The Framework of St. Francis’ Spiritual Journey

Chapels II and XV

Chapel II and Chapel XV both depict mystical, theophanic, and, indeed, miraculous experiences attributed to St. Francis, one at the beginning of his mission and one toward the end. The chapels feature moments along St. Francis’ spiritual journey as he perfected an imitation of Christ (imitatio Christi). The idea that Francis imitated Christ with such devotion that he became a second Christ (alter Christus) dominates the didactic theme of the Sacro Monte di Orta (see Chapter 1). The devotional path upon the sacred mountain dedicated to St. Francis begins at Chapel I with the saint’s nativity—in a stable—explicitly establishing the mimesis of Francis and Christ, and establishing the Franciscan agenda, from the outset. It is Chapel II (St. Francis before the San Damiano Cross) and Chapel XV (St. Francis receives the Stigmata at La Verna) that provide the spiritual framework of the saint’s ministry, his life of living the Gospel. They highlight two periods of struggle for discernment in his life, and the transformative role that total submission and thankful praise may play in the life of the Christian. Chapels II and XV are thematically united in celebrating what Catholic tradition holds as the initial wound of God’s love in St. Francis’ heart and the culminating wounds of that love in Francis’ flesh.

Chapel II

As the second stop of the Sacro Monte’s “pilgrimage within a pilgrimage,” the iconographic program of Chapel II focuses on a visionary encounter between Francis and Christ crucified in the San Damiano Church, an encounter long considered by his early hagiographers a decisive moment in Francis’ conversion. In the thirteenth-century Legend of the Three Companions, we read:

A few days had passed when, while he was walking by the church of San Damiano, he was told in the Spirit to go inside for a prayer. Once he entered, he 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.¹

The conversion of Francis did not happen at one precise moment but in a series of events.²
Nevertheless, early followers and biographers considered the tradition of the theophany of the Cross of San Damiano an important turning point. Again, from the *Legend of the Three Companions*, we read:

From that hour, therefore, his heart was wounded and it melted when remembering the Lord’s passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart. This was brilliantly shown afterwards in the renewal of those wounds that were miraculously impressed on and most clearly revealed on his body.

Similarly, Celano writes:

Francis was more than a little stunned, trembling, and stuttering like a man out of his senses. He prepared himself to obey and pulled himself together to carry out the command. He felt this mysterious change in himself, but he could not describe it. So it is better for us to remain silent about it too. From that time on, compassion for the Crucified was impressed into this holy soul. And we honestly believe the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh.

The belief that a person could bear the signs of Christ’s Passion (internally or externally) was not an innovation of the medieval Franciscans. In Galatians 6:17, Paul writes: “I bear the stigmata of the Lord Jesus in my body.” Usually the Church Fathers understood these marks to be metaphorical, indicating the hardships Paul endured for his faith. Alternatively, Paul’s comment could be considered indicative of the physical penance that Paul performed as a Christian. The comment was rarely, however, understood to mean a literal replica of Christ’s stigmata. Similarly, early medieval Latin writers use the term “stigma” in a general sense to denote any bodily mark derived from self-inflicted wounds in the course of penitential Christian devotion, as in the cases of Bishop Silvinus of Therouanne and William of Gellone. Other marks were considered signs of miraculous intercession or signs of great faith, as with the wounds of Pope Leo IX, the martyr Theodard, and the bodies of some Crusaders. Medieval commentators sometimes understood the marks of Paul as the tattoo of a soldier—a soldier of Christ—a term by which Francis is also repeatedly identified. Even in such contexts, the wounds suffered by the especially devout could be internal, like that described in Francis’ encounter with Christ at San Damiano, echoing 2 Corinthians 4:10: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.” Just so, in the eleventh century, Peter Damian prayed that his soul be marked with the cross. In the fourteenth century, Bartholomew of Pisa outlined two types of “transformational similitude” to the wounds of Christ; his typology encompassed the range of interpretative tradition: one transformation (common to mystics) occurred in the soul, while a second type occurred in both soul and body, as with Francis. However, as traditions about Christ’s Passion began to emphasize His human suffering, and artistic representations changed to more naturalistic depictions of the dying Christ, “stigmata” came to denote more narrowly the wounds of the Passion. It is in this context that Bartholomew of Pisa understands the external, bodily stigmata of Francis, and the way in which his biographers wish us to understand the events on La Verna (Chapel XV).

