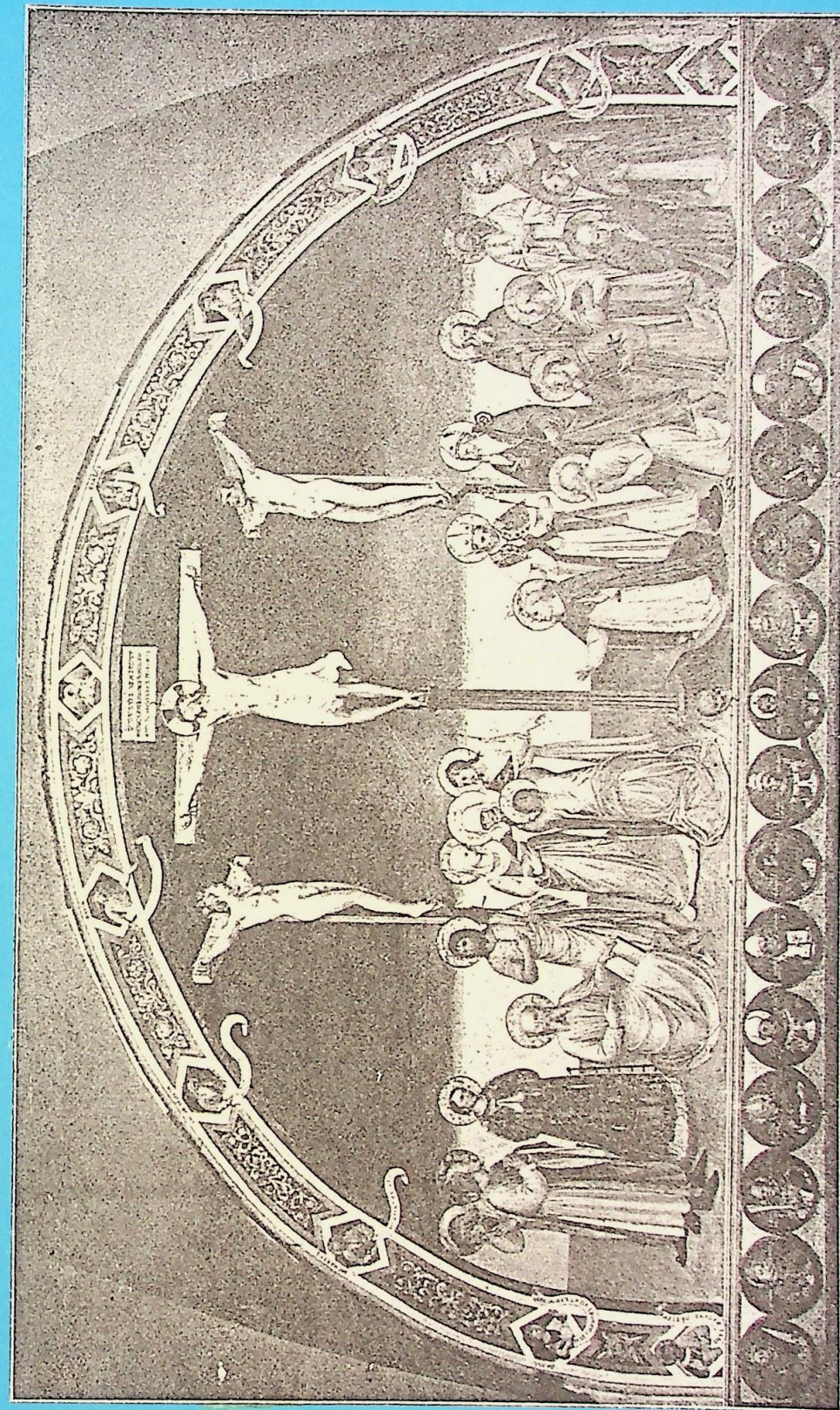
Illus. VIII

As already stated the theme of the large Crucifixion with attendant Saints in the chapter room expands that of the cloister Crucifixion, only now including Thomas Aquinas and Peter Martyr and saints who founded other orders as well as patron saints of the Medicis, Cosmas, Damian, Lawrence, St. John the Baptist, the patron of Florence and St. Mark, the titular saint of the convent, and other figures of the historical narrative. Beneath the crucifixion scene are a row of Dominican heroes, as it were, names to urge the friar on to perfection. St. Antoninus had written "when you are in the chapter room you should stand as Jesus stood before the proconsul to be judged."

Behind the chapter room is the stairway that leads to the upper corridor. Near the top the stairway turns right and one is faced with, framed in the opening of the stairway, the large Annunciation. There is still the connection with the Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic, for the Annunciation is the beginning of the gospel story. In an inscription beneath the friar is urged to say the "Ave", the greeting of the Angel to Mary, to recall words often repeated in the liturgy. In another inscription in the fresco the angel greets Mary as the one who contains the Trinity by being the



PIETÀ. Cloister, San Marco, Florence.



Crucifixion with attendant saints, Chapter Room.

Annunciation, Upper Corridor.



VIRGIN AND CHILD ENTHRONED WITH SAINTS DOMINIC, COSMAS, DAMIAN, MARK, JOHN THE EVANGELIST, THOMAS AQUINAS, LAWRENCE AND PETER MARTYR. Upper Corridor, San Marco, Florence.



5. THE ANNUNCIATION. Cell 3, San Marco, Florence.

mother of Christ. Here the friar will recall his own role as someone who through his study and meditations, and following theologians like Thomas Aquinas, ponder the truths of the Christian faith. Fra Angelico will never paint Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers, in the act of preaching but rather in the contemplation of the beliefs of the Christian faith.

There is another Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic on this corridor, to the left at the top of the stairway and opposite the Annunciation, again repeating the central theme. The corridor here turns at right angles. In this part of the upper corridor we find the Virgin and Child enthroned with eight Saints, (Dominic, Cosmas, Damian and Mark, John, Thomas Aquinas, Lawrence and Peter Martyr). With the sternness of a reformer Fra Angelico paints Dominic pointing to the Rule "Have charity, serve humility, keep voluntary poverty. The curse of God, and mine, on the one who brings possessions into this Order". This fresco and the Annunciation are thought to have been executed on Fra Angelico's return from spending a number of years in Rome. What he saw there may have expanded his artistic vocabulary but did it also deepen his anxiety about the need for reform in the church?

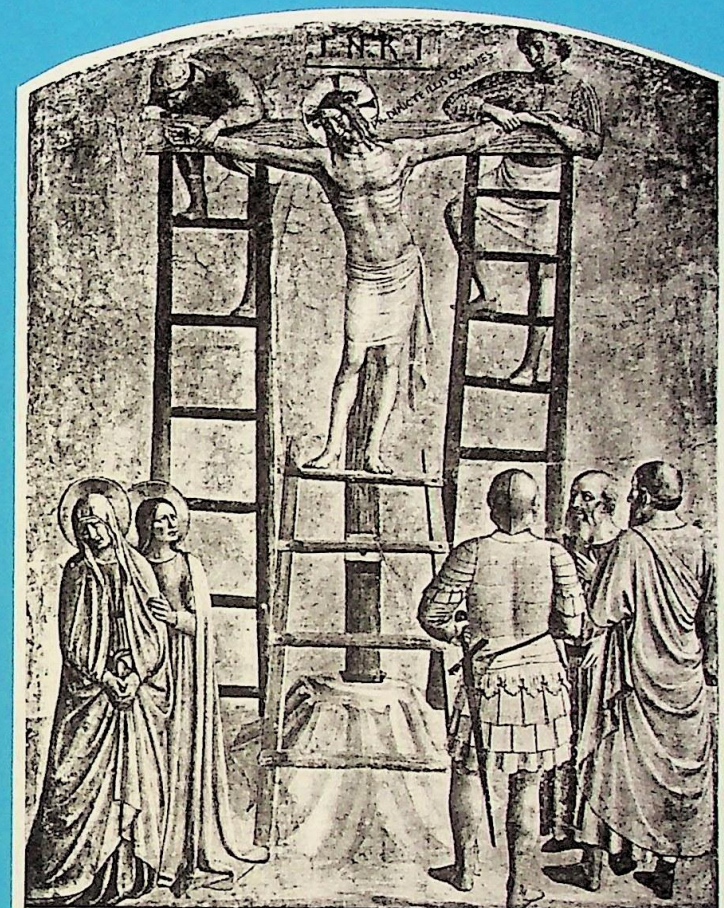
Finally we come to the frescoes in the cells, the main subject of this paper. We have stated that Fra Angelico did not work alone but was the director of a workshop. Most of the frescoes we have so far detailed are for the most part by Fra Angelico himself or by assistants working with him and closely supervised by him. Angelico was certainly involved in the execution of work in cells 1 to 11, but after he was summoned to Rome the work was completed by other members of his workshop. Pope Hennessy states it thus: "that the class of frescoes in the cells was created by Angelico and that Angelico himself supervised the decoration of the cells is not open to doubt, but the frescoes for which he was directly responsible are vastly outnumbered by the scenes in which assistants were charged with executing his cartoons or which were conceived by his disciples within the framework of his style".¹

Illus.XI

Illus.XII

To clarify this we might compare two frescoes - the Annunciation by Angelico and the Crucifixion by the Master of Cell 36. What is striking in Angelico's work is its simplicity and austerity, the most suitable form for the kind of painting it is, leading to contemplation rather than distraction in details. In the Crucifixion there are a far greater number of narrative details - note the detail of the soldier's dress, the number of figures, all precluding a

¹ Pope Hennessy p 20.



