

ARS GRATIA DEI

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THE YEAR 1955 marks the 500th anniversary of the death of the Dominican Friar, Guido da Vicchio, popularly known as Fra Angelico, the "Blessed." To celebrate the occasion, the Vatican sponsored a special exhibition of his paintings gathered from museums all over the world, at the opening of which, Pope Pius XII delivered an address entitled, "The Art of Fra Angelico: Window into Heaven" which was reported in *Observatore Romano*, April 21, 1955. The pope pointed out at this time how Fra Angelico raised his art to the dignity almost of a minister of God. What this means in terms of his life and work can in large measure be explained by the fulfillment of his Dominican vocation. As a Dominican, living today, studies his works he can realize that they do not reflect a dead and pointless tradition, but rather a *living ideal*, the ideal of St. Dominic expressed in art works so great in their lasting beauty, that they have won the admiration of critics through the ages and are even now the center of renewed study and artistic criticism.

"In the case of Fra Angelico, more truly than of any other painter, the artist and the man are one."¹ This judgment of a prominent art critic leads us naturally to an inquiry into the highlights of the history of this friar-painter.

Not much is known of Fra Angelico's early life. He was born in 1387 at Vicchio, a small town guarding the approaches of the valley leading to Florence. Famous for its natural beauty, it was here in his formative years that the future artist learned to appreciate beauty. He entered the Dominican Priory at Fiesole with his brother, Benedetto, was professed a year later in 1408, and with the exception of a short interruption, spent the first 18 years of his religious life here. Quickly developing his artistic skills, he gained sufficient reputation to be invited to help decorate the Priory and church of San Marco in Florence, where he worked for nine years, completing with his assistants some seventy frescoes. Called to Rome at the command of Pope Eugenius IV, he painted frescoes in two chapels for Eugene

¹ Pope Hennessy, John, *Fra Angelico*, 1952. Phaidon Press Ltd., London.

and his successor, Pope Nicholas V. Legend has it that this latter Pope offered him the Archbishopric of Florence, but he declined the honor, offering instead the name of his friend, St. Antoninus. He was elected Prior of S. Dominico in Fiesole, and after serving three years in this position, returned to Rome where he died in 1455.

The chief source for the life of Fra Angelico is the work of G. Vasari, *Vite dei piu eccell. Pittori*. This biographer gathered most of his material from one Fra Eustachio who had received the habit from the hands of Savonarola and still remembered the tales about the artist. He told Vasari the legends surrounding the friar, and it is these pious tales which have drawn the scorn and ridicule of some critics of the history of art. Pope Pius XII mentions these tales in his address and regrets that they have distorted somewhat the true character of Fra Angelico.² We are told, for instance, that the saintly artist never retouched his paintings once they were completed, believing them thus to be the will of God; that he always painted while on his knees, and that many of his works were the result of an inspiration produced in an ecstatic trance. The critics find quite rightly a discrepancy between the evidence of the works themselves which show a very definite and carefully planned design and these legends which are perhaps poorly phrased.

But to question the validity of these statements is not to question the validity of the influence of Fra Angelico's deep religious spirit upon his art. The evidence that Fra Angelico was a hard and systematic worker, using all of the human techniques involved in the expression of art, does not destroy the efficacy of this influence. Inspiration does not at all involve a suspension of the natural faculties of man. Besides knowing from his biographers that he was a deeply religious man, we also know from an examination of his works that this spirit was transmitted through the artistic medium of his works. The extent of this influence will be shown in the further development of this paper.

We are indebted to Vasari for other details in the life of Fra Angelico which give us further evidence of his Dominican character. Although never receiving the honor of being canonized, yet he was saintly in his life and character, a lover of perfection, a follower of the high ideals of his Order. The convents at Florence and Fiesole where, it will be remembered, he spent most of his life, were rich in the traditions of Dominican saints and blessed who had lived there,

² "The Art of Fra Angelico: Window into Heaven," reprinted in *The Pope Speaks*, Summer, 1955, p. 127.

among whom were his friend and fellow novice, St. Antoninus, and his Prior at Fiesole, Blessed Lorenzo Ripafratta.

But a more important influence on his life, if not so immediate, was the reform movement then underway within the Dominican Order—a movement initiated by Blessed Raymond of Capua and sustained by Blessed John Dominic who was the Master General of the Order during the formative years of the artist. We do not know if the two ever met, yet the influence of John Dominic's reform policies upon Fra Angelico are an undisputed historical fact.

