

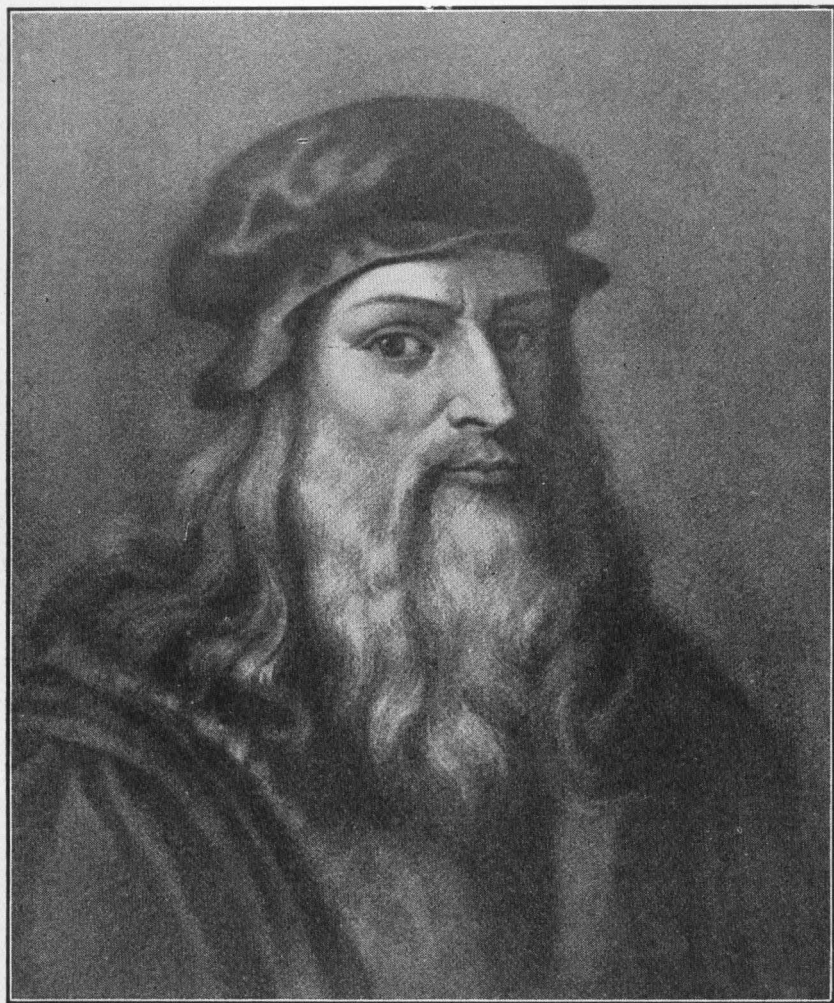
## *"The Last Supper" of Leonardo da Vinci*

By BRO. GERALD CORBETT, O. P.

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**N**OT only in the religious and intellectual worlds have the sons of Saint Dominic ever held a foremost place, but in the artistic world as well the Friar Preacher holds a unique and enviable position. Besides having given to the world such artists as the masterful Fra Angelico, and Raphael's master—who was Angelico's brother—the Fra Bartolomeo della Porta, the Dominicans have ever realized the quickness and effectiveness by which the human heart can be reached through the medium of a beautiful painting. Blessed Jordan of Rivalto voiced a thoroughly Dominican conviction when he said, "Art is the quasi-daughter of preaching." This conviction has found its expression on the richly adorned walls of such glorious edifices as that of St. Mary's, once the temple of the Minerva, at Rome, Saint Mark's and Santa Maria Novella at Florence, SS. John and Paul at Venice along with many other European convents of the Order, which were opened to artists not only of the Friars' ranks but to the best talent of the age as well. In view of all this it is not surprising that what has proven to be the supreme triumph of the painter's art was executed on the walls of a Dominican refectory.

Art critics have never unanimously agreed as to just what one of the world's masterpieces is the greatest of all, yet they have decided that the "Sistine Madonna" of Raphael, the "Last Judgment" of Michelangelo and the "Last Supper" of Leonardo da Vinci form the finest trio of paintings in the world. It remained, then, for public favor to select its choice among this mighty trio, and that favor has undoubtedly been accorded the "Last Supper" of da Vinci; for there have been more copies, prints and reprints of this work than of the other two masterpieces taken together; while Raphael and Angelo both admitted that if it were not for Leonardo's great work their efforts would have never seen the light. As early as the year 1468 a young



**Leonardo da Vinci**

"The greatest genius the world has known."