Master of Cell 36: *Christ nailed to the Cross*. San Marco, Florence (Cell 36)



NOLI ME TANGERE. Cell 1, San Marco, Florence.

focus for contemplation which the Fra Angelico's succeed so well in achieving. Those not under Fra Angelico's direct influence "revert, by some process of natural attraction, to the norm of fresco painting".¹

The frescoes are generally on the window wall opposite the door. The wall thus contains two apertures, one opening on the physical world and the other on the spiritual world. The frescoes were intended to secure for the mysteries they described a plane in the forefront of the friar's mind by keeping them constantly before his eyes.² Though we cannot be certain whose idea it was to decorate the cells in this fashion; it is where Fra Angelico's hand is obvious that the idea is most fully understood and expressed.

It is the meaning of this group of frescoes, particularly those by Fra Angelico's own hand, which this paper intends to explore. It will illustrate with examples mostly by Fra Angelico to give an idea of what they are. Illus. XI — (Annunciation, Cell 3); Illus. XIV — (Transfiguration, Cell 6); Illus. XV — (Coronation of the Virgin, Cell 9) are thought to be wholly by Angelico. Illus. XIII — (Noli me Tangere, Cell 1); Illus. XVI — (Mocking of Christ, Cell 7) and Illus. XVII — (Presentation in the Temple, Cell 10) are thought to be largely by Angelico.

Illus. XXX (The Adoration of the Magi, Cell 39) was probably designed by Angelico but has been much restored, making this uncertain.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have seen the extent of the work carried out by Fra Angelico and his assistants. We are focussing our attention on the cell frescoes most closely associated with Fra Angelico himself. We have stated that the Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic on the ground floor is the key to understanding these works. The cell frescoes are also scenes from the life of Christ and they also include Dominican saints and others, in the historical scenes. Where did these ideas come from?

In this paper we will be tracing the origin of this kind of painting, trying to discover its meaning and since it has to do with prayer we will be discussing the relationship of the history of spirituality to the history of painting in the Middle Ages.

1 Pope Hennessy p 23. 2 Ibid. p 22.

CHAPTER 3

THE HISTORY OF SPIRITUALITY UP TO THE TIME OF FRA ANGELICO

In this chapter we will describe what is important in the history of spirituality for an understanding of Fra Angelico's cell frescoes. These frescoes are to do with prayer. The history of spirituality is that of the development of understanding and practice of prayer.

THE FIRST 10 CENTURIES OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Since early Christian times the basis for Christian prayer has been the Bible. Prayer was seen as nourishment for the soul, so the reading of the Bible was compared with eating. The idea occurs in the New Testament itself; that man lives not only on ordinary bread "but on every word that God speaks". Matt. 4:4. The idea was that reading would lead to thinking about what was read, or meditation. "What is eaten and drunk spiritually in reading is transformed into a spiritual dynamism by meditation and through the prayer leads to good actions in life".¹

For Gregory the Great, the most influential writer of the Dark Ages, prayer meant uniting man to God by way of knowledge, gained from meditation in the Bible, especially as used in the Church liturgy and the writings of the early Church fathers. This reading and meditation on the Bible became known as Lectio Divina or spiritual reading. But it is not reading for intellectual knowledge but as a springboard for prayer. Already we see how the figure of Dominic, on the right in the foreground of the Mocking of Christ (Cel 7) and reading a book that we can presume to be the Bible is an image that is deeply rooted in the history of Christian prayer.

Illus. XVI

THE TENTH TO THE TWELFTH CENTURIES

From the 10th to the 12th century new ideas begin to appear, that involve feeling and emotions in prayer over and above intellectual knowledge. For Gregory prayer had been an act of love but knowledge of God was the end. In the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the Cistercian monk who had a marked influence on the development of spirituality, we find the idea of prayer as man "uniting himself to God through love for the human Christ". Bernard uses imagery like the soul as a bride of Christ.

¹ Dict.Spir. meditation p 1005

For Bernard, knowledge of God is the means, but love of God through union with him is the end. Bernard composed loving meditations on the principal events of the life of Christ.¹ In Bernard and other spiritual writers of this time prayers and writings about Mary express a tenderness unknown in past centuries.²

However, to him is largely due the development of meditations in the life of Christ which is what the cycle of frescoes in San Marco are.

There are still harsher elements of Christian spirituality that came from the violence of the Dark Ages, the sense of sin and corruption in the world that drove hermits and monks to desert places or to extreme forms of life, and to forms of asceticism such as self scourging which we find evidenced in Fra Angelico. These elements remain in Christian spirituality at least symbolically into the 20th century.

THE INFLUENCE OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISSI

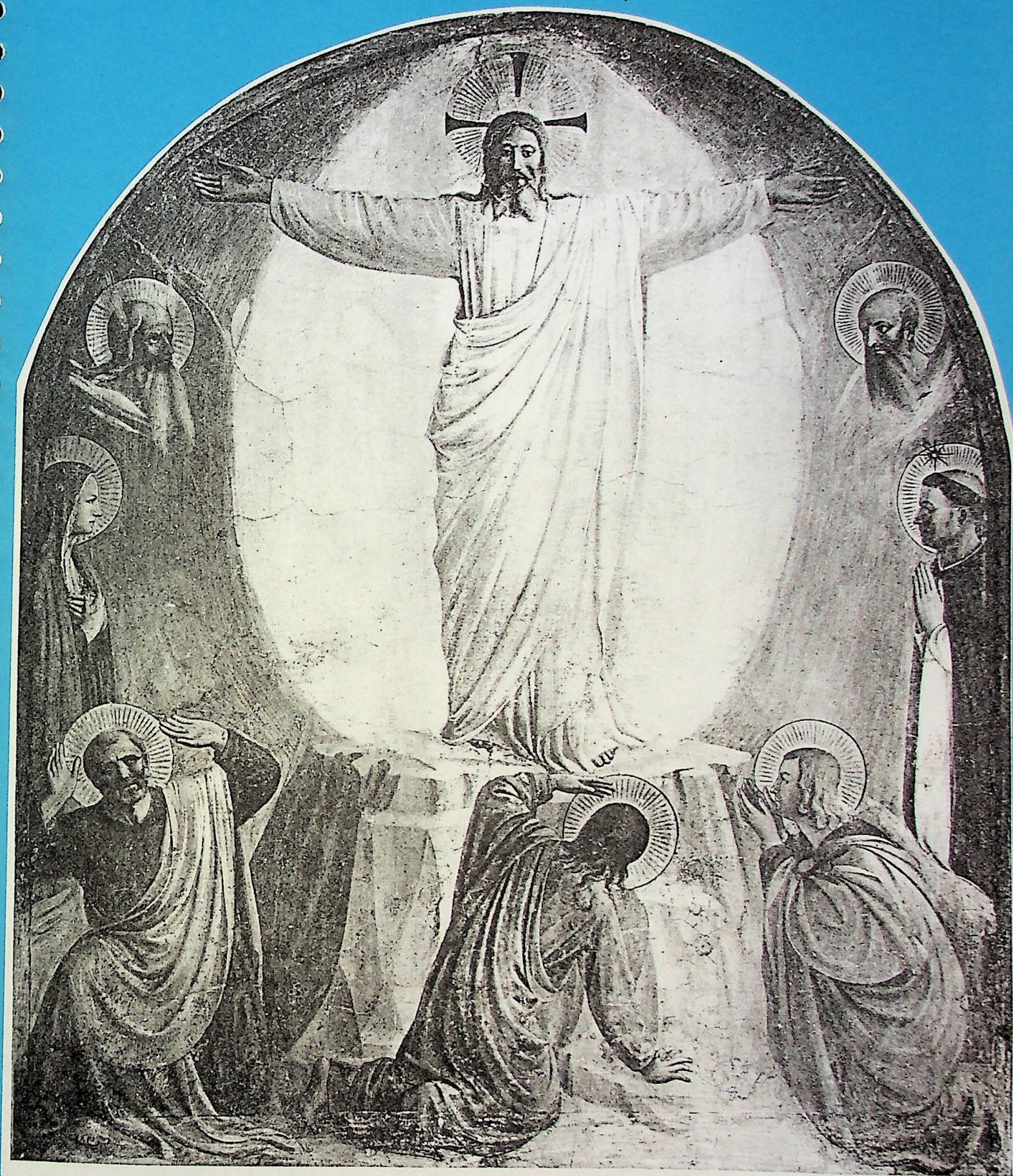
Illus. XV

In understanding Fra Angelico it is the development opened up by St. Bernard and continued by Francis of Assissi (1181-1226) that concerns us most. Francis appears in the Cell painting of the Coronation of the Virgin (Cell 9). The emphasis in the meditations of St. Francis is on the human Christ, particularly in his suffering and death, as it had been with Bernard. As opposed to the early Middle Ages the prayer of these two was not so much directed at knowledge of God but love of God through a personal affective attachment to the person of Christ as described in the narrative of the New Testament. Meditation for them was the slow thoughtful reading of the stories of the New Testament, forming them into apostles parallel to the original apostles who had a human relationship with Christ.

