

## The Second Christ

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Some would split the Middle Ages into two distinct periods, calling them the first and second Feudal Age. This idea was first introduced by Marc Bloch, and although it has caused some contention between medieval historians, most agree that during what Bloch would call the Second Feudal Age there was a birth of thought, or a renaissance. This rebirth included the emergence of a new class and an increase in the amount of currency circulated through society. All aspects of society adapted, changed or reacted to this new culture, including the church. During this time many new religious orders developed, reacting negatively to the new society, rejecting its wealth and materialism. One person who reacted to this new society and started up his own religious order is St. Francis of Assisi. Despite the conflicts the order faced amongst them, the Franciscans are one of the most famous orders that developed during the Middle Ages. Because the time period limited the use of the written word as communication, the Franciscan Order used artwork in churches to communicate major ideals of the order as well as the importance of their patron saint, Francis, through his relation to Jesus Christ.

Francis was born the son of a merchant and was set to follow in his father's footsteps, but a call from God changed his mind. When his father learned of this, he was outraged. He eventually took his son to the bishop, hoping to correct the "problem." When in front of the bishop, however, Francis stripped and gave away his clothes, which caused the bishop to take him in.<sup>1</sup> Francis lived a very simple life after this, seeking out solitary places and praying constantly.<sup>2</sup> Part of his simple life included only having one tunic and not having a beard, staff, or shoes, and well as not possessing any money. His "highest intention, greatest desire, and supreme purpose was to observe the holy gospel in and through all things."<sup>3</sup> One of his desires was to model himself after Jesus, he "strove to conform himself to Christ and to imitate him perfectly."<sup>4</sup> His order, the Franciscans, did not begin until he had twelve followers, very similar to Jesus' twelve disciples. Furthermore, he occasionally performed miracles reminiscent of the ones Jesus performed, such as healing the sick.<sup>5</sup>

Francis was canonized in 1228 A.D., only two years after his death. Although the speech Pope Gregory IX made at his canonization is available, there is not much one can draw from it. He makes reference to a vineyard, saying Francis was sent by God to clean up this vineyard and teach people about Him.<sup>6</sup> His accomplishment of this task could be why he is being named a saint. Furthermore, it is obvious that the Pope admired Francis, and makes many references to bible verses in his speech, which elevates Francis's status.

As stated previously, the Franciscan order began when Francis had twelve followers. The official name of the Franciscans is the *ordo fratrum minorum*, or the order of minor brothers. The Franciscan Order gained popularity because it filled a need,

and its members were not required to live life like a monk inside a monastery. Francis set up certain rules his friars were supposed to abide by, and the most prominent aspect of these rules is "to observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience without anything of our own, and in chastity."<sup>7</sup> There are certain things the brothers must abide by, such as living in chastity, not having any property whatsoever, modeling their lives after Jesus, and they must have always been obedient.

Furthermore, they must be humble, and only use what little they need.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the friars must live a life of poverty, because Jesus and Mary chose a life of poverty, and Jesus is someone the members needed to model their lives after.<sup>9</sup> A majority of these principles and ideals are very similar to what Francis wanted his life to be like, so it is obvious that at this point in time his friars followed closely to what he believed.

Despite this initial closeness, shortly before Francis's death a conflict arose in the order. Society was rapidly changing, and the pursuit for knowledge was gaining popularity. Major points of contention within the order were that some members of the order wanted to learn and thus modify the rule of poverty.<sup>10</sup> Two sides emerged within the order: the Spirituals who supported Francis and his ideals and the Conventuals, who supported the idea of loosening the noose, so speak, on the rules of the order.<sup>11</sup> As somewhat of a last-ditch-effort before his death, Francis issued a Testament, hoping it would end the conflict within his order. In this Testament he reiterated the original set of rules laid out for the order, saying the friars must always have obedience, they can still only have one tunic, and follow the rule of poverty. Despite his efforts, it proved to be futile: the order was growing rapidly at this time and this Testament imposed too many limitations for the order.<sup>12</sup> In order to accommodate the rapidly changing society the Franciscans had to loosen the following of their rules in order to survive.

Despite this split, the Franciscans still thought very highly of their patron saint, and this is seen in the artwork. For instance, in the basilica at Assisi, there is an image in the Lower Basilica depicting Francis in glory. He is sitting on a throne wearing a not-so-simple frock with a large amount of people surrounding him.<sup>13</sup> The Franciscans are portraying Francis in an extremely good light, and making him appear very important. This idea is further seen in the church of Santa Maria Donna. In the *Procession of Elect*, which is found in the church, Francis is seen with other famous saints, but Francis is the saint that is featured most prominently.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Francis is featured prominently demonstrates the idea that he was the most important and the saint most revered by the people.