Florentine, Leonardo da Vinci by name, had begun to attract wide-spread attention through those myriad accomplishments that were to earn for him the title of "the greatest genius the world has known." With the signing of the peace of Lodi in 1454 the long wars between Venice and the Kings of Naples were at an end and so when Ludovico Sforza, called *il Moro*, ascended the throne of Milan some several years later, peace reigned supreme. It was a time of rejoicing and feasting and every new amusement and diversion was sought. In order to maintain his hold upon the reins of government Ludovico sought to appear before his subjects in the dual role of tyrant and philanthropist; with one hand banishing and slaying his enemies, and with the other drawing around him the leading representatives of science and art of his day.

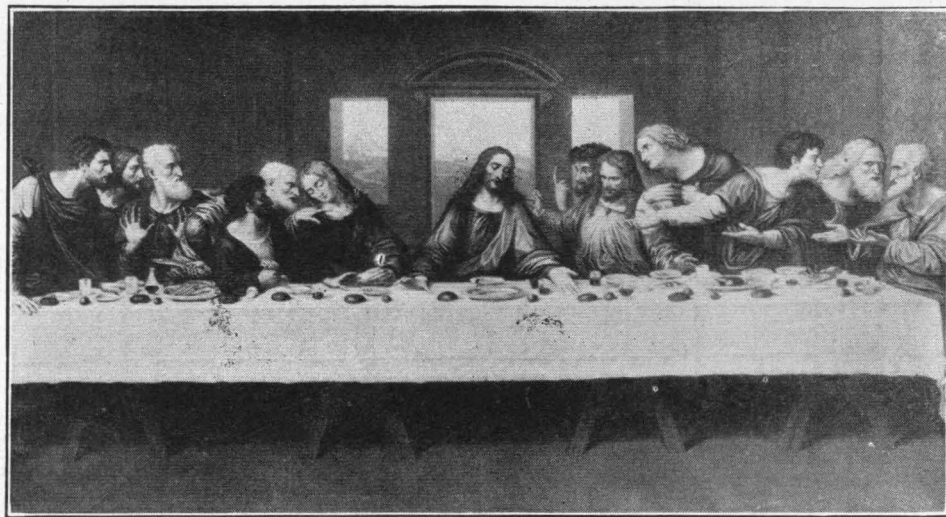
Ludovico had not long been Duke when he sent for Leonardo. In a letter still extant written in response to Ludovico's invitation to Milan, Leonardo gives a list of his accomplishments which is nothing less than startling. In this unique document the Florentine describes his inventions of portable bridges, rapid-fire guns, a type of cannon unknown in that day, and "indestructible steel-covered carts bearing artillery which break through the enemies' line"—a remarkable resemblance to the "tanks" of the late war. Then he goes on to say that in time of peace he could serve in the capacity of architect, sculptor, mathematician, astronomer, anatomist, surveyor, poet, geologist or philosopher. Here Mrs. Heaton, in her account of Leonardo, aptly remarks that such a letter could have been written only by a genius or a fool. After sixteen years spent in the services of the Sforza prince, Leonardo could add a few more accomplishments to this formidable list; for by this time he had completed his model flying machine (which is now in the United States National Museum at Washington) and also that masterpiece of painting which since his time has been the wonder and despair of all those who have followed in his path.

Here it may be interesting to know that it was in none of the above mentioned capacities that the Duke engaged Leonardo. Ludovico had heard that da Vinci could play the sweetest and most harmonious melodies upon the lyre, so it was as musician that Leonardo was introduced to the royal court of Milan. The new and curious silver lyre that Leonardo played was of his

own construction and was quite similar to the modern Italian harp; and being much larger than the other instruments it gave forth such a strong and sonorous tone that it was heard above all the other instruments. Chroniclers of the period tell us that Leonardo was a handsome youth, possessed an exceptionally fine voice and was a brilliant improviser of verse which he was wont to sing while playing for the fetes, ballets, interludes, jousts and tournaments of which the Renaissance was so fond. At the time of Louis XII's entrance into Milan a mechanical lion crossed the banquet hall, halted before the king and kneeling opened its breast, spreading before him a shower of fragrant lilies. This machine was Leonardo's invention. Such was Leonardo da Vinci when towards the end of 1482 he entered the services of Ludovico il Moro.