Whether internal or external, stigmata are wounds that Catholics believe indicate intense physical and spiritual connection with the divine. By all accounts Francis was overwhelmed by the great mystery of the Passion; he was known for weeping openly as he wandered the streets, overcome by Christ’s sacrifice. The intensity of Christ’s suffering moved Francis deeply, as the crucified Christ became for him the model of his own spirituality and of his devotion to the Church.
Francis’ emphasis on the crucified Christ was not unusual for the period and reflected the popularity of Passion devotion in the Middle Ages. Medieval Passion devotion aroused “powerful feelings of compassion, and the interiorization of these emotions. In the process, a much greater emphasis came to be laid on the sense of the suffering humanity of Christ, and the wonder and awe with which Christians in earlier centuries had regarded the Son of God was complemented by powerful sensations of compassionate love.”

Like others who were said to have been made “new” through devotion to the Passion experience, Francis’ status within his social world—his family and the community—was altered, but his biographers also said he experienced a significant internal change in his very nature, as his priorities, beliefs and worldview became focused on a mission to imitate Christ.

The post-Tridentine Church embraced St. Francis’ renewal as emblematic of the Church’s program of rejuvenation, which made St. Francis one of the most popular saints of the Catholic Reformation.

Medieval hagiographers and contemporary scholars situate St. Francis firmly in the mystical tradition. However, his place in the history of Christian mysticism is complex. A mystical experience is in its essence one in which the devotee has an alteration of consciousness during what they believe to be an immediate encounter with the divine. (A mystical text can likewise transform the consciousness of the believer by encouraging what they regard as a similarly intimate connection.) Through prayer, bodily mortification, and theophany (e.g., the events of San Damiano, the vision of the stigmatic Seraphim, and the vision of Christ at Porziuncola), St. Francis is said to have experienced many such mystical encounters. What is unusual about Francis’ place in the history of Christian mysticism is that he was orthodox in his support for the established Church. Mysticism is typically described as “the paradigm of religious individualism and radicalism,” with mystics as peripheral to the mainstream establishment:

The mystic, it is said, is the great religious rebel who undermines the orthodox establishment, placing his own experience above the doctrines of the accepted authorities, and who not infrequently engenders serious opposition even to the point of being put to death for heresy.

It is true that Francis was radical in his break with contemporary monastic tradition and in his embrace of abject poverty, but in these moves he still sought and submitted to Roman authority. According to the medieval testimony he embraced the veneration of angels, the primacy of the Virgin Mary, the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, the cult of relics, and the granting of indulgences. Saint Francis urged “fidelity to the Roman Church because it perpetuates the reality of the Incarnation through the religious buildings, sacred vessels and especially the Eucharist, and thus renders visible the presence of God among men and women.”

As for the crucified Christ’s directive that Francis rebuild the Church, this too would have lasting import for the saint’s mission and his legacy in the Reformation Church. According to André Vauchez, for Francis churches, the buildings themselves, mediated communion with God. Within such sacred space, in prayer and contemplation, Saint Francis knew the immediacy of God through the sacrifice of His Son. Thus churches, and especially the crucifix, became important reference points of holiness for Francis. Yet his medieval hagiographers (and perhaps even Francis himself) understood Christ’s message to mean he should work beyond the walls (and limits) of material structure, as Bonaventure reports: “the principal intention of the words referred to that which Christ purchased with his own blood, as the Holy Spirit taught him and as he himself later disclosed to the brothers.” In other words, Francis was charged with rebuilding the universal
Fig. 1. Francis kneels beneath the San Damiano Cross. Chapel II, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 2. Christ on the San Damiano Cross. Chapel II, Sacro Monte di Orta.
church, a theme that we encounter in several of the chapels at the Sacro Monte di Orta, especially Chapels II and XV.

The diorama of Chapel II captures the essence of the mystical event laid out by medieval hagiographers. In a dimly lighted nave, Francis kneels below the crucified Christ, pleading for direction and guidance (see Fig. 1). Though in anguish, Francis does not appear in a state of ecstasy, nor does he appear unnerved. In this way, the depiction seems to follow the account of the Legend of the Three Companions rather than Celano's The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul or Bonaventure's The Major Legend of Saint Francis. Meanwhile, the figure of Christ is imposing in both its authority and its sorrow (see Fig. 2). As blood drips from His wounds, Christ locks eyes with Francis. The quiet intensity of their mutual gaze is accentuated by the flurry of activity around them, as the stableman attends the frisky horse and three dogs give chase to a hare. To their goal, the artists have effectively executed a moment of profound divine communion amidst the mundanity of life.