It is especially important to note the *direction* of this reform, which was away from the humanistic excesses of the early Renaissance. Niccolo Niccoli was even then sending his messengers over sea and land in the search for old manuscripts of the Greek classics. Enthusiasm among the youth of Florence was beginning to show a dark tendency in the imitation of pagan vices. The works of Blessed John, *Lucula Noctis* and *Trattato della santa carita* soon appeared as defences of traditional spirituality against the onslaughts of the humanists.

"Let the Christian cultivate the earth rather than study heathen books; let him read not the poetry of antiquity but 'the Holy Writ, in which the Lord has laid out the true poetry of wisdom, the true eloquence of the spirit of truth.' Let those who have charge of the young remember that Christ is our only guide to happiness . . . our father, our leader, our light, our food, our redemption, our way, our truth, our life; let them recall that 'as the years of tender youth flow by, the soft wax may take on any form. Stamp on it the impress not of Narcissus, Myrrha, Phaedra, or Ganymede, but of the crucified Christ and the Saints.' Let them above all, propagate the faith, through which the Christian is permitted year by year to warm his frozen mind before the crib."³

The battle lines were forming, and if the issue was one of theology, love of Christian truths and practice of Christian virtues versus the "new learning," there can be no doubt which side Fra Angelico chose. One has but to study his works.

Like all true Dominicans, following the example of their holy founder, Fra Angelico was wholly absorbed in the contemplation of the basic Christian truths. We have seen that his was a full Dominican training, formed through the earlier years by monastic and community discipline, a contemplation, the fruit of which he was to give to others through the medium of his art. A quick survey of his works proves this. There is hardly a major episode in the life of Jesus and

³ Quoted in *Fra Angelico* by John Pope-Hennessy.

Mary that is not the subject matter for at least one of his paintings. The Crucifixion, Transfiguration, Resurrection of Our Lord, His Agony, Temptation, Baptism and Passion; scenes showing Him preaching on the Mount, being taken from the Cross, the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the Holy Innocents, His teaching in the temple; taken together they form a mosaic portraying the New Testament story. The fifteen mysteries of the Rosary are represented; the Annunciation, Nativity, and Mary's triumphant crowning especially reflect the Dominican friar's great devotion to Mary. The mysteries of Our Lady are the material for many of his most popular and oft-repeated works.

To complete the general catalogue there are the portraits of the saints and the narrative panels depicting episodes in the lives of St. Nicholas, St. Stephen, St. Lawrence and, among his better works, Saints Cosmos and Damian. These portraits have been reproduced many times, but one must remember that often they are taken from paintings in which the saint in question is serving a particular function in the whole of the painting. Consequently, the full appreciation of the attitude and gesture of the saint can be gained only by viewing the picture as a whole. For Fra Angelico, the saints served to highlight some major episode in the life of Jesus or Mary. St. Dominic and St. Thomas Aquinas are shown for instance in the *Crucifixion with Saints* at San Marco as wholly absorbed in the sufferings of Our Saviour. Besides the portraits of Saint Dominic himself, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Peter Martyr are among the Dominican saints most frequently seen grouped around the mysteries of Jesus and Mary

It is not the subject matter of his paintings that sets Fra Angelico above and apart from both his contemporaries and later painters. Nor is it his entire preoccupation with religious subjects which makes him uniquely an ideal Dominican. We must remember that Fra Angelico lived at the beginning of the Renaissance when artists were still painting primarily religious subjects. He did not fall in line, however, with those contemporary artists who were rebelling against older traditions. Consequently, the Dominican friar and his works have been the object of scorn by certain critics who in comparatively recent times have unleashed an attack against medievalism in all its forms and have tried to glorify the Renaissance. These critics have painted a false picture of man's emancipation from the dark and despotic rule of the Church, an emancipation ending in the defiant cry of art for art's sake. To the supposed ignorance of nature and reality which was the unhappy

lot of the schoolmen and theo-centered medieval culture, they have contrasted the discovery of man's noble place in the universe effected by the rebels. Naturally, the critics of this school were led by their bias to overlook almost completely Fra Angelico's importance and certainly to misjudge both his purpose and method. Fortunately, the excesses of this school of criticism are currently causing it to lose ground and there are signs of a new awareness of the greatness of the Dominican friar.

In terms of development of style, there is no denying that Fra Angelico was a reactionary. He was uninterested in the visual techniques achieved by his famous contemporaries save where these could serve his greater purpose. One critic has called him a classical medievalist, contrasting this term with the more complicated and ornate Gothic style.⁴ He looked backward for his artistic medium, and if there is one characteristic note on which all critics seem to agree in discussing his works and style, it is that he was strikingly single-minded, direct, and alone among his contemporaries.