Under these influences Johannes de Caulibus, a Franciscan friar from San Gunignano near Florence wrote, around 1300, the Meditationes Vitae Christi (Meditations on the Life of Christ).³ Vitae Christi, or the Mediationes describe the events of Christ's life, including the Passion and exhort the reader "spiritually to absorb what he sees". He repeatedly interrupts his account of events "...to exhort his readers to meditate and linger".⁴ St. Cecile, the model of prayer in the Meditationes "carries the gospel hidden

¹ Le Clerq p 219. ² Le Clerq p 185.

³ Schiller II p 10, note 8. ⁴ Schiller II p 11.



THE TRANSFIGURATION. Cell 6, San Marco, Florence.



THE CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN. Cell 9, San Marco, Florence.

in her heart, her method of prayer is making yourself present to the words and actions described (in the gospel) as if you heard them with your ears and saw them with your eyes". Following this method St. Bridget of Sweden (1304-73) contemplated scenes from the Passion "as though they actually occurred before her eyes".

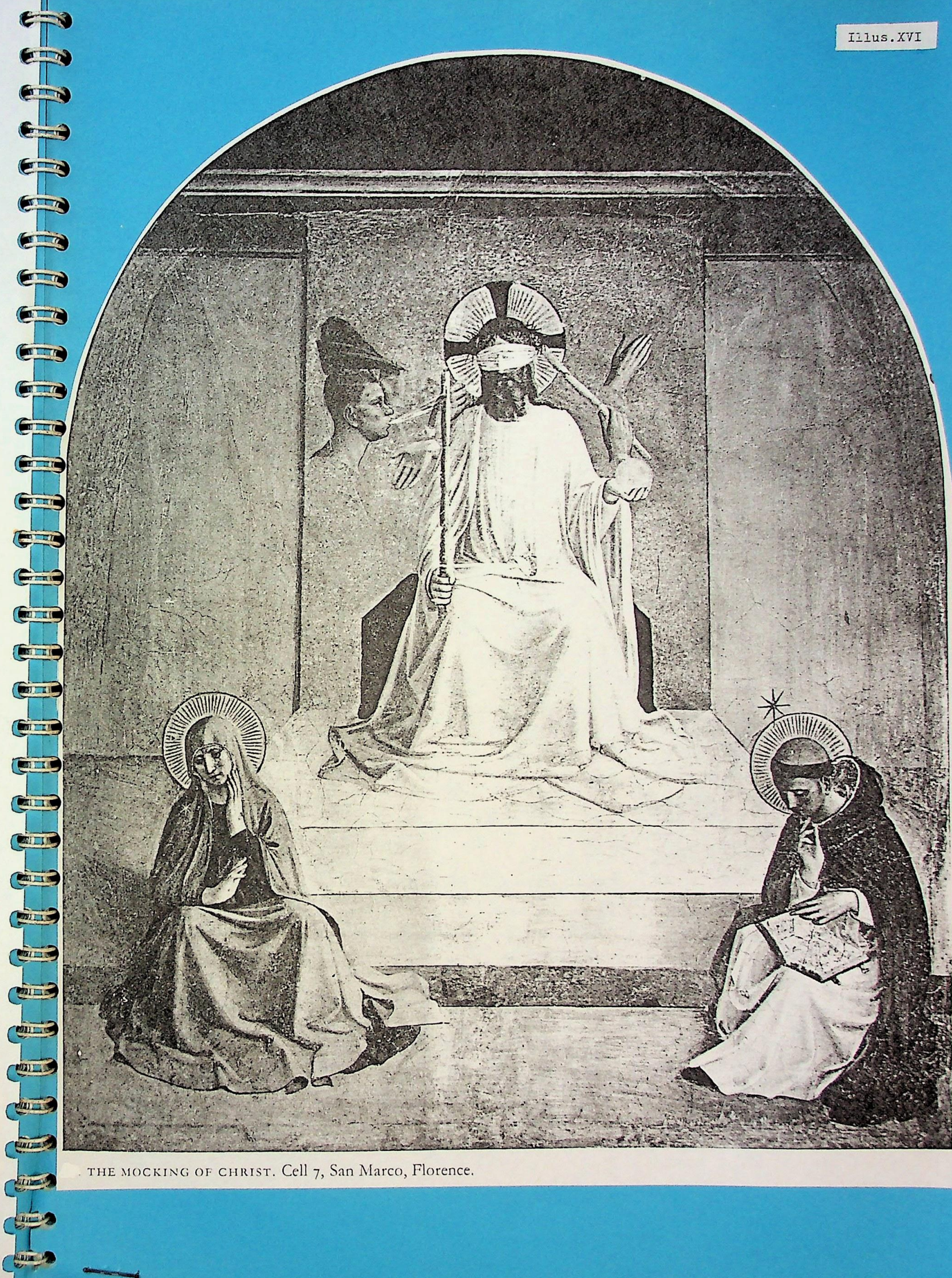
The Meditationes enjoyed wide circulation throughout the Middle Ages and it is the most important spiritual work in understanding the cell frescoes of Fra Angelico. They are, in a sense, the meditations in paint. The language of prayer that we are now describing being present to the actions described in the gospel, are in fact the verbal descriptions of what Fra Angelico is depicting. We shall examine this in more detail.

THE CELL FRESCOES AS AIDS TO MEDITATION

In The Annunciation (Cell 3) the presence of St. Peter Martyr, an early Dominican who died at the hands of heretical Christians he had set out to convert, is an example for the friar who inhabited this cell of how to practice the meditation. Like St. Cecile he makes himself present to the words and actions described in the gospel. In this scene, too, note that Mary is holding a prayer book. There is an act of prayer (the observer's) within an act of prayer (Peter Martyr) within an act of prayer (Mary's). This is the intended mood. The atmosphere is of calm increased by the gestures of the figures, arms and bodies are in a state of rest. There is no attempt to create a sense of drama (the drama in an apparition of angel, for example) but rather the reality of the event is accepted and there is an emphasis on 'presences', the presence of each of the characters and an attempt to grasp the significance of the whole event and not just one moment in a drama.

In The Transfiguration (Cell 6) Dominic (standing on the extreme right) and Mary (standing extreme left) set the example for the observer. Here some drama is allowed in the actions of the three apostles, Peter, James and John in the foreground, since St. Mark's account says they were overcome with awe (Mk. 9:6). But it is the gestures of Dominic, Mary and, above all, the majestic gesture of Christ which control the atmosphere. The heads of Moses and Elijah appear rather than the whole figures, to simplify the story and keep a single focus for the meditation.

Coronation in Cell 9. From left to right the people represented are St.



THE MOCKING OF CHRIST. Cell 7, San Marco, Florence.

Thomas Aquinas, St. Benedict, St. Dominic, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Peter Martyr and perhaps St. Mark, the patron saint of the convent. It is significant that in this work by a Dominican friar that

St. Francis, from another religious order given such pride of place. This is testimony to influence beyond own Religious Order in the history of spirituality, and present in the work of Angelico. We shall discuss the Dominican influence presently.

Illus. XVI

In The Mocking of Christ (Cell 7) we find in the figure of Dominic, in the right foreground, the perfect exemplar of the meaning of these frescoes. The reading of the Bible takes us back to the origin of Christian prayer, the emphasis in this fresco is on the sufferings of Christ that we have noted in the spirituality of St. Francis. Through his meditations Dominic is represented as present in the scene, enough to absorb the meaning of what is before him, that is, the particular manifestation of the love of God which finds its expression in the sufferings of Christ.

Illus. XVII

In The Presentation (Cell 10) there is a reminder that beginning with Bernard of Clairvaux the emphasis in spiritual writings has been on the humanity of Christ expressed in the tenderest of language. The gestures of Mary and the priest, Simeon, towards the child Jesus are expressions of this.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have seen that the frescoes in San Marco are suggested meditations on the New Testament in the tradition of the Franciscan Meditationes Vitae Christi. The meditations are on the human Christ of the New Testament and included in that is the story of Mary. The reading of the Bible for meditation is as old as Christianity itself. But a more humanistic note appears in the Middle Ages that emphasises personal involvement with the people of the New Testament, so much so that in a sense time is broken down between the New Testament age and that of the person making the meditation.



THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE. Cell 10, San Marco, Florence.

CHAPTER 4

DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITYTHE PROBLEM

We have stated that the sources of Fra Angelico's work are Franciscan, yet Fra Angelico is a Dominican friar. Should the contribution of the Dominican to spirituality not be most evident in his work? What is the Dominican contribution and what is evident in the work of Fra Angelico?

THE EARLY DOMINICANS

The early Dominicans (early 13th century) were not particularly concerned with the interior life. Their prayer was simple, devotional, petitionary. They followed the monastic practice of private prayer after Compline and Matins. There is no hint of a single method. The absorbing ambition of the friar was to be useful to the souls of others through preaching.¹ In the early Constitutions we find that the novice master is "to teach the novices how they are to remain in their rooms, to keep their eyes lowered, how and what they are to pray, and how quietly they should pray so that they do not disturb the others with their roaring".² We can only guess, however, what the novice master taught since the early documents are silent on this. There was no one school of prayer that became as influential as that of the Franciscan author of the Meditationes.