Leonardo had not long resided at Milan before he learned to love the Dominican convent of Santa Maria Della Grazie and in the Friars he found true friends and fond admirers of his genius. This convent possessed a miraculous statue and the Duchess Beatrice's profound devotion joined to the fitful pietistic moods of her husband Ludovico gave great honor to this shrine. At one time it seemed as if Ludovico was determined to make the convent as rich and splendid as the Cathedral and the Pavian Certosa, which the preceding dynasty had left as its monuments. About 1485 the increasing community at the convent had outgrown the building and it became necessary to enlarge many portions of it. Under the Duke's patronage artists, architects, sculptors and church-jewellers were set to work there. To da Vinci was assigned the re-decoration of the refectory. Here was an opportunity for the fulfillment of the greatest desire of Leonardo's life,—an opportunity to execute a design his heart had long cherished. So about the year 1489 we find him beginning work on what was to be his chef d'oeuvre, "The Last Supper."

A few artists had treated this subject previously but in an entirely different way than the great Florentine. They had seen only a religious significance—the institution of the Holy Eucharist—while Leonardo wished to add over and above this a broader and more human note. He was not content with merely satisfying devout souls for he knew that Christ wished to gain for himself the souls of all men of all times. He saw not only



**"The Last Supper" of Leonardo da Vinci**

James the Less	Peter	John	Thomas	Philip	Matt.	Thad.
Bartholomew	Andrew	Judas	Christ	James the Greater		Simon



divine religion in the subject but the human reaction in a dramatic moment as well. So when the greatest thinker as well as the greatest painter of the Renaissance brought all the resources of his master mind to the subject of the Last Supper small wonder that the result was a triumph.

When the time came to begin actual work Leonardo dreaded the undertaking; for he feared that he would never find upon earth a face that might serve as a model for the Christ. He spent hours in prayer and meditation, until finally, we are told, while assisting at Mass one morning his eyes fell upon the countenance of a youth serving the priest. Here was a face that typified innocence and holiness. The boy's services were immediately procured and the drawing known as "The Head of Christ," now in the Breta Gallery at Milan, was the result. This more youthful and loveable type of face underwent many changes, however, before it was thought worthy to represent the Man-God. Wrinkles were placed on the forehead, a light beard upon the face, more character was given to the chin, making the whole more in keeping with the noble masculinity of the Saviour. The artist told a friend that his hand trembled every time he attempted to paint this face and yet, when it was completed, it contained the sum of all human grace in mould and quality. The most perfect expression of male beauty. Here it was that Leonardo solved the problem of all art,—the elevation of the natural by the infusion of the supernatural.

Brandello, a contemporary, gives us a glimpse of the da Vinci of this period when he relates in one of his novels:

"Some gentlemen living in Milan were met one day in the friars' refectory of the convent delle Grazie, where with hushed voices they watched Leonardo da Vinci as he worked upon his marvellous picture of the Last Supper. The painter was much pleased that they should each tell him what they thought of his work. He would often come to the convent at early dawn; and this I have often seen him do myself. Hastily mounting the scaffolding, he worked diligently until the shades of evening compelled him to cease, never thinking to take food at all, so absorbed was he in his work. At other times he would remain there three or four days without touching his picture, only coming for a few hours to remain before it, with folded arms gazing at his figures as if to criticize them himself. At midday too, when the glare of a sun at its zenith has made barren all the streets of Milan, I have seen him hasten from the citadel, where he was modelling his colossal horse, without seeking the shade, by the shortest way to the convent, where he would add a touch or two and immediately return."

These mannerisms of da Vinci have given rise to a number of anecdotes. One of them concerns the Prior of the convent who is said to have complained frequently to the Duke about the dilatoriness of the artist. Better authorities, however, discredit this tale. Still one can easily imagine the inconvenience the community was caused, and this for a number of years. The main reason for Leonardo's prolonged delay was his inability to find suitable characters to pose for him. Giralaldi, a chronicler of the time, tells us of Leonardo's manner of securing models for his heads; that after long meditation as to the rank, age and expression proper to each subject, he used to go into the streets, and scrutinizing the passers-by he would transfer to his sketch book such traits as he could afterwards reunite for the desired head. His greatest guides were the New Testament and the lives of the Saints which he studied constantly. No other painting, perhaps, was founded on such prolonged out-door studies of characters. Leonardo almost despaired of finding a face that could depict the baseness and hatefulness of Judas; but one night, in the latter part of 1497, his persistent search led him to the less respectable parts of the city and as he was passing a certain shop of ill-repute a man came crashing through the door and fell at the artist's feet. A gleam of lamp light streaming through the open doorway revealed to the painter the face he had so eagerly and laboriously sought after. "At last I have found the Judas of my painting," cried da Vinci. The services of the degenerate were easily procured and he was immediately brought to the convent delle Grazie. When Leonardo removed the curtain from his nearly-finished work the man drew back in horror and falling upon his knees he confessed, "Good God! I once posed as the Christ in this picture."

