

## WINDOW INTO HEAVEN

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"It is . . . Our desire to revive the deeply religious and human message his paintings have preached to his own and succeeding generations, which have never tired of contemplating his symbolic images where beauty and harmony seem to transcend the summit of the purely human and to open as it were a *window into heaven*."<sup>1</sup>

**W**ORDS OF HIGH PRAISE for a great artist from a saintly Pontiff. The occasion was the commemoration in 1955 of the 500th anniversary of Fra Angelico, which was marked by a Vatican exhibition of his paintings. Then it was the role of the Holy Father, Pius XII, to invite the Christian world to render just praise to this great artist by prayerful contemplation of his world of peace and holiness. Now, four years later, recent action of the friar's own Order gives us even greater reason for celebrating the praises of Angelico. Last September, the General Chapter of the Dominican Order, convened in Calaroga, Spain, recommended the erection of an inter-provincial commission to promote the beatification of Fra Giovanni da Fiesole, Fra Angelico.

Never formally beatified, the title *Il Beato* was bestowed by popular acclamation—his fellow religious and others perceived that only one who had seen and experienced the beauties of the interior life could so perfectly reflect them in his art. Perhaps this belief was prompted by the words of the artist himself: ". . . To paint the things of Christ, the artist must live with Christ." Few artists have given rise to such a considerable quantity of studies; throughout the long centuries, Angelico and his art have been subjected to most thorough examinations. While scholars remain doubtful over many moot points, there has never



*Fra Angelico and His Assistants at Work, by  
Sister Mary of the Compassion, O.P.*

been any doubt that he was a very great painter of deep spirituality.

There have been some, to be sure, a bit too insistent on this latter point, who have made Angelico a mere instrument in the hands of God. His profound piety to them became ecstasy: they saw him always absorbed in unconscious ecstasy, he painted always on his knees, and always mixed his paints with copious tears. His faces are divinely beautiful, his colors harmonious, his forms inspired with grace and holiness because his paintings simply reflect the heavenly vision glimpsed in these rapturous states. In short, because he was a saint, his painting is saintly. The altogether unfortunate perpetuation of such a pious legend can be traced largely to the hand of Vasari, the nineteenth century biographer of the Italian painters, who added appreciably to the above list of attributes.

Pius XII, while rejecting the popular legend, does discern in it a certain element of truth: this rejection "does not mean however, that his profound religious sense, his serene and austere asceticism, nourished by solid virtue, contemplation and prayer, did not exercise a determining influence on his artistic expression."<sup>2</sup> One must set aside the unfortunate exaggerations of uncritical authors and the pious unknowing; it is hardly possible to reject the fact of the greatness of the religious art of Fra Giovanni.

But Angelico was much more than a great Christian artist—he was a distinctively Dominican artist, a feature knowledgeable critics have not failed to note: "There is no point in separating Fra Angelico's religious ideals from those of the Dominican Order."<sup>3</sup> A Dominican must work out his salvation by fidelity to the end of the Order: the salvation of souls through preaching. His motto, and the norm according to which he directs all his apostolic labors is *Contemplare, et Contemplata Aliis Tradere*, "To give to others the fruit of one's own contemplation."

Just as Dominican preaching of the twentieth century is solidly grounded on the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, so also are the viewpoints and aesthetic ideals of this "Angelic Painter" of the fifteenth century founded on the principles of the "Angelic Doctor." "Thomistic doctrine is reflected not only in the content of his paintings, but also in style and technique."<sup>4</sup> Like his elder brother by two centuries, who began his monumental *Summa* with an exposition of the "five ways" by which we know God through natural phenomena, Angelico also took nature as his

point of departure. Like St. Thomas, he viewed the universe, with its many component elements, as coming from God and returning to Him, "after having run its course in the form of an orbit radiant with harmony."

For Angelico, all of created nature reflects the divine perfections. He had absorbed the thought of St. Paul that "From the creation of the world His invisible attributes are plainly observable, being perceived through observable things" (*Rom.* 1:20). Thus Fra Giovanni by highlighting certain aspects of nature, "seems in fact to be striving boldly to fix upon it his own ideal of beauty, sought in devout contemplation of his supernatural world. The vision of creation in his aesthetic form is neither stunted nor incomplete, for he identifies the beautiful with the true, the good, the holy, the perfect, the chaste. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Certain other aspects of his painting were also profoundly influenced by the thought of St. Thomas. Light, and its implementation, is perhaps the most salient feature of Angelico's art, the one which more than any other prompted the appellation, "angelic" painter. And upon analysis, the process whereby his brethren and the faithful arrived at this title (which has become so permanent that few are there who know his real name!) seems most logical. For Fra Angelico held firmly, as did St. Thomas, to the view that light springs not from earthly sources, but emanates from heavenly bodies; it has, therefore, no quantity, but is pure quality, and can neither be measured nor propagated. In the words of one of St. Thomas' commentators, "No one portion of the air illuminates another, but the air as a whole acted upon by the illuminant, undergoes change."<sup>6</sup> Put quite simply, this means that light leaps as it were from color to color, from one colored object to another; and variations of intensity arise from the degree to which the light receiving bodies are diaphanous: "The colored object is such as it is by virtue of graduation in the light, impinging on it according to the extent that it is diaphanous. . . . In bodies themselves, colors are *potential* . . . It is light that stirs them into *action*."<sup>7</sup> This is perhaps the key notion in Angelico's aesthetic technique.