From early Dominican times we do have a book called the Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic. St. Antoninus of Florence is known to have had an interest in it, so it was probably known to Fra Angelico.³ The Nine Ways briefly describes the kinds of prayer or more the positions of prayer that St. Dominic was said to have adopted. He stands, kneels and throws himself on the floor, holds his arms wide, or raised, or pointed to the sky 'like an arrow'; he uses the 'discipline'; all these "apart from his usual devout ways of praying the Mass or the Psalms". The Nine Ways tell us that Dominic would "sit down in a room or somewhere to read or to pray,... recollecting himself in himself and fixing himself in the presence of God. He would sit there quietly and open some book, then he would read, letting the sweetness of what he read touch his mind as if he heard the Lord actually speaking to him".⁴ We find also in this book the aspect of intimacy

¹ Nine Ways Intro. ² Tugwell p 416.

³ Dict.Spir. Freres Precheurs p 1443. ⁴ Nine Ways p 44.

SAINT PETER MARTYR. Cloister, San Marco, Florence.





SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS. Cloister, San Marco, Florence.

with the human Christ that is part of medieval spirituality in that Dominic "reads as if he were discussing something with a friend".

We do find in this book the same elements we have in the Franciscan Meditationes. The difference is that in the Dominican work the content of the prayer is unknown. The Meditationes is a detailed description of how to meditate on the New Testament story. It is the text for a school of prayer for which we do not have the equivalent in Dominican spirituality. Judging from the presence of St. Francis and St. Bernard in the work of Fra Angelico the likelihood is that the writings influenced by these men had great influence in the spirituality of Dominicans.

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

There is one Dominican writer who constantly appears in the work of Angelico, the theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) - in lunettes or in the Coronation. But Thomas's works are abstract speculation on the nature of God and man. Thomas's meditations on the truths of Christian theology were an attempt to gain a superhuman mode of knowledge that is intuitive, experimental, impregnated with love, wisdom and knowledge,... distinct from the knowledge of faith, its formal principle is a light which the generality of Christians do not possess".¹

There is nothing here that can be directly tied in with what we find in Fra Angelico's work. But perhaps there is something of Thomas Aquinas' ideas in the light that pervades the autograph frescoes in San Marco. There is a sense in which the figure of Mary in the Annunciation (Cell 3) seems to have no form and yet transmits light. This scene, more about presence than action, flooded by light, also conveys another idea dominant in Dominican writings, here expressed by Albert the Great, the teacher of Aquinas, "that no being is able to subsist or act by its own power but acts by virtue of God himself who is the first mover, the first principle, and cause of all action, working in all that acts".²

DOMINICAN IDEAS IN ANGELICO

So it is in the attitudes and atmosphere of Fra Angelico's frescoes that we find Dominican touches. There is a sense of calm in the belief that God's action is of primary importance, man's striving secondary. This mood is to be found in Fra Angelico's work. It is an idea that pervades Dominican spirituality to this day. The Dominicans flourished before anxiety of the 16th century Carmelites and Jesuits to analyse God's actions

¹ Le Clerq p 250. ² Tugwell p 200.

on the soul, and to measure man's response to God. For the 16th century Jesuit, active in the world, acting independently, it was important to give a great deal of thought to his prayer and his interior responses to it. For the Dominican, absorbed in the cloistered life, studies, the prayers of the liturgy, this concern for forms of prayer was not so important. It was not until 1505 that the Dominicans made mental prayer part of their daily programme, as a modern Dominican is at pains to point out.

We are saying here that there is less concern among the late medieval Dominicans with forms of prayer, a lack of anxiety that is one mood of Fra Angelico's work, yet 60 years before mental prayer, or meditation, becomes stipulated in the Dominical rule we find Fra Angelico obviously encouraging it. And in his inclusion of figures like Dominic and Peter Martyr in the historical narrative, which draws us to consider the effects of their meditation on their own lives, he prefigures later developments in spirituality.

SUMMARY

We are saying that Fra Angelico's work is based on a spirituality that was developed more by Franciscans than Dominicans, yet there are obviously Dominican touches in Fra Angelico's approach. And we are also saying that Fra Angelico played an important role in carrying these ideas from the realm of spirituality into that of painting, as we shall see when we come to discuss him from the point of view of iconography. The inclusion of contemporary figures in the gospel scenes is not new and the idea is based on forms of spirituality that are hundreds of years old in 1445. Yet Fra Angelico's development of this idea, his emphasis on the contemporary figure begins to prefigure later developments in spirituality that emphasise the response of man to God. We shall see that other painters at this time were doing the same, but none so successfully as Fra Angelico.

CHAPTER 5

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE SAN MARCO FRESCOES

The history of spirituality had direct influence on the iconography of Christian art, and this is the other way of coming to understand Angelico. The same ground will now be covered but from the point of view of artistic development, what Fra Angelico inherited as artistic language apart from his religious background.

EARLY MEDIEVAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CRUCIFIXION

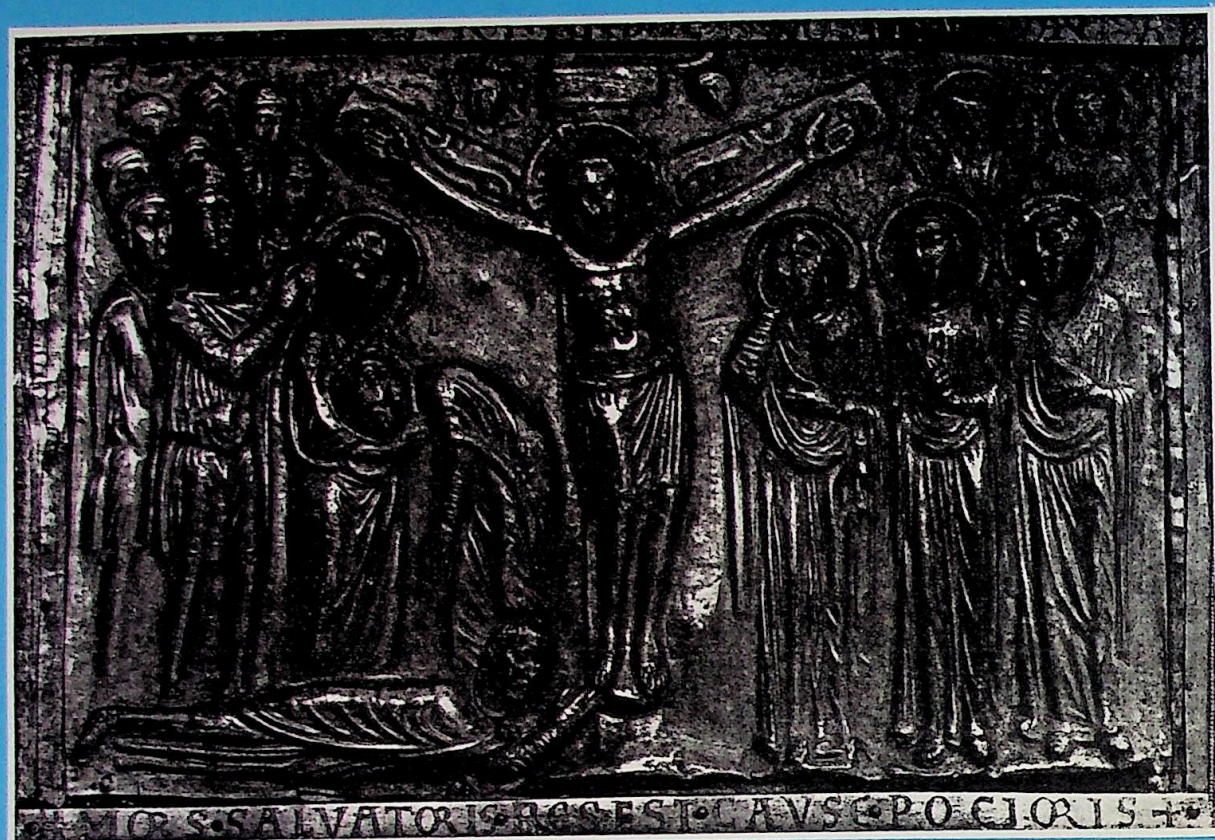
The most important image in Christian art is the crucifixion scene, just as in the New Testament itself each gospel leads up to and gives most attention to the events surrounding the death of Jesus Christ - his arrest, sufferings at the hands of his captors, death and resurrection. The crucifixion came to be the central image since it is the death of Christ which is the strongest symbolic act showing what Christians believe to be the love of God for humanity. That God would be willing to accept death at the hands of human beings and still to live humanly. We have already noted the importance of the fresco in the cloister of San Marco of the Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic.

