FROM ITS INCEPTION, the Dominican Order has been intimately associated with the Blessed Mother of God. Her special favor has been clearly manifested by the fact that she commissioned the propagation of her Rosary to the sons of St. Dominic and that as a proof of her maternal protection she gave them the important part of their habit, the scapular. Through seven centuries the Friars have not forgotten these signs of affection and wherever they have gone to preach the truths of her Divine Son the “Champions of the Faith” have concomitantly spread devotion to Mary whom they venerate as their Queen and Mother. This sketch is concerned with a friar whose veneration of his heavenly Queen was to shine above that of most of his Dominican brethren. So sublime were the praises which he rendered to her, that after five centuries souls are still drawn through his works to the knowledge of their spiritual mother, Mary. Who was this famous proponent of the Blessed Mother? Perhaps a gifted orator or a great theologian? No, he was neither. For in extolling the beauties of His Lady this Friar neither commanded the persuasive words of a Vincent Ferrer nor did he wield the forceful pen of an Aquinas; rather he used a painter’s brush. This humble Dominican who by his pictures was to etch the image of Mary into thousands of souls was Fra Giovanni de Fiesole, who because of his saintly life and the angelic nature of his works has become known to us as Fra Angelico, or Beato Angelico.

Charged by his Dominican vocation to shed the light of truth and grace upon souls, Fra Angelico fulfilled his religious profession by presenting to the faithful pictures of the Mother of God which converted and sanctified their hearts. Painting was his ministry, and Marian masterpieces were the fruits of his contemplation. By means of his brush and palette the Angelic Friar pursued silently the paths of wisdom and truth. His sermons on the Madonna were brilliant compositions of color on canvas, radiating a spirituality and purity of such a degree that the better one wishes to understand them, the holier one must be. His unique method of preaching was by far
superior to that of the spoken or written word, for the truth captured in his paintings hurdled the barriers of language and expressed itself in a universal tongue. And even now, after five centuries, his preachings of art have not lost their eloquence, especially in the case of his many portrayals of the Mother of God.

In this brief study we shall review some of the more important paintings of the Virgin done by the Friar painter. To facilitate our task it will be expedient to present these descriptions in a chronological fashion. By utilizing this mode of procedure we can trace in outline form the life of our Painter while we make an analysis of his works.

At the outset however, it should be noted that to list the paintings of Angelico chronologically with absolute certainty is impossible for several reasons. The first is that he never signed or dated any of his works. Without much reflection we can ascribe this habit to his saintly humility. Secondly, unlike other artists who were susceptible to external influences none of his works indicate changes in style. His only inspiration was his love of God. This love was the stabilizing influence which diffused a unity and harmony over all of his works. Consequently, the order of Angelico’s paintings which we will follow is derived from information supplied by the Italian painter-writer Giorgio Vasari and Father Marchese, O.P., who are two frequently quoted sources of historical knowledge pertaining to our religious artist. Since Vasari records no definite order of time in his review of Angelico’s works, to establish the chronology we revert to the system used by Father Marchese, that is recording the works of Angelico in accordance with his personal history.

Then too, any descriptions of Angelico’s paintings must of necessity be considered incomplete. For, it is a difficult task to describe a picture since words ill express what the brush so vividly represents. This is especially true of the Beato. For other artists, standards may be formed by which we can make the results of their inspiration understood and by which we can judge the qualities of their talent, but with Angelico the same criteria cannot be applied, for he was not only a painter but also a saint! This prominent characteristic most certainly must be remembered in any examination of his works. How can one adequately describe the celestial music as played by his angels? Or express in words the triumphant emotions which permeate his pictures of the coronation of the Virgin? The viewer can hear the music, or witness the emotion, but how successfully these experiences evade expression in the written or spoken word! We must limit our-
selves to the narrow, trite confines of words which fall short in their futile attempt to describe this simple, true beauty that is not of this world.

