Sacred Views of Saint Francis

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This section contains short essays describing each chapel and providing the raison d'être for each. There are twenty chapels in the park-like setting of the Sacro Monte di Orta. The architecture, style, and setting are uneven from chapel to chapel, and can vary in emphasis and attention to ornamentation. The essays reflect these disparities: for some chapels, more space is devoted to a description of the exterior than the interior; for others, the frescos receive attention equal to or greater than the dioramas. Photos of both the exterior and interior accompany each essay.

Content of the Artistic Program

Despite the distinctiveness of each chapel, the reader will find unity in the artistic program. The chapels teach visually what the Franciscans so adeptly preach, while simultaneously explaining the identity of the Order in the program. Each chapel, in its own way, asserts: (1) the unique status of Francis, who, according to Franciscan tradition, conformed to Christ; (2) the distinctiveness of the Franciscans and their special, penitential mission in following the gospel life; (3) the orthodoxy of the Franciscan order and its close ties with the institutional church; (4) the program of the Tridentine reform; and (5) Francis' role in revitalizing the church of the thirteenth century and the parallel role of the Franciscans in revitalizing the church of the post-Tridentine era. The emphasis on the legitimacy of Francis and the Franciscan order is one that played out in Franciscan art over centuries. Bradley Franco observes that the repeated selection of certain events in the saint's life, events in which the presence of church authorities is notably highlighted, underscored the orthodoxy of the movement. This is certainly the case at Orta, where we see church authority on display in Francis' penitential renunciation before the bishop (Chapel III), his attendance at Mass (Chapel IV), the papal approval of the Order (Chapel VII), the administration of Last Rites at Francis' deathbed (Chapel XVII), the papal visit to Francis' tomb (Chapel XVIII), and the gathering of cardinals, bishops, abbots and the pope at the saint's canonization (Chapel XX). Authorities appear in multiple frescos, such as the gathering of bishops before whom Francis announces the Porziuncola Indulgence (Chapel XI) and that of Innocent III's dream in which Francis holds up the Lateran church (Chapel VII and Chapel XI). The depiction of numerous Old Testament and New Testament personalities, as well as that of saints such as Dominic, Basil, Benedict, Augustine, Rocco and John Nepomuk, are also found throughout the chapels.
Design and Execution of the Artistic Program

The Sacro Monte di Orta was developed over a period of almost two hundred years. During that time, a number of artistic styles came in and out of vogue: classicism, mannerism, baroque, and rococo. The chapels reflect that great diversity of tastes and it is not unusual to find the elements of a single chapel exhibiting differing styles: an exterior in one style and the frescos in another. Several chapels underwent repairs or “updating” with a facelift to the façade, the addition of statues, or new interior painting.

Our records of the construction are incomplete, particularly owing to the destruction of archives when Napoleon closed religious houses in 1810. Typically, Franciscan building projects had two governing bodies, called fabbriciere (pl. fabbricieri). They functioned much like a modern day vestry might, except that, because of the Franciscan prohibition against handling money, a secular fabbriciere handled all the financial matters of the project, while a fabbriciere of friars directed the design and its execution. We have some records of the secular fabbriciere at Orta, and though we have found no reference to a religious fabbriciere there, Father Cleto da Castelletto Ticino, the main designer and architect of the site from 1594–1619, had experience serving on several fabbricieri for projects at other locales. Already at work on the site, Father Cleto was appointed supervisor by Carlo Bascapè, who became Bishop of Novara in 1593. The Sacro Monte di Orta belonged in the Bishop’s diocese, and we know that he took an avid interest in selecting artists and designing the artistic program of the pilgrimage site. He funded Chapel III, Francis Renounces his Worldly Goods, and it is widely considered that the statue of the Bishop of Assisi in this same chapel is in Bascapè’s likeness.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Sacro Monte di Orta is a precinct, surrounded by a temenos of hedgerows, trees, and walls. Pilgrims approach the sacred site via a fairly difficult walking path, the physical exertion intended to prepare both the body and mind of the faithful for kinesthetic, sensory, and mental participation at the shrine. The builders designed the park as an immersive experience with entrance arch, purification font, wall shrine, well, green spaces, and chapels, all amplified by the naming of lanes and piazzas after elements in Canticle of the Sun, such that the pilgrim physically moves through the song as part of the devotional performance. In keeping with the Borromean emphasis on discipline, the pilgrim’s visit is controlled by a set itinerary along a clear-cut path leading from chapel to chapel, with the chapel numbers painted on each structure and a frescoed hand pointing the pilgrim in the correct direction. The pilgrim is further controlled by the prescribed viewing opportunities relative to each chapel. The interior of some chapels may be viewed only from the exterior through screened windows that direct one’s line of vision. Even in those chapels that allow entry, the pilgrim’s gaze is controlled by iron, wood, and/or glass screens that serve to intentionally frustrate the viewer’s access to the devotional images. Despite such restraints, the transformative experience that is the pilgrim’s goal may actually be enhanced by these viewing controls. The screens frame the tableau and concentrate the viewer’s attention. As frames, the screens serve to revere and celebrate, to create desire and awe, much the same way, Margaret Bell argues, that reliquaries serve to enhance the relic. The pilgrim’s body is manipulated into a devotional posture, to bend and to kneel in order to look through the viewing holes that punctuate the screens. In some chapels this manipulation allows the pilgrim to positionally identify with the terracotta figures, such as in Chapel II where the kneeling pilgrim is positioned alongside the young Francis as he, too, kneels before the feet of Christ on the San Damiano Cross. Apertures (both windows and screens) as well as candles controlled lighting for effect that, in addition
to creating a sense of sanctity, could create mood and unleash the pilgrim’s imagination. Play between lightness and darkness inside the chapels, an environmental chiaroscuro, might animate the images in the pilgrim’s gaze. The architects of the Sacro Monte di Orta designed the physical fabric of the shrine be to simultaneously, and orthodoxly, kinesthetic, tactile, and spiritual so that the pilgrim could fully experience, and bear witness to, what they believed was the miraculously transformative nature of pilgrimage to this Franciscan shrine.

We know something of the manufacturing techniques that would have been used by the artists of the Sacro Monte di Orta. The terracotta figures were crafted in situ. The artists might mold the clay and then hollow out the figures, using various interior and exterior structural support systems so that the clay shell did not collapse during the firing process. Alternately, the clay could be coiled into place, again with the assistance of supports for strength. At this point the figures were cut into sections (so as to fit into the oven and bake evenly) and fired. The oven at the Sacro Monte di Orta adjoins Chapels XIX and XX. The figures were then reassembled using clasps and brackets (see Fig. 1). Plaster could be used to conceal cracks, joins, and breaks. Painters were employed at Orta to work on the narrative frescos, ornamental and architectural motifs, and painted sculptures. The terracotta statues might be glazed (which would require a second firing) and/or painted. Oil and tempera in the full range of colors were painted onto figures over an egg-based sealant, or they could be applied to an undercoating of gesso and glue. As opposed to marble or bronze statues, the naturalistically painted figures of Orta and the other Sacri Monti further enhanced the mimesis and immediacy desired for an affective devotional experience.

As indicated in the artist’s biographies (see Appendix), some very well-known artists of the period worked at Orta. For a few, painting or sculpting was a multigenera-

Fig. 1. A behind the scenes view of terracotta figures showing construction techniques. Nave, Chapel VI. Sacro Monte di Orta.

Chapel I. The Nativity of St. Francis

Chapel I is devoted to the stories surrounding Francis’ birth, particularly the tradition that Francis, like Christ, was born in a stable. The chapel was designed by the Capuchin Father Cleto da Castelletto Ticino and built between 1592–1604, though the façade one sees today was added in 1848 by Novaran
architect Paolo Gaudenzio Rivolta. For the interior decoration, the frescos by Bernardo and Giacomo Filippo Monti were completed in 1615, and the terracotta statues of sculptor Christoforo Prestinari were installed by 1617. Funding for the chapel is variously attributed to the citizens of Orta, a local tinsmiths guild, and terracotta artists from France and Spain.

The nineteenth-century façade of the chapel is scored with faux marble blocks (see Fig. 2). Engaged Ionic columns flank the central double door, where each column sits on a tall plinth. Note that all the chapels at the Sacro Monte di Orta follow the Renaissance-era preference for smooth (non-fluted) columns. A shallow stylobate forms the base of the chapel. Two steps lead to the front door, which is topped by a cornice and crest. The eye follows the rectilinear lines of the columns upwards, to a demilune window, corbel, architrave, and pediment. The chapel itself is rectilinear, though attached to the left are two additional, smaller buildings that originally served as a meetinghouse and caretakers quarters but currently house a bookshop, vending, and souvenirs.

The square chapel is divided into two equal parts: a vestibule with frescoed walls and the nativity scene behind an arched wooden screen (see Fig. 3). The archway is filled on the lower course by a solid wooden screen topped with a perforated wooden screen. A kneeler lies at the base of the screen. On either side of the arched screen, frescoed faux-niches depict Francis (to the left) and Dominic (to the right). Above the niches are single panels representing, respectively, Francis and Dominic giving alms. The decoration of the vault is largely ornamental, painted in garish hues that emphasize the intricate plaster modeling.

On the right and left interior walls of the vestibule are large frescos, each with a single scene. Two smaller panels flank the interior of the front entrance. Each scene foreshadows certain aspects about the life of Francis: that he will be born in a stable, that he will be a reformer and rebuild the church, that he is blessed by God, and that he will be an inspiration to his fellows. One scene, in particular, recalls the story in Luke 2:25–35 of Simeon who, upon meeting the holy family on the steps of the Jerusalem Temple, took the Christ-child in his arms and foretold the crucifixion. Here on the steps of the Porziuncola, Lady Pica hands Francis into the arms of an angel, a reinterpretation of the account in both Arnald of Sarrant’s Kingship of St. Francis (1365) and Bartholomew of Pisa’s De Conformitate in which a pilgrim (for Bartholomew, and as depicted here, the pilgrim is an angel in disguise) appears to Francis’ mother and predicts that he will be a blessing (see Fig. 4).

In the tableau behind the screen are almost a dozen terracotta figures—both hu-
Fig. 3. Vestibule of Chapel I, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 4. Lady Pica presents her newborn to the Angel. Chapel I, Sacro Monte di Orta.
man and animal. Lady Pica, Francis’ mother, with her rose dress and bluish-green cloak, appears imitatio Mariae (see Fig. 5). Both servants and well-dressed women attend her needs. The newborn Francis holds his hands in benediction. The walls of the nave are painted to imitate stone, the ceiling is painted to imitate wood, and a hayloft hangs on the wall. Additional attendants grace the background frescos.

Though the early biographers of Francis provide scant details of his birth, the tradition becomes amplified to the point that by the fourteenth century, legends aggressively portray Francis as a saint who lived in perfect conformity with Christ, even in his birth. As the first chapel of the pilgrimage, it explicitly identifies the connection between Christ and Francis. It establishes the message that at the Sacro Monte de Orta a pilgrim is able to directly encounter Christ through Francis.

**Chapel II. The Speaking Crucifix of San Damiano**

The iconographic program of Chapel II focuses on the mystical encounter between Francis and the crucified Christ in the San Damiano Church, an encounter long con-
Fig. 7. The Speaking Crucifix of San Damiano. Chapel II, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 8. A stableman and horse. Chapel II, Sacro Monte di Orta.
sidered a decisive moment in Francis' conversion. The chapel was built in three years, between 1606 and 1609, with Father Cleto da Castelletto Ticino as the architect. It is a rectilinear building fronted by a foreshortened portico supported by a Romanesque colonnade (see Fig. 6). The portico is adorned with now faded landscape and architectural frescos. The niche-flanked doorway of the portico leads into a large vestibule. The frescos of the vestibule walls, painted by the Fiamminghini (Giovanni Battista and Giovanni Mauro Di Roberio, c. 1608) depict scenes of Francis' youth (below), the virtues (in four lunettes, above), and angels in various poses, some holding instruments of penance (above). Two cherubs in heavenly glory grace the vault. A demilune window above the outer entrance and a rectangular window on a sidewall provide natural light. Opposite the vestibule entrance is an arched window cut into the interior stonewall that separates the vestibule from the nave. The lower portion of the opening is fitted with a wooden divider and kneeler for pilgrims, while the upper portion is of leaded glass. An iron screen protects the lower half of the glass window. Just beyond is the central vignette of St. Francis before the San Damiano Cross. Cristoforo Prestinari created the original statues (c. 1606), which included Francis, crucified Christ, and four angels, though the sculpture of Francis seen in the chapel today is by Dionigi Bussola. Bussola also added a stableman, a horse, three dogs and a hare (c. 1609), all reflecting a distinctive baroque influence. The walls of the diorama show a verdant landscape below and the heavenly host above and surrounding Christ crucified.

In the dimly lighted nave of Chapel II, the statue of Francis kneels before the crucified Christ, his right arm outstretched in supplication, his left arm clutched to his chest (see Chapter 3, Fig. 1). The pilgrim sees, and can even feel, Francis' penitence. Meanwhile, Christ, surrounded by four terracotta angels, looks down upon Francis (see Fig. 7). His sorrow-filled figure is imposing in its author-
Fig. 9. Francis exchanges clothes with a poor knight. Chapel II, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 10. Francis kisses a leper. Chapel II, Sacro Monte di Orta.
story of Francis, who despite his revulsion, kisses a leper (see Fig. 10), thus marking the moment Francis “began doing penance.” On the panel on the back wall to the left of the vestibule entrance, the fresco repeats Francis’ ecstatic vision of Christ crucified. These hagiographical portraits, arranged according to content and sequence following Bonaventure’s Major Legend of Saint Francis, underscore the special relationship that they assert Francis had with the divine long before donning a friar’s robe. Their accounts of his many dreams and visions of Christ (and his later reputation for prophecy) call to mind the biblical text of Numbers 12:6: “He said, ‘Now listen to the words of the Lord: Should there be a prophet among you, in visions will I reveal Myself to him, in dreams will I speak to him.’” These visions, so vividly portrayed for the pilgrim, were used by the artists “as a tool for demonstrating the saint’s eminence and the divine legitimization of his actions.” The scenes also remind the pilgrim that the Gospel life was not easy; even Francis had many missteps and struggles.

Though not every chapel at Orta carried special sacramental blessings, a pilgrim guide from the seventeenth century noted that Chapel II earned the pilgrim an “indulgence of 100 days” for a once weekly recitation of the late sixteenth-century Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” The incorporation of this prayer into the program of Chapel II underscores the emphasis on Marian devotion by both the Capuchins and by the post-Tridentine Church.