The crucifixion scene went through many forms from the beginning of Christian art. But generally this theological meaning pertained to it; that this action of Christ dying for sinful humanity was the very action which somehow brought them forgiveness for all kinds of sin and therefore 'salvation'; the reward of happiness in a life after death. In the early Middle Ages it tended to be ideas that were represented by the crucifixion scene, as Christ conquering death for example, or where in the 8th century Mary and John appear at the foot of the cross as described in St. John's gospel. The idea is that they represent the community of the faithful redeemed by Christ's death. Images showing the blood from the side of Christ are symbols of the Eucharist.¹

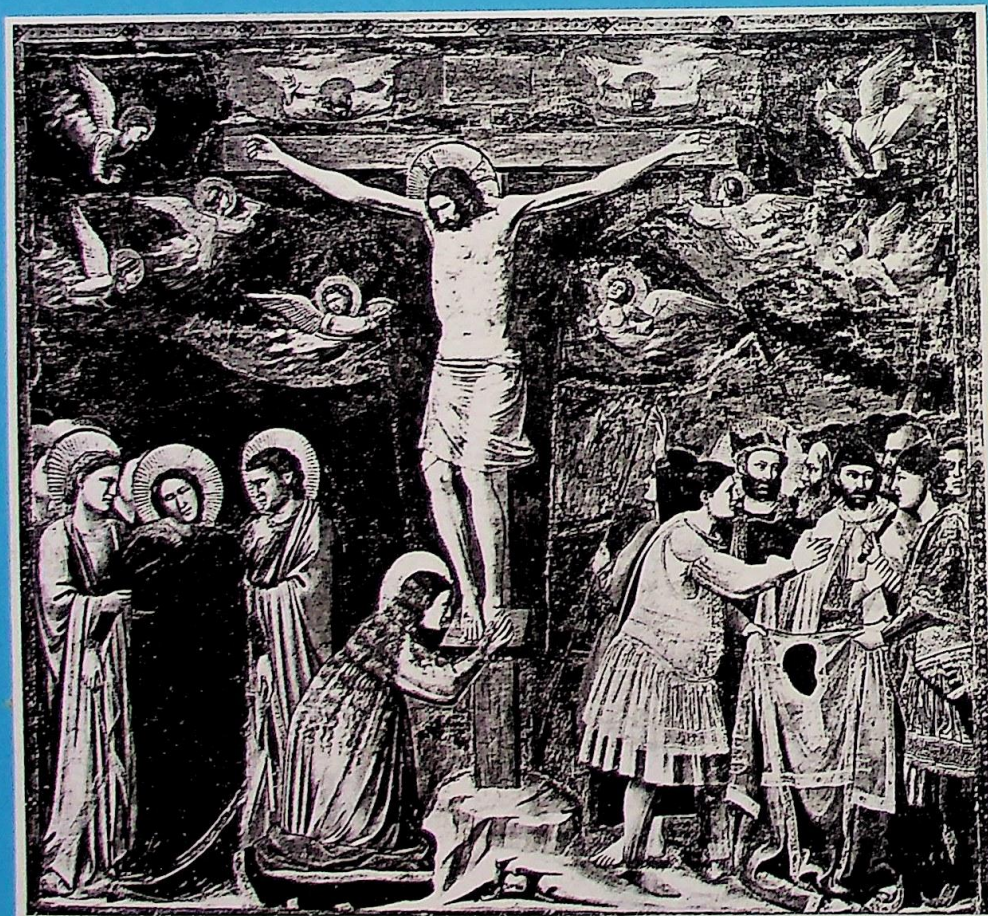
¹ Schiller II p 96.



SAINTS FRANCIS AND BERNARD.



Silver relief, c.1186. Cologne.
Shrine of Albinus. Cologne. Crucifixion.



Wall painting, c.1305. Giotto. Padua. Crucifixion.

FROM THE 12th CENTURY

We have seen how with Bernard of Clairvaux there develops an emphasis on the humanity of Christ and his physical suffering. This development has an influence on the depiction of the crucifixion in art. In the Shrine of Albinus (Cologne 1168) we see figures from the historical narrative, but we can note the emphasis on suffering. Christ's garments are removed, the figure is bent to show the reality of the nailing to a cross. Mary is fainting in the arms of another of the women. And separated from the others in posture is possibly the donor of the shrine in a penitential posture, expressing sorrow for his sin - but also sharing in some way with the suffering of those involved in the historical scene. Here are the beginnings of the supra historical merging of contemporary figures with biblical scenes that is a mark of the Middle Ages and we are to find in Fra Angelo. The Shrine of Albinus can be compared with the Christ on the Cross adored by St. Dominic. The relationship between the donor lying on the ground in the Shrine and that of St. Dominic in the San Marco fresco is clearly evident as is the style of the figure of Christ. The Shrine predates Angelico by 300 years. However, the Shrine is unique in its time since it is not until later that this idea is expressed extensively in European art.

THE FRANCISCAN INFLUENCE

In the Shrine of Albinus are at least three elements that are to be developed in Christian art through the Middle Ages.

1. We have already noted the emphasis on the humanity of Christ portrayed in his human suffering rather than in majesty.
2. The sufferings of Mary are to become a secondary subject for meditation by the onlooker.
3. The presence of a figure in a repentant posture with whom the onlooker is to identify himself.

The development of the spirituality that culminated in the Meditationes is responsible for these developments.

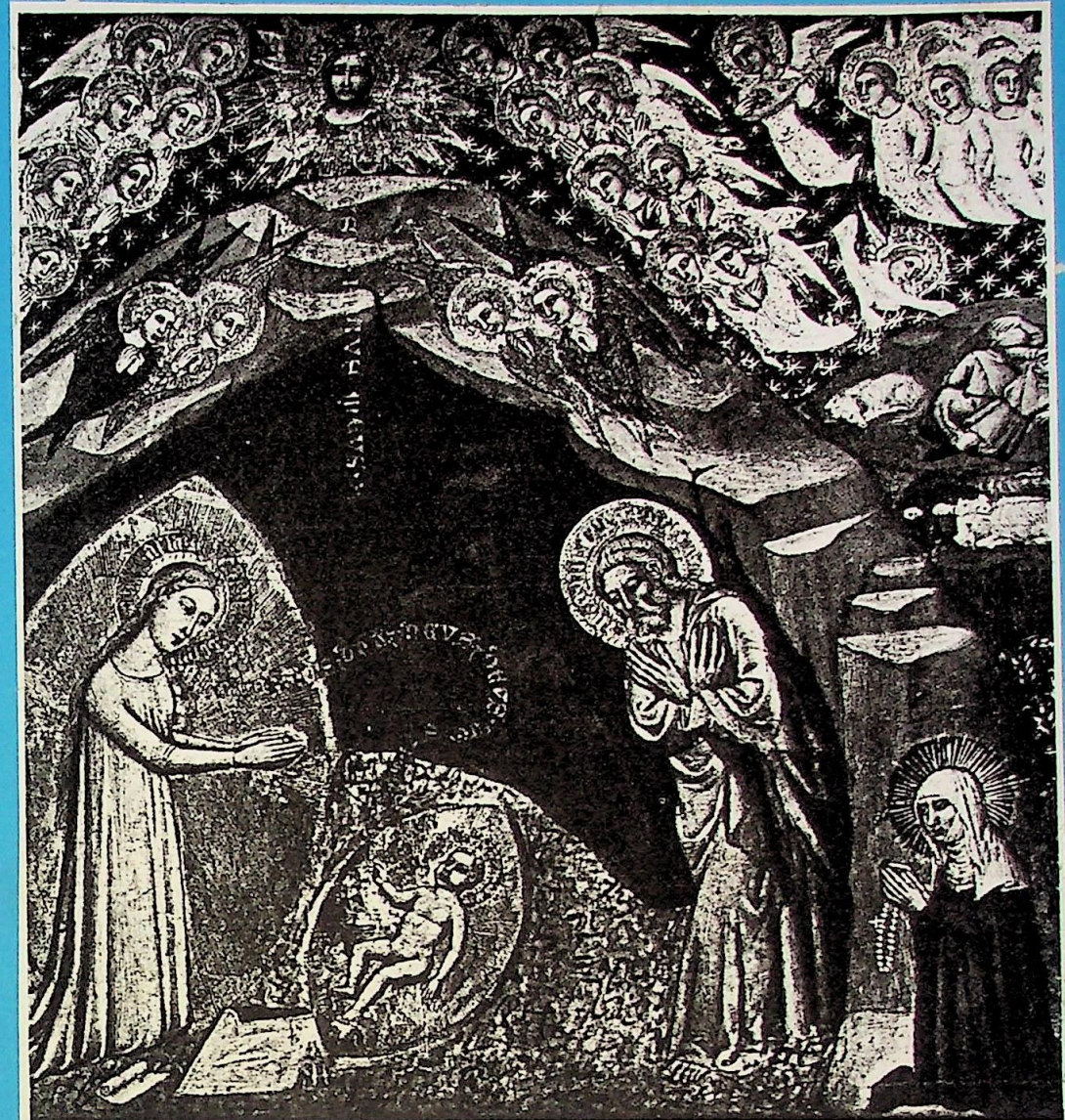
If we next take a crucifixion of Giotto roughly contemporary with the Meditationes we can note how the suffering of Christ is drawn attention to by the angels arriving to assist him and express their grief. By this stage Mary and John are clearly no longer representatives of the faithful but they

"embody that participation in and contemplation of suffering which was then important as a spur to the imitation of Christ".¹ And they also now form a focus for meditation themselves. Finally note that it is Mary Magdalen, the repentant sinner who is at the foot of the cross, reminding the onlooker who is meant to identify with her of his sinfulness, but also implied in her gestures is the attempt to grasp the significance of the crucifixion, a task the viewer is also invited to undertake. The unusual aspect of the Albinus Shrine, the inclusion of a contemporary, becomes much more common in the 14th century with the increased involvement of the biblical characters. In a Crucifixion by Cimabue in the upper church of Assisi, St. Francis kneels on the hill of Golgotha praying earnestly and resting his face against the stair of the cross. In the lower church in Assisi followers of Giotto (1320-30) have painted several Franciscans kneeling in prayer facing the crucified Christ.²

SUMMARY

The development of Christian iconography was influenced by books of meditations in the life of Christ, of which the Meditationes was most widely used. The Meditationes cover other aspects of the life of Christ besides the crucifixion, and we have seen how they appeal to the reader to become involved. So in art Fra Angelico takes other scenes from the New Testament and offers them as meditations, and is including a wider variety of more contemporary figures. He is expanding the elements we see in the Giotto and Cimabue already discussed and he is among the first to do so, so extensively in fresco painting.