The representation of St. Francis’ encounter with the crucified Christ at Sacro Monte di Orta differs in important ways from the medieval accounts as found in Legend of the Three Companions, The Remembrance of the Desire of the Soul, and the Major Legend of Saint Francis. One significant difference is that the crucifix of the chapel is not the San Damiano Cross. The San Damiano Cross is an icon in the Italo-Byzantine style. Icons can tell the story of an event, and the San Damiano Cross tells the entire story of the Passion: death, resurrection and ascension. The icon portrays the crucified Christ, witnesses to the death of Jesus, the empty tomb (represented by the black background), Christ’s ascension to heaven, and the hand of God with fingers held in benediction. But the scene of Chapels II features a sculpted crucifix of terra cotta with only angels (of terra cotta and fresco) attendant (see Chapter 2, Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 7). The substitution for the San Damiano icon, the emblem of the Franciscan order to this very day, of the simpler version of the crucifix is perhaps best understood when we consider the general function of the icon. Through the icon, the viewer becomes psychologically engaged in the Passion story, becoming one of the eyewitnesses among the disciples, women, children, centurions, and saints. Chapel II of the Sacro Monte, constructed within a hundred years of when the popularity of Passion devotion had reached an all-time high (c. 14th–16th centuries), would then affect the intensely emotional experience of the Passion. Such an experience would seem fitting for a pilgrimage site that was expressly devotional and influenced as it was by Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises (1548). The story the artists of Orta want to effect, however, is not that of the Passion, but rather the story of Francis’ encounter with the crucified Christ. The emphasis of the chapel is on Francis and an important moment in his spiritual conversion—the formal beginning of his ministry and life as a new man. It is the tradition of his mystical and visionary experience that the post-Tridentine Church embraces as an exemplar of adoration and devotion, with an emphasis on justification though good works in imitation of Christ. It was precisely this psychological engagement that the architect and artists of Chapel II wanted to effect, rather than that of the Passion, and the use of the traditional crucifix as found in the chapel facilitates this focus. It is a specific example of an occasion at the Sacro Monte when the historical-literary tradition is subsumed by the interests of the didactic tableau.

The second unusual feature of Chapel II is that the setting of the encounter between the crucified Christ and Francis takes place not in the church of San Damiano but outdoors. This divergence from the tradition may reflect an interpretation that developed over time: that the commission Francis received was to have universal applicability. Christ told Francis not just to rebuild the crumbling San Damiano, but to rebuild the Catholic Church, to bring it back to a Gospel
centered mission. It is the universality of this message that is reflected in the artistic program of Chapel II. The crucified Christ and the saint, and most importantly the message, are not constrained to one location. The notion of particularity is displaced as the physical walls where the encounter happened are torn down and replaced with a panoramic landscape that is everywhere and anywhere. The message is literally reframed in Chapel II to create an affective corollary echoing Jesus’ own universal message that was spoken from a mountain top—the Sermon on the Mount—just as the message of Francis is spoken from the Sacro Monte. The landscape provides a powerful mimesis for the pilgrim, who is able to project themselves into this imaginary, universal landscape just as the deliberate use of seventeenth-century dress encouraged pilgrims to see themselves as participants in a contemporary scene.

The landscape perspective of Chapel II directs the pilgrim’s gaze from rugged terra firma to the angelic heavens of the frescoed walls. This visual movement from foreground to background, low to high, is accentuated by the bleakness of the rocky terrain against the bright colors of the elevated features. The figure of the stableman with the animals epitomizes the banal and mundane; the heavenly host and crucified Christ are God manifest. Meanwhile the figure of St. Francis kneeling on the barren ground, in the posture of contrition, visually mediates the earthly and heavenly realms.

Chapel XV

In Chapel XV, Francis’ spiritual journey, begun in the church of San Damiano where he became a “new man,” ends in his transformation into a new Christ. And as in the narrative tradition surrounding his conversion at San Damiano, Francis was in the midst of a personal struggle just prior to the transformative experience at La Verna. At this point, the biographers, as Paul Sabatier notes, show us Francis distressed for the future of the Order, and with an infinite desire for new spiritual progress. He was consumed with the fever of saints, that need of immolation which wrung from St. Theresa the passionate cry, ‘Either to suffer or to die!’ He was bitterly reproaching himself with not having been found worthy of martyrdom, not having been able to give himself for Him who gave himself for us.28

By 1223, Francis was withdrawn and reclusive;29 his order grew, but not in the direction he had envisioned. Eventually he, along with a few companions, moved to La Verna—an uninhabited, isolated wilderness in Tuscany. Celano recounts that,

While he was staying in that hermitage called La Verna, after the place where it is located, two years prior to the time that he returned his soul to heaven, he saw in the vision of God a man, having six wings like a Seraph, standing over him, arms extended and feet joined, affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up, two were stretched out over his head as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe, but could not decide what the vision meant for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph’s beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart. Concerned over the matter, he kept thinking about what this vision could mean and his spirit was anxious to discern a sensible meaning from the vision. While he was unable to perceive anything clearly understandable from
the vision, its newness very much pressed upon his heart. Signs of the nails began to appear on his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little while earlier on the crucified man hovering over him.30