“Our Lady of Sorrow” Oratory

Some seventy years after the construction of Chapel II, an oratory dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrow was added to the left side of the chapel (c. 1681, see Fig. 11). It was sponsored by noted fabric merchant, Giovanni Righetti of Orta, and his bust is located in a niche just inside and above the front window of the oratory. The wall frescos are by Francesco Gianoli (c. 1681), including three putti, one of whom carries a banner that reads in Latin “Virgo Mater Dolorosa,” or Our Lady of Sorrow. Angels and various witnesses (including, presumably, portraits of Joseph of Aramathea, Nicodemus, and John the Evangelist) appear against a backdrop of clouds and rocks as they adorn the walls of the small chapel. The focus of the oratory is a pietà, a terracotta statue of Mary grieving her son; the lifeless body of Christ, carved in marble by Rossi of Novara, lies atop a sarcophagus which is in effect the upper portion of an altar designed by Monti di Borgomanero and added in 1846. Mary is flanked on either side by a terracotta angel, both of whom are looking down in the direction of Christ’s face. The angels hold a white cloth with which to cover his body. The maker of the terracotta statues is unknown, but they were placed in the oratory after the altar, so sometime after 1846. In post-Tridentine Italy, this chapel underscores the importance of Mary in the devotional life of Church.

The chapel and the oratory, side by side, indelibly link the beginning of Francis’ spiritual journey with the death of Jesus. Here Franciscan devotion is firmly situated within the spiritual exercises of Passion devotion. The crucifixion (Chapel II) and pietà (Oratory) are signposts incorporated into a shrine dedicated to St. Francis, instructing the pilgrim to meditate on the stations of Francis’ spiritual journey, housed within the chapels of the Sacro Monte di Orta, just as a penitent would meditate at the Stations of the Cross.

Chapel III. St. Francis Renounces His Worldly Goods

Designed by Father Cleto da Castelletto Ticino and funded by Carlo Bascapé, the Bishop of Novara, Chapel III was constructed between 1596 and 1599. The rectilinear, classically styled chapel sits on a three-foot stylobate that is articulated along the façade and interrupted by five steps that lead up to the entrance (see Fig. 12). Two engaged, Doric columns, sitting upon tall rectilinear plinths, flank each side of the double door. Each door is pierced with a small screen-covered oval window that allows in little light. Above the doorway is a leaded-glass demilune window. Atop the columns, a plain architrave forms the
base of the entablature with its cornice and pediment. Toward the front end of the slate rooftop perch three crosses. The effect of the tall and linear but proportionally narrow façade compels the viewer’s gaze upward and gives the chapel a sense of majesty.

Chapel III has both a nave and a vestibule. As with most chapels at Orta, the diorama occupies the nave. The theme of the chapel is renunciation, and the setting is a hearing before the church court of Assisi, the bishop presiding, where Francis breaks ties with his family:

Within earshot of many who had gathered about, he declared: “From now on I will say freely: ‘Our Father who are in heaven,’ and not ‘My father, Pietro di Bernardone.’ Look, not only do I return his money; I give him back all my clothes. I will go to the Lord naked.”

There are seven terracotta statues, including the Bishop of Assisi (thought to be modeled after Bishop Bascapè), Francis, Francis’ father Pietro Bernardone, three members of the council and one attendant. The action is dynamic: Francis, clothed only in a hairshirt, has just renounced his name and inheritance, and in so doing has stripped down (see Fig. 13). As Francis kneels before the bishop, the prelate bends forward to wrap his mantle (a symbol of his legal and spiritual protection) around the young man. Francis has become the penitential Prodigal. Indeed, the posture of Francis and the Bishop emulates the composition of paintings, sculpture and illustrations of medieval and Renaissance depictions of The Prodigal Son. It is distinctive, however, in extending the reading of the Prodigal to the story of Francis’ renunciation. Meanwhile Francis’ father steps forward in irritation while the council looks on. The background frescos portray several additional onlookers both of the community and the council. Meanwhile an attendant brings Francis a “new” cloak that he cuts it into a cruciform

Fig. 11. The tomb of Christ. Our Lady of Sorrow Oratory, attached to Chapel II, Sacro Monte di Orta.
In the vestibule, along the lower portion of the three exterior walls runs a course of faux marble slabs. Above that are a series of panels depicting various events relevant to Francis’ spiritual evolution just prior to and after his renunciation, though the series does not run in the narrative sequence provided by the hagiographers. To the pilgrim’s immediate right upon entering the chapel is the scene of Francis praying before the San Damiano cross. Moving to the left along the wall, the next scene is Francis selling his father’s cloth and horse at market, followed by Francis being mocked and bullied by local children and, lastly along this wall, a depiction of Francis being captured and escorted home by his father. Along the opposite wall, the scenes depict Francis giving money to the priest of San Damiano, Francis ministering to the lepers, Francis being beaten by thieves, and Francis, after having been given a tunic by the bishop, tailoring it into the shape of a cross.

As the eye travels upward from the wall panels, the viewer takes in lunettes decorated with the personification of virtues such as perseverance, vigilance, patience, solitude, simplicity, humility, victory over oneself, compunction, suffering, and penance (see Fig. 14). For didactic purposes Franciscans used depictions of personified virtues (as well as vices, though not in this program) to promote an emotional response during meditation. Such artistic images complimented the mental images friars used to aid memory in preaching and meditation.

The ceiling is adorned with eight roughly triangular frescos of angels, each carrying a penitential instrument such as the Bible, fasces, hairshirt, rope, scourge and flail. The Capuchin Franciscans were particularly well known for their strict observance of discipline, including bodily mortification. In this they imitated the practices of their revered founder whose goal was to embrace and imitate the sufferings of Christ.

The message of this chapel urges pilgrims to follow in Francis’ footsteps by detaching themselves from worldly possessions. But it does more than that. As the fresco cycles make clear, for the Capuchins renunciation comprises more than goods—money and clothes; renunciation extends to all things of this world, including the flesh and, through that, the self and self-will. An image above the central section of the vestibule screen underscores this message; there stands an armored knight, a warrior for Christ, holding the palm of victory. It is inscribed, “Dispregio del Mundo” or “Contempt of the World.”

Chapel IV. St. Francis Listening to the Mass

The chapel, another designed by Father Cleto da Castelletto Ticino, was constructed between 1609 and 1610, and replicates the occasion when Francis experienced his calling as a mendicant.
Fig. 13. Francis renounces his family, his name and his inheritance before the Bishop of Assisi. Chapel III, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 14. Personification of virtues. Ceiling frescos, Chapel III, Sacro Monte di Orta.
One day while he was devoutly hearing a Mass of the Apostles, the Gospel was read in which Christ sends out his disciples to preach and give them the Gospel form of life, that they may not keep gold or silver or money in their belts, nor have a wallet for their journey, nor may they have two tunics, nor shoes, nor staff. Hearing, understanding, and committing this to memory, the friend of the apostolic poverty was then overwhelmed with an indescribable joy. “This is what I want,” he said, “this is what I desire with all my heart!” Immediately, he took off the shoes from his feet, put down his staff, denounced his wallet and money, and, satisfied with one tunic, threw away his leather belt and put on a piece of rope for a belt. He directed all his heart’s desire to carry out what he had heard and to conform in every way to the rule of right living given to the apostles.\(^{25}\)

The Prestinari statues were crafted over the period from 1610 to 1616. Giovanni Battista and Giovanni Mauro Di Roberio (the Fiammenghini) painted the interior and exterior chapel frescos in 1614–15, though this attribution is contested.\(^{26}\) Funds for construction of the chapel, in keeping with the populist nature of the Franciscans, their art and its purpose, were raised through begging.

Chapel IV, which a pilgrim can view only through two iron-screened exterior windows, is small in comparison to the chapels that allow entry (see Fig. 15). The building is rectilinear with a portico along the length of the front exterior. The portico’s dual-arched façade and vaulted roof are richly frescoed with faded scenes of various Christian symbols—all underscoring the orthodoxy of the Franciscan tradition (the bishop’s miter, the crucifix, the instruments of penance, a chalice and monstrance, and the mandylion) as well as cherubs, angels, and faux marble panels.

The interior is intended to replicate the church of St. Mary of the Angels, or the Porziuncola (see Fig. 16). Looking inside, to the pilgrims’ left is an altar upon which stand a metal crucifix and four tall candlesticks. On the left wall, serving as a backdrop to the altar, is a fresco of a suffering Christ crucified that echoes Francis’ encounter with the crucifix of San Damiano. Before the altar and with his back to the congregation stands the Benedictine priest from the Abbey of Monte Subasio, whose once colorful vestment, now faded with time, contrasts sharply with the tattered garment of Francis, who stands to the viewers’ right and just behind the priest. Though Francis’ tunic is humble, he wears both shoes and a belt that in terms of the narrative chronology indicate a moment prior to his revelatory understanding of scripture (the Gospel reading Matthew 10:9–10) and, in turn, his new vocation (see Fig. 17). The priest stands on the raised dais of the altar. Francis and one other religious stand on a elevated floor just below the dais. All three hold their hands clasped in supplication. Their elevated
Fig. 16. An interior view of Chapel IV, St. Francis Listening to the Mass. Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 17. St. Francis and the Priest, Chapel IV, Sacro Monte di Orta.
status, both literally and figuratively, sets them apart from the other figures in the diorama that cluster to the right side of the chapel and are placed on a lower elevation. In the mix are children and adults, men and women, the impoverished and the burghers—even a dog is welcome in the sanctuary. The frescos surrounding the diorama in the lower register of the walls are a continuation of the scene, depicting more of the faithful with the same demographic diversity.

The frescos of the upper walls, lunettes, and vault depict Francis abandoning his shoes, bag, and stick; Francis in his new garb (tunic with cowl and rope belt); Francis before Mary enthroned; angelic personifications of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and angelic illustrations of Desire for God, Obedience to God, and Diligence. A fourth angelic illustration, whose inscription has been lost, depicts a delightful scene of a semi-nude angel holding a squirrel in the palm of her hand. The representation of the resourceful and tenacious squirrel could well represent strength in the face of adversity, an important message for each pilgrim on his or her own path to spiritual growth.

Sometime during the year 1208 or 1209 at the little chapel of the Porziuncola, Francis heard the Gospel of Matthew 10:9–10. It was at this juncture that Francis changed garments by altering his hermit’s tunic into a symbol of his own making: that of apostolic missionary. The identity of Francis, and thus of the Franciscan mission, was firmly established. With the significance of this moment in mind, the message of Chapel IV is three-fold. In the first place the composition identifies an important juncture in Francis’ calling, an event that foreshadows the founding of the Franciscan Order. Secondly, Francis’ epiphany, mediated at it was by a priest, illustrates the important and close relationship between the Franciscans and Catholic orthodoxy. Lastly, the artistic program of the chapel emphasizes the Franciscan message of inclusion. For the pilgrim this is implicit; Francis is a saint for all believers and all are welcomed in the congregation of the church.

Chapel V. The First Followers of St. Francis Take the Habit

Father Cleto drew the blueprints for Chapel V in 1609 and construction began in 1610. The building was completed in 1613. The style of the exterior façade is classical, with a single arch and a wide architrave capped by cornice and pediment (see Fig. 18). Two freestanding, smooth-sided Doric columns on either side of the arch and two engaged Doric columns flanking a center rectilinear window support the portico. Traces of faded and damaged frescos decorate the façade. Like Chapel IV, this chapel can only be viewed from outside. Both Christoforo Prestinari’s statues and Giovanni Battista Fiammenghino’s frescos were completed by the end of 1615. The financiers of the chapel were the residents of Orta.

The thematic content of the chapel follows the narrative trajectory of Francis’
newfound vocation, depicted in Chapel IV. By 1209, Francis was devoted to a life of poverty. Shortly thereafter, according to his biographers, like-minded men began to follow Francis as the truth of the man of God’s simple teaching and life became known to many, and men began to be moved to penance and, abandoning all things, joined him in habit and life. The first among these was Bernard, a venerable man, who was made a sharer in the divine vocation and merited to be the firstborn son of the blessed Father, both in priority of time and in the gift of holiness.

A statue of Francis stands at the center of the sanctuary (see Fig. 19). He holds the now-familiar brown Franciscan tunic in his outstretched arms, extending the garment to a kneeling man. To the saints’ left, two more supplicants kneel in anticipation of ordination by Francis. Pages and retainers, all male, compose the remaining figures of the diorama. Immediately behind the saint and his followers, the surrounding fresco is more demographically diverse, including not only men but also women, and what appears to be a little girl. The spatial framework indicates an outdoor setting for the scene.

The upper walls are adorned with frescos depicting various notable members of the early order at the moment of their conversion. The arcade features personifications of the four essential Capuchin virtues: Poverty, Obedience, Meditation, and Mortification. Frescos on the vault depict the end times, when believers young and old, male and female, powerful and powerless, rich and poor, receive their crowns as they are ushered by the angels into the celestial heavens (see Fig. 20).
The chapel was constructed in the classical style between 1614 and 1615, though the identity of the architect has been lost; he is described only as an “Honorable Father” from Milan. An arched colonnade extends around three sides (front, left, and right) of the building. An apse defines the rear of the sanctuary (see Fig. 21). Blind windows, architectural molding, and (now faded) frescos decorate the exterior. Once again Prestinari and the Fiammenghini executed the artistic program of the chapel interior, which was completed by 1619. The residents of Orta financed the chapel. Later renovations introduced baroque additions, including the statues by Bussola (c. 1662) now seen in the nave. The result is two discrete dioramas, one (located in the apse) dedicated to the theme of Franciscan missions, the other (located in the nave) dedicated to the healing miracles that illustrate the order’s divine sanction. This second theme comments on, and underscores the legitimacy of, the first.

According to the ocular plot, the pilgrim stands in the vestibule and gazes through the screen, and through the dynamic baroque scene of the nave into the apse (see Fig. 22). There, sober and static terracotta statues of the central diorama depict Francis and six followers. Despite the inherent risk of this new, global apostolic mission, the artists created a calm stillness that pervades the scene; to the pilgrim, the steadfast commitment of the friars is in no doubt. Frescos decorating the wall surface of the apse emphasize the noble purpose, and dangers, of Franciscan missions, dangers that according to the literary traditions were well understood by Francis:
“Go, my dear brothers,” he said to them, “two by two through different parts of the world, announcing peace to the people and penance for the remission of sins. Be patient in trials, confident that the Lord will fulfill His plan and promise. Respond humbly to those who question you. Bless those who persecute you. Give thanks to those who harm you and bring false charges against you, for because of these things an eternal kingdom is prepared for us.”