Fra Giovanni was not a precocious painter and began his work relatively late, presumably after his studies in philosophy and theology. But this key notion, more or less perfectly formed, is to be found in all his works—though, of course, it evolved somewhat through the years. His early colors are quite precisely defined, e.g., his *predella* scenes of the Annunciation, or that de-

picting the life of St. Nicholas, where light adheres to color like a thin film, almost identified with it, yet different in nature. In the middle period, light and color merge; light thoroughly permeating color and transforming it. When the artist was at his peak, figures and objects have become so disembodied that they live but "symbolical lives" and no longer offer surfaces congenial to light. This is the period of the San Marco frescos, perhaps the most familiar (certainly the most moving) of all of Angelico's painting.

What follows from all this? What followed for Angelico? Why, quite simply, if light flows from heavenly sources, then its very presence here on earth has a certain divine-like quality! It is a gift sent by God to reveal the wonders of the world He has made to the eyes of unseeing man. It reveals nature purified. It shows us creation in all its original perfection, it restores harmony between the earthly and the celestial. We shall have occasion later to see all this exemplified by comparing two of the artist's Annunciation scenes, taken from two different periods in his development.

There is yet another striking similarity between Angelico and Aquinas that is rarely singled out for mention. Difficult to describe in one word, this quality is best designated by the seemingly paradoxical term "impersonality"—a conscious striving to "keep self out of work." For Angelico's paintings are every bit as impersonal as the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. One can see very little of the individual in the work. Each sought to speak to the hearer not as man to man, but as heart to heart; their message was to reach the inmost being of the beholder untrammelled by the accidents of personality. In this attempt they succeeded admirably, yet this devotion to truth at the expense of person betrays them both. Once this absence of personality is recognized as the result of conscious design—the man stands revealed. Gilson calls this "impersonal transparency."

Reliance on St. Thomas is clearly a foremost feature in Angelico's art. It has often been called the "theoretical basis" of his work. Yet there is another element that cannot be overlooked: the polemical purpose of the artist.

One hesitates to use the phrase "propagandist intent" for fear of rustling the feathers of those few and rare birds still twittering over "whether art can or cannot teach," but the phrase does in fact belong in our discussion. The fifteenth century was a period of revolution, not so much in the political sphere (at



least, not yet), as in the intellectual, and consequently, moral order. It was the period of the Early Renaissance, the age of the humanists. Not that there is anything wrong with humanism—Fra Angelico was himself a humanist; he was, in the words of Pius XII, “a felicitous innovator.”<sup>8</sup> This gifted artist was most certainly no monastic recluse; his entire work arose in terms of the main trends then revolutionizing Florentine art, and he was prompt to assimilate these new revivifying currents in art: perspective, proportion, landscape, *etc.* Nor did he fear to part with them when they seemed to conflict with the traditional character of religious art’s didactic and ethical aims.

Angelico is a most representative link in this period of transition. Anyone attempting to understand the artistic evolution of the times, would be foolish indeed to by-pass his art. Angelico *was* a humanist. As is the case with most movements, however, some humanists were overly eager. It was against their unfortunate excesses that the Dominican Order rallied its forces and directed its salvos. In essence, the mission entrusted to the Order by the Master General, Blessed John Dominici, was to stem the rising tide of humanistic excesses. The stress should fall on the word “excesses.” Blessed John assuredly did not decry learning; he was on the contrary, familiar with the classics and something of a Latin stylist in his own right. What he principally censured in the humanists was their preference for ancient pagan writers to the detriment of the Scriptures, “as if,” John might well have said, “the words of pagan man could surpass the divine Logos.”

At first glance, this might seem to be merely a question of proper emphasis and perspective. So it might seem, but this preference for the pagan inevitably led to abuses in the moral order—even to the imitation of the vices of the ancients. It was only to be expected that at such a time the Dominicans, under Blessed John, would assume their traditional role as defenders of the Christian heritage.

Since Dominici’s crusade relied heavily on art as one of its most potent tools of persuasion, it is not difficult to see Fra Giovanni casting himself into the fray with all his soul, energies and talents.

The aim of this friar-painter, consonant with the ideals of John Dominici, was first to convince men’s minds of the truths of faith by the very force of their beauty; secondly, to draw the faithful to the practice of the Christian virtues by setting before them beautiful and attractive examples. In an effort to bring true

life to the faithful through his painting, he presented a model Christian, the man in whom all is "balanced, serene, and perfect."