This importance is further seen in the fact that the Franciscan Order took the idea that Francis chose to model his life after Jesus very seriously. This idea was evident in the rules of the order, as well as in the artwork in Franciscan churches, which helps give credence to the idea that the artwork displays these ideals. Many believed that because Francis's life was so Christ-like he was the *alter Christus*,<sup>15</sup> or essentially the second Christ. Not much has been done recently on the just the subject of the relationship between Jesus Christ and St. Francis in artwork in churches. Or rather, not much has been done examining what these connections mean and the importance of these connections. In her book entitled *The Franciscans and Art Patronage in Late Medieval Italy*, Louise Bourdua discusses the role Franciscans had in developing artwork in the Middle Ages. She states very directly that her aim is to "uncover the

role played by the Order of friars minor ... from the planning stages to execution"<sup>16</sup> in constructing a physical reminder or statement of the Franciscans. Thus, her work would be very helpful in determining how the conflict in the order contributed to the construction of churches and creation of artwork. The friars of the Franciscan Order were not supposed to handle money and were supposed to live a very simplistic life. The creation of art and the construction of churches and buildings conflicts with these ideals, and Bourdua gives examples where these rules were bent. This discussion, however, is not directly related to one of Francis being the second Christ. Despite this, she does provide an excellent description of the artwork found in four prominent Italian churches, which is helpful in determining which images portray Francis and his relation to Christ.

Taking this discussion a step-further, Alastair Smart's work *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto* does touch upon the importance of Christ-like images appearing in Franciscan churches, although he primarily studies these images in relation to Bonaventure's life of the saint and other pieces of literature. Smart's main argument focuses on who the actual artist was on the artwork found in the basilica at Assisi. Smart effectively makes the connection between the presence of Christ in Franciscan images, although he seems to fail to take it one step further by examining what it means and why it is important.

One major element that is present in Franciscan churches is the presence of images depicting the cycle of Christ and Christ-centered images. For instance, in the San Fermo Maggiore church, there are images depicting the ancestors of Jesus, as well as the Christological cycle, including part of the crucifixion.<sup>17</sup> There is also a Tree of Life image, its purpose being to refer to "the origin, passion, and glorification of Jesus Christ."<sup>18</sup> The interesting thing about this depiction is that it includes images of Francis instead of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> As it was seen in Bonaventure's life of the saint, Francis modeled his life after Christ. Maybe the friars chose to change the image of Jesus in the Tree of Life to Francis to signify this relationship. Furthermore, the friars may have done this in order to elevate Francis to Christ's status. The Tree of Life depiction as well as more cycles of the life of Christ can also be found in St. Antony's church at Padua.<sup>20</sup> These Christ-centered pictures can also be found at the basilica at Assisi, which is the hub church for the Franciscans. In the Upper Basilica there are representations of the resurrection as well as people crying over the dead Christ.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, in the Lower Basilica there are images depicting Christ's birth as well as various important parts in his early years of life.<sup>22</sup>

The presence of these images can tell us a lot about Francis and the order of the Franciscans. Smart comments on the presence of these depictions, and speculates that these images were supposed to serve as reminder to the friars. The images of the crucifixion and Francis embracing the cross are visible from the choir, where the friars would have sat often. This image obviously was meant to be remembered always by the friars.<sup>23</sup> As Bonaventure commented in his work, many events in Francis's life were reminiscent of events that occurred in Christ's life. In order to communicate this importance to everyone, including the commoners, the Franciscans may have chosen to paint images of Jesus. The church was a very important aspect of medieval life, so it makes sense that the Franciscans would want to advertise a very important aspect of their order there. Moreover, many commoners would probably not know how to

read, so images would be the next best thing to use, and everyone would probably be able to recognize who Jesus was on the walls of a church. The Tree of Life images also could have been a way to communicate ideas of the order to the people. These could be used as a way to show that Francis stems from Jesus, or that he is directly related to Jesus, even if it was not by blood. This then would have justified the claims that Francis was the second Christ.

These images also could have been a way to demonstrate Francis's power. Christ was the ultimate figure, so to speak, so tying Francis to Jesus would have increased his power and his credibility. People may be more willing to follow a saint if they think it will bring them closer to salvation and Jesus Christ. On the other hand, this could have been a way to undermine Francis's power. After his death his order split into two separate camps: the Spirituals and the Conventuals. The Conventuals believed in taking a step back and loosening ties with the strict rules of Francis. They could have used these images to prove that Francis was not as good as Jesus, or discredit him in any way they could. They also could have been using these images as a way to prove that Francis could never compare to Jesus.

