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Chapels XI and XVIII

At the Sacro Monte di Orta, the Council of Trent’s directives on the use of didactic art were mindfully implemented. Affirmation of a new kind of spirituality, answering the needs of the faithful, was firmly situated within the orthodoxies of the Church; St. Francis embodied both of these ideals—affective piety and orthodoxy—and naturally became an appealing role model. Both Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, a significant force in the Council of Trent, and his cousin Federico Borromeo wrote extensively on the correct use of didactic art in the reform of the church.

In 1593 authority over the construction at Orta was given to Carlo Bascapè, Bishop of Novara, with the agenda to make sure all of the chapels were attuned to an appropriate and accurate post-Tridentine vision of the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. Chapels XI and XVIII, in particular, offer answers to the Protestant Reformation’s critiques of the Church. They illustrate the dual purposes of the chapels and of the complex as a whole: to invite the worship of pilgrims and to present an edifying, didactic diorama of orthodox truths.

Chapel XI concerns the granting of an indulgence to Francis at the Porziuncola, while Chapel XVIII relates a papal visitation to Francis’ tomb in Assisi. Both chapels offer carefully measured replicas of places sacred to the life of Francis, which give viewers a way to enter into a vicarious relationship with both the original pilgrimage locations and the special meaning of Orta. The themes of both offer a staunch rebuff to Protestant attacks and underscore the decisions of Trent regarding the legitimacy of indulgences and the intercessory role of saints.

The Indulgence of Porziuncola is the theme of Chapel XI; it culminates a story begun in the previous chapel. In Chapel X, Francis’ battle with temptation (Satan) leads him into the woods surrounding the Porziuncola, his flesh scourged by the thorns. Then, as the Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals relates:

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 church and cried in one voice, ‘Blessed Francis, hurry to the Savior and his Mother who await you in the church.’ 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.

The terracotta angels of the diorama direct Francis toward a frescoed scene of Christ and Mary enthroned, thus foreshadowing the Porziuncola Indulgence. The story takes up in Chapel XI, when, after Francis has offered a bouquet of roses to Mary, Jesus in turn of-
fers Francis an unspecified boon. Francis asks for an indulgence, which becomes known as the Indulgence of Porziuncola. Following the Blessed Virgin’s suggestion, Jesus picks August 2 for the indulgence.3

Thomas McGrath has studied the history of the Porziuncola Indulgence in art, noting that depictions of the event fell out of favour from the fifteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries. By the late sixteenth century, the image experienced a revival. McGrath ties this reintroduction to competition between the Franciscans and the Dominicans; images of the Porziuncola Indulgence “offered support for the legitimacy of the Perdono legend, called attention to Francis’ devotion to the Virgin, and alluded to a Franciscan rosary tradition that directly competed with that of the Dominicans.”6 All of those reasons dovetail nicely with the agenda of the Franciscans at Orta, and make the emphasis on the Indulgence in both Chapels X and XI a logical move.

The exterior of Chapel XI is a miniature reproduction of the huge Basilica Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, which now houses within it the little chapel of Porziuncola (see Chapter 27, the Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 40). The original Porziuncola was a small abandoned church which the Benedictines allowed Francis to use, and which became a center for the early Franciscans. Here, the friars returned each year for their general chapter, St. Clare entered religious life, and, according to tradition, Francis had the mystical encounter related above and lived out his last days. The walls of Chapel XI are covered with narrative frescos representing the stages involved in granting the indulgence (see Fig. 1): Francis prays to the crucifix for the salvation of all sinners; an angel invites him to the church of Porziuncola where Jesus and Mary await him; a version of Pope Innocent III’s dreams with several friars physically supporting the Lateran church; Francis petitions Honorius III for the indulgence; Francis, in the presence of an angel, kneels

Fig. 1. The Vestibule and surrounding Frescos of Chapel XI. Sacro Monte di Orta.
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. Within the diorama, Christ and Mary are equally enthroned on a grand scale behind an altar covered with real linen altar cloth (see Fig. 2). Eight angels are arrayed on either side. Of equal size, wearing identical large crowns, mother and son turn to look at each other. Mary holds her hands out in a questioning gesture, while Christ holds a sceptre in one hand and gestures to the kneeling Francis with the other.

While the Porziuncola Indulgence has remained in place until today, albeit with several revisions, the story’s sources and authenticity are still disputed. In the 1260s, as the story became current that Francis had wished for a total indulgence for all sins, the rush of pilgrims created a need for the Franciscans to validate its authenticity. They began to collect notarized testimonies about the Pardon of Assisi and brother Francesco Bartholdi made a compilation of them in 1340. All accounts of its creation are second- or third-hand, such as the following testimony:

I, Brother Benedict of Arezzo...now bear witness that I often heard from one of the companions of blessed Francis...that he was with blessed Francis at Perugia in the presence of the Lord Pope Honorius when he asked for an indulgence of all sins for those persons who, being contrite and having confessed them, come to Saint Mary of Angels, otherwise known as Portiuncula, from the first vespers of the first day of August to the vespers of the following day. Since this indulgence...
was so humbly and yet so earnestly sought by the blessed Francis, it was eventually most liberally granted by the Supreme Pontiff, although he made it plain that it was not the custom of the Apostolic See to grant such indulgences. Another witness relates that Leo told him that “Francis had himself said that he had petitioned the Pope to attain an indulgence for the church of Portiuncula on the anniversary of its consecration.” When the Pope asked for how long he wanted this remission to be, they negotiated almost for seven years, but still Francis was not satisfied until he received the remission of all sins “so that no further [temporal] punishment is attached to them.” The Pope granted it, but the cardinals were aghast and asked the Pope to limit it to the length of one natural day per year, which he did. Adding authority to the Indulgence, the account of the meeting concludes: “When the blessed Francis left the Pope after the concession of the indulgence, he heard a voice saying to him: ‘Francis, know that, just as this indulgence has been given on earth, so it also has been ratified in heaven’.”