In the fresco just above Francis, one sees Jesus sending his disciples to preach. The fresco directly behind Francis is more provocative: it is of Jesus’ crucifixion. It implies, graphically, the possibility of painful persecution, but also eventual and anticipated sacred reward. Likewise, frescos in the vault depict various Old Testament scenes of persecution, such as Jonah thrown into the sea (Jon 1:15; see Fig. 23) and Jeremiah thrown into a cistern (Jer 38:6).

In the foreground, eleven terracotta figures compose the diorama of the nave, where the action is divided into two discrete scenes. To the viewer’s left are six figures: two friars and four commoners (see Fig. 22). All the commoners are poorly clothed, physically impaired men. Two are in a state of mid-collapse, unable to stand, though their particular ailments are undisclosed. Both friars offer assistance; one gestures a benediction towards a pilgrim, the other makes the sign of the cross on the other pilgrim’s forehead. Behind the friars stands a third pilgrim with multiple ailments: an amputated left leg, a bandaged head, a bandaged left arm, a withered right arm. Toward the front left a double amputee, a leper’s horn tied around his waist, sits strapped to a sled (see Fig. 24). Meanwhile, one of the friars guides the viewer’s gaze towards the right and to the second scene within the nave. In this episode a woman, held by one male companion and protected by another, collapses on the ground. Two friars, each with walking staff in one
hand and gesticulating stage right with the other, draw the viewer’s attention to the immediately adjacent wall fresco of Brother Sylvester and his famous vision of Francis’ battle against a dragon: as the dragon attacks Assisi, Francis opens his mouth, emanates a golden cross, and expels multiple demons from the dragon’s own opened mouth. The miracle recounted in the painting is the encoded correlative of the diorama: a woman delivered of evil spirits. Such a subject would have been familiar to those versed in Franciscan legend, wherein Francis cures many individuals of demonic possession. Women were frequently portrayed as the victims of such possession, a condition, perhaps, that scholars now take to have been epilepsy or mental illness.

The emphasis in this chapel on physical impairment reflects an important element of the Franciscan tradition. Francis suffered from a debilitating eye disease for over six years. By the time he died, he was blind. It is an important point towards understanding the Franciscan message at Orta as images of the physically impaired are present in both the central and peripheral spaces of numerous chapels (for example Chapels II, III, IV, IX, XIII, XVI, XIX, XX). But even when on the margin, the impaired are part of the community, the community of plastic and paint but also the community of the pilgrim. In Chapel VI, just as the foregrounded figures are spatially closer to the pilgrim, the figures of the impaired are emotionally immediate to the pilgrim. The figures of the physically impaired functioned as mediators and messengers of theological instruction: the suffering body was a step towards union with the suffering Francis, and therefore the suffering Christ.

Chapel VII. Pope Innocent III Gives His Approval of the Order

The fabbriciere of the Sacro Monte funded the construction of this chapel, and building took place largely between 1619 and 1625. The chapel is a rotunda, capped by a win-
dowed, oval cupola, and fronted with a four columned portico (see Fig. 25). Engaged ionic columns surround the rotunda.

The interior frescos were painted by Antonio Maria Crespi and are dated by the artists’ signature to 1629. Statues of the diorama were added in two phases: Giovanni and Melchiorre d’Enrico sculpted the cluster of cardinals, the pope, St. Francis, and a couple of the friars, c. 1634. In 1662, Bussola added additional friars, the Swiss Guard, and dignitaries, all executed in the baroque style. The ironwork screen (c. 1623–34) was designed by the Milanese craftsman Stefano Penaggio and its execution is attributed to various Milanese artists, including Penaggio, Ambrogio and Arbana. 

The diorama in the chapel is rather staid, with some baroque animation added by the later Bussola statues (see Fig. 26). From beyond the iron screen, the pilgrims’ gaze is immediately drawn to the figure of the Pope flanked by cardinals and enthroned on a dais. A now-faded red frescoed canopy frames the figure of the Pope. Francis and the friars kneel before Pope Innocent III in humble submission, while the Pope’s hand is raised in the sign of blessing. The few animated figures on the periphery of the diorama contrast with the stillness that is the focus of the pilgrims gaze. It is a stillness of dramatic intensity. Much was hanging in the balance for those first Franciscans, just as for the later Capuchin Reform.

The scene captures the moment that Pope Innocent grants the Friar’s petition, officially sanctioning their order and allowing them to preach:

He saw in a dream, as he recounted, the Lateran basilica almost ready to fall down. A little poor man, small and scorned, was propping it up with his own back bent so that it would not fall. “I’m sure,” he said “he is the one who will hold up Christ’s Church by what he does and what he teaches.” Because of this, filled with exceptional devotion, he bowed to the request in everything and always loved Christ’s servant with special love. Then he granted what was asked and promised even more. He approved the rule, gave them a mandate to preach pen-
Fig. 26. The brothers receive approval from Pope Innocent III. Chapel VII, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 27. God looks down upon Moses in the Wilderness. Ceiling fresco, Chapel VII, Sacro Monte di Orta.
ance, and had small tonsures given to all the lay brothers, who were accompanying the servant of God, so that they could freely preach the word of God.\textsuperscript{34}

It was a momentous occasion in the history of the order, and one not without controversy. In 1209, Francis wrote a Rule to guide the life of the brothers.\textsuperscript{35} Francis’ way of life was recognized by supporters as a move toward “Gospel perfection.”\textsuperscript{36} But critics had their suspicions. Francis founded his brotherhood during a period of schismatic heresies, such as those of the Cathars and Waldensians. What proof did Francis have that his movement was not just another heresy, especially given the similarity between his claim to apostolic poverty and that of the Waldensians? Jealousy also played a part in the criticism. The Franciscan way of life challenged the secular clergy’s prerogative to preach, while their mendicancy rivaled that of the Dominicans. According to tradition, Francis allayed concerns about his intentions by taking along eleven brothers, which, when counting himself, made twelve brothers, thus modeling the twelve disciples of Christ. Bonaventure underscored the Order’s divine approval by relating the story of Pope Innocent’s dream of the Lateran. The Order was still defending their privilege centuries later, and the artistic program of the chapel reflects this position as the frescos in particular speak of the history, and orthodoxy, of the order. A fresco of the Last Supper, with the twelve disciples and covenant of communion, evokes the twelve friar’s audience with Pope Innocent, a scene that is also painted on the walls. The Pope’s Lateran vision, wherein Francis saves the Lateran by upholding the building pace his rebuilding of San Damiano (Chapel II) is also depicted. In both cases Francis supports the established church (both physically and metaphorically), he does not found a new one. Another covenantal relationship is found in the depiction of David and the Ark of the Covenant. Moses stands with Jesus and Elijah (and in the company of Peter, John, and James), and then again when he is portrayed as leader of Israel (see Fig. 27). Moses points up, directing the pilgrim’s eye to a portrait of God in the central ceiling medallion. God in turn points to the Pope. Another panel shows Francis’ vision of the tree, representing the growth of the Order.\textsuperscript{37}

The wall frescos are separated by trompe l’oeil marble columns that support standing portraits, though most of these are missing. The figures wear green tunics and carry banners inscribed with biblical passages. One of the figures is St. Rocco (d. 1327), identifiable by his lesions even though the torso and head are missing. Like Francis, Rocco was born to wealth but renounced his possessions to become a mendicant. He ministered to the ill, again, just like Francis. He carries a banner with the words “Vacillantes Confirmaverunt Iob 4,” which refers the pilgrim to Job 4:4: “Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees.” A second figure, unidentifiable, carries a banner that quotes Psalm 77, which praises the God of Salvation, while a third missing figure holds banner referencing Deuteronomy 29, again affirming the covenantal relationship between God and His chosen people. The artists portray Francis and his Rule in distinguished company, as part of a long successive line of holy mediators between heaven and earth.

Chapel VIII. St. Francis on a Chariot of Fire

Chapel VIII captures the dramatic vision of Francis, embodied in a glowing orb, driving a chariot of fire. Thomas of Celano reports:

One night the blessed father Francis was away from them in body. About midnight, some of the brothers were sleeping and others were praying in silence with deep feeling, when a brilliant fiery chariot entered through the little door of the house, and moved here and there
Construction began on the chapel in 1624, just as that of Chapel VII was winding down, and was likewise funded by the fabbriciere. It was completed in 1629. The structure is polygonal, with an elevated porch accessible by steps from three different directions (see Fig. 28). An arcade surrounds the building. Above the roofline, a smaller domed polygonal cupola hints at the elevation of the interior vignette. Pilgrims are not allowed access to the interior, but can peer through one of the many windows in the exterior walls and doors. These portals allow the viewer multiple perspectives of the scene inside.

The d’Enrico brothers, who had done much of the diorama for Chapel VII, were commissioned for the nine terracotta figures of Chapel VIII as well. The suspended sculptures of St. Francis, the horses, and the chariot, all of which were carved of wood, were the special commission of Bartolomeo Tiberino (see Fig. 29). The wooden sculptures were painted by Christofo Martinoli (Il Rocca), who also painted the chapel’s frescos. The artistic program was undertaken over the course of three years and was completed with the installation of the airborne chariot in 1641.

The nine terracotta figures are arranged along the back wall of the chapel, every other brother reclining (having been awakened by the brilliant light) or kneeling/standing (having been interrupted at prayer) (see Fig. 30). According to hagiographic accounts the vision took place in an abandoned hut, though no attempt has been made to replicate that setting. The floor of the chapel is barren, the walls paneled with frescoed scenes from Francis’ life and, above, the chariot hangs suspended from an elaborately painted vault.

Although some of the frescos are in a poor state of repair, inscriptions along the lower register make it possible to identify the scenes at eye level. From the pilgrim’s right to left: (1) Francis explains the vision of the chariot to the brothers (see Fig. 31); (2) Francis leads the souls of the saved; (3) Francis appears to Brother Leo and displays his stigmata; and (4) Francis appears before the brothers in Arles as they listen to St. Antho-
ny preach about the crucified Christ. Each of these subjects stresses the relationship between Francis and Christ, indeed, Francis as a second Christ. Like Jesus appearing before his disciples (Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:13–52), so Francis appeared to his followers. Furthermore, in making the connection even more explicit, Celano (and Bonaventure after him) notes that at Arles, Francis appeared “lifted up in the air with his hands extended as if on a cross.”

The frescos of the vault echo the connection between Francis and Jesus as well as Francis’ privileged place among other mediators between God and humankind, at least according to the Franciscan tradition. There is a fresco of Jesus appearing before his disciples and another depicting the Last Supper. Elisha and Elijah are also prominent in the artistic program, for followers subsequently understood Francis as a new Elijah, who was borne to heaven in a horse-drawn chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11–14). Bonaventure (c. 1221–74) elaborates on the connection between Francis and Elijah and their special commission:

Like a second Elijah,
God had made him
a chariot and charioteer for spiritual men.

And that through this connection with Elijah, Francis was a legitimate (and orthodox) source of spiritual guidance:

Shown to them by the Lord as one
coming in the spirit and power of Elias,
and as Israel’s chariot and charioteer, he
had been made leader for spiritual men.
When the holy man rejoined his brothers,
he began to comfort them concerning the
vision they had been shown from heaven,
probe the secrets of their consciences,
predict the future, and radiate with
miracles. In this manner, he revealed
that the twofold spirit of Elias rested
upon him in such plentitude that it was
new order, it also affirms the decision of Pope Innocent (see Chapel VII).

Chapel IX. St. Clare Takes the Veil

The fabbriciere financed the construction of Chapel IX, which began in 1634 and ended in 1639, though the artistic program was not finished until almost 1650. Even then, a baroque remodeling sometime after 1661 saw the introduction of additional terracotta figures. The artists Melchiorre and Giovanni Righi (sculptors), Giacomo Ferro (sculptor), Cristoforo Martinoli (Il Rocca, painter), and later Dionigi Bussola (sculptor) decorated the interior, which replicates the nave of the church of St. Mary of the Angels, also known as the Porziuncola. The chapel is a rectilinear building with a squared, two-story porch affixed to a two-story nave (see Fig. 32). Pilgrims are allowed no further than the porch, but the ironwork doorway and its lunette, as well as the clerestory window of the nave, illuminate the interior for optimal viewing.

The chapel captures the conversion of Clare in 1212. As told in the anonymous Legenda of Saint Clare:

And so she ran to Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, leaving behind her home, city, and relatives. There the brothers, who were observing sacred vigils before the little altar of God, received the virgin Clare with torches. There, immediately after rejecting the filth of Babylon, she gave the world “a bill of divorce.” There, her hair shorn by the hands of the brothers, she put aside every kind of fine dress.

In the diorama, Clare, accompanied by her aunt, her sister, and a companion, kneels before Francis at the altar of the church (see Fig. 33). Her hair has been shorn and she has relinquished her fine coat. All of the figures in the immediate scene face Clare, with the exception of Francis, who looks out beyond the kneeling woman to the viewer. In the
same way, the two figures on the periphery and closest to the viewer—an amputee to the viewers’ left and a mother holding an infant with a toddler at her feet standing to the viewer’s right—both look directly toward the pilgrim (see Fig. 34). The three figures, Francis, the amputee and the mother, form a triangular matrix that invites the viewer to participate in the scene, indeed in the conversion. While all other figures gesture toward Clare, these three figures gesture toward the viewer.

The frescos are dynamic with movement and action. Behind the altar is the statue of Our Lady of Assumption, surrounded by sculptural and frescoed putti and angels riding on the clouds of Heaven. The combination of these single- and three-dimensional images forms a distinctive multi-layered perspective. Just above Our Lady is a fresco of Christ and Mary sitting side by side on heavenly thrones (foreshadowing the imagery of the Porziuncola Indulgence of Chapels X and XI), each commending Francis and Clare respectively. In a post-Tridentine environment, the emphasis on Mary is clear affirmation of her very special place in Catholic theology. It also underscores the legitimacy of the Poor Clares.

Episodes from Clare’s life line the walls of the chapel and include: (1) the cutting of her hair by Francis, (2) the moment her sister Agnes determines to join Clare, (3) the attempted kidnapping of Agnes by their uncle, (4) the arrival of Clare and her sisters at the Benedictine monastery at Monte Subasio and, finally (5) the sisters’ arrival at San Damiano.