The final point for consideration is that in this examination of Angelico’s portrayals of the Virgin, none of the originals have been seen but only photographic reproductions, and even these are not the same size as the originals. That some of the details have been lost we readily admit, but despite this, what has been retained supplies us with an accurate enough account of the blessed painter’s labors.

At the age of twenty Guido di Pietro da Mugello entered the service of the Divine Son of His Lady when in 1409 he entered the Dominican convent of San Domenico de Fiesole. At the time of his entrance into religion Christendom was being torn from within by the Great Schism. The Council of Pisa, in an unfortunate effort to end the rivalry of the popes of Rome and Avignon, added more coals to the already rampant fire of unrest by electing a third Pope. Confusion and alarm fell upon the faithful. Feeling on this issue had become so intense that Guido, who was now known in religion as Fra Giovanni, and his brother Benedetto were forced to leave the city because of the convent’s support of the Roman Pontiff. They took refuge in the Dominican convent at Foligno.

During the ensuing years spent in the radiant Umbrian countryside one can imagine how Angelico enjoyed and filled to satiety his love for the brilliant colors which filled the verdant valleys and azure skies. As he gazed at the rolling countryside he could appreciate the depth, form, and space which he was soon to begin to transpose onto canvas. In this respect, the Angelic Painter followed the innovations of Giotto and later of Massacio, the pioneers of three dimensional painting. By the adoption of these new methods he introduced a vitality to his work which was to free his figures from darkness and flatness.

For Angelico, these first years of his exile were used to prepare himself both spiritually and technically for the execution of his Dominican vocation. His spiritual direction was entrusted to the very capable supervision of his novice master, Blessed Lawrence of Ripafracta. The early part of his study at Foligno was devoted to illuminating manuscripts. This task was undoubtedly well suited to his tranquil soul. He then applied himself assiduously to the study of the masters. Various chroniclers state that this is clearly indicated by his earliest paintings of the Madonna, which reveal the special influence of the school of Giotto. In these works are found the types
and figures borrowed from the paintings at Assisi which, at the time of Angelico, was the proud possessor of the great treasures of Christian art. Famous artists such as Giotto and Cimabue deposited their noblest masterpieces at the tomb of the Poverello. It would be folly to deny that the Angelic Painter would neglect the opportunities to study these masterworks which were so near at hand. It seems that at this time he also acquired a knowledge of the Sienese painters and from their works modelled his Madonnas with looks so pure and sweet. Nor is this assumption improbable. On his journeys to and from Fiesole he could have had many occasions to pass through the city made famous by his sister in religion, St. Catherine.

His first opus which is recorded at this early stage of his career is an altar piece done in tempera in the Church of San Domenico in Perugia. He depicts the Virgin seated on a throne with the Divine Babe standing on her lap. The Infant holds a rose in His left hand while the right is raised in benediction. Two angels stand at either side with baskets of flowers. At the foot of the throne we see some red and white roses in vases. The delicate position of the hands coupled with her contemplative expression make this Madonna one of the sweetest and noblest that the Beato has executed. Skillfully he has blended the characteristics of maternity, gentleness, and purity into this picture. When we view a portrait such as this we are prompted to give credence to the legend related of Angelico which says that angels worked on his canvases at glorifying Mary as he slept. To complete this work there are two lateral compartments on either side. The figures of St. John the Baptist and St. Catherine the Virgin Martyr are on the right and St. Dominic with St. Nicholas are painted on the left.

Vasari is silent concerning the possibility of any other works done by Angelico during this period, either for his convent in Foligno or for any of the other Dominican convents in Umbria. After a residence of about five years in Foligno, Fra Angelico and his brethren were obliged to move once again, this time to Cortona, because of the plague. This was about in the year 1414.