"Look carefully at the saints who surround Christ and the Virgin, or even the anonymous figures in his picture stories. They betray no intellectual uncertainties or torments. Each of them enjoys the calm possession of the truth, which he has attained by natural knowledge or by supernatural faith, their will is orientated toward the good; the passions, reactions, emotions to which they are subject . . . are always tempered by the inner control of the soul. . . . This moderation in the passions and emotions is what Fra Angelico wished to preach to Christian souls."<sup>9</sup>

His desire to portray the perfect, as a model for his fellow men, made his presentation of evil somewhat unconvincing. As our late Holy Father noted in his allocution, there is a "positive goodness" clothing each one of his figures. Even the wicked judges and executioners of the martyrs have a certain air of goodness, "as if they were conscious of being the instruments of God's glory."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, his chief concern seems to be not with the mystery of iniquity but with the mystery of goodness!

There is now but one thing lacking: a descent from the more or less theoretical to see how all these factors merged into the productions of Angelico's genius. The two paintings chosen for discussion are familiar to most people; both are scenes of the Annunciation.

The first of these two, the *Cortona Annunciation*, is one of the most significant works of the early period, remarkable for its fine detail. Here Fra Angelico, appealing to laymen who saw little beyond the things of this world, manifests his skill as a preacher, employing descriptive and decorative accidentals to enhance his essential theme. For like St. Paul (*Rom. 1:20*) in a passage already quoted, Angelico understood that the approach to salvation finds its inception for many men through earthly experience; since God created the earth, a good soul, if alive to the beauties of creation, is also alive to the beauty of the Creator. Hence, in his painting he neglects nothing, however small, that might catch the attention of the beholder and elicit the desired response. The *Cortona Annunciation* is a striking example of judicious devotion to detail.

The figures of Mary and the angel are enclosed within the columns of an open gallery, one of the columns separating these two main figures. Mary, wrapped in a deep blue mantle, is seated on a golden, embroidered highbacked chair; the angel, a brilliant figure in glowing tunic of purple and gold, has just entered. His



wings are of the same brilliant gold, and from his body there issue forth golden rays of light. He has in fact only half-entered when words pour forth from his mouth to calm the Virgin's fear—words which the artist fittingly chose to portray in gold also: "Fear not, Mary. . . . Behold, thou shalt conceive and bear a Son . . ." (Lk. 1:30-31). This is the central mystery the preacher seeks to describe and he omits nothing that might lead the viewer to this central theme. The delicate, multi-colored flowers on the green without, and even more so, the perspective of the palm tree in line with the columns of the loggia is an indication that nature and the works of man should present a harmony of adoration to the Incarnate Word of Whom the angel speaks to Mary. This same line of perspective traces pictorially the divine decree from the first announcing of a Redeemer to the great Annunciation. It begins with a little scene in the upper left background; an angel drives Adam and Eve out of the garden, sword in one hand and the other on Adam's shoulder in a comforting gesture—a confirmation of the divine promise to send a Saviour. Angelico appeals not only to the sense but also to reason: there is an obvious connection between this little background scene and the central drama, and he wants his audience to grasp this.

Among the San Marco frescos we find our second *Annunciation*. Here Angelico was painting for his fellow friars who had renounced the world. There was no longer need to depict the continuity between nature and supernature; the friars were more than aware of it. In these paintings, therefore, in which he merely suggests themes for contemplation, the figures are stripped to symbolic simplicity. He eliminates possible elements of distraction. No longer are his colors strong and clearly defined; decorative elements are not to be seen, nor are the architectural forms of earlier paintings in evidence. And for the contemplation of this divine mystery, the friars did not demand a chain of logic from the fall of man to the Annunciation. The stress is on the internal and the result is a portrait of the most sublime interior harmony.

The brilliance is indeed gone from these frescos. The figures of Mary and the angel do not receive light but seem rather to be part of it. There is a soft pastel quality to these colors. Here again the two figures are in a loggia or gallery, but one of utter simplicity. This time, we too are inside, divested of earthly aids, contemplating the mystery itself. Movement in the *Cortona Annunciation* is a dynamic one from the Fall to the Incarnation; here it is the

silent movement of grace which we are witnessing. Mary has already answered the angel's message with her *Fiat*; the angel reposes in calm adoration before the Incarnate Word in Mary's womb. In the first *Annunciation*, the angelic painter comforted the layman whose fault within the framework of creation had already found salvation through the *Annunciation*. In the second, he invites the religious to enter into perfect conformity with Mary in her completely rational submission to the divine will.

Thus in Angelico we see a perfect catholicity of outlook, answering the needs of layman and religious, using techniques proportionate to both. The "window" is a product of human genius perfected by grace, and it opens onto a vision of eternity.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius XII, "The Art of Fra Angelico: Window into Heaven." Translation in *The Pope Speaks*, Summer, 1955, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, *Fra Angelico: Biographical and Critical Study* (Skira, 1955), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Pius XII, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> A. D. Sertillanges, O.P., *St. Thomas d'Aquin*, Vol. I, p. 120, quoted in *Fra Angelico*, Giulio Carlo Argan, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.



Today humanism is in the very order of the times. Undoubtedly, it is not easy to discern and get an exact idea of its nature. However, although humanism has pretended to be formally opposed to the Middle Ages, which preceded it, we are no less sure that whatever truth, goodness, greatness, or lastingness there is in humanism has come from the universal mentality of the greatest genius of the Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas."

Pope Pius XII: "To the Participants in the International Congress of Philosophico-Humanistic Studies," September 25, 1949.