The artistic program of Chapel IX highlights not only Clare’s story and her role as alter Franciscus, but also Clare’s connection to other important women in biblical history and her role as successor of these strong figures and the virtues they represent. In the vaults and lunettes, there is Judith holding the head of Holofernes (symbolizing strength); the creation of Eve (identifying Clare as a helpmate for Francis) (see Fig. 35);
Chapel X. St. Francis Victorious over Temptation/Satan

Chapel X is a hexagonal building (c. 1648) with front steps leading to a doorway that is flanked by columns supporting an arched pediment (see Fig. 36). There is a square clerestory window above the pediment. At the pinnacle of the roof is an iron cross created by Pietro Ponti of Pettanasco in 1653. Upon entering the chapel, the pilgrim stands in a small, foreshortened vestibule separated from the diorama by an iron screen. The screen also dates to the mid-seventeenth century but the artist’s name has been lost over time. The statues of the diorama have traditionally been thought the work of Dionigi Bussola; but are now considered by some scholars the work of Antonio Pini de Bellagio (c. 1654). The frescos (c. 1665) are by Carlo Francesco and Giuseppe Nuvolone.

The central inspiration for Chapel X, “St. Francis Victorious over Temptation/Satan,” is a story found in Arnald of Sarrant’s Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals. Driven by demonic temptations, Francis flees the Porziuncola to the nearby forest:

When blessed Francis was in the middle of the woods, his flesh all stained and bloodied from the thorns, he said: “It is better for me to acknowledge the passion of my Lord Jesus Christ than to give in to the seduction of the deceiver.”

Then suddenly there was a great light in the midst of the forest and in that time of frost rose blossoms appeared right there where blessed Francis was. And a countless host of angels suddenly appeared both in the woods and in the said church next to the woods, and behold they cried with one voice: “Blessed Francis, hurry to the Savior and his Mother who await you in the church.”

Chapel X augments this story with three related subplots: (1) the striking drama of good versus evil in St. Francis’ daily pursuit of
the Gospel Life, (2) the earthly Grace given by God through the gift of indulgence and, at the end of time, (3) the ultimate redemption of humankind purchased through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The antagonists are the various temptations (often in the form of demons) that continuously challenge the saint’s devotion. The legends documenting this struggle can be found in various thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Franciscan sources, with humankind’s redemption in the final victory over Satan illustrated by the Book of Revelation (rather than the story of Christ’s Passion, as is so often the case at Orta). Chapel X, more than any other chapel to this point, reflects the tremendous variety of influential medieval and Renaissance literary sources both for the Franciscan legend in general and for the message of Sacro Monte di Orta in particular.

The artistic program of Chapel X is an example in which the scenes, both painted and sculptural, do not form a unified vision but are nevertheless connected by theme and/or narrative trajectory. Though the pilgrim is first drawn to the dynamic (and fairly scary) diorama before them (see Fig. 37), the program as a whole flows nicely in a sequential spiraling narrative that crescendos, as the believer is guided through paintings of vari-

Fig. 37. St. Francis lying on thorns between Devils and Angels. Chapel X, Sacro Monte di Orta.
ous demonic temptations, then again to the diorama of Francis’ dramatic encounter with Satan outside the Garden of the Porziuncola, next on to Francis’ theophany of Jesus and Mary inside the Porziuncola, where they bestow the gift of the Indulgence until, finally, the viewer, eyes raised aloft, meditates upon a vision of the Apocalypse and the salvific triumph of Christianity.

The diorama of Chapel X is breathtaking in its sublime portrayal of the battle between good and evil. Francis, naked, lies upon the barren and rocky ground in the wooded wilderness (pace Jesus in the wilderness; Matt 4) (see Fig. 37). To the viewer’s left are three winged demons (see Chapter 5, Fig. 1). The most prominent demon is, at first glance, angelic in appearance, but horns, clawed hands and feet identify the figure as Satan, the fallen angel. To the viewer’s right, a group of angels guide Francis toward the silk path and into the action of the wall painting of the Porziuncola Indulgence (see Fig. 38). Interspersed throughout the diorama are animals: rabbits, goats, a squirrel, a lion and a boar (the boar is symbol of greed and passion; it is replicated above the chapel door, where the animal is fighting an elephant, a Christian symbol of chastity).

Of the many temptations Francis encountered during his lifetime, the artists chose four illustrative episodes for the wall panels: (1) Francis driving away the devil (the temptation to lust) by rolling in the snow and performing a sign act by making snowball family;\(^\text{47}\) (2) Francis kneeling at prie dieu, in front of which creeps a horned demon;\(^\text{48}\) (3) the courtesan of Frederick II attempting to seduce Francis and failing (see Chapter 5, Fig. 5);\(^\text{49}\) and, (4) Francis, having been pushed off a

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Fig. 38. Angels point the way to the Porziuncola. Chapel X, Sacro Monte di Orta.
cliff at La Verna by the Devil, lands softly and unharmed. The final wall panel of the reading line, the one to which the eye is drawn after the diorama, is not of temptation but rather of the outcome of Francis’ dedicated fight against the temptations of Satan. It depicts Francis’ vision of Jesus and Mary, and the subsequent gift of the Porziuncola Indulgence. This panel is visually and narratively integrated into the action of the diorama.

Various allegorical and biblical figures in service of the narrative adorn the walls and ceiling. Not surprisingly we find Job, the perennial symbol of temptation and forbearance (see Chapter 5, Fig. 3). The cartouche inscription specifically references Job 7, a passage where Job laments the harshness of life, the futility of hope, and unavoidability of death. The accompanying fresco aptly portrays the Devil attacking Job. A second portrait illustrates Mathew 4:4, when Jesus, hungry in the wilderness, refuses the Devil’s temptation to turn stones into bread. Also from Matthew 4 are depictions of Satan taking Jesus to the Jerusalem Temple (Matt 4:5–6) and Jesus driving Satan away with the admonishment to serve only the Lord (Matt 4:10). Nearby, Tobit refuses dinner and defies the Assyrian king in order to bury a fellow Israelite (Tobit 2:12–13). The apocryphal story highlights piety, faithfulness and resilience in the face of tribulations. Personifications of Virtue and Temperance complete the portraits.

In a series of larger panels along the vault we see the woman of the Apocalypse with her crown of twelve stars (Rev 12:1, 2, 5), who is commonly identified as Mary or as the Church (see Chapter 5, Fig. 4). A portrait of St. John writing what is presumably the Book of Revelation appears in the corner of the painting. In an adjacent panel Mary protects the infant Jesus from a fiery dragon (the Devil) by giving him to God (Rev 12:5). Continuing the sequence of scenes from Revelation is a panel that features archangel Michael battling an apocalyptic dragon (Rev 12:7; see Fig. 39).

Elsewhere on the walls are the portraits of female allegories. There is a young, bare-breasted Temptation, a similarly bare-breasted Penance holding an instrument of self-mortification as well as the palm of martyrdom, and Virtue holding a crown of laurel leaves, all patterned on the iconography detailed in Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia, a reference work used by the designers of the Sacro Monte. The depiction of Virtue calls to mind Francis’ “A Salutation of the Virtues,” in praise of Wisdom, Simplicity, Poverty, Charity, Humility, and Obedience.

The context of the central narrative concerns one of the ongoing controversies in the medieval-Renaissance church: the historicity of the Porziuncola Indulgence. According to tradition, in the year 1216 Francis received a vision of Jesus, Mary and the Angels, wherein Jesus granted pilgrims to the church of Mary of the Angels (the Porziuncola) freedom from retribution for all sins. Days later, an astounded Pope Honorius III confirmed the indulgence. The indulgence is still in effect to this day on the first Sunday of August at any Franciscan church or shrine. Nevertheless,
the earliest documentation of this indulgence dates some sixty years after the reported events and obviously extended a popularity and authority to Franciscanism that other religious orders of the time found enviable. Stories circulated to enhance the authenticity of the event, including the one found in Sarrant’s *Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals.* The artistic program of Chapel X, then, simultaneously asserts Francis’ conformity to Christ, his special status with respect to the Holy Family, and the historical and spiritual veracity of the Porziuncola Indulgence, which itself is the focus of the following Chapel XI. For pilgrims, this chapel encapsulates the struggle against earthly temptations in the lives of all humans, the temporal salvation selflessly requested by Francis on behalf of all believers, and the eternal salvation awaiting all the faithful at the end of days.

Chapel XI. The Indulgence of the Porziuncola

Chapel XI is one of the earlier chapels of the sacred mountain, designed by Father Cleto of Castelletto Tricino and constructed in 1606–1607. The financier of the chapel was the vice-mayor of Orta, a lawyer named Giovanni Antonio Martelli whose name and family crest appear on the façade. The exterior stone statues were executed by Christoforo Prestinari, and Giovanni and Melchiorre d’Enrico (completed by 1630). Only traces remain of the exterior frescos by Giacomo Filippo Monti (1623). The interior terracotta statues were the work of Christoforo Prestinari (c. 1615–17), while the frescos were painted by Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli (il Morazzzone) (1616–17) and Giacomo Filippo Monti (1623). The elaborate and very beautiful iron screen is attributed to Giovanni Battista Contini (1688).

The exterior of Chapel XI reproduces the huge Basilica Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, which was built around the Porziuncola and, as such, this sanctuary is one of the more elaborate buildings of the Sacro Monte (see Fig. 40). The large portico rests upon four freestanding columns, two on each side of the doorway, while a broken pediment, with a statue niche and a demilune window above, caps the door. A narrow architrave supports the arched vault of the frieze above the entrance and flanking statue niches. A central carved medallion decorates the triangular pediment. Along the left and right side of the building runs a portico decorated with ornamental frescos and terminating in a statuary niche. The statues of the façade are Saint Francis, Saint Giulio, the Virgin Mary, God, and two allegorical figures; angels perch on the rooftop. Inside is a replica of the little Porziuncola, with only a nave and an apse; the nave, separated from the apse by an elaborate iron screen, functions as a vestibule for pilgrims.

Chapel XI culminates the story of Chapel X, where Francis triumphs over satanic temptation and finds himself invited into the Porziuncola, into the presence of Jesus Christ and Mary, where Jesus gives Francis the opportunity to make one request:

There then appeared to him a straight path as if of decorated silk going up to the church, and blessed Francis took from the rose patch twelve red roses
and twelve white roses and entered the church. He proceeded to the altar and placed on it the roses he had brought with him in joined hands. There he saw Jesus Christ standing with his Mother at his right with a great multitude of angels. Then Francis found himself dressed in a very beautiful garment before the Savior and his Mother, and the Savior said to him: “Francis, ask whatever you will for the enlightenment of the nations and the consolation of souls, to the honor and reverence of God, for you have been designated a light to the nations and the repair of the earthly church, that is the Church Militant.”

In response, Francis asks for an indulgence, that is, the remission of the temporal punishment of sins that have been subject to the Sacrament of Confession. That indulgence is known to this day as the Porziuncola Indulgence and occurs on the first Sunday of August at any Franciscan church or shrine.

The walls of the vestibule in Chapel XI are covered with a narrative sequence of frescos depicting the events that led to papal approval of the indulgence (see Chapter 7, Fig. 1): (L to R) Francis prays before the crucifix just prior to demonic temptation (cf. Chapel X); an angel invites him to the church of Porziuncola where Jesus and Mary await him; Pope Innocent III dreams of several friars physically supporting the Lateran church; Francis petitions Honorius III for the indulgence; Francis, in the presence of an angel, kneels before the altar of the Porziuncola and prays for the souls of all sinners; Francis announces the Porziuncola Indulgence before the pope, bishops, and a crowd of onlookers.

At the center of the vaulted ceiling above the vestibule is an octagonally-framed fresco of God and Christ in heaven, surrounded by pillowy clouds and frolicking putti (see Fig. 41). There are four triangular panels on the

Fig. 41. God and Christ in ceiling center, surrounded variously by Putti, angels. The female figures standing upon plinths are personifications of the Beatitudes. Ceiling frescos, Chapel XI. Sacro Monte di Orta.
dome, each with a white-robed angel holding a censer. Directly beneath these four triangular panels are lunettes; three of these contain frescos, one encases a leaded window. One lunette depicts a woman breastfeeding a child while tending two other children, another features a woman holding yet another incense burner, and a final lunette fresco is too damaged to make out. Each of the four triangular panels, and their respective lunettes, are flanked by two painted female figures each standing on an inscribed plinth. These figures are allegorical representations of the beatitudes as articulated in Matthew 5:3–10. The figures are not in the biblical sequence and some of the cartouches are illegible, but as best as we can discern based upon the remaining inscriptions and iconography they are: a woman in a tattered garment representing the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3); a woman holding an ermine, whose white coat symbolizes purity and moderation, representing the meek (Matthew 5:5); a pious woman with her hands clasped in prayer representing the persecuted (5:10); Lady Justice with sword and scale representing the righteous (Matthew 5:6); a very sad looking woman representing those who mourn (5:4); a woman with three young children may represent the peacemaker (5:9) (this artist clearly had a sense of humour!); a serene and untroubled looking woman who seems to represent the pure of heart (5:8); and, finally, a woman standing over a dead child who may represent the merciful, who were often called to tend the sick and deceased (5:7).

Jesus and Mary are the central figures of the diorama in the apse and are flanked by four terracotta angels to either side (see Fig. 42 and Chapter 7, Fig. 2). Jesus and Mary are equally enthroned on a dais and sit beneath a gilt canopy trimmed with red, green and gold fringe. Mother and son engage each other through gaze and posture, while Jesus’ extended hand invites Francis into conversation. In front of the dais is an altar, covered with a real linen cloth used during mass.18 Frescos on the apse walls portray bucolic
landscapes, *trompe l’oeil* architectural elements such as columns, and, directly behind the holy family, a radiating sun. The vault of the apse is decorated simply and sparsely with geometric designs and portraits of winged putti.

Centuries of criticism, from Wycliff and Hus to Luther, called not only the sale of indulgences but the theological underpinnings of the indulgence system into question. In Session 25, the Council of Trent, while proscribing the sale of indulgences, reaffirmed the doctrine. The artistic program of Chapel XI argues for the divine origin and legitimacy of indulgences in general, and of the Porziuncola Indulgence in particular. For the faithful, the chapel stands as testimony to the efficaciousness of Francis’ mediation and the special favour shown the Franciscan Order by both the papacy and the Divine.