In Cortona, where he was to pass the last years of his exile, he produced for the Church of San Domenico what is believed to be his first work in fresco. He painted a Virgin with her Son in her arms and St. Dominic with St. Peter Martyr adoring on either side. Since it was frescoed on the exterior facade of the church over the entrance, the picture is not well preserved and has suffered from exposure. However, he did two other fine pieces for the same church. One is
located in the side chapel, while the other has been moved to the Church of the Gesú. The work in the side chapel is a repetition of the one in San Domenico in Perugia which we have already described. Added to the upper part of this picture is a triangular rendition of the crucifixion. Two circles are located at the base angles of the triangle. One contains the Angel Gabriel and the other an Annunciation.

The second picture, which is now in the Gesú, is also an Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin. From the frequency with which this subject appears in the various convents and churches where Angelico labored, we can judge that this theme must have been very dear to his heart. His Virgin in this picture, as in all of his delineations of the Madonna, is varied and graceful, whereas one notices that in his portrayals of saints he has the tendency to keep the same types. It is difficult to find anyone that can excel him in that angelic purity and virtue that radiates from his Virgins and saints. A Giottesque tradition is inserted in the Gesú work by the inscription of the angel's salutation, "Ave Maria Gratia Plena," and the ensuing colloquy from the Gospel of St. Luke. His object in incorporating the text undoubtedly was to stir the faithful to a more profound contemplation of this joyous message. There cannot be any other reason, since in his time the use of such inscriptions had been entirely abandoned and an artist of his capability had no need of them to convey his ideas. It seems that on this point he did not like to be confined by the canons of art and followed the impulse of his piety. For one can observe that in most of his paintings he uses inscriptions either above, below the figures or in the halos and garments of his saints. In the background of this work Angelico shows Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. By introducing this scene he intended to signify that it was through Mary's acceptance of her role in our salvation that the sin of our first parents was to be repaired. With this picture there is an accompanying gradino which describes the Life of the Virgin. These little masterpieces are now in the Uffizi in Florence. They are arranged in chronological order. The first compartment portrays the Birth of the Virgin followed by the Espousals and the Visitation. Next is the Adoration of the Magi succeeded by the Presentation in the Temple. In the sixth panel we find the Burial of the Virgin. And in the last, the Blessed Virgin surrounded by angels is telling Blessed Reginald of Orleans to take the habit of the Order. One marvels at the diligent execution of
these panels and is struck with the beauty and grace with which the figures are endowed by the Beato.

After some lengthy negotiations by Blessed John Dominic with the Bishop of Fiesole and Pope Gregory XII, the Friars were permitted to reoccupy their convent in that city. It must have been with a feeling of great joy that Angelico returned to the spot where he first sacrificed himself to his God. As a renewal of that sacrifice he was to grace this convent with some of his most beautiful compositions.

His first Marian portrait upon his return "home" was executed for the Church of San Domenico di Fiesole. The Blessed Virgin is seated on a throne with the Christ Child. Here, as in many of his pictures, he adds saints on either side of the central figures. On the left of the Virgin he portrays St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Peter the Apostle, while on the right we find St. Dominic and St. Peter Martyr. Assembled closely around the Virgin are angels in profound veneration.

Vasari mentions an Annunciation in this same church which has been lost. We can judge what the artistic value of this piece must have been from his own words, "a painting of Our Lady and the Angel Gabriel, the profile of whose countenance is so devout, so delicate, that it does not seem to be the work of man, but of paradise."*

The third picture produced for the Church in Fiesole is now in the Louvre in Paris. There are many photographic reproductions of this remarkable work which is classified as one of Fra Angelico's finest masterpieces. We here borrow the exuberant phrases of Vasari to describe the work. "But above all the works of Fra Giovanni, and one in which he has surpassed himself, is a picture in the same church, ... In this he proves the high quality of his powers, as well as his profound intelligence of the art he practiced. The subject is the Coronation of the Virgin by Jesus Christ: the principal figures are surrounded by a choir of angels and a vast number of saints male and female. These figures are so numerous, so well executed, in attitudes so varied, and with expressions of countenance so diversified, that one experiences incredible pleasure and delight in looking at them. Nay, it seems as though these blessed spirits cannot be otherwise in heaven; or, to speak more correctly, could not, if they had forms appear otherwise. For all the saints here, male and female, have not only life and expression most deli-