Bonaventure adds additional details in his version of the event:

On a certain morning about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, while Francis was praying on the mountainside, he saw a Seraph having six wings, fiery as well as brilliant, descend from the grandeur of heaven. And when in swift flight, it had arrived at a spot in the air near the man of God, there appeared between the wings the likeness of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended in the form of a cross and fastened to a cross. Two of the wings were raised above his head, two were extended for flight, and two covered his whole body. Seeing this, he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced at the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph, but the fact that He was fastened to a cross pierced his soul with a sword of compassionate sorrow...  

...As the vision was disappearing, it left in his heart a marvelous fire and imprinted in his flesh a likeness of signs no less marvelous. 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 hands 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.31

For his biographers, the reception of the stigmata marked a fitting end to Francis’ spiritual transformation, as the trials of the recent years had become his own “personal passion.” According to Bonaventure, Francis was “totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified.”32

The stigmatization of Francis, a stunning claim of mimesis,33 was controversial throughout both the medieval and Renaissance periods. André Vauchez documents the early critics, noting that opposition to the claim was derived from various motivations.34 Some hostility originated in the clash between the secular clergy and the perceived arrogance of the Franciscans. The Dominicans on the other hand were jealous of the exclusive prerogative claimed by the Franciscans. For others, the dramatic break with tradition, wherein only the Son of God had stigmata, and the innovative claims about Francis’ holiness created deep suspicions.35

In the end, according to Vauchez, lasting resistance to the stigmatization of Francis was caused by “…the fact that his followers were ‘divinizing’ him.”36 From Peter John Olivi to Bartholomew of Pisa, many Franciscans claimed that the saint was truly, and literally, another Christ.37 While for other devout Christians, the popular Franciscan belief that Francis was an alter Christus, or second Christ, was simply too strong a claim.

But the Franciscans and the papacy pushed back against the critics. Between 1237 and 1291, the Vatican issued nine papal bulls authenticating the stigmatization and condemning the critics.38 Meanwhile, Franciscan writers elaborated on the tradition by adding greater detail and underscoring its miraculous nature. This elaboration can be found in the artistic program of ensuing centuries as well.

Arnold Davidson traces the representational evolution of Francis’ stigmata.39 He
begins with earliest known depiction of the account, a scene from Bonaventura Berlinghieri’s *Francis of Assisi* (c. 1235) from the church of San Francesco in Pescia. In this panel painting, the artist has moved Francis outside the hermitage of La Verna and onto the mountainside. He no longer stands, but kneels in a prayerful attitude before the Seraph. Through these changes, the artist is making an “unmistakable iconographical reference to Christ’s Agony in the Garden,” on the Mount of Olives, thus furthering Franciscan identification of Francis as *alter Christus*. Also noteworthy is that Francis is stigmatized while in the presence of the Seraph. Though Celano’s account leaves the reader to put together cause and effect, Berlinghieri straightforwardly connects the appearance of the Seraph with the appearance of the stigmata. Davidson goes on to assert that the writings of Bonaventure and the frescos of Giotto further accentuate the miraculous nature of the stigmata and the special standing of St. Francis. In his *Major Legend of Saint Francis*, Bonaventure recounts that Francis was praying on the mountainside when a Seraph, who was Christ, appeared before him. As the vision disappeared, it left imprinted upon him the stigmata. Though as in Celano’s *Life of Francis* the marks appear after the departure of the Seraph, nonetheless Bonaventure avers an explicit causal connection between the two. Bonaventure’s description of the event established a new paradigm for artistic representations going forward, as exemplified by the work of Giotto. As with Bonaventure’s account, the painter’s fresco of the stigmatization at the Basilica of Assisi (c. 1300) shows Francis on bended knee in prayerful attitude on the mountainside. The Seraph appears above him, the wings revealing a human form from the ribcage upwards. The figure is unmistakably Christ. Giotto was innovative as well, in ways that came to dominate future representations. In order to visually illustrate the causal connection between the Seraph and the stigmata of Francis, Francis’ stigmatization occurs in the presence of the Christ-Seraph, not after the vision had disappeared; the artist has collapsed the chronological sequence of events. Furthermore, Giotto painted rays of light emanating from the stigmata of the Christ-Seraph and terminating in the marks of Francis. There is no question but that the viewer is to understand the miraculous and divine origin of Francis’ stigmata. A second innovation was the inclusion of a witness to the stigmata, Brother Leo. We have seen that in the earliest depictions of the event (such as that of Berlinghieri, discussed above) there was no second figure, in keeping with the account of Celano’s *Life of Francis*. Indeed, Celano stresses Francis’ desire to keep the stigmata a secret; only two brothers are named as having seen the wounds during Francis’ lifetime. It was Bonaventure who introduced the explicit testimony of witnesses in *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, when he wrote that Francis was compelled to reveal his experience in order to share “the Lord’s sacrament.” These witnesses were said to have seen the stigmata for themselves and heard about the vision directly from the saint. Bonaventure writes:

> Now Through these most certain signs, Corroborated Not by the sufficient testimony of two or three witnesses, But by the superabundant testimony of a whole multitude, God’s testimony about you and through you Has been made overwhelmingly credible, Removing completely from unbelievers The veil of excuse, While they confirm believers in faith Raise them aloft with confident hope And set them ablaze with the fire of charity.

The addition of witnesses functioned to lend confirmation to the event and provide authenticity in the face of both Catholic and Protestant critics. Following Bonaventure’s
account, Giotto underscores the authenticity of the miracle by including just such a witness in his artistic program. And what began with Giotto in 1300, adding a witness to the scene, was commonplace by the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The choice of Leo as witness in Giotto’s work (and those paintings subsequently influenced by his innovation) is also important. Though other friars accompanied Francis to La Verna, it was Leo who became, in the textual tradition, his most trusted companion. In Little Flowers of the late fourteenth century, Leo is portrayed as a complex character; he is tempted, frightened, sceptical, devoted, and good. He strives and sometimes fails. And in his fragility of spirit, he provides for believers a reflection of themselves.

At the Sacro Monte di Orta, the setting of Chapel XV conveys the emotional and geographical desolation of Francis’ La Verna experience. Figures of small animals dot the landscape, underlining the danger and violence of the wilderness: a mountain cat attacks a wild boar, while a large lizard with open jaws lurks menacingly nearby, producing a measure of discomfort and fear in the viewer. The artistic program of Chapel XV reflects the textual vision of Bonaventure and the artistic vision of Giotto. Francis, echoing the penitential posture of the terra-cotta Francis in Chapel II, kneels on a bleak and rocky mountain with his arms outstretched at waist level, looking in awe at the Christ figure, a Seraph (see Fig. 3). Francis bears the stigmata; blackened flesh like “nail heads” mark the palms of the hands, and the skin surrounding the blackened flesh is red with irritation. In the Life of Francis, followed by The Major Legend of Saint Francis, Francis’ response to the vision was characterized by a mixture of joyousness, fearfulness, and incomprehension, followed at last by understanding. Prestinari captures this latter moment of clarity; it is a moment of decisive response, with Francis at once joyful in his share of Christ’s Passion, but also accepting of the suffering it entails.

Fig. 3. Francis and Brother Leo on La Verna at the moment of the Seraph’s appearance and Francis’ stigmatization. Chapel XV, Sacro Monte di Orta.

In the diorama, Brother Leo accompanies Francis. In contrast to St. Francis’ posture of attention, the witness leans away from the Seraph in fear while shading his eyes from the blinding vision (see Fig. 3). Leo’s posture thus amplifies the emotional pitch of the occasion by creating a tension between his attitude and that of Francis. Davidson examines the dynamics of the witness as depicted in painting. In Giotto’s Assisi fresco (c. 1300), Brother Leo sits to the side reading a book. The friar seems to take no notice of the encounter occurring before him. In Giovanni Bellini’s Pesaro altarpiece (c. 1470), Leo, book in hand, rests his head with his eyelids closed, mimicking the disciples of Christ who slept in the Garden. (473) Davidson concludes:
The contrast between Francis praying and Leo reading invokes the contrast between prayer and the study of sacred theology made by Francis in his letter to Anthony of Padua. Furthermore, Bonaventure has Francis contrast reading and studying with prayer. As in Christ’s life, prayer takes precedence over reading, so Francis prays on the mountainside while Leo reads, and Francis’s praying culminates in his stigmatization, while Leo’s reading distracts him from a vision of the supernatural.

In other works, such as the *Stigmatization of St. Francis* by Domenico Ghirlandaio (c. 1430), the *Stigmatization of St Francis* by Benozzo Gozzoli (c. 1450), and the *Stigmatization of St. Francis* by Federico Barocci (c. 1560–1580), Leo looks up from his book to watch the event. In our chapel, too, Leo clearly had been reading his book but was distracted by the vision. If Davidson is correct about the contrast between reading and prayer, it seems that in our chapel, as in the paintings by Ghirlandaio, Gozzoli, and Barocci, the need for authentication and eyewitness testimony was more imperative for these artists than the theological debate between reading and prayer. In terms of viewership and experiential participation at this critical moment in the life of St. Francis, the presence of Leo (or of a Leo) in the scene of Chapel XV invites each pilgrim to be a witness as well.