**Chapel XII. God Reveals the Rule to St. Francis**

Built between 1591 and 1597, Chapel XII, also known as the Roman Chapel because it was paid for by native Ortans living in Rome, was one of the first chapels constructed on the mount. The original chapel is an elegant two-story circular structure built upon a squared foundation (see Fig. 43). The upper story is decorated with engaged columns and is pierced by a tall rectangular lead-glass window and several small round windows. Its gently sloping roof is topped with a circular cupola. A heavy, rectilinear neo-classical portico was added in the late eighteenth century. Inside, a small vestibule allows just enough room for a few pilgrims at a time to peer upward through the wooden screen and toward the elevated diorama perched upon a faux mountaintop. Christoforo Prestinari sculpted the terracotta figures. The current frescos were painted in 1772 by Giovanni Battista Cantalupi and are characterized by the artist’s sensitive and delicate rendering of the regional landscape on the walls and heavenly landscape on the vault above.

As followers joined Francis in community, he realized that, like other holy orders, his group needed a *Rule*. He first drafted a statement that was presented to and verbally affirmed by Pope Innocent III in 1209/10. This *Earlier Rule* was revised and expanded until 1221, when a second *Rule* (the *Later Rule*) was written to better serve the needs of what was, by then, a large and robust order. The *Later Rule* was authorized by the Bull of Pope Honorius III in 1223. There are multiple sources that document the development of the rules, but they are singular in asserting that the rules were the work of God, received by Francis in divine revelation, thereby underscoring the authority of the rules. Commenting on the inception of the *Rule*, Francis wrote:

And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few
Fig. 44. Francis receives the Rule, delivered through the Holy Spirit. Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 45. Joshua, Caleb, and Moses (Num 13–14). Ceiling of Chapel XII, Sacro Monte di Orta.
words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me.39

Bonaventure elaborates on the audience before Pope Innocent III, also emphasizing the divine origin of the Franciscan way of life. He relates that Francis worried about the papal audience but while on the road to Rome, God sent him a reassuring vision. Francis saw a tall tree and, as he flew to the top of the tree, the tree bent over before him. The vision thus signified Pope Innocent yielding to his request and, indeed, the Pope gave verbal approval for the Order.40

Continued growth of the Order as well as challenges from critics necessitated written confirmation of the Rule. As Francis considered approaching Pope Honorius with this request, he received yet another vision. In this vision, among other things, the Rule was equated to the communion host— in other words the Rule was indispensable divine nourishment for the soul. The vision further claimed divine origin of the Rule as Francis was advised to record the Rule as dictated by the Holy Spirit:

He went up to a certain mountain led by the Holy Spirit, with two of his companions, to condense it [the Rule] in a shorter form as the vision had dictated. There he fasted, content with only bread and water, and dictated the rule as the Holy Spirit suggested to him while he was praying. When he came down from the mountain, he gave the rule to his vicar to keep. After a few days had elapsed, the vicar claimed that it had been lost through carelessness. The holy man went off again to the place of solitude and rewrote it just as before, as if he were taking the words from the mouth of God. And he obtained confirmation for it, as he had desired, from the lord Pope Honorius, in the eighth year of his pontificate.

Fervently exhorting the brothers to observe this rule, Francis used to say that nothing of what he had placed there came from his own efforts but that he dictated everything just as it had been revealed by God. To confirm this with greater certainty by God’s own testimony, when only a few days had passed, the Stigmata of our Lord Jesus were imprinted upon him by the finger of the living God, as the seal of the Supreme Pontiff, Christ, for the complete confirmation of the rule and the commendation of its author...41

Within the diorama are eight terracotta friars in various pious attitudes (see Fig. 44). Though the overall timber of the diorama is static, no two statues are identical. Each figure has a distinctive expression, unique physical features, and an individualized pose. Through the variety of gestures, stances, and expressions, Prestinari manages to convey a sense of earnestness among the friars that lends dynamism to the otherwise staid scene. The artists created a unified field of vision by having the mountaintop vignette of the diorama blend into the scenic landscape of the frescos. Frescoed friars, rocks, and trees elaborate the narrative of the diorama in the near view while in the distance grasslands and a cityscape expand the illusion. The landscape of the lower walls flows upwards into a pink-orange sky and, above that, in the center of the vault, heaven. Christ, seated among the clouds and accompanied by the angelic host and putti, looks upon the diorama below and gives his approval to the formative work of the Order.

On the vault just below Christ is a cartouche bordered by a gold-trimmed green curtain held aside by four putti (see Fig. 45).46 The curtain reveals a gray monochromatic scene of a story from the Old Testament book of Numbers. In the story, a scouting party returns to the wilderness encampment
with bounty from the Promised Land but sadly report that the enemy is too strong to overcome; only Joshua and Caleb stand firm on God’s plan for conquest. The people rend their clothes, lament their circumstance, and threaten to stone the two men of faith. While Moses’ intervention saves the people from God’s wrath, Joshua and Caleb alone are destined to enter the Promised Land as reward for their faithfulness (Num 13–14). The fresco encapsulates the story in a single scene, depicting the moment of the scouts’ return, the people’s mourning, and the people arming themselves with stones. Moses, arms outstretched, entreats God, who appears on a cloud over the Tent of Meeting. The theme of the biblical story is obedience to God’s command, a lesson echoed in the story of the Franciscan Rule. As Bonaventure repeatedly asserts in his version of events, Francis was only a passive recipient of God’s command, and that command was the Rule. According to this belief, and reflected in the program of the chapel, the Rule, and thus the Franciscan Order, was divinely conceived and ordained, and should not be contravened.

Chapel XIII. The Humility of St. Francis

Chapel XIII was constructed between 1670 and 1690. The heart of the chapel is a two-story rectilinear nave, with a single-story rectilinear porch on the front and a one-and-a-half story rectilinear apse at the rear (see Fig. 46). To each side of the chapel are one-and-a-half story circular apses. The chapel is topped with a tall octagonal cupola. The lateral and vertical movement between angles and curves gives the exterior added interest and an eye-pleasing symmetry. A lunette window over the front double doors, another over the porch, and a window in the cupola provide light to the interior.

Inside, pilgrims view the magnificently elaborate interior from a small vestibule separated from the diorama by an ironwork screen. Over sixty terracotta figures of men and women, children, horses and other animals, compose the diorama (see Fig. 47). A marble column, stairs, and a wooden post (the work of sculptors Bernardo Falconi and Giuseppe Rusnati) add architectural dimension to the scene. The Grandi brothers (Giovanni Battista and Gerolamo), along with Federico Bianchi, are responsible for the frescos. The chapel was funded by a Milanese knight cum Franciscan Capuchin named Constanzzo Besozzo, whose family crest is worked into the iron screen.

Francis maintained a strict discipline focused on denial of the flesh. This took many forms, from bodily mortification (such as wearing a hair shirt) to eating a minimal, vegetarian diet. On one rare occasion, he ate a small bit of chicken in order to regain his health. For this he held himself in disdain, in spite of what was quite understandable in light of illness:

Once, because he was ill, he ate a little bit of chicken. When his physical strength returned, he entered the city of
Assisi. When he reached the city gate, he commanded the brother who was with him to tie a cord around his neck and drag him through the whole city as if he were a thief, loudly crying out: “Look! See this glutton who grew fat on the flesh of chickens that he ate without your knowledge.” Many people ran to see this grand spectacle and, groaning and weeping, they said: “Woe to us! We are wretches and our whole life is steeped in blood! With excess and drunkenness we feed our hearts and bodies to overflowing!” They were touched in their hearts and were moved to a better way of life by such an example.63

Francis seems to have taken a verse from First Corinthians to heart: “But I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27). For him eating meat was a great hypocrisy; it was an act of gross indulgence that crossed the line from venial to mortal sin. Francis, who reportedly described himself as “the greatest sinner in the world,” was renowned for his humility.64 For this sin of eating meat, Francis humbled himself in contrition before God. But ever the teacher, Francis turned his personal repentance into a teachable moment with a very public message. In the vein of the Old Testament prophets his humiliation became a sign act; he dramatized his confession through symbolic action as he had himself loudly condemned and dragged through the streets of Assisi.

The diorama of Chapel XIII illustrates this moment, as four friars lead Francis, whose hands are bound with rope, through the city plaza. There are reflections of Christ’s passion, as Francis’ humble entry into Assisi recalls Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem upon a humble donkey. Reminiscent of Zaccheaus who climbed a tree to better see Jesus as he rode in (Luke 19:4), in Chapel XIII a man clings to a tall post to better see Francis (see Chapter 6, Fig. 2). Scattered throughout the chapel are small intimate groupings, figures clustered in

Fig. 47. Carnival celebrants surround (and largely ignore) St. Francis. Chapel XIII, Sacro Monte di Orta.
Fig. 48. St. Francis sharing a meal with social outcasts. Wall fresco, Chapel XIII, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 49. Brother Bernard, in obedience, steps on St. Francis. Wall fresco, Chapel XIII, Sacro Monte di Orta.
conversation, either nonchalantly looking on or disconcertingly unaware of the pious spectacle. Figures who gesture toward Francis control the pilgrim’s gaze and provide the reading lines for the artistic program. At the center front, a beggar points to Francis and by looking directly at the viewer, arrests the viewers’ attention. To the viewer’s right, three separate family groups look or gesture toward Francis, while to the viewer’s left, the figure clinging to the post rises above the fray below and directs attention back to the friars. These reading lines are necessary, for the dynamic, colorful and frenetic activity of carnival celebrants surrounds the friars and can distract the viewer’s eye. To the viewer’s right are a rearing horse, a dwarf, a monkey, and two drunken revelers tussling on the ground (see Chapter 6, Fig. 1). To the left are running children, dogs, and the rearing horse of King Carnival (see Chapter 6, Fig. 2). To both the right and left are cross-dressing men, a practice popular during carnival and representing the inverse social mores of the hedonistic festivities. There are representations of otherness; there are blacks, the old and the unattractive, the physically impaired, a Jewish prisoner, and a dwarf. Along the chapel walls, the paintings extend the illusion of the city plaza with additional figures and building façades. There are elements of whimsy with women and men peering out of windows and from balconies, leaning over pillars and around columns, and looking down from a rooftop parapet. One man waves a greeting to the pilgrim. And in the far distance soldiers go about their normal duties standing guard on battlements. We see clearly the influence of the Brueghel family (Pieter the Elder, Jan the Elder and Jan the Younger) and Peter Paul Rubens who made these crowded, exotic, animal-filled landscapes popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More importantly, the extravagance of the scene serves an important function as it contrasts the humility of Francis with the indulgent excess surrounding him.

Four ceiling medallions emphasize the humility of Francis in imitation of Christ. One depicts Francis sharing a meal of broth with society’s marginalized, in this case poor and physically impaired men (see Fig. 48). Below is a banner referencing Jesus’ comforting words to the oppressed: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29). A second medallion depicts Francis lying on the ground while Brother Bernard steps upon him (see Fig. 49). The source of this episode is The Little Flowers of Saint Francis. After he had an unkind thought against Brother Bernard, Francis lay on the ground and ordered Bernard to place one foot on the saint’s neck and the other over his mouth. Bernard was to do this three times while admonishing Francis to be humble. The banner for this medallion contains an excerpt from Psalm 36:11 (Ps 35:12 Vulgate): “Let not the foot of the arrogant tread on me, or the hand of the wicked drive me away.” A third medallion is simply inscribed with the theme of the chapel “Humility,” which is, not coincidentally, also the motto of the Borromeo family. A final medallion graces the center wall just above the terracotta portrait of Francis and directly in the sightline of a pilgrim entering the chapel. It is bordered with a fringed green curtain and replicates the frame of an earlier fresco in Chapel XII. The scene is Jesus led before Pilate, in the same exact pose as Francis below in the diorama; Jesus is half-naked, bound at the hands, and taken for judgment (see Fig. 50). The accompanying banner is inscribed: “He humbled himself,” excerpted from Philippians 2:8 which reads in full “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” The decoration of the center vault shows a multitude of angels rejoicing in Francis’ embrace of the core Gospel message.

The artistic program of Chapel XIII is a visual buffet of color and texture, costume and decorative detail, gesture and expression. And, as with so many of these chapels,
the mise-en-scène is sophisticatedly multivalent. Archbishop Carlo Borromeo was a chief critic of Carnival with its secular focus and libertine excess. In keeping with the Tridentine didacticism of the Sacri Monti and Borromeo influence in design, the Carnival setting of Francis’ humble contrition is apt. We have already noted the nod to the Borromeo family motto “Humility,” as it connects Francis to Christ, to the great Tridentine reformer, to the Capuchin ascetic life, and, finally to the theme of the chapel. Furthermore, we see Francis’ sin, eating a meager portion of meat, innovatively juxtaposed to the celebration of carnevale, the Latin etymology of which means literally “putting away flesh” (from carne and levare). This season “without meat” is inversely celebrated by gluttonous feasting. In the textual tradition, Francis’ sign act is efficacious. The crowd recognizes their own transgressions; they are reflective, remorseful and contrite. This is not so with the crowd portrayed in the chapel. With the exception of four brethren, few of the celebrants are struck by the call to repent. The responsibility now falls upon the pilgrim, who stands in the vestibule of Chapel XIII, to heed the message.
Chapel XIV. St. Francis and the Sultan

Constructed in the mid-eighteenth century (1757–59), Chapel XIV is the last completed chapel of the Sacro Monte. It is a hexagonal, neo-classical building with expected classical elements: Greco-Roman styled statuary, columns, and capitals (see Fig. 51). Despite its classicism, the exterior has unexpectedly extravagant elements. Two multi-paned windows, vertically related, rest above the entrance. Frescos, executed in pastels, exude rococo grace and elegance. Inside, one encounters indisputably rococo (and late baroque) design. Sculptor Carlo Beretta is responsible for the over fifty terracotta statues. Artist Federico Ferrari painted the frescos.

The artistic program of Chapel XIV recounts Francis’ participation in the Fifth Crusade (1213–21). Fervent in his wish to imitate Christ, Francis yearned for martyrdom and to that end traveled to the Egyptian port city of Damietta during the siege of 1218. He and his companions were taken captive, tortured, and presented to the Sultan. Francis attempts to convert the Sultan and offers a series of challenges, each of which the Sultan rebuffs:

“If you wish to promise me that if I come out of the fire unharmed,” the saint said to the Sultan, “you and your people will come over to the worship of Christ, then I will enter the fire alone. And if I shall be burned, you must attribute it to my sins. But if God’s power protects me, you will acknowledge Christ the power and wisdom of God as the true God and the Savior of all.” The Sultan replied that he did not dare to accept this choice because he feared a revolt among his people. Nevertheless he offered him many precious gifts, which the man of God, greedy not for worldly possessions but the salvation of souls, spurned as if they were dirt. Seeing that the holy man so completely despised worldly possessions, the Sultan was overflowing with admiration, and developed an even greater respect for him.