This relation to Christ and the idea of the second Christ is taken a step further in some images, particularly in the basilica at Assisi. For instance, Smart comments on the fact that the artist who did the paintings in the basilica dedicated two bays on the south wall to the death of Francis.<sup>24</sup> This is significant for a number of reasons. The death of Jesus is a very important aspect in the Christian faith, because it signifies that he was willing to die to save people. By dedicating this much time to Francis's death, they could once again be trying to reinforce the idea that he was as important as Christ; maybe Francis's death meant as much to the order as Jesus' death mean to the Christian faith. The friars could have been trying to relate Francis to Christ and the order to the Christian faith as a whole. Maybe they thought if they relayed the importance on a smaller scale it would be easier for the commoners to relate to. The idea of martyrdom was also very important in the Franciscan Order. For instance, in close relation to a cycle of Christ in the church San Fermo Maggiore there is a depiction of four martyrs that were members of the Franciscan Order.<sup>25</sup> Francis himself wished to be a martyr.<sup>26</sup> Francis and the friars may have hoped they would be more like Christ if they were martyrs. The friars may have chosen to include the idea of martyrdom in their churches in order to remind people that the Christian faith is important enough to die for. Or, they could have used it as a reminder that one should always model their life after Christ.

The friars also chose to take this relationship a step further in the artwork found in the basilica. There is an image of Francis and Clare in the Upper Basilica. If one looks closely, holes in Francis's hands and feet can be seen, obviously representing a place where nails could have been.<sup>27</sup> A similar image is seen in the Lower Basilica as well. In the *Depiction of St. Francis in Glory* Francis has marks where nails could have been on his hands and feet.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in the *Procession of Elect*, found in the church of Santa Maria Donna, Francis is seen with wounds that clearly resemble the wounds of Christ.<sup>29</sup> This clearly demonstrates the likeness of Francis to Christ. The friars must have taken the idea of Francis being the second Christ very seriously if they chose to show him with holes in his hands and feet where nails could have been. The fact that this idea appears in the artwork once again demonstrates the importance

communicating to the people the significance of a Christ-like Francis. In fact, this idea could have been a contributing factor in why Francis had such a large following. The fact that Francis was Christ-like could have piqued the curiosity of many people who wanted to know exactly how he resembled Christ. Furthermore, this could have been a marketing ploy for the Franciscans. Jesus had a very wide-spread following, so maybe they thought if they promoted and pushed the idea that Francis modeled himself after Christ more people would join the order. Francis's status would most likely be raised by an association with Christ, so the friars could have used this thought to their advantage.

The Franciscans chose to demonstrate what they thought about Francis in another way through artwork: by using depictions of Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary. Mary was very important to the Franciscans, as is seen in "The Religious Life in Hermitages." In this writing, Francis declares that some of the friars that are living in hermitages should be referred to as Mary Magdalen.<sup>30</sup> As was the case with the direct relation to Christ, there has not been much done on this relationship in recent studies. Mary Magdalen is discussed in the article "Patronage and Franciscan Iconography in the Magdalen Chapel at Assisi" by Lorraine Schwartz. Schwartz mentions that although no images of Francis actually appear in the Magdalen chapel at Assisi, there is Franciscan iconography present.<sup>31</sup> She effectively makes the connection between these images and Francis. One aspect of her article that is particularly useful is her contemplation on how the conflict in the order was seen by the friars and painters. There are two donor portraits found in this chapel, one dressed as a bishop and the other dressed as a friar. Schwartz supposes that since the friar faces a nun, he represents the Spiritualists, or the side that wanted to stick with Francis. The bishop, on the other hand, faces a figure with a secular orb and crown, which could represent the Conventuals belief that the friars should seek advancement in the church.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the images of Mary Magdalen can help the common observer understand what was going on during the time of the Franciscans.

Although the Virgin Mary is not directly discussed in *The Church of Santa Maria Donna Regina*, an association can be made between Clare and Mary. Through a collection of articles solely focused on the Church of Santa Maria Donna Regina, the history of the cult of Santa Maria Donna Regina is discussed. Many of the authors claim that this order was established to glorify Clare, the woman who was close to Francis during his lifetime. Clare may have been to Francis what Mary Magdalen could have been to Jesus. This analogy reinforces the idea that the Franciscans wanted to promote the idea of Francis being the second Christ.