We do not know what the original frescos in Chapel XV looked like; they were replaced approximately one hundred and seventy-five years after the chapel was completed, probably because of decay. The current frescos were painted in 1783 by Riccardo Donnino (alt. Donini), and feature the gentle pastels, curving lines, cherubs, and pastoral landscapes typical of the rococo style. Despite this later renovation, the artistic program remains unified and compelling. The wall frescos sweep the viewer’s eye up toward the heavens, where the heavenly host, who ride swirling clouds, make their way (see Chapter 2, Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 55). Golden rays of light emanate from the Christ-Seraph, who is surrounded by a mandorla (see Fig. 4). The body and wings are highlighted in a soft red and gold while the stigmata are a deep black that is striking against the softer background.

Unusually, Donnino depicts an infant Christ-Seraph on the wall of Chapel XV. The six wings are present but diminutive and do not cover the infant’s body. Such a depiction may have had its roots in the Renaissance-era popularity of Roman putti, or cherubs, in iconography. Most commonly associated...
with love, the putti were also known as spirite, little sprites. By the fifteenth century in Italy and France, putti could be found festooning church entrances, hanging garlands on altars, and sitting vigilantly upon tombs. The Florentine sculptor Donatello (c. 1386–1466) is credited with the earliest sculptural examples of Renaissance putti. His putti are chubby, male and winged, typically having only two wings. As Charles Dempsey notes, there were medieval precedents to Donatello’s putti but, static in their execution, they served a minor decorative role. Dempsey emphasizes the celebratory role of the Renaissance putti and the development of “appealingly childish” personalities of their own. Sally Struthers credits Donatello with restoring their respectability, using them in a positive light, and infusing them with Christian meaning. Donatello’s putti romp, play instruments, dance, laugh and even show fear. They attended Christ at his Incarnation and at his death. But most striking in Donatello’s reinvention of the putto is its ability to be “a participant in [a scene’s] larger meaning, and even an independent bearer of meaning itself.”

Though putti and seraphim belong to different orders of the angelic hierarchy (seraphim being the highest order), in Renaissance iconography there was fluidity between angels, cherubim (which biblically speaking were composite creatures, part human, part animal, with multiple wings; cf. Ezek 1:5–16), putti and seraphim. The illuminated seraphim of the fourteenth century Petites Heures de Jean de Berry are infants rather than adults. In Benozzo Gozzoli’s Virgin and Child (c. 1460), infant seraphim surround Mary and Jesus. Infant seraphim are also associated with St. Francis in fifteenth-century painting. In Taddeo di Bartolo’s St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1403), St. Francis is surrounded by a mandorla of putti-seraphim. Domenico Ghirlandaio replicates this image of the seraphic infant mandorla in his St. Francis in Glory (c.1440). Similarly, Ghirlandaio uses a mandorla of infant seraphim around the crucified Christ-Seraph of his Stigmata of St. Francis in the Sassetta Chapel in Florence (c. 1483–85). By the end of the fifteenth century, putti cum seraphim have become a common motif.

Donnino’s innovation, influenced by the precedent of putti-seraphim with perhaps a dash of rococo playfulness, need not be a purely flamboyant or superficial one. The Christ child calls to mind Bartolomeo of Pisa’s parallel between the infancy narratives of Christ and Francis, vividly illustrated at the Sacro Monte di Orta in Chapel I. It also brings Francis’ transformation as a “new man” full circle by juxtaposing spiritual growth from birth to death. At the very least, the infant represents purity and innocence of both the divine and the saint. In this presentation, the stigmatization of Francis was a miracle in its purest form.

In addition to the infant Christ-Seraph, the ceiling fresco of Chapel XV is crowded with biblical and Church figures, interspersed with assorted angels, both children and adults. To the viewers’ left as one approaches the diorama is the Prophet Jeremiah and his assistant Baruch, both holding Scripture. Continuing to the right a helpful putto catches the toppled mitre of a male church figure. Next to them a second church figure has a five-star halo, which identifies him as Saint John Nepomuk (d. 1393; see Fig. 5). Though the inclusion of an eighteenth-century Bohemian saint in the artistic program of Chapel XV seems incongruous at first, the canonization of John in 1729 by Pope Benedict XIII played a very important role in the post-Tridentine Church. According to tradition, when King Wenceslaus ordered John to betray the seal of the confessional and reveal the sins of his queen, John refused. King Wenceslaus subsequently had John killed. Thus John became a symbol for the inviolability of the confessional, an upholder of the sacrament of Penance, and a defender of the autonomy of the Church. His popularity increased with his canonization, and his image spread throughout Catholic Europe. At Orta, St. John Nepomuk’s inclusion in the
late eighteenth-century fresco of Chapel XV serves as an example of the post-Tridentine program at work on the Sacri Monti.