What then was the purpose which quietly energized his life and set him apart? What else but the purpose of every Dominican—the giving to others the fruit of his contemplation. His paintings have this one aim and only this aim. Fra Angelico realized better than his imitators that the theme of Christian art is the theme of prayer.

A very revealing testimony to the angelic brother's inner spirit is the great difference seen between his work and those of his imitators. The profound purpose and abstract quality of his work seems not to have been understood by anyone during his lifetime. He had no genuine descendants; he started no tradition nor finished any; he stands alone with his profound inner vision shining through his work with the quiet confidence of his holiness.

Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the paintings in the cells of the Monastery of San Marco. One critic warns that "those who know the frescoes in the cells upstairs only from photographs miss their essential character . . . The cursory examination of the frescoes which we make as we walk from cell to cell today is the exact opposite of the use for which they were designed."⁵ The "exact opposite" of a cursory examination is one that is absorbing and meditative. The paintings in these cells are on the window wall opposite the door so that the friar in his cell had two openings—one to the physical world through his door and the other to the spiritual

⁴ Muratoff, Paul, *Fra Angelico*, 1930.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, Pope-Hennessy.

world through contemplation of the painting. Thus we see that even in the arrangement of the paintings Fra Angelico had his aim of teaching the truths of faith in mind.

These paintings are distinctive for their stark simplicity. The figures are like sculptured groups—restrained and motionless. There is nothing to distract the viewer in the designs which were “to be filled out by the religious imagination of the onlooker.” There is a “minimum of incident,” and what spectators there are in the paintings are either participants in the drama or are rapt themselves in the vision of the whole. In one of the more famous of these, *St. Dominic at the Feet of the Crucified Christ*, we see the saint absorbed in singular attention upon the mystery before him, thus symbolizing the mystical participation of the members of his Order in the drama. In this phase of his work Fra Angelico is the mystic enriching the lives of his brethren by providing means for the development of this inner life.

This is not the case with his other paintings in the churches open for public view. Here we see Fra Angelico the preacher, using his full artistic personality to communicate and encourage, to point out and instruct, to compassionate and warn. These are the glorious paintings of the Crowning of the Virgin, of the lives of the saints, of the full panorama of the Lamentation at the foot of the Cross, or the Last Judgment. The vision is broader, more inclusive, although the style is the same. Here too the viewer is invited to stop and meditate, to learn. Often this purpose is obviously effected by a figure which is looking directly at the viewer, motioning him to look up at the scene as he points with a proclaiming gesture. Our attention is extensive rather than intensive as we are attracted to one group of saints, then to the main figures back again to another detail which in turn leads us again to the focal point of interest.

Fra Angelico, the preacher, makes use of other techniques to attract and inspire. He decorates the sides of panels and triptychs with angels or figures of saints, he fills in the background of some of his paintings with landscapes of the Tuscan countryside. His paintings in Rome have figures of famous contemporaries, Popes and other prominent churchmen. He heightens the narrative, for instance, of the martyrdom of Sts. Cosmas and Damian by showing passion in the faces of the participants or in their gestures. There is a popular opinion (due partly perhaps from the impression gained by some very poor reproductions) that Fra Angelico is insipid and “bloodless” in his work. This can never be affirmed after a closer study of the details of these paintings. Here is real passion, but always under the

control of reason, always pointing to something higher, yet nevertheless lifelike and vibrant.

These added attractions however, are never for their own sake. They always contribute to the whole message in the painting. It is the unity and harmony of his works which account in large measure for their greatness. Trained as he was in scholastic disciplines, he could distinguish the essential from the accidental and work out the proper relations between the parts of his composition and the whole desired effect.

The vision Fra Angelico gives us is the same as all true Dominicans give—the good news of the Gospel stories, the ideal of peace and harmony gained on this earth by a right ordering of earthly elements and, finally, at certain moments, a glimpse into the very reward that is awaiting us. A study of his works gives us hope and encouragement, for his struggle was the same as ours, nor is it absent from his works. He gives us simply, directly and sincerely, as do all great contemplatives, the weapons which he learned how to use through the Dominican disciplines and which are the heritage of all Christians.

THE RECITATION OF OFFICE (*according to Ephesians 5:18-20*)

source . . . “be ye filled with the Holy Spirit

the external act . . . “speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles

its internal echo . . . “singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord

motive . . . “giving thanks always for all things

mediator . . . “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

goal and object of the act . . . “to God and the Father.”