Alastair Smart also touches upon Mary briefly in his work, although he still keeps with the theme that it is a way to express what was written about St. Francis and the Franciscans. For instance he quotes Bonaventure when mentioning the apse dedicated to the Life of Mary in the basilica at Assisi, saying that Francis loved Mary deeply because she was Christ's mother and gave them mercy.<sup>33</sup> This could account for the reason why the apse was dedicated to Mary. Louise Bourdua also discusses the presence of Mary in the churches she looks at. Once again, however, she discusses this presence in relation to what role the friars had in the construction/dedication of the images, rather than their connections with the beliefs of the order and the importance they hold to society.

The presence of Franciscan iconography dealing with Mary in the basilica at Assisi can tell us about the order as a whole as well as the relationship Francis had with Christ. In the Upper Basilica there are images of stories of Mary Magdalen, such as *Mary Magdalen Talks to Angels* and *Mary Magdalen Talks to cardinal Pietro di Barro*. In the first, Mary is seen kneeling on a cloud with her hands folded in prayer around angels. In the second, a friar is seen kneeling and hold Mary's hand.<sup>34</sup> Lorraine Schwartz attributes these images, as well as others found in the chapel, as a way to portray two very important aspects of the Franciscan Order: penitence and the contemplative life. She remarks that although the cult of Mary Magdalen was not directly linked with Francis himself, one aspect the two orders had in common was penitence. She even goes as far to say that members of the order "frequently allude to the Magdalen as a paradigm of penitence."<sup>35</sup> The glorification of the contemplative life can be seen in the image of Mary with the angels, and its relation with Francis is seen in the depiction of his stigmatization. Schwartz muses that by pairing these images together the Franciscans are trying reinforce the beliefs of Francis and encourage other brothers to stick with Francis.<sup>36</sup> This can lead us to conclude that in this case the Spiritualists were the ones behind the painting, as they were the group that was behind Francis. Another aspect of the Magdalen chapel at Assisi asks us to find a correlation between Francis and Jesus. In the chapel there is a portrait of Beata Giacomina dei Settesoli, a friend of Francis. She respected him very much, and once while in Assisi she kissed his feet and then proceeded to bathe them with tears. This reminded people of Mary when she cried over Christ's dead body; some have even said that she was a second Mary.<sup>37</sup> This woman once again brings us back to the idea of Francis being the second Christ, as the woman who kissed Francis's feet is reminiscent of Mary Magdalen and her role in Jesus' death.

These similarities and iconographic images tie Francis even further to Christ. By making a connection between Francis and someone associated with Christ, Francis's status is elevated even further. Using Mary is also a good way to communicate the beliefs of the order, such as penitence and living the contemplative life. Maybe the people would accept these ideas more willingly if they came from a figure they all knew, or someone that was more visible and talked about more often in religious society. Furthermore, this demonstrates how important Mary was to the friars, despite the fact that Francis dictated in his Rule of the Order that they try to avoid communication with women at all costs.<sup>38</sup> Because she was communicating two key aspects of the order, she must have had some significance to the friars. This could also demonstrate the shifting of the order away from Francis's teachings. If they are holding a woman in such high esteem they must be drifting away from the original rules of the order.

Images connecting the Virgin Mary to Francis can also been seen in the artwork found in Franciscan churches. For instance, in the church of San Lorenzo there is a depiction of Mary above the doorway. Mary is sitting on a throne with baby Jesus on her lap, and the child is holding a dove. St. Francis is looking on while Mary blesses a kneeling benefactor.<sup>39</sup> This scene not only shows closeness to the Virgin Mary, but also may be demonstrating a characteristic of their patron saint. Francis was known as the patron saint of animals, so the depiction of baby Jesus holding a dove could be a subtle way to communicate this. Furthermore, the fact that Jesus is communicating this idea

could show either its importance or a way to strengthen the idea that Francis is the second Christ: they both share the same ideals, thus Francis could be considered the second Christ.

The relation between Mary and Francis is seen again in St. Antony's church through the promotion of the cult of Mary. There is a statue of the Virgin with a baby Jesus in this church, both of them wearing crowns.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the dedication of another altar could be proof that the Franciscans wanted this church to be the site of the cult site for the cult of the Virgin Mary.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, in one of the chapels found in this church, the focal point of the apse has a painting of Mary once again sitting on a throne with Jesus sitting on her lap. Mary and Jesus are surrounded by Franciscan friars, one of them being Francis.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, images of the Virgin Mary can be seen the Lower Basilica the church at Assisi. There is an image of Mary sitting on a throne holding baby Jesus. Francis is off to the side looking on at the pair.<sup>43</sup>

These images help demonstrate the importance of Francis. By relating him to the mother of God, they are trying to elevate his status and emphasize his importance. Associations with people connected to Jesus, although not as strong as a direct relation, can influence what people thought about Francis and his order. Francis's status is raised up by association with Mary. On another note, the idea discussed in class about people having to go through Mary to get to Jesus could be applied here. The fact that Francis is pictured with Mary could mean that before he was able to be Christ or before he could be the second Christ he had to have a connection with his mother.