Adjacent to St. John Nepomuk, one immediately recognizes Moses with shining horns and holding the tablet of the Ten Commandments. Behind Moses is another church figure looking down upon Francis and swinging a smoking incense burner. An adult angel hovers over a knife-wielding Abraham who leans towards a pale youth (Isaac) who holds a fasces across his body, perhaps symbolizing the salvific power and protection of God. The artist’s design leads the eye further upward and to the right, where the viewer encounters Eve and Adam modestly draped in greenery. Above them are the figures of Joseph and Mary, both gesturing toward the Holy Trinity who occupy the highest register. The figure of Christ is depicted as having just been removed from the adjacent cross; his semi-nude body is crumpled but sitting upright, with one hand, clearly displaying a stigma, raised aloft. God the Father sits enthroned, a pyramidal nimbus surrounding his head, and rests his hand upon the globus cruciger symbolic of authority and dominion. Both God and Christ look down on the scene below. The white dove flies above Christ and God, with rays of light emanating in all directions from its body. The painting of the Trinity is directly above the terra-cotta statue of St. Francis. Adjacent to the Trinity, putti bear a large cross, reminding the pilgrim of the glory of the Resurrection.

Continuing again to the right around the circumference of the ceiling and at a register just below Joseph and Mary, Donnino included additional New Testament figures who appear to be John the Baptist, Simon, James, and Bartholomew. Bartholomew, just below James, is engaged with yet another church figure. The design on the ornate vestment of the church representative is that of three men in a boat, thus recalling the biblical stories of Luke 5:1–11 and John 21:1–14. For Catholics, Church leadership, like the disciples, functions as fishers of men (Mark 1:17), with special emphasis on the pope, who from the thirteenth century until the mid-nineteenth
century, wore the Fisherman’s Ring to seal official documents. This particular papal figure is anonymous, his back to us; he personifies the papacy. His inclusion among the disciples speaks to the importance and authenticity of the papacy, and church authority in general. The unnamed pope is in conversation with a fair, golden-haired young man holding the martyr’s palm. Given the presence of a putto holding a book nearby, the iconography indicates that the youth is St. John the Evangelist. Moving again upward and to the right, King David plays a harp, and next to him Noah sits in an ark and holds an olive branch. Below Noah are Peter, dressed in white and holding a key to heaven, and Paul, also dressed in white, holding a sword (see Chapter 2, Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 56). A putto sits with them, holding Paul’s book of letters in one hand and a second key to heaven in the other. Donnino’s willingness for innovation is also found in these representations: Paul is beardless, John the Baptist is not in animal skins, and Adam and Eve are depicted in a positive light, content in Eden.

While the ceiling fresco with its swirling clouds and heavenly host commands attention, a rather washed-out landscape fills the eye-level register surrounding Francis and Leo. There is no hermitage in the vicinity of the friars; the ground level is a continuation of the rocky terrain of the diorama. Most unusually, however, the setting seems to be seaside foothills rather than an isolated mountaintop. While a tall mountain range appears in the far distance, the pilgrim finds Francis and Leo near the shore with a panoramic view of buildings, a bridge, and four tall sailing ships (see Chapter 2, Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 55). Though the water is evocative of the beautiful Lake Orta immediately below the Sacro Monte, the presence of large seagoing vessels takes the viewer away from the central Piedmont region to coastal Mediterranean Italy. This move echoes Chapel II, where the historical location of the encounter, the Church of San Damiano, is replaced with an outdoor landscape that could be anyplace. Given the rococo predilection for bucolic landscapes, perhaps this substitution of the coast for La Verna is simply a whimsical innovation that conjures any number of locations throughout Italy. On the other hand, it is possible that Donnino is making a connection between the universal message of St. Francis and the universal—literally global—mission of the Franciscans during the late eighteenth century. These ships of Chapel XV are sailing away from land; they are going out into the world. And by this time, Franciscan missionaries were active in all parts of the known world, including Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Venezuela, Florida and the American Southwest; Japan, Mongolia, China; Goa, Sumatra, Java and Borneo; the Guinea Coast and the Congo. Such missionary zeal reverberates especially with the theme and message of Chapel XI, St. Francis and the Sultan.