Francis, realizing the futility of his errand, one in which he would accomplish neither martyrdom nor conversion of the Sultan, returns to Italy.

When entering the chapel, the statue of Sultan al-Malik al-Kâmil, who sits on a richly canopied throne, voluptuously robed, and crowned with a royal turban, immediately attracts the pilgrim’s eye (see Fig. 52). Given the eighteenth-century European penchant for turquerie, it is not surprising to find the scene imitative of a Turkish court. Surrounding him are heavily armed soldiers, boys, a dog, and four friars in a highly animated scene. In the confusion that the presence of Francis and the three friars with him have no doubt provoked, there are several identifiable scenes from the hagiography.

Francis, standing before the Sultan, is seen rejecting the Sultan’s gift of gold coins. To the right of Francis, and walking away from him, one sees the back of an imam trying to quickly absent himself from Francis’ challenge by fire. He carries a large text, presumably a Quran. Also to the right of Francis and just beyond are two Muslims stoking and feeding the fire that Francis proposed for the ordeals. To the viewer’s left are three friars and various Muslim guards, both frescoed and sculpted. The friar closest to the viewer holds communion hosts in his right hand and extends them towards the Sultan (see Fig. 52).

Unlike other artistic representations of this event that put dramatic focus on Francis’ bold challenge and willingness to step into the fire, at Orta Francis is not paying attention to the fire at all. Indeed, the fire ordeal seems an ancillary element. Francis’ attention is focused on the Sultan and his brethren, as he looks and gestures with his left hand toward the communion hosts extended by the brother and with his right hand toward the Sultan. These gestures are the reading lines of the viewer, guiding their gaze and focusing
Fig. 52. St. Francis before the Sultan. Chapel XIV, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 53. St. Francis preaches to Muslims (below) and Jesus preaches in the synagogue (above). Wall fresco, Chapel XIV, Sacro Monte di Orta.
their attention on an invitation to repentance and conversion.

The surrounding wall fresco offers a panoramic view of the port of Damietta where distinct episodes of Francis’ Egyptian mission are collapsed within the scene: we observe the friars landing at the port and their immediate capture; we witness the beating of the friars; we watch as the friars are escorted to the Sultan; and, in the largest of the depictions, we see Francis preaching to Muslims. Above this particular vignette is a cartouche with a parallel scene of Jesus preaching to a hostile congregation of Jews (see Fig. 53). The quotation inscribed on the banner above is from Mark 1:39, “And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” The artist underscores the rejection of Francis through a forced comparison with Jesus, for this Gospel account nowhere indicates that Jesus was amongst a hostile audience in that moment, nevertheless the artist here portrays Jewish men gathering stones to hurl at Jesus, with one man even drawing a sword. The bodily danger to those who believed they were God’s messengers, whether Jesus, Francis, or Franciscan friars, was very real. The challenge reverberates in another interesting element in the panorama: the insertion of a Native American reclining on the shores of the port city and silently observing the arrival and capture of the Franciscans (see Fig. 54). This anachronistic element, an editorial comment of the artists’ own day, testifies to the global reach of Franciscan missions and the dangers of such work. Meanwhile, the ceiling of the chapel is covered with angels and putti frolicking among billowy clouds. The movement
and energy of the heavenly audience echoes the dynamic action of the scene below.

Though Francis failed in his goals for the mission to Egypt, the episode is instructive and was put to use by the architects of the Sacro Monte. By placing Francis’ audience with the Sultan immediately following the Carnival scene of Chapel XIII, they make a damning indictment of their fellow Christians: while the imam recognized the power of the holy man, while Muslim crowds heard him preach, while the Sultan was impressed (to such a degree that by some accounts he desired conversion), the Italians of Assisi largely spurned the saint and his message. Francis suffered the same rejection that Jesus had experienced within the Jewish community of Roman Palestine. The foreign mission was then a type of success: the Muslims at least recognized Francis’ saintliness. This recognition foreshadows the final acceptance of Francis by his fellow townsmen (Chapel XVI) and the eventual successes of international Franciscan missions.

Chapel XV. St. Francis Receives the Stigmata

Chapel XV is dedicated to the tradition of Francis’ miraculous reception of stigmata, the climactic spiritual event in his faith-filled life. One of the earliest chapels on the mount, it was designed by Father Cleto and constructed between 1591 and 1597. The first story of this round chapel is surrounded by an arched portico supported by smooth Doric columns (see Fig. 55). Trace evidence of paint upon the vaulted ceiling of the portico testifies to frescos long eroded. A blind, engaged arcade decorates the second story with a single leaded window at the front to light the interior. The chapel is topped with a cylindrical cupola that reinforces the verticality of the building. Six steps lead up to the front entrance, above which is a niche containing the bust of the donor, Giulio Maffioli, a financier from Orta. A filigreed iron screen bisects the circular interior, separat-
ing the vestibule from the tableau. The terracotta statues are by Christoforo Prestinari, while the original wall decoration was lost in the late eighteenth century when painter Riccardo Donnino was commissioned to update the frescos in the baroque style.

Within the tableau the floor rises sharply to mimic the mountainous terrain of La Ver- na. The figure of Saint Francis kneels while that of Brother Leo cowers, both looking upward toward the frescoed seraphic Christ and heavenly host (see Fig. 56 and Chapter 4, Fig. 3). Other figures on the rocky ground include small terracotta animals and sparse metal flora. The ceiling fresco surrounding the seraph and above the diorama depicts numerous saintly, angelic, and biblical dignitaries, including Peter, Paul, Noah and David (see Fig. 57). The frescoed decoration behind the viewer (and opposite the diorama) is composed of equally sparse foliage and angels. There is significant damage and decay to this portion of the wall and ceiling frescos.

In Chapel XV, Francis’ spiritual journey culminates in his transposition to a new Christ. According to Franciscan tradition, Francis was in the midst of a personal struggle immediately prior to the transformative experience at La Verna. By 1223, Francis had become withdrawn and reclusive.24 His Order of the Friars Minor was growing, but not in the direction he wanted; Francis was disappointed as he watched the movement become embroiled in Papal bureaucracy. Eventually he, along with a few companions, moved to the mountainside retreat at La Verna, where according to tradition Francis received the stigmata:

Fig. 57. Peter, Paul, Noah, and David. Ceiling fresco, Chapel XV, Sacro Monte di Orta.
For immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet just as he had seen a little before in the figure of the man crucified. His hand and feet seemed to be pierced through the center by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner side of the hands and the upper side of the feet and their points on the opposite sides. The heads of the nails in his hands and his feet were round and black; their points were oblong and bent as if driven with a hammer, and they emerged from the flesh and stuck out beyond it. Also his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red wound from which his sacred blood often flowed moistening his tunic and underwear.  

According to Bonaventure, at that moment Francis was “totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified.”

The landscape of the diorama in Chapel XV conveys the emotional desolation Francis experienced during this period of his life. The landscape also alludes to locations relevant to Christ’s Passion: the Mount of Olives in general and the Garden of Gethsemane in particular. Animals dotting the mountainside convey the danger and violence of the wilderness: a mountain cat attacks a wild boar; a large lizard with open jaws lurks menacingly nearby. This wildlife imbues a measure of fear in the viewer. Francis kneels on the bleak mountainside, arms outstretched, gazing intently at the seraphic Christ figure. Francis bears the five wounds of the Crucifixion. According to Celano and Bonaventure, Francis’ response to the vision was a mixture of fear and joyful incredulity, followed in turn by a great epiphany once the stigmata were realized. Prestinari captures this latter moment of clarity in the figure’s pose and expression; it is a moment of decisive response, with Francis at once joyful in his union with Christ and accepting of the suffering it requires.

Brother Leo is absent from the literary accounts of the miracle, but commonly included in artistic renderings. Given that the veracity of Francis’ stigmatization was challenged throughout the centuries and in many quarters, the presence of Brother Leo is essential in providing witness to the miraculous event. Given the experiential nature of the chapels at Orta, Leo’s presence as witness invites each pilgrim to be a witness as well.

The stigmatization was a particularly important theme in art of the Renaissance-era Franciscans. Its promulgation asserted the fact of the event, whose historicity even five hundred years later was controversial. The miracle illustrated the unique relationship between Francis and Christ, and by implication the special status of his order. It also distinguished the Franciscans from the rival mendicant order of the Dominicans, whose
founder, St. Dominic, received no similar divine favour. Like images of the stigmatization in earlier twelfth- and thirteenth-century Franciscan art, we can say that the stigmatization of Chapel XV functioned as “visual proof” of the event.  

Chapel XVI. St. Francis, Nearing Death, Returns to Assisi

Construction of this chapel, designed by Federico Bizzozzero, began in 1640 and was completed with the addition of a portico in the early 1690s. Undulating curves of the baroque façade echo in column niches and the quatrefoil window, the entrance archway, the frescoed door-surround, and cartouche of the pediment (see Fig. 58). The curves play against the many angles of the roofline and open pediment. A single engaged column with elaborated vegetative capital stands to either side of the archway surrounding the rectangular double door. The façade retains much of its original painted decoration including cherubs and the anthropomorphized figures of Prayer and Love, as well as trompe l’oeil architectural elements. The inscription within the cartouche above the doorway is Luke 6:19, “And all the people tried to touch him,” referring to Jesus’ reputation as a healer. This biblical passage on the exterior forecasts the message of the interior program: the recognition of Francis’ saintliness, manifest in his healing powers, by his contemporaries: “The city rejoiced at the arrival of the blessed father and all the people with one voice praised God, since the whole multitude of the people hoped that the holy of one of God would die close to them, and this was the reason for such great rejoicing.”

For the interior of the chapel, Dionigi Bus sola sculpted roughly two-dozen terracotta figures. Stefano Maria Legnani’s frescos, with their soft colors and florid embellishments, reflect a late-baroque/rococo influence. As the pilgrim peers through the ornate grille separating the vestibule from the tableau, the eye is immediately drawn to Francis and his messianic entrance into Assisi astride a donkey pace Christ’s entry into Jerusalem (cf. Matt 21:2; Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30; John 12:14) (see Fig. 59). Gazing upward towards heaven, Francis’ countenance is of pain-filled exhaustion. Three men hover next to Francis, close but not touching, and through pointing gestures draw the viewer’s attention to his stigmata. Two figures in the crowd have obvious physical impairments (one a goiter, the other a muscular atrophy) and reach out toward Francis, hoping, one can assume, for a cure. Each figure emotively captures the viewer’s gaze and redirects it to the figure of Francis. Surrounding these main figures are men, women, children, horses, and dogs who simultaneously normalize the street scene while underscoring (through movement and gaze) the extraordinary saint in their midst. The throng of people replicates the literary descriptions of crowds in Luke 6 and in Celano’s account of Francis’ return home. It is a scene that culminates a narrative ark begun in Chapel XIII and told over the course of the next three chapels. In Chapel XIII, the Carnival-goers overwhelmingly ignore the holy man. The story line moves to Chapel XIV with Francis’ audience before the Sultan, one point being that, in contrast to the residents of Assisi, even a Muslim such as the Sultan recognized the special nature of the holy man. In Chapel XV, Francis receives the stigmata, again underscoring in the most powerful way the holy nature of the mendicant friar, and sets the stage for his celebrated return home, as depicted in Chapel XVI. His special relationship to Christ can no longer be denied, since the miracle of the stigmata convinces even the most intemperate individuals of Francis’ sanctity; the citizens of Assisi rush to embrace him. The stark contrast between the reception of Francis by his fellow citizens in Chapel XIII with that of Chapel XVI models the experience (according to tradition) of Jesus, whose true identity, though repeatedly revealed through healing miracles, was only gradually understood by those around him (cf. the Gospels of Mark and John).
The trompe l’oeil paintings at eye-level extend the scene of the diorama with additions to the crowd and of the built environment of Assisi. Interrupting the contemporaneous scene is a vignette within the wall painting, just above and behind the statue of Francis, that depicts Christ healing the hemorrhaging woman (Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–29; Luke 8:43–48) (see Fig. 60). She is modest in depiction; her disability is not graphic. Nor for that matter is biblical passage. Her identity is only indicated by the painting’s caption. Her inclusion in the artistic program at Orta is curious, where women are often helpmeets...
and bystanders rather than the center of narrative action (Claire and Mary notwithstanding). Among the depictions of the physically impaired, women are a significant minority. But the woman with an issue of blood was a common subject in early Christianity, from catacombs and sarcophagi to reliquary caskets (such as the Brescia Box). While the subject may have declined in popularity with Renaissance artists, there are examples from the period. We can speculate that the image was included at Orta because it played a role in advancing the Tridentine agenda. According to Eusebius and early Christian tradition, there was a bronze statue of Christ with this woman, erected by the woman herself, at the gates of Caesarea Philippi. Alexander Nigel points out that the statue is important evidence in the Catholic Reformation defense of images, as it provided proof for the use of images in early Christian practice. There may have been additional reasons for the artist’s inclusion of the image. By the medieval period, the bleeding woman was associated with St. Veronica, who was said to have loaned her veil to Christ to wipe his brow as he carried his cross. Her story is greatly expanded in the Golden Legend, wherein Veronica presents the veil, a mandylion preserving the image of Christ, to emperor Tiberius, who looked upon it with devotion and was miraculously healed. In Latin, Veronica (from *vera icon*) means “true image.” At Orta, then, this depiction of the bleeding woman could function with triple meaning: she represents the power of Christ (even his image) to miraculously heal, she represents the Tridentine argument for images, and as a literal *vera icon*, signifies Francis as the true image of Jesus. Meanwhile, in the vault above, an-
sacred views of saint francis

Francis’ return to Assisi is illustrated through stories of pain and healing. By focusing on the ways in which Francis’ life imitated that of Jesus, both the suffering and the miraculous, the chapel furthers the Franciscan narrative by demonstrating that the people of the day—young and old, rich and poor—recognized Francis’ miraculous powers before his death. Such tacit recognition furthered the Order’s claim to the veracity and legitimacy of Francis’ sainthood.

Chapel XVII. The Death of St. Francis

The hexagonal chapel, designed by architect Federico Bizzozzero, was constructed in the mid–seventeenth century. The small vestibule was separated from the diorama by an ornate floral grille in 1695 (see Fig. 61) and the chapel was fully completed, including the statues (Dionigi Bussola) and frescos (Carlo Francesco and Giuseppe Nuvolene, and Giovanni Battista Grandi), by 1698. In 1850, the northern Italian architect Paolo Rivolta added the building’s neo-classical façade and parapet (see Fig. 62).