*References to Vasari are taken passim from Fr. Marchese's two volume work. (V. bibliography)
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...cately and truly rendered, but the whole colouring of this work seems to have been executed by the hand of a saint or an angel like themselves. "He depicts Christ holding with both hands the crown which He is about to place on His mother's head. Mary kneels before Him, her arms crossed upon her breast. Twenty four angels encircle the throne singing her praises and playing various instruments while the multitude of saints contemplate this glorious event. Truly this is a scene stolen from Heaven!"

During his residence in Fiesole, Angelico executed a tabernacle, which is now in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence, for a guild of joiners. It is comprised of a centerpiece flanked by two doors. On the interior he painted Our Lady seated on a rich cushion shot with gold. Her blue mantle is adorned with golden embroidery. On Mary's knee stands the Infant Jesus clad in a tunic and holding a globe in his left hand. Around the border of the main figures a troop of small angels play on various instruments. On the inside of the two panels he pictures St. John the Baptist on the Virgin's right and St. Mark on the left. He has drawn St. Peter the Apostle and St. Mark again on the reverse side of these doors. The latter figure was repeated because he was the patron of the guild. This picture also has a charming predella which shows St. Peter preaching, the Adoration of the Magi and St. Mark writing.

After sixteen years of creative labor in Fiesole, Fra Angelico was transferred by his superiors to Florence to decorate the newly acquired convent of San Marco. This famous priory, whose history was subsequently to be identified with religion, literature, art, and politics, was established late in the thirteenth century. The original owners were the Silvestrine monks but the building was given to the Dominicans and St. Antoninus by Pope Martin V. In 1436 Pope Eugenius IV ordered the Dominicans to take formal possession of the convent. With the financial aid of the munificent Cosimo de Medici the convent was remodeled and certain new additions were made under the direction of Cosimo's personal architect Michelozzi. The walls of this convent were destined to become alive with the figures of Angelico's lovely Virgins, comely angels, and pious saints. Thirty of his sublime compositions, marvelously brilliant in their richness of color and incomparable in their spirituality, were placed for the meditation of the friars throughout the cloister and cells of the convent. Some of the finest and most important works that were produced by the brush of the Beato can be found among these works which he created during his assignment in San Marco.
One of the first works believed to have been frescoed by Angelico in San Marco was a piece for the altar of the church. We quote Vasari. “But singularly beautiful is the picture of the grand altar of that church, for the Madonna not only excites to devotion, as do the saints who encircle her and resemble her . . . (It) is so well executed, that it is impossible to imagine anything more diligently elaborated, or in which the figures could be more delicate or better defined.” The saints are grouped in a variety of attitudes as if they were paying court to the Virgin. Angelico deviates from Giottesque tradition in this fresco by not placing his saints on a horizontal line but grouping them. This divergence is also noticeable in some of his later works.

Proceeding now to the upper dormitory of the cloister, the first picture that presents itself is an Annunciation. Mary is seated on an unadorned chair in an open loggia supported by Corinthian columns. Her tunic is pale red. An azure mantle drapes from her shoulders and over her knees. Gracefully her nutbrown hair falls on her shoulders. Her arms are devotionally crossed on her bosom, her countenance calm and serene. Apparently it was a mystical delineation such as this that caused Michelangelo to remark, “Surely the good monk visited paradise and was allowed to choose his models there.” The Angel Gabriel begins to kneel on one knee as he delivers the message of salvation. For the meditation of his brothers, Angelico has inscribed on the base of the loggia, “Hail Mother, noble resting place of the Holy Trinity.” Below this he adds the admonition, “when you come before the image of the spotless Virgin, beware lest through carelessness the Ave be left unsaid.”