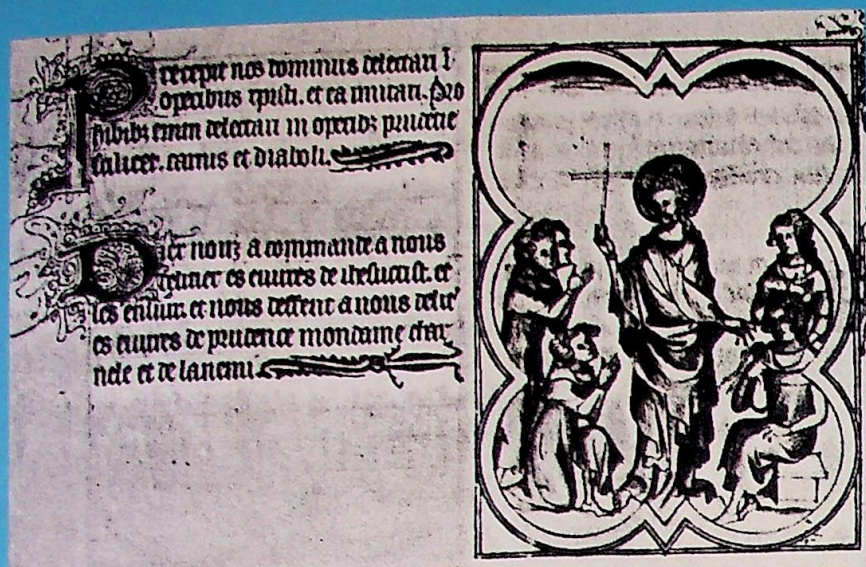
¹ Schiller II p 71. ² Schiller II p 153/4.



Niccolò di Tommaso: *Nativity with St. Bridget* (detail). Rome, Pinacoteca Vaticana.



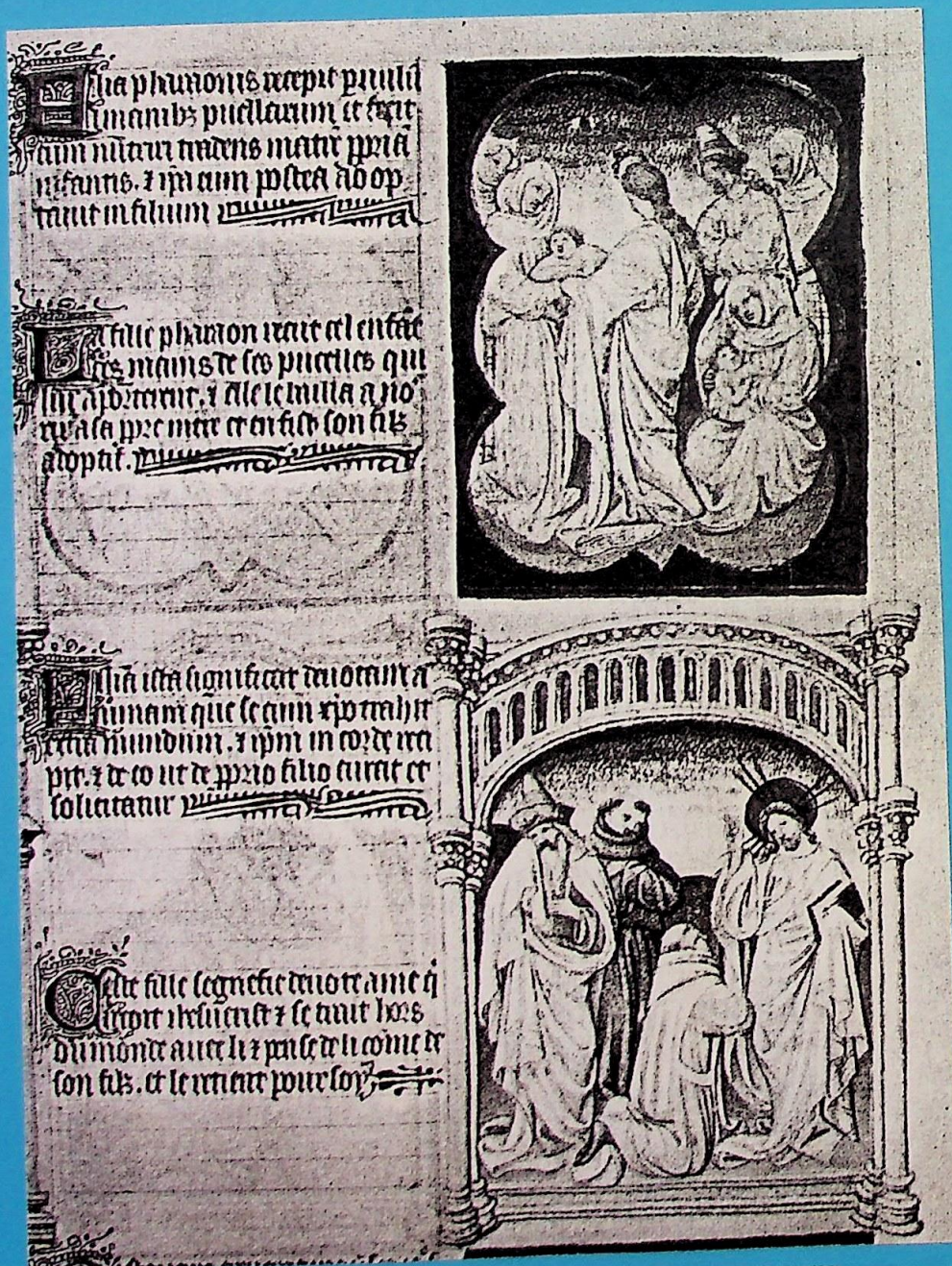
Master of Cell 2: *The Nativity*. San Marco, Florence (Cell 5)



Illus. XXIV

Bible Moralisée, French c. 1350.

Illus. XXV



Bible Moralisée, illus. Paul de Limbourg, early 15th. century.

CHAPTER 6

OTHER SOURCES FOR FRA ANGELICO'S ART

LITERATURE OF VISIONS

The relationship between meditations and art can be clearly seen in the influence of St. Bridget of Sweden. Following her meditations she had a vision of the nativity, details of which were published and entered into the iconography of the subject. These details include the Virgin kneeling in adoration of the Christ child who is on the ground moments after the birth. Rays of light emanate from both Virgin and child. Bridget herself is shown kneeling outside the cave in a painting by Nicollo di Tommaso and some of these elements can be found in the Nativity from San Marco.¹

Illus. XXII

Illus. XXIII

ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPTS

But where did the idea of including contemporary figures in the historical portrayal come from? We have seen it already in the Albinus Shrine. It seems to come from a kind of visual shorthand. This can be more clearly seen in medieval manuscripts. Early in the 13th century Bible moralisees appear, for example, heavily illustrated books which included short passages from the Latin bible accompanied by moralizations from biblical commentaries mainly of the 12th century.² The formula is a biblical text with illustrations and a moralization with illustration. In a bible moralisee of 1350 the text is about Christ's instructions to us as Christians so in the illustration it is natural to place Christ and 'ourselves' together. This is visual shorthand. In a later work by Paul de Limbourg, a contemporary of Fra Angelico, we clearly see other examples. The bible text is of Pharaoh's daughter accepting Moses - the moralization of the Christian accepting the son of God. The language of the Meditationes is visible, seen in another when Joseph's coat, given to Jacob, reminds us of Jesus' robes removed for his scourging and there are Franciscans meditating on this suffering. This is the same language we find in Fra Angelico. In the same book by de Limbourg we find an illustration very similar to one of Fra Angelico's frescoes, that of the Coronation of the Virgin with apostles looking on representing the church. There were also illustrated versions of books of meditations.