Despite the juxtaposition between the simple figures of Francis and his companion and the far more flamboyant frescos of the ceiling and the imaginary landscape of the sea, the focus of the chapel remains firmly on Francis and his spiritual connection to the Seraph, emphasizing the miracle of his transformation. And, in the midst of action (the threatening beasts, the cowering friar, the swirling heavens and radiating Seraph), Francis, in his stillness, provides a profoundly dramatic moment.

Conclusion

These two chapels of Orta, Chapel II and Chapel XV, capture pivotal moments in the tradition of Francis’ spiritual journey. The hagiographic accounts of his experiences at San Damiano and La Verna provided the architects and artists of the Sacro Monte di Orta the framework of his missionary activity. The differences between the literary accounts of these two transformational events in Francis’ life and their representation in the chapels of Orta reflect a duality of meanings embedded in the pilgrimage site at large. Each event held meaning for the life
of Saint Francis and additional meaning for the Counter Reformation Church, but both messages were part of a Franciscan love story. The *Legend of the Three Companions* asserts that the wounds of Christ were initially inscribed upon Francis’ heart as the young man prayed in adoration before the Cross of San Damiano. Toward the end of his life, through the seraphic spirit (love), Francis received the wounds externally in his flesh. Francis’ *conformitas Christi* signifies his role as mediator between God and humankind in Franciscan tradition from Celano, for whom Christ represents sacrifice and the Seraph represents the contemplative life—both pillars of the Franciscan Order—to Francis de Sales, an affiliate of the Capuchins, who wrote of Francis:

Love then drove the interior torment of this great lover S. Francis to the exterior, and wounded the body with the same dart of pain with which it had wounded the heart; but love being within could not well make the holes in the flesh without, and therefore the burning seraph coming to its help, darted rays of so penetrating a light, that it really made in the flesh the exterior wounds of the crucified which love had imprinted interiorly in the soul.⁶¹
Endnotes

1 Legend of the Three Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3 vols., eds. Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., et al. (New York: New City Press, 1999–2001), 2:76. The Legend of the Three Companions (c. 1245–46) is a compilation of episodes from the saint’s life intended to fill in gaps left by Thomas of Celano’s Life of Saint Francis. It is presumably based on the collected memories of those who knew Saint Francis in his lifetime. Later, Celano includes the story in his revised and expanded version of his Francis biography, entitled Desire of Remembrance of a Soul (c. 1250) in which he relied upon the Legend of Three Companions. Celano notes the story again in his Miracles of St. Francis (c. 1254), as does Bonaventure in his official biography of St. Francis, Major Life of St. Francis (c. 1260).


3 Legend of the Three Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:76.

4 Thomas of Celano, Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:249. Celano’s Life of Saint Francis makes no mention of the encounter between Francis and Christ at San Damiano.


7 Ibid., 200.


11 Ibid., 199, 201.

12 By tradition, Francis is the first case of external stigmata (in the narrow sense) in Christianity. Catherine of Siena (1327–80) is also said to have experienced stigmata, but that when she prayed God would make them invisible, her prayer was granted.

13 Legend of the Three Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:76. See also The Assisi Compilation, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:180–1.


15 The identification of Francis as a “new man” appears frequently in Thomas of Celano’s Treatise on the Miracles of St. Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:399–400.


17 For discussion, see Hammond, “Saint Francis’s Doxological Mysticism in Light of His Prayers,” 106–11.


19 Ibid., 3. Katz challenges this traditional image of the mystic and of mysticism, arguing that the relationships between mysticism and established religion “are far more varied and dialectical than is usually appreciated.” Nevertheless, the traditional understanding of the relationships seems to still apply within the history and scholarship of medieval European Christianity.


23 Ibid., 30.


25 The stableman and riding mount hint at Francis’ previous aspirations for knighthood.

26 The icon became property of the Poor Clares when they occupied San Damiano. When the sisters moved to the Basilica of Saint Clare in 1257, the icon went with them. It still resides in the Chapel of the Crucifix.


29 Michael Robson, *The Franciscans in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 18, 44.


32 Ibid., 2:632.


36 Ibid., 83.

37 Ibid., 84–86.

38 Ibid., 66.


40 Ibid., 464.

41 Ibid., 496–71.

42 Probably following Thomas of Celano’s later *Legend for Use in the Choir*, in which he emends his earlier account to include that Francis “saw above him a crucified Seraph who clearly impressed on him the signs of the crucifixion so that Francis, too, appeared crucified.” See *Legend for Use in the Choir*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 1:323.

43 Davidson, “Miracles of Bodily Transformation,” 468.


45 The two brothers are Elias and Rufino.


47 Ibid.


Ibid., 473.

Ibid.


Ibid., 26–33.


The starred halo represents the miraculous and radiant light that marked the spot of his drowning.