The table, which was painted first, was an exact copy of the original from which Christ and His apostles partook of the Pasch. It now reposes in the Church of St. John Lateran at Rome. The table fills the entire extent of the wall and the figures are a little less than life-size. The Pascal lamb and other food stuffs specified for use were carefully reproduced. The banquet room is designed along the biblical type of architecture and extremely plain and simple, for Leonardo, like Fra Angelico, believed that when treating a spiritual subject all superfluity of earthly detail should be eliminated. The lighting comes from the

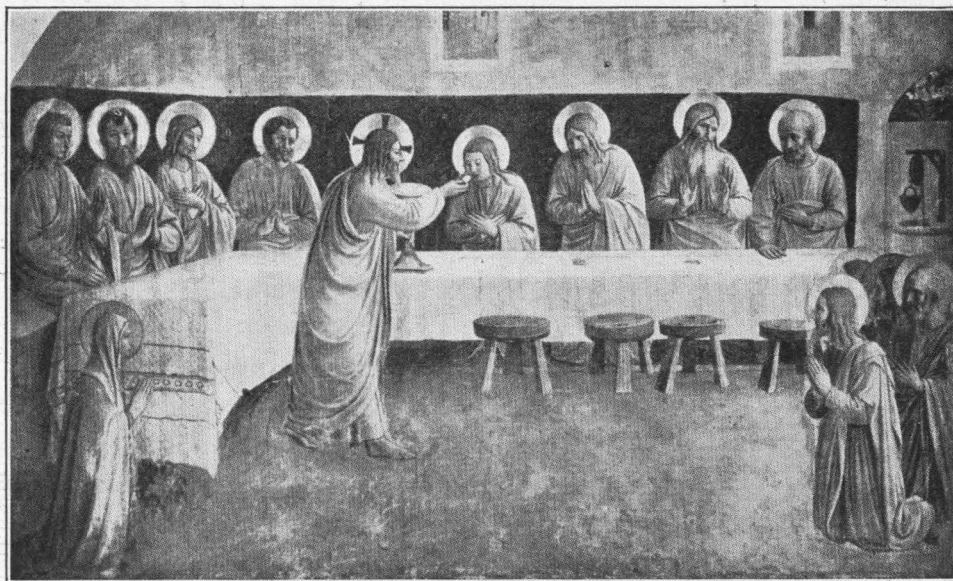
door and two small windows at either side in the back of the room. The sun has just set and the scarlet rays of twilight tint the scene. The peaceful hill country is seen in the distance. The apostles are divided into four groups and placed on three sides of the table with Christ in the center. The feast was well under way when the Master announces, "Amen, amen I say to you, one of you shall betray Me" John xiii, 21.

The apostles knew that Jesus was to be betrayed but they had never suspected that the culprit would be one of their own little band. As soon as the words were uttered the whole assembly was thrown into utter confusion, and it was Leonardo's purpose to portray the effect these words had upon twelve diverse temperaments and personalities. A stupendous undertaking to be sure. Da Vinci paints the souls of men, and their bodies serve merely as the expression of the inward workings of the heart. Here was a departure from all previous attempts in the art, the artist becoming, in a sense, the first of the "moderns."

The rank-and-file order was avoided by breaking the company into four groups of three; yet, by a simultaneity of action the harmony of the whole was preserved. The expression on the faces and the action of the hands in pantomime of the highest order. It is a play without words. The figure of Christ is in the center. All the perspective lines of the picture converge at a point of sight covered by His head; thus centering the interest on this great central figure and emphasizing its importance, the eye of the spectator is always drawn back to it. The face of Jesus has nothing in common with any of the other faces at the table; it differs from them all as widely as if it were that of one belonging to another race and order of being. The head is inclined and the eyes cast down. As one writer observes, "The intellectual elevation, the fitness of nature, the benign god-like dignity suffused with the profoundest sorrow in this divine head surpass all that could be conceived in Art; the character has been stamped by the soul, not the hand of the artist and until it fades into nothingness will have the lineaments of divinity."

The study of the disciples' heads shows a similarity in feature in some of the groups but a complete diversity of expression. The fact that the great majority are portrayed in profile makes the achievement all the more remarkable. Next to Christ on the right hand are John, Judas and Peter. Peter, the farthest, upon