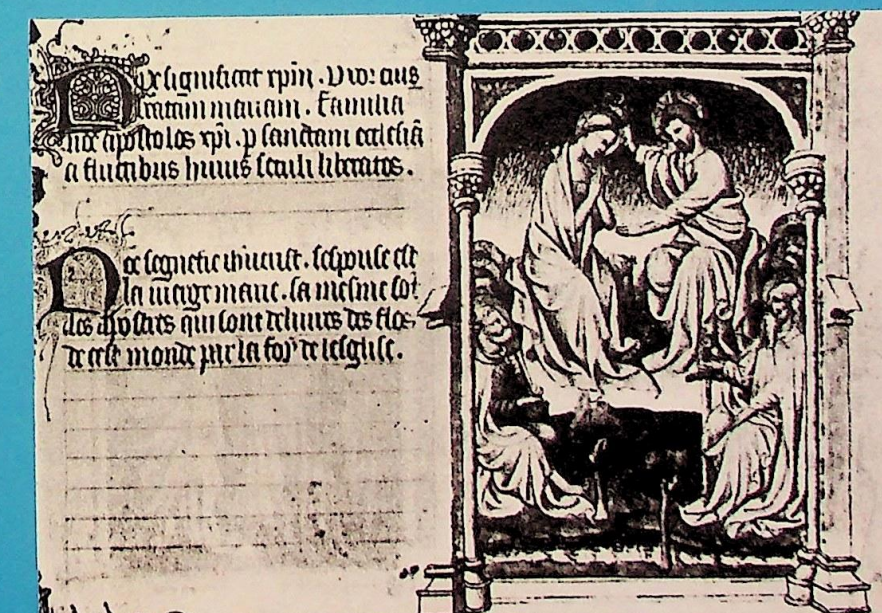
Illus. XXIV

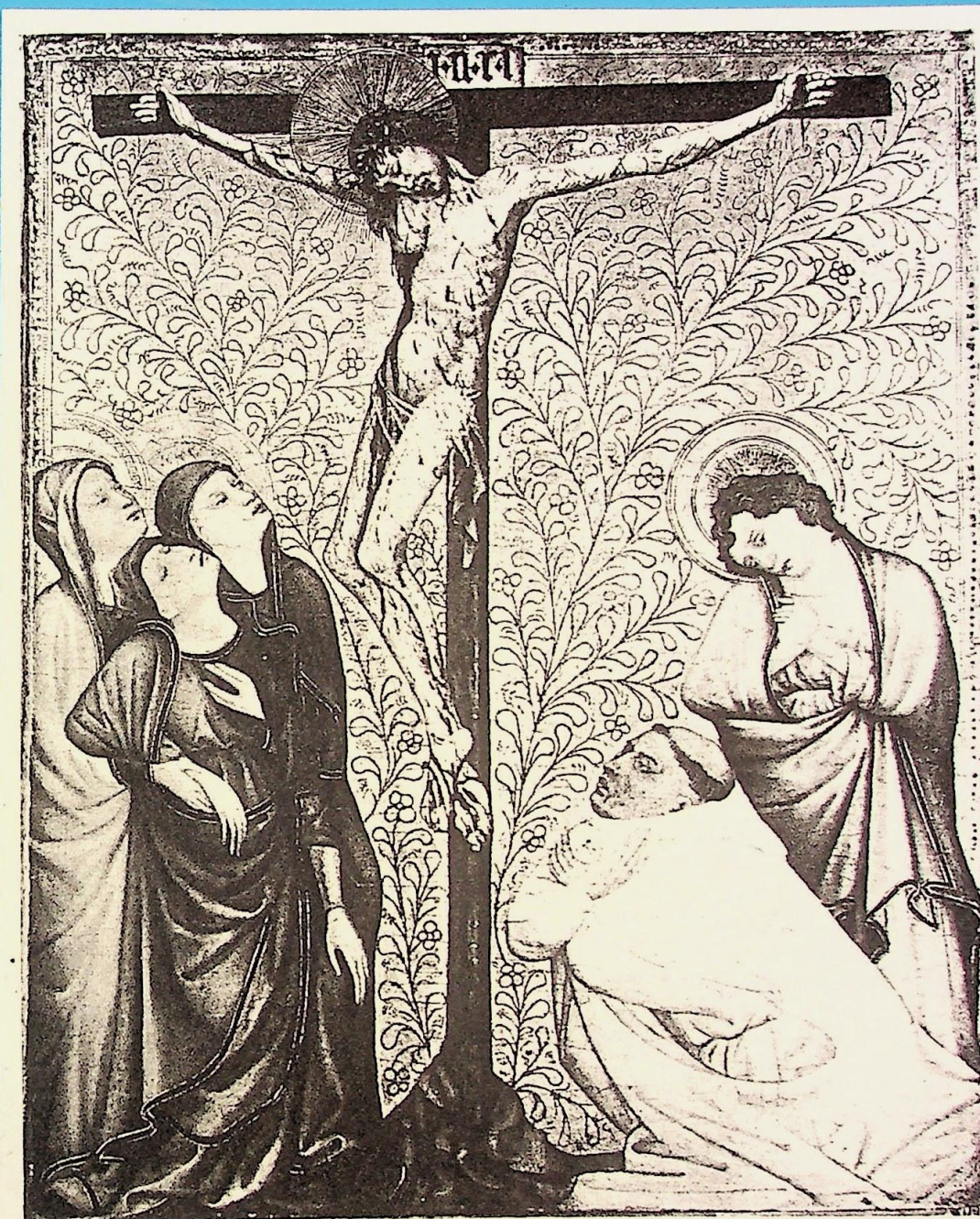
Illus. XXV

Illus. XXVI

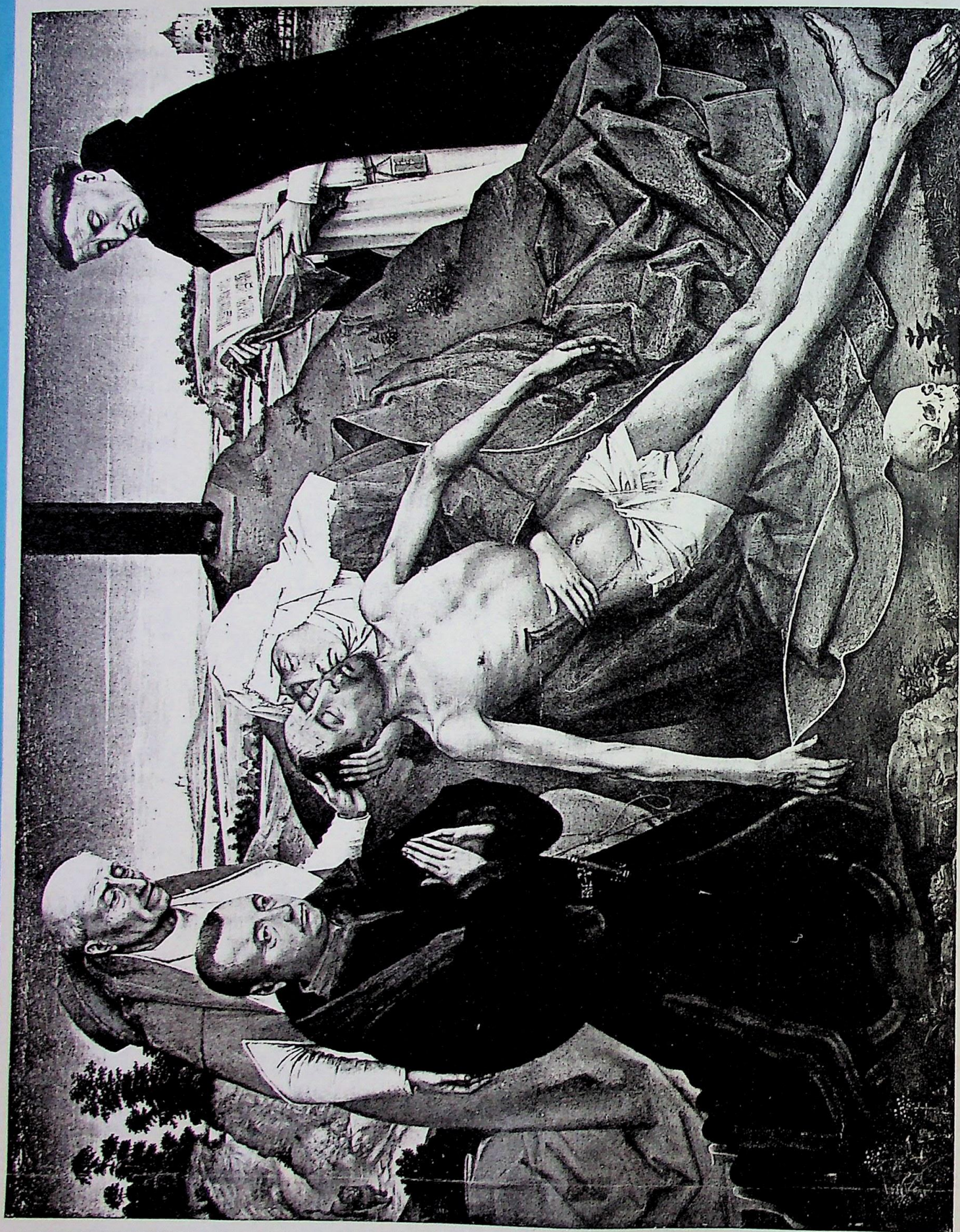
Illus. XXVII

¹ Millard Meiss p 86. ² Ibid. p 81/2.