The idea of both Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary could be analyzed in a larger context. The fact that both are portrayed in artwork found in the same church could signify the split in the order. Maybe one side idolized Mary Magdalen and the other side saw the Virgin Mary as being the most important. Furthermore, while Mary Magdalen is portrayed as exemplifying Franciscan ideals, Francis is only seen as observing the Virgin Mary. Maybe one Mary was more "touchable," so to speak, to the order. Mary Magdalen could not have had as strict rules (in the theoretical sense) about how she is portrayed than the Virgin Mary. Despite this difference, both correlations were used by the Franciscans to promote and elevate the status of their patron saint.

Thus, the use of images in churches of Jesus, Mary Magdalen, and the Virgin Mary were used by the Franciscans to promote their patron saint, Francis, as well as communicate the beliefs of the order. This connection is useful in discovering why Francis was so popular as well as learn what was most important to the order. In a way, the artwork found in various Franciscan churches was most likely used as an advertising ploy in order to get people to follow their order. The fact that they chose a church is not coincidental; the church was a major part of the everyday life. The cathedral at Chartres was used in class to display just how integral the church was to the life of the people there. It can then be inferred that Franciscan churches were just as integral. It thus makes sense that the main way of getting the word out about their order was to use the church. Hence, in order to learn the history of St. Francis, one only has to look at the church.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas of Celano, *First and Second Lives of Saint Francis*, trans. by David Burr, from Internet Medieval Sourcebook, Paul Halsall (accessed 13 October 2006), available from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/stfran-lives.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis*, trans. by Ewert Cousins, foreword by Donna Tartt (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 11, 14.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas of Celano.
- <sup>4</sup> Bonaventure, 154.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 35, 38.
- <sup>6</sup> Pope Gregory IX, *Mira Circa Nos: The Bull Canonization of St. Francis of Assisi*, from Internet Medieval Sourcebook, Paul Halsall (accessed 13 October 2006), available from <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/G9MIRA.HTM>.
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- <sup>10</sup> Vida Dutton Scudder, *The Franciscan Adventure* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Limited, 1931), 71.
- <sup>11</sup> Louise Bourdua, *The Franciscans and Art Patronage in Late Medieval Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.
- <sup>12</sup> *Testament of St. Francis*, trans. by David Burr, from Internet Medieval Sourcebook, Paul Halsall (accessed 13 October 2006), available from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/stfran-test.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Olteanu, *Assisi, Lower Basilica* (accessed 5 November 2006), available from <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/francis/lower.html>.
- <sup>14</sup> Janis Elliot, "The 'Last Judgment': The Cult of Sacral Kingship and Dynastic Hopes for the Afterlife," *The Church of Santa Maria Donna Regina: Art, Iconography and Patronage in Fourteenth-Century Naples*, Janis Elliot and Cordelia Warr, ed, (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 185.
- <sup>15</sup> Alastair Smart, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1983), 18.
- <sup>16</sup> Bourdua, 5.

- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41-42.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 52.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 54.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 98, 115.
- <sup>21</sup> Michael Olteanu, *Assisi, Upper Basilica* (accessed 5 November 2006), available from <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/francis/upper.html>.
- <sup>22</sup> Olteanu, *Assisi, Lower Basilica*.
- <sup>23</sup> Smart, 10.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 195.
- <sup>25</sup> Bourdua, 47.
- <sup>26</sup> Thomas of Celano.
- <sup>27</sup> Olteanu, *Assisi, Upper Basilica*.
- <sup>28</sup> Olteanu, *Assisi, Lower Basilica*.
- <sup>29</sup> Elliot, 185.
- <sup>30</sup> St. Francis of Assisi, "The Religious Life in Hermitages," Raphael Brown and others, trans, in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Bibliographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Marion A. Habig, ed (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 72.
- <sup>31</sup> Lorraine Schwartz, "Patronage and Franciscan Iconography in the Magdalen Chapel at Assisi," *The Burlington Magazine* 133, no. 1054 (January 1991), 32.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>33</sup> Smart, 10.
- <sup>34</sup> Olteanu, *Assisi, Upper Basilica*.
- <sup>35</sup> Schwartz, 32.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 33.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>38</sup> *The Rule of the Franciscan Order*.
- <sup>39</sup> Bourdua, 74-75.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 106-107.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 140.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 135.
- <sup>43</sup> Olteanu, *Assisi, Lower Basilica*.