As we continue through the collection of masterpieces we come to a tender rendition of the Nativity. The Infant is lying on a handful of straw on the ground. Our Lady, St. Joseph, St. Peter Martyr, and St. Catherine the Virgin Martyr kneel with hands folded in devout adoration. Another cell contains a Presentation in which Angelico portrays most accurately the affection of Mary and the awesome joy of Simeon as he clasps the swaddled Saviour in his arms. St. Joseph carries two turtle doves in a basket on the extreme left of the picture. His face reflects a note of peace.

An exquisite treasure of design, chiaroscuro and coloring is Angelico’s next production, The Adoration of the Magi. Here the craftsmanship of the Friar is patently revealed in both the technical and spiritual aspects. A distant view of the mountains of Judea supply the background for the picture. Outside the miserable stable
The Queen and Her Angel

The Virgin Mary is seated with her Divine Son on her knees. At her left Joseph contemplates the offerings of the kings. A hoary bearded king, who has removed his crown, is kneeling before the Mother and Son in profound adoration. He is about to kiss the feet of the Child who is blessing him. The second and third kings stand as they wait to perform the same act of adoration. To the extreme right a group of footmen and servants discourse excitedly with gestures. It is difficult to detect a repetition of such a realistic delineation of attitudes in any other of Angelico's works.

Perhaps the most beautiful of his frescoes in which he displays his mastery in depicting the ineffable joys of heaven is evidenced in his interpretation of the Coronation of the Virgin. Father Marchese describes it as follows. “He painted the Virgin seated on a white cloud, which is overarched by a charming rainbow; she is robed in white, her arms are folded on her bosom, a gentle smile on her lips, and she leans gracefully forward towards her Divine Son. 'Mid all the joy she is the humblest of all. The Word is seated by her side, and seems to crown her. He does not, however, hold the golden diadem in His hands; ... He barely touches it with the extremity of His Fingers, as though He had ordered it to go and encircle His mother's temples ... whosoever stands in the presence of it, may almost fancy himself translated to the society of the Blessed.” He painted six saints—Paul, Thomas Aquinas, Francis, Benedict, Dominic, and Peter Martyr rapt in ecstasy as they contemplate this glorious event. The tints are so delicate and transparent they remind one more of a vision than of a painting. The hands of the saints are especially expressive. At this juncture it is interesting to observe that Fra Angelico followed two different styles in painting Our Lady. In those that represent her as glorified he clothes her in white, while in others which represent her as living on earth, he clothes her in red and azure colors.

A most captivating picture of motherhood is set forth by Angelico in his “Madonna of the Stars.” Here the friar painter has truly characterized the love which transpires between mother and child. The Infant Jesus smiles happily as he nestles closely to his Mother. Mary seems to appreciatively acknowledge this sign of childish affection and gently holds his tiny left hand. She is a figure of dignity and grace as she stands with her God in her arms. The blue of her robe and the gold background blend so softly that one is immediately stimulated by the ethereal effect. A tiny star glows above the head of the Virgin. A border of sixteen large stars and six
angels in various attitudes frames this piece.

During the course of our consideration of Angelico’s Madonnas we have not yet touched upon the Mater Dolorosa. This however, presents some obstacles, because the Beato has treated this phase rather thoroughly, as in his Depositions from the Cross and his Crucifixion scenes. Thus, one is at a loss in choosing a picture which would be truly representative of this aspect of Mary’s life. On the other hand to delineate and describe all of these works would involve too great an expenditure in time and writing for a brief study such as this. Often the scenes which depict the culmination and the raison d’être of Mary’s motherhood, that is, her role as the Mother of the suffering Christ and Co-redeemer of the human race, are too crowded with figures to give a prominent place to the Mother of Sorrows. She is virtually lost in the shouting groups of soldiers and bystanders. Thus we limit ourselves to a half symbolic treatment of the way of the cross by Fra Angelico. Against a bleak background of rocks Our Lord is shown shouldering His cross. A little to the left Our Lady follows. This is no longer the young, charming girl that we have seen in his Annunciations, but rather the aging, grief-stricken mother who follows her Son to His end. Her hands are wrung in tortured anguish under her flowing mantle as she presses them to her breast. Though united with the will of the Father in permitting His death, her eyes mirror her desolation. Here Angelico has transposed a heavenly love to earthly walls. The only other figure that appears is that of St. Dominic. He kneels on the right with his hands clasped as he contemplates this poignant drama.