368. Jean de Beaufort and Shop, 1390-5: *Crucifixion*. Cleveland, Museum of Art.



72. *Pietà*. 14 x 17 3/4 in. London, National Gallery (Cat. Rogier, London 3)

Illus. XXVIII

PAINTINGS FOR PRIVATE DEVOTION

The use of pictures to encourage devotion in the cells of monks and friars, as opposed to more public works, is not new with Fra Angelico. In the primitive constitutions of the Dominican order from the early 13th century Dominican friars are "to have only one poor cell without ornamentation of profane images, but with the images of the Crucifix, the Blessed Virgin and our Father Dominic".¹ We don't have much of what was used privately as devotional images in monastic cells.

From Burgundy in the 1390's we have panel paintings by Jean de Beaumetz that were small devotional images used by the Carthusian monks of Champnol. They employ all the iconography we have been discussing - the emotional involvement of the historical figures, the contemporary figure to encourage the onlooker to meditate on the Passion in the manner described.

FRA ANGELICO AND ROGER VAN DER WEYDEN

Illus. XXIX

The spirituality and consequently the art of the Middle Ages encouraged people to imaginatively enter into the life of Christ as portrayed in the New Testament, especially in a spirit of repentance confronted with the story of the passion. A contemporary of Fra Angelico, Roger Vander Weyden in Northern Europe, can be seen using the same artistic language based on this kind of piety. In Van der Weyden's *Pietà* we find a Dominican friar on the right with his bible, in meditation. The extent to which the faithful were encouraged to enter into their meditations is indicated by the Cardinal at the left who is encouraging the donor in his meditation, and significantly touching the head of Christ with his own hand. There is an awkwardness in the placement of these figures, however, that is not in Fra Angelico. Van der Weyden paints this kind of meditation but in frescoes like the *Annunciation* Fra Angelico somehow makes it more convincing. He does not simply juxtapose the present with the past but creates a sense of a place where both can co-exist. It is tempting to think that this is due to some extraordinary spiritual gift as 19th century art historians to write. But only his skill as an artist can be authenticated.

¹ Alce p 42.

SUMMARY

Books of meditations, visions and bible moralisees are concerned with a spirituality that is highly visual. And works of art from illustrated manuscripts to pictures for the use of monks in their cells are intended to increase devotion. It can be seen that there is a rich relationship between art and spirituality in the middle ages. To understand the work of Fra Angelico it is necessary to be aware of this relationship.

CHAPTER 7

C O N C L U S I O N

The work of Fra Angelico is a high point in the history of the relationship between art and spirituality. After Angelico the humanistic and highly visual form of meditation of the middle ages was to be developed and has been handed on even to our day, particularly by orders like the Jesuits. But Fra Angelico's contemporaries in art were moving towards a realist art that divorced it from the world of spirituality.

This form of meditation owed much to figures like St. Bernard of Clairvaux and to St. Francis rather than to any particular Dominican influence, but its influence in art and religion can be seen in the work of Fra Angelico in San Marco.

Having found some of the roots of Fra Angelico's work some final words will now be written of its significance in the eyes of this author. In the introduction mention was made of the compartmentalisation of western civilization that affects the forms of Christianity, in particular the sharp division between lay and religious. This notion existed in the middle ages.

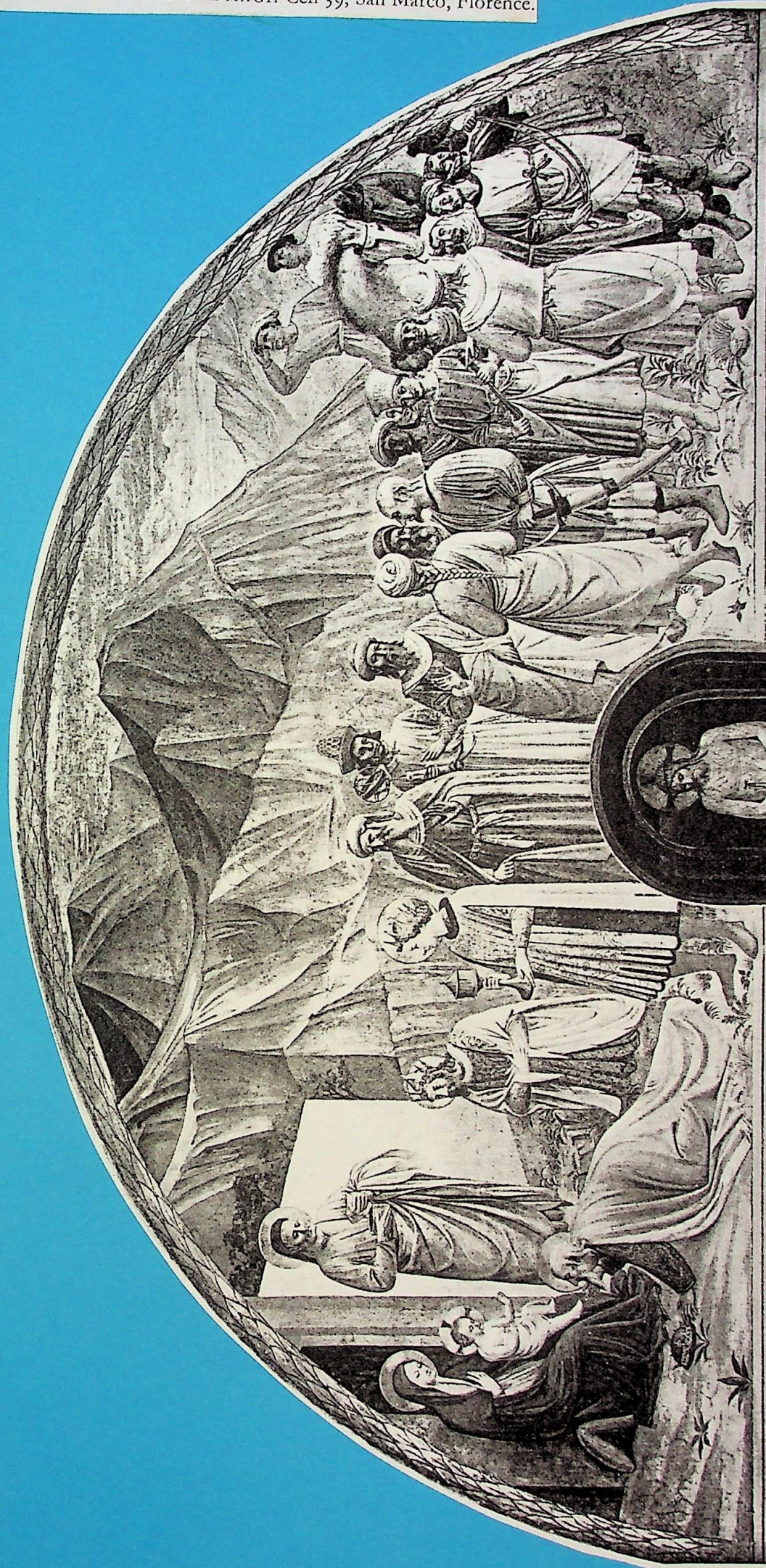
The fundamental idea of religious life as it was understood by the medieval man was that "a life fully pleasing to God could not be lived in the secular world. Strictly speaking, perhaps, it could not be lived anywhere in man's fallen state. But the gap could be closed until it was very small if man dedicated himself entirely to a life of particular discipline, self abnegation and prayer, making the following of Christ a regular, full time, authorised activity".¹ One feels that for Fra Angelico these are the ideas that prevail. There is nothing present in Angelico of what is happening in the Devotio Moderna of northern Europe. "For the brethren of the common life for example, the certainty and safety of an irrevocable decision which earlier religious leaders had decided so eagerly for their followers, the brethren sought to avoid";² they had a desire rather for the danger in being constantly exposed to freedom.

The 14th century Dominican, Eckhart had written in northern Europe "For whoever seeks God in some special way will gain the way and lose God who is hidden in the way".³ Angelico's work is very much about one of these ways - the Dominican life. He sees it as being very different to the secular way. This can be clearly seen in the richness of figures in

1 Southern p 341. 2 Ibid. p 343. 3 Ibid. p 340.

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI. Cell 39, San Marco, Florence.

Illus. XXX





SAINT LAWRENCE DISTRIBUTING ALMS. Chapel of Nicholas V, Vatican.

in the cell of Cosimo, the one designed for the lay person which only in the landscape has the starkness of the other frescoes. The friar's way is a denial of the senses expressed in the bare surroundings of the cell frescoes. In the Noli me Tangere cell 1 there is the freshness of the garden, but the theme of the painting itself is for the monk a reminder of the denial of the physical world for the spiritual. This other worldliness of Angelico is a weakness in his spirituality and his art.

Even in his paintings for the outside world, the many altarpieces, or the Vatican frescoes, there is not a sense of human experience being touched by the divine. Of Fra Angelico Berenson wrote, "It is true that Giotto's profound feeling for either the materially or the spiritually significant was denied him...when he was obliged to portray evil his imagination failed him".¹ When he paints the world of suffering in the Vatican frescoes of St. Lawrence and St. Stephen there is no real feeling that Angelico the man has been touched by the world of suffering. In Giotto's Kiss of Judas there is a sense in which the divine touches even the depths of evil in humanity in Judas's betrayal, and somehow wins it over.

Even though Fra Angelico does not convincingly speak of the relevance of meditation to human experience as lived by the majority of people, he does communicate many of the feelings with which, we presume, his meditations inspired him, serenity, freshness, clarity and simplicity.

¹ Berenson p 62/3.

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