This chapel chronicles the death of St. Francis on October 3, 1226, about which Bonaventure relates:

In all things
he wished without hesitation
to be conformed to Christ crucified,
who hung on the cross poor, suffering,
and naked.

Naked he lingered before the bishop
at the beginning of his conversion;
and, for this reason, at the end of this
life, he wanted to leave this world
naked.

And so he charged the brothers assisting
him,
under the obedience of love,
that when they saw he was dead,
they should allow him to lie naked on the
ground
for as long as it takes to walk a leisurely
mile.

O truly the most Christian of men,
who strove by perfect imitation to be
conformed
while living to Christ living,
Fig. 63. St. Francis receiving the Last Rites. Chapel XVII, Sacro Monte di Orta.
The central focus of the diorama is Francis recumbent on the ground, per his dying wish, and surrounded by friars, priests, secular notables and their attendants (see Fig. 63); a wooden bedframe stands discarded against the chapel wall, just as Francis distained bedding in the story. Of the figures in closest proximity to the saint, a priest stands with arms posed in benediction as he administers sacraments to the dying man; another priest stands over Francis sprinkling holy water with an aspersarium (brush); a friar cradles Francis’ head upon Lady Jacoba’s cushion; and Lady Jacoba reaches to caress and bathe his wounded feet in the manner of Mary Magdalene (see Fig. 64). Around these main figures cluster a friar offering Francis his patchwork robe—an iconic symbol of the saints’ true poverty; a friar kneeling in prayer and gazing toward the wall fresco depicting Francis’ ascent into Heaven; a well-dressed Black man, presumably part of Lady Jacoba’s Roman contingent, inclining his head towards the two friars and gesturing animatedly; a friar—presumably having just read the Passion narrative in John 13 to the assembled group—holding a Bible; and Lady Jacoba’s personal retinue.

The leitmotif of Franciscan hagiography is Francis’ conformity to Christ. The diorama of Chapel XVII replicates this theme in plastic: Francis, as alter Christus, lay naked on the ground; prominent rendering of the stigmata and the friar’s Bible evoke the Passion narrative of John 13; and Lady Jacoba models the Magdalene.

Despite the seeming simplicity of the chapel (it lacks the illusionistic and impressive “built environment” of Chapels XI, XIII,
and XVI for example, or the dramatic terrain of Chapels X, XII, and XV), Chapel XVII has a far more complex artistic program than meets the eye. Beyond the diorama, upon the walls, a variety of Old and New Testament images underscore Francis’ selection as one specially chosen by God. Some parallels are presented in pairs of frescos that are to be read as one-on-one correlates: the depiction of Jacob’s blessing of Ephraim (Gen 48) along the upper wall is echoed in Francis’ blessing of Brother Bernard on the wall below; Jacob, on his deathbed, predicting the destiny of his children (above) parallels a friar’s deathbed vision of Francis’ ascension (below); the fresco of the upper wall depicting Thomas’s examination of Christ’s wounds (John 20:24–29) pairs with the fresco along the lower wall depicting Jerome’s certification of Francis’ stigmata; finally, just as Christ leads souls from purgatory (above), so does Francis (below). Other frescos evoke such parallelism not through illustrated pairs but through symbolism: David’s entry into Jerusalem with the head of Goliath symbolizes Francis’ defeat of death and his entry into Paradise (see Fig. 65); Habbakuk’s delivery of food to Daniel in the lion’s den embodies, in the works of Bonaventure, the ardent desire of both Daniel and Francis for humility and God’s mercy; the portrayal of Elijah riding his chariot of fire illustrates Bonaventure’s description of Francis as “a second Elijah” and “a chariot and charioteer for spiritual men.” The remaining scenes detail the final days of Francis: Lady Jacoba, her sons, and
retinue attending Francis; Francis’ blessing of the friars; Francis dictating his testament; and Francis ascending to Heaven. The fresco cycle weaves a narrative that binds Francis to patriarch and prophet, king and Christ, all the while maintaining the saint’s connection to the people and peninsula of Italy.

Previously we have noted that figural placement, pose, and perspective are designed to direct the pilgrims’ visual (and ergo affective) experience. Here in Chapel XVII the artists incorporate numerous reading lines to such purpose. The pilgrim’s gaze is arrested by the figures of two priests and a servant that look directly at the viewer, inviting the pilgrim into the drama; Francis, too, faces the viewer, so that they become a witness to his death. As the drama unfolds, three women, two noblemen, and two friars direct the pilgrim’s gaze to Lady Jacoba and her emotive caress of Francis’ stigmatized feet. The prone body of the saint is presented to the viewer three times, once, of course, in the diorama itself and twice in the surrounding wall frescos. The repetition reinforces the message of “[Francis] dying to Christ dying.” The artists shift the viewer’s focus from death to resurrection through the Black nobleman, whose red tunic and upward pointing gesture replicates the red tunic and gesture of Francis in fresco just behind. These upward hand gestures, coupled with the upward gesture of the priest’s benediction, actualize the concept of ascendancy. The message of salvation echoes in the pose of the kneeling friar who guides the pilgrim’s eye to the fresco of Francis’ heavenly reception, as well as in the fresco immediately behind the kneeling friar, one of a variant tradition, where another friar witnesses the saintly soul’s ascent to heaven.

Chapels XVIII, XIX, and XX: The Basilica of Assisi

Although Francis was originally buried in Assisi at the Church of St. George, his body was later moved to the crypt of the basilica built in his honor, the Basilica of St. Francis, also in Assisi. Pope Gregory IX laid the cornerstone of the Basilica in Assisi one day after the canonization of Francis (July 16, 1228), just two years after the saints’ death.
Bonaventure describes the translation of the body:

While that sacred treasure was being carried, marked with the seal of the Most High Kinds, he whose image Francis bore deigned to perform many miracles so that through his saving fragrance the faithful in their love might be drawn to run after Christ. It was truly appropriate that he who was pleasing to God and beloved by him in his life; who, like Enoch, had been borne into paradise by the grace of contemplation and carried off to heaven like Elijah in a fiery chariot; now that his soul is blossoming in eternal springtime among the heavenly flowers it was, indeed, truly appropriate that his blessed bones too should sprout with the fragrant miracles in their own place of rest.

The design of Chapels XVIII, XIX, and XX at the Sacro Monte di Orta is intended to replicate the three levels of the Basilica: the crypt (Chapel XVIII), the lower church (Chapel XIX), and the upper church (Chapel XX), with Chapel XVIII literally beneath Chapel XIX. All three chapels were designed by Father Cleto and their construction began in 1591. Chapel XVIII was completed by 1624, while Chapels XIX and XX were not completed until 1670. A bust (now missing) of Abbot Amico Canobio of Novara (c. 1532–92), who originally developed the idea of the Sacro Monte di Orta and funded Chapel XX from his own estate, once stood in the interior lunette above the door of Chapel XIX. He laid the cornerstone of Chapel XX in 1591.

The pilgrim approaches Chapels XVIII and XIX though partially enclosed, vaulted corridors. Doorways lead into very small vestibules; iron grilles and kneelers separate the pilgrim from the dioramas. The façade of the Chapel XX (the only one of the three chapels with an exterior architectural style per se) is an example of Renaissance classicism (see Figs. 66, 67, and 68). The interior of Chapel
XVIII ("the crypt") is, predictably, quite dark. A local Ortan artist named Giacomo Filippo Monti painted the frescos though few of the largely ornamental designs survive. The frescos of Chapels XIX (again, largely ornamental motifs) and XX (narrative and figural) were done by Antonio Busca. Dionigi Bussola created the statues in Chapels XVIII and XX, while Giuseppe Rusnati crafted the figures in Chapel XIX. The frescos of Chapels XIX (again, largely ornamental motifs) and XX (narrative and figural) were done by Antonio Busca. The ironwork of both Chapels XIX and XX was crafted by Giuseppe Malcotto da Borgomanero.

Chapel XVIII. The Vision of Francis in the Crypt

Chapel XVIII (constructed ca. 1591–1624) commemorates the visit of Pope Nicholas V to the tomb of St. Francis in 1449. According to the mid-sixteenth-century account by Mark of Lisbon, as the Pope and his retinue (which included the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, Enrico Rampini) knelt before the tomb, Francis appeared before them in a vision—standing, looking heavenward, crying tears of devotion, with bleeding stigmata. "With great fear and reverence," the Pope kissed the stigmata of the Holy Saint. This vision is reminiscent of Christ's miraculous post-resurrection appearances (Matt 28:16–17; Mark 16:14; Luke 24:33–37; John 20:19–20) and serves to underscore for the pilgrim the parallel lives of Christ and St. Francis, the alter Christus. The connection between Francis and Pope Nicholas is important as well, for both men revived and rebuilt the Church spiritually and physically.

In this chapel, the figure of Nicholas kneels before Francis, his left hand holds his zucchetto, his right arm reaches toward the saint as his hand seeks to touch the cord of Francis’ belt, intimating a connection with both Francis and the Franciscan Order that is, once again, both figural and literal (see Fig. 69). As Bradley Franco notes, the inclu-
sion of church authorities in Franciscan artworks, as in this case a pope, bespeaks a close relationship between the saint, his order, and the institutional church.

There are five cartouche inscriptions among the ornamental and architectural frescos of the chapel walls: (1) an Old Testament quotation from Isaiah 11:10, “And his rest shall be glorious”; (2) a quotation from St. Anthony of Padua, “His conveyance is acceptable to God”; (3) an identifying marker above a life-sized faux sarcophagus, “The burial of some companions of Seraphic Father S. Francesco with their bodies intact” (see Fig. 70); (4) a quote from Deuteronomy 34:5 referencing Moses’ death: “And he died by the mouth [kiss] of the Lord”; and, (5), an identifying marker just behind the statue of St. Francis, “The Sepulcher of Father Francis.”

Chapel XIX. The Miracles at the Saint’s Tomb

As pilgrims ascend the stairway from Chapel XVIII to Chapel XIX (ca. 1591–1670) (see Fig. 71), through verisimilitude they move from the crypt to the Lower Basilica of Assisi with its ornamental frescos and white marble statues of Peter, David and Solomon. Chapel XIX celebrates the healing power of St. Francis, extolled by Bonaventure, among others. In a series of small vignettes set around a railing (where an opening to the crypt below would normally be), the almost two-dozen statues depict pilgrims at various moments during their petitions (see Fig. 72). The demographics represented by the statues reflect many different strands of society: male and female, adult and child, rich and poor, white and Black, soldier and civilian, and even a large dog (see Fig. 73). Throughout the chapel’s vignettes, body positions create intimate conversations all the while gestures point toward the opening to Francis’ crypt. Thus the pilgrim’s gaze is guided through each vignette, but is ultimately directed back to the tomb of the saint. The central focus remains on St. Francis as the chapel promulgates his reputation as a miracle-worker and serves to promote the continued observation of his cult.

Chapel XX. The Canonization of St. Francis

Chapel XIX (the “Lower Basilica of Assisi”) shares interior space in the apsidal choir area with Chapel XX (the “Upper Basilica of Assisi”), which is immediately adjacent. This final chapel (ca. 1591–1670) is the triumphal celebration of the day Pope Gregory IX “came personally to Assisi in the year of the Lord’s Incarnation 1228 on Sunday, July 16, and inscribed our blessed father in the catalog of the saints, in a great and solemn ceremony that would be too long to describe.” Where words failed Bonaventure, the artists at the Sacro Monte Di Orta succeeded in capturing
Fig. 74. Pope Gregory IX canonizes St. Francis before prelates and a body of onlookers. Chapel XX, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 75. Crowds attend the canonization of St. Francis. Wall fresco, Chapel XX, Sacro Monte di Orta.
the drama in a dynamic recreation of the moment the Pope handed the official document of canonization to the Minister General of the Friars Minor, Giovanni Parenti. More than fifty statues of friars, pageboys, papal guards, cardinals and other prelates flank either side of the enthroned pope, who is seated before an altar (see Fig. 74). Vivid *trompe l’oeil* portraits of citizens of Assisi along the sidewalls further the illusion of a crowded scene and add heightened intensity (see Fig. 75). Pilgrims are encouraged to stand or kneel in order to peer through peepholes in the elaborate iron grille encrusted with florets and vines. Several of the terra cotta figures actively engage the viewer through gestures and eye contact, inviting pilgrims into the crowd and into the moment (see Fig. 76).

Antonio Busca’s wall and ceiling frescos are as spectacular as Bussola’s diorama. Engaged columns and arches frame three large frescoed panels on each sidewall. The scenes echo or replicate images already presented elsewhere in the Sacro Monte but are intended to reiterate and underscore important points. The first fresco to the viewer’s immediate right depicts Mary holding the infant Jesus toward St. Francis’ outstretched arms. The three are surrounded by a host of cherubs. It illustrates the special closeness Francis enjoyed with the holy family. In the second fresco, Francis appears in a heavenly vision to revivify a dead child cradled in the lap of his grief-stricken mother (see Fig. 77). It is representative of the miraculous healing power afforded Francis. The third fresco to the viewer’s right, and the one in closest proximity to the altar (and the Pope) portrays the seraphic presence at the moment of Francis’ stigmatization. Brother Leo, in the capuchin robe, hides his eyes. This scene reiterates the saint’s devotion to the crucified Christ and his conformity to Christ.

On the viewer’s immediate left, Francis is attacked by demons who try to throw him down a precipice. Pilgrims here are asked to recall his struggles against temptation. The scene of the middle left fresco depicts Francis...
performing a variety of miracles. The crowd of penitents includes parents with a dead infant, a pregnant woman, a man with a head wound, and a man suffering with a goiter, an arm injury and an impaired ability to walk. The final fresco of the series, once again the painting in closest proximity to the altar, portrays Christ, angry at humanity and ready to strike the earth, along with Mary, who stays his anger by introducing Saints Francis and Dominic who, in turn, kneel beside a globe and entreat Christ to spare humankind (see Fig. 78). The fresco illustrates the intercessory power of the saints, an important point within the Catholic Reformation program.

The ceiling fresco is operatic. Herald angels and cherubs surround Francis as he is welcomed to Paradise by the Holy Trinity. Christ crowns Francis with garland; God offers a golden crown (see Fig. 79 and Foreword, Fig. 1). Around the perimeter of the scene, several of the heavenly host play musical instruments. Inscribed upon an unfurled banner in lower left corner are lines from the fourteenth-century Gregorian chant “O sanctissima anima” (“O Most Holy Soul”) used for centuries in the Franciscan rite of Transitus, the “crossing” of Francis from earthly death to eternal life, celebrated on Oct 3: “O sanctissima anima, in cujus transitu coeli cives occurrunt, Angelorum chorus exultat, et gloriosa Trinitas invitat, dicens: Mane nobiscum in aeternum” (“O most holy soul, at your departure the heavenly host comes to meet you, the angelic choir rejoices and the glorious Trinity welcomes you, saying: remain with us forever”).