After nine years of religious labor Angelico finished his splendid frescoes in the Convent of San Marco. These were labors of love, paintings of the Virgin, her Son, and the saints which collectively were to be a choir of voices which for centuries were to chant their messages of eternal beauty. Upon completion of these frescoes he was summoned to Rome by Pope Engenius IV to work in the Vatican. In that same year after the death of Eugenius, Pope Nicholas V retained the Beato commissioning him to apply his skills to the chapel of the Most Holy Sacrament, and to the chapel of Pope Nicholas V. We find no record of any Marian paintings in these chapels. For the chapel of Nicholas V he painted some histories of St. Stephen the Proto-martyr and St. Lawrence. The frescoed histories of Our Lord executed for the Blessed Sacrament Chapel fortunately were removed to a museum when the chapel
was taken down by Paul III. Aside from the fact that during his sojourn in Rome he left the city to work on a Last Judgment in the Cathedral of Orvieto, we know nothing more of his activities in the Holy City.

It is with a sense of insufficiency that we conclude this treatment of Fra Angelico's paintings of the Virgin. In retrospect, we are fully cognizant of how much had to be omitted either through necessity or expediency. Such a study, were it only to approximate the fifty years of devoted labor expended by the Saintly Friar, would require volumes. We have ventured to present only a portion of a certain phase of his works, trying at the same time to show that through these portraits of the Madonna, Angelico professed and practiced as a true Dominican a most tender devotion to Our Lady. Tradition quotes the Beato as saying, "To paint the things of Christ, one must live with Christ." Surely, we see that he lived with Christ and His Mother through the vivid testimony of his works. For never do they even so much as suggest anything that is not God or of God. Motivated by love of his Saviour his brush presented Madonnas of purity, gentleness and the very essence of motherhood, because true love for Christ must always carry with it a veneration for His Mother. In Mary, Angelico found the greatest love that any creature could render to its Creator. In her he found the closest approximation to God, the perfect created pattern. And if, by the grace of God, he was permitted to procure the models for his Virgins from heaven, as so many writers have inferred and which his works urge us to believe, then he with Dante could exclaim:

"Forthwith, I saw
Such floods of gladness on her visage showered,
From holy spirits winging that profound,
That, whatsoever I had yet beheld,
Had not so much suspended me with wonder,
Or shown me such similitude of God."

Paradiso, Canto XXXII

Angelico in his sixty-eighth year had reached the end of his illustrious career. In Florence, Perugia, Cortona, Fiesole, and Rome he had bequeathed to all future ages many beautiful moral and religious examples of his work as well as of his life. From his youth he had subjected himself to the light yoke of his Divine Master. His memory could offer him the comfort of chaste recollections of
his pious creations. He had only one consolation left and that was to possess the supreme Archetype of his works. History has not preserved for us the details of his last moments. We may but surmise how it might have been on that eighteenth of March, 1455. How joyful he must have been when his brethren for the last time knelt at his bedside and sang the Salve Regina. And Mary, whose love he had gained through his masterpieces must have come personally to escort his soul to his Creator. But Mary, as all mothers, tenders an all-consuming love towards her children. She would not only have the soul of her Artistic Troubador, but also his body and, so to this day the mortal remains of the Beato repose in the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. Now they are united forever, the Queen and her Angel.

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