Seventeenth-century guidebooks for early pilgrims to the Sacro Monte di Orta illustrate the didactic levels of the artistic program. Simple messages reached the masses, but sophisticated readings were also incorporated for the educated. The Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta states that the chapel, with Francis hurrying on foot to offer to the Redeemer and Mary the Queen of Heaven the corona delle sue vittorie, represents the victory of his chastity. Corona is multivalent here because the crown is a garland of roses, both a metaphorical crown of chastity and a “rosary” of his devotion. This is surely a clever intertextual reference to the Franciscan Rosary, or “Crown” (sometimes also known as the Seraphic Rosary, or the Rosary of the Seven Joys of Our Lady). Although the origin of the Franciscan Crown is unclear, the rosary, a distinctive seven decades for the Seven Joys of Mary, and its legend seems to have been codified by Luke Wadding in his Annales Minorum (1625–54). Certainly, though, the Marian devotion was popularized within the Franciscan order in the fifteenth century, particularly during the rule of the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV (1471–83), who in 1479 strongly encouraged the rosary as an invaluable instrument of personal and societal conversion. In any case, the importance of the Franciscan Crown was well established by the time Chapels X and XI were constructed in the early to mid-seventeenth century at the Sacro Monte di Orta. As Marian devotion was a special touch point of the Tridentine reform, here at Orta the Franciscan Capuchins were (re)asserting: 1) Mary’s important place in Catholic belief and practice, 2) the Franciscan claim to a privileged relationship with the Queen of Heaven, 3) the importance of the rosary as a devotional practice, and 4) the Franciscan claim to a long–standing tradition of the rosary.

The Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta goes on to say that, as a special acknowledgment of his love, Jesus and Mary granted to Francis the grace of a plenary indulgence for the remission of the temporal punishment of sins that have been subject to the Sacrament of Confession. However, they cautioned Francis that this must be “according to the Pope’s conditions.” According to tradition, then, Pope Honorius III allowed the indulgence on the second day of August each year. A second pilgrim’s guide, the Instruzioni Al Divoto Lettore Che Desidera Visitar Il Sacro Monte Di S. Francesco D’Orta, reiterates the story of the indulgence and its authenticity: “In 1223, when Pope Honorius III ruled, Francis presented it to him at the Lateran arousing admiration and amazement for his patience and courage.”

This chapel teaches the validity of indulgences and their divine, direct, emphatic institution by Christ. It reconstructs the church at Assisi and refers to the indulgence
available there. But it also reminds pilgrims of their participation in the divine economy at Orta, where indulgences are also granted for visits to the Sacro Monte. A visit to Chapel XI could earn the pilgrim an indulgence of one hundred days per Saturday Mass in the small chapel.

In the story of the Porziuncola Indulgence, Francis, who traded thorns for roses, accomplished a greater *imitatio Christi* than had ever been seen before, for he become a conduit of grace to the believers which equalled that provided by Christ, thus pilgrims accessed Christ through Francis and by imitating Francis. The creators of the chapels hoped that the worshippers would become so integrated into the “realness” of the scenes that their unmediated sensation would become indistinguishable from the mediated one, and all realities would be fused. Thus references reverberate between Francis (a kind of Christ) and Chapel XI (a kind of Porziuncola). Worshippers who could not participate in the August indulgence could nevertheless achieve the same effect by viewing the chapel. All of this presupposes on the part of the site’s designers and sponsors the absolute legitimacy of the mechanism of plenary indulgence. The importance of the Pope, the rosary, and the Blessed Virgin are confirmed within the program as well.

The story of Chapel XVIII is again the story of two chapels, one being the simulacrum of the other. The first is the tomb of St Francis in Assisi. Bernard of Besse relates that Francis died in 1226, at the age of forty-five, and then

His most holy body was buried at Assisi in the Church of Saint George, where the Monastery of Saint Clare (?) now stands. After a few years a church was built in the saint’s honor near the walls of the city and by the authority of Pope Gregory IX who laid the first stone of the founda-

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*Fig. 3. Pope Nicholas V and his prelates experience a vision of St. Francis during a visit to the saint’s crypt. Chapel XVIII, Sacro Monte di Orta.*
The site of the church is called the Hill of Paradise.  

On the lowest level is the crypt, and above were built two superimposed churches. Francis was interred in 1230. It was consecrated a basilica in 1253.

Orta’s Chapel XVIII is part of a carefully executed replica (encompassing Chapels XVIII, XIX, and XX) which powerfully portrays the basilica in Assisi. Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta explains that the church at Orta “is constructed on three floors to resemble the church in Assisi where the body of St Francis reposes. The lower part, which is subterranean, faithfully represents the sepulchre and the deposition of our father Francis.” The complex frescos seen inside most of the other chapels are not present here. The chapel interior simply suggests structural backdrops. It holds only four life-sized sculptures—Francis, a pope, a prelate and an assistant (see Fig. 3). Mark of Lisbon relates that Pope Nicholas V (often erroneously identified in the texts and on the UNESCO website as Nicholas III), along with the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan and Andrea da Norcia (Captain of the Guard) visited Assisi in 1449 and descended into the crypt of the basilica to venerate the remains of the Saint. Nicholas is an interesting person, much admired for his love of letters and his friendship with some of the important humanists of his day. Eamon Duffy has called him “the most attractive of the Humanist Popes.” He brought peace, ended schisms, and renovated the city of Rome. His Jubilee of 1450 was an enormous success which revitalized pilgrimage and fostered the display of important relics. Essentially, he “confirmed