The New Chapel

In early plans, Chapel XVI was devoted to Francis’ Canticle of the Creatures, but as work on the Sacro Monte took place over the centuries, and not necessarily in narrative sequence, construction on the Canticle chapel was initiated only toward the end of the eighteenth century and, as history unfolded, it was the last of the chapels to be built. Only the neo-classical exterior, designed by Santini of Lagna, was completed when in 1795 construction was halted amidst the political turmoil of the Napoleonic Era (see Fig. 80). The suppression of religious orders eventually brought about the expulsion of the site’s guardians—the Capuchin monks of the Sacro Monte—and the end of any new construction on the Mount; the so-called New Chapel was never completed. Today the three-storey circular building, located between Chapels XV and XVI, serves as an exhibition space with an observation deck (see Fig. 81). Meanwhile, the Canticle of the Creatures is nevertheless represented in the names of the various paths.
and piazzas along the pilgrimage route, such as Viale di Frate Vento (Avenue of Brother Wind) near Chapel V (see Fig. 82) and Piazzale di Frate Sol (Brother Sun Square) near Chapel XIII (see Fig. 83).

Fig. 79. The magnificent, operatic ceiling of Chapel XX, depicting St. Francis’ ascension into Heaven. Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 80. Exterior of the New Chapel, whose completion was disrupted in 1795 by Napoleon’s elimination of religious orders. Sacro Monte di Orta.
Fig. 81. Observation deck of the New Chapel. Sacro Monte di Orta.
Fig. 82. The Canticle of the Creatures is evidenced in the name of paths and piazzas of the Sacro Monte. Here we see the sign for the Avenue of Brother Wind. Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 83. As with the previous figure (Fig. 82) we see The Canticle of the Creatures represented in the name of this piazza: Brother Sun Square. Sacro Monte di Orta.
Endnotes


3 Ibid.

4 See, for example, Angelo Maria Manzini, O.F.M. Cap., Sacro Monte of Orta (Orta: Community of the Franciscan Friars, Custodian of the Sacro Monte of Orta, 2006), 26. Bascapè was also intimately involved in the (re)design of the Sacro Monte di Varallo. There he had to mediate the ongoing disputes between the guardians of the sacred mountain, the Franciscan Observants, and the fabbriciere. Eventually, the bishop ordered the removal of the Observants and the installation of the Capuchins. See Geoffrey Symcox, Jerusalem in the Alps: The Sacro Monte of Varallo and the Sanctuaries of North-West Italy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019).

5 The Reformation-era contestation over the role of images and pilgrimage resulted in Tridentine efforts to “control both the visual and embodied experience,” and Carlo Borromeo was central to these efforts. Carla Benzan, “Alone at the Summit: Solitude and the Ascetic Imagination at the Sacro Monte of Varallo,” in Solitude: Spaces, Places, and Times of Solitude in Late Medieval and Early Modern Cultures, eds. Karl A.E. Enenkel and Christine Göttler (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 343–45.


8 Paul Davies, “The Lighting of Pilgrimage Shrines in Renaissance Italy,” in The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, eds. Erik Thuno and Gerhard Wolf (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2004), 64, 79.


11 See, for example, the story told by Mark of Lisbon: “Before his birth, his mother endured very much being many days in labor of delivery, meanwhile there came a poor pilgrim to the door of the house, who having received alms, said to him that brought it: ‘Cause that woman who endures such pain of travail to be carried to a stable, and she shall be incontinently delivered.’ Once done, she was instantly delivered and for that respect there built a chapel, where in memory of the birth of this Saint the history of the this miracle was depicted; he whom our Lord Jesus Christ would in regard of his birth in a poor and contemptible place, make like unto himself.” Mark of Lisbon, The Chronicle and Institution of the Order of the Sacraffical Father S. Francis Conteyning his Life, his Death, and his Miracles, and of all his Holie Disciples and Companions, 2 vols., trans. William Cape (England: John Heigham, 1618), 1:3. [Note that this is not the same volume as the two Italian editions referenced in this work as Croniche, 1605 or 1680. Spelling and some phrasing adapted for a contemporary audience by the authors of this book.]


13 See Arnald of Sarrant, Kinship of St. Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3 vols., eds. Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., et al. (New
According to the Legend of the Three Companions, the Holy Spirit told Francis to enter a dilapidated church. Once inside, Francis saw a crucifix and “began to pray intensely before an image of the Crucified, which spoke to him in a tender and kind voice: ‘Francis, don’t you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me.’ Stunned and trembling, he said: ‘I will do so gladly, Lord.’ For he understood that it was speaking about that church, which was near collapse because of its age. He was filled with such joy and became so radiant with light over that message, that he knew in his soul that it was truly Christ crucified who spoke to him.” See the Legend of the Three Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:76.

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:532. The stories and sequence vary in the other sources; in Thomas of Celano’s Life of Saint Francis, Francis suffers illness, dreams of knightly armorment and success, later refuses to go on military mission to Apulia, then kisses a leper; in Legend of the Three Companions, Francis dreams of knightly armorment and success, donates clothes to the bedraggled knight, departs for Apulia, has second dream of Christ telling him to return home, goes to Rome and begs for alms, returns home and kisses the leper; in The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, Francis gives clothes to a bedraggled knight, dreams of knightly armor and success, departs for Apulia, has second dream telling him to return home, goes to Rome and begs alms, returns to Assisi and dines with friends, has a vision of an ugly woman, and kisses the leper.


21 The biographers state that Francis stripped nude. That Francis appears here in a hairshirt is consistent with the penitential practices of the Capuchins, for whom wearing a hairshirt was an important method of daily mortification. See Paul Hanbridge, O.F.M. Cap., trans., The Capuchin Reform, A Franciscan Renaissance: A Portrait of Sixteenth-century Capuchin Life, An English Translation of La bella e santa riforma by Melchiorre da Pobladura, O.F.M. Cap. (Delhi: Media House, 2003), 198–99.

22 See Kimberly Rivers, Preaching the Memory of Virtue and Vice: Memory, Images, and Preaching in the Late Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 218–19. Though the Franciscan artistic tradition owes much to the work of Giotto, with many of his innovative compositions becoming normative over the succeeding centuries, it is interesting that the virtues enumerated by Giotto at the Arena Chapel in Padua bear little, if any, resemblance to the virtues depicted in the Capuchin program of Chapel III here at Orta. See Douglas Lackey, “Giotto in Padua: A New Geography of the Human Soul,” The Journal of Ethics 9, nos. 3–4 (2005): 551–72.

23 The Fasciculus Morum was a Franciscan guide for sermons which cataloged virtues and vices, a list that became a standard index within the Order. See Siegfried Wenzel, Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth Century Preacher’s Handbook (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989).

24 As Capuchin brother Antonio Corse (d. 1585) declared, “The mortifications of our
Father Saint Francis enriched heaven and earth. Through them came so much light that it was as if another sun were shining, giving light to the whole world. The Lord would never have brought Francis' exemplary life and that of his Order to such heights of perfection had he not striven so mightily to mortify himself. Therefore, if we are unwilling to mortify ourselves a little, we inflict great damage on ourselves and on those who seek enlightenment.” Hanbridge, The Capuchin Reform, 48. Twentieth-century Franciscan scholar Melchiorre da Pobladora further explains, “The body is a powerful enemy that needs to be brought into servitude, otherwise it will prepare some dangerous ambushes for us. Therefore the Capuchins, as true athletes of penance and austerity, nourished themselves with the most frugal meals, wore the most humble habits, slept little (and on bare boards), and punished their bodies with harsh sackcloth and bloody disciplines...Their external penance was nothing else but a departure point to attack a stronger, battle-hardened enemy: self-love, which is conquered with internal mortification—the annihilation of self-will to conform it to the will of God.” Ibid., 175.

25 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, 2:542.
26 De Filippis and Carcano suggest that the local artist Giacomo Gilippo Monti of Orta was responsible for painting the frescos. Guide to the Sacro Monte of Orta, 23.
27 See the discussion regarding the squirrel in Giovanni Bellini’s St. Jerome Reading, in D.A. Brown and S. Ferino-Pagden, Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 132.
28 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:543.
29 De Filippis and Carcano, Guide to the Sacro Monte of Orta, 28.
30 Thomas of Celano, Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:207.
33 See Manzini, Sacro Monte of Orta, 34.
34 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:548.
35 This is called the Earlier Rule, or First Rule, subsequently supplanted by Francis with the Later Rule (written c. 1221, approved by Pope Honorius III, c. 1223) to reflect evolving circumstances within the Order and the Church.
36 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:526.
37 Thomas of Celano, Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:212–13.
38 Thomas of Celano, Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:224.
39 Bonaventure also compares Francis to Ambrose, who was said to have appeared at the funeral of St. Martin while simultaneously at Mass elsewhere. See Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:557.
40 Thomas of Celano, Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:225; Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:557.
41 Ibid., 2:552.
42 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:692.
44 Ibid., 285–86.
46 Arnald of Sarrant, Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3:810–11.
50 Considerations of the Holy Stigmata, in The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, 184.
51 See Arnald of Sarrant, Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3:606.
54 Arnald of Sarrant, Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3:810–12.
55 Ibid., 3:811.
56 Ibid., 3:810–11.
57 For an early version of the prophetic dream, see Legend of the Three Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:97–98.
58 Chapel XI is the only chapel of the Sacro Monte di Orta that is consecrated for services.
60 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:547–49.
62 The style of this cartouche is imitative of the seventeenth-century curtained cartouche of Chapel XIII painted by the Grandi brothers.
63 Thomas of Celano, Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:228.
64 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, The Evening Sermon on Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:725. Francis’ humility is yet another echo in imitatio Christi, for as Bonaventure describes, “Christ’s cross is the sign of the most perfect humility and self-abasement because on the cross he humbled and abased himself to such an extreme for us” (726). In his perfect imitation of Christ, Francis too was marked with the greatest humiliation—the stigmata.
65 See especially Pieter Brueghel’s The Fight between Carnival and Lent (1559) and Jan Miense Molenaer’s Battle between Carnival and Lent (1633), which must have influenced the designers of Chapel XIII (especially Molenaer’s two men tussling in the foreground), though admittedly there is no explicit record of a link.
68 The thirteenth-century sources vary as to the number of companions traveling with Francis. Celano and Bonaventure record only one companion while the expansive account in The Little Flowers of Saint Francis records twelve.
69 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:603.
Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio understand this turn of events as God's plan to reserve for Francis the greatest of all honors—stigmatization. Ugolino Baniscambi, author of *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, once again expands the tradition asserting that the Sultan wanted to convert and in fact did convert years after Francis' death and with his own death in sight. Bartholomew of Pisa follows suit. See Baniscambi, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, 93–96.

See the depictions of this event by Giotto (1291–1299; Upper Basilica of Assisi and Bardi Chapel of Santa Croce in Florence); Gaddi (1330–1335; Santa Croce in Florence); Sassetti (1444; San Sepolcro Altarpiece); and Gozzoli (1450–1452; Montefalco).

According to some traditions, the Sultan was so impressed with the holy man that Francis was given permission to preach to the Muslims throughout his empire. See Mark of Lisbon, *The Chronicle and Institution of the Order of the Seraphicall Father S. Francis Conteyning his Life, his Death, and his Miracles, and of all his Holie Disciples and Companions*, 1:123–26.

The seventeenth- to eighteenth-century pilgrim guide *Intruzzione al Divoto Letitore che Desidera Visitare il Sacro Monte di S. Francesco D'Orta* mistakenly attributes the design to “the famous architect and painter Buonarroti,” presumably Michelangelo, though the dates are off by half a century. See Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 257.

St. Francis referred to Lady Jacoba de Settesoli (c. 1190–1273), a wealthy noblewoman of Rome, as Brother Jacoba. This close friend had privileged access to the saint. He summoned her to his deathbed and she was allowed to mourn by his side along with the friars. The earliest biographical account to include her story is Thomas of Celano's *Treatise on the Miracles of Received the Stigmata,* "Critical Inquiry" 35, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 464–65.


Mark of Lisbon, *The Chronicle and Institution of the Order of the Seraphicall Father S. Francis Conteyning his Life, his Death, and his Miracles, and of all his Holie Disciples and Companions*, 1:342.

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Saint Francis (c. 1250). Bonaventure does not include her at Francis’ deathbed, but her story is found later in The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions (c. 1330) and then Considerations of the Holy Stigmata (c. 1390). According to tradition, Lady Jacoba was a member of the Third Order (a group of lay Franciscans). At Orta, she is indeed dressed in the humble robes and veil of a tertiary both in the diorama and in a wall fresco behind the diorama. Lady Jacoba is buried in the crypt of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, near the tomb of the saint. See Thomas of Celano, Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:417–19; Boniscambi, The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3:471–74; Considerations of the Holy Stigmata, in The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, 203–6.

90 See The Assisi Compilation, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:123.
91 Thomas of Celano, Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:278; Julian of Speyer, The Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:414; Legend of the Three Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:106, and An Umbrian Choir Legend, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:475 all report that an anonymous brother attendant at the moment of Francis’ death saw the saint’s soul carried heavenward on a cloud. Variant accounts, similar but not identical, record that Brother Augustine witnessed the ascension (Bonaventure of Bagnoaregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:644) as did Brother Angelus (Mark of Lisbon, The Chronicle and Institution of the Order of the Seraphical Father S. Francis Conteyning his Life, his Death, and his Miracles, and of all his Holie Disciples and Companions, 343–44).
92 See Boniscambi, The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:576–79.
93 Considerations of the Holy Stigmata, in The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, 206.
94 Bonaventure of Bagnoaregio, The Evening Sermon on Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:725; and The Morning Sermon on Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:754.
95 Bonaventure of Bagnoaregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:552.
97 Manzini, Sacro Monte of Orta, 78.
99 Pope Nicholas V embraced the revitalizing current of Renaissance humanism and intellectualism, and also undertook successful remodeling and building programs at the Vatican. For more on Pope Nicholas in this regard, see, for example, F. Donald Logan, A History of the Church in the Middle Ages (London: Routledge, 2012), 339–40.
101 Bonaventure of Bagnoaregio, Bonaventure, 326.
102 This episode is from a lesser-known tradition but one that is highlighted previously in Chapel X.
103 Dominic also figured in the frescos of Chapel I. The pairing of Francis with Dominic bookends the pilgrimage, from Chapel I to Chapel XX.