**"The Last Supper" of Fra Angelico**

Angelico painted the religious significance of the "Last Supper"—the institution of the Holy Eucharist

hearing the words jumps to his feet, in accordance with his impulsive nature, grasps a carving knife with which he accidentally touches the side of Judas. Leaning over Judas he taps John's shoulder saying, "Ask Him who it is." Judas in dismay leans across the table. Unable to conceal his inner feelings his countenance is terrified and with his right hand he clutches the money bag; his arm upsets the salt-cellar. The left hand is upon the table, the palm is averted with the fingers raised in a gesture of surprise and alarm betraying his guilt. The fingers of Jesus' right hand point directly to Judas. The face of the Iscariot is seen in profile and cast into shadow; without being vulgar it is hateful. St. John is seated at the right of our Saviour, at the place he himself tells us he occupied (which was a special mark of favor and predilection). His hands are clasped. His head is bowed in intense anguish of spirit. He has raised his head from the shoulder of Christ to hear the query of St. Peter and has answered with a shrug of the shoulders. The almost feminine sweetness of his countenance expresses the character of this gentle and amiable apostle. This is the leading group of the picture and by far the most perfect, corresponding in minutest detail with the Gospel narrative.

On our Saviour's left hand St. James the Greater draws back in terror with arms outspread, head bowed down and eyes transfixed as if he is already beholding the horrible things he hears with his ears. Thomas is right behind him, raising the forefinger of his right hand and dubiously asking, "Did You say one of us, Lord?" Philip who has arisen stoops over the shoulder of James and with his hands upon his pure breast he asks, "Could I be the traitor, Lord?" fearing that in human frailty he should betray his Master. The group beyond these offers an entirely new form of expression. Matthew, a young man of a much finer type than the other apostles, eagerly turns to the old and dignified Simon at the end of the table (who because of his deafness has not caught the words of the Master) and with arms stretched towards Jesus attempts to explain what the Master has said. By an admirable contrivance of the artist Matthew is made to connect the foregoing group with his own. Thaddeaus, who stands between Matthew and Simon half consciously tries to explain to Simon what has happened. He expresses the utmost surprise, doubt and, above all, suspicion.

His left hand rests upon the table and he is about to strike his right to it. The aged Simon shows it is all too much for him; he cannot comprehend it.

At the opposite end of the table stands Bartholomew. He has risen suddenly for his feet are still crossed; bending over and leaning upon the table he waits for Jesus to say more. James the Less, who is next to Bartholomew, stretches out his hand to Peter's shoulder to bid the Prince of the apostles not to be too hasty. Andrew, who is sitting next to James the younger, is an admirable figure in his long gray beard. His half-lifted arms and outspread hands express the fixed horror with which a simple hearted old man is seized. To a solemn scene Leonardo has given sufficient movement and variety of action, without any sacrifice of dignity or pathos. He has kept the expressions of the apostles true to traditional character without effort or exaggeration. To have accomplished this, to have been the first to accomplish this, required a master mind—a genius of the first rank. The painting was completed in 1498.

The most unfortunate circumstance connected with the "Last Supper" is the fact that Leonardo ignored the old method of fresco-painting, mixed his colors with oil and painted on a badly prepared wall. This innovation proved fatal to his work, for serious deterioration commenced almost five years after the picture was completed. Forty-seven years after the death of da Vinci, Vasari testifies that the painting was "in such a bad condition that one can distinguish nothing but a blur." In the course of a few centuries it has been retouched no less than five times, and in most cases by extremely incompetent men.

The hand of the restorer, however, has been no more cruel than the hand of time. In 1796 the soldiers of Napoleon quartered their horses in the refectory of delle Grazie, and against his express orders amused themselves by pelting the heads of the apostles with brickbats. The deterioration continued until 1904 when a singularly successful scientific restoration was made. Fortunately for all these efforts at restoration Fra Girolamo of the Order of St. Dominic had made a perfect copy of the painting before it had undergone serious deterioration, and if the picture provokes our admiration as we look at it today we can thank this talented friar whose copy served the restorers as a model. The celebrated engraving of Raphael

Morghen which appeared in 1800 is reputed to be the most faithful reproduction possible, and the best substitute for the original that has been made.

In an article which appeared in the Catholic World some twenty-five years ago John J. O'Shea gives us an accurate estimate of the genius of Leonardo and his great masterpiece when he says, "Few minds have helped our imagination to realize the greatest event in Christianity,—as the foundation of the Eucharist must be regarded,—as Leonardo da Vinci's did. Whilst the Christian religion lasts his wonderful painting of the 'Last Supper' will be known and marvelled at. The walls upon which it is worked may crumble away under the weight of ages, the work will be transmitted, for it possesses the imperishable quality of truth and beauty. . . . It is not given to many founders of schools in the different arts to be at once the pioneer and the master. This was the privilege of da Vinci. To the Church in which he lived and died he gave his noblest work. It was to the Church he owed its inspiration. In paying his debt he achieved what no other human agency of his time could have achieved. His fame was secured as long as perishable things could last, and even beyond that vista, down the long galleries of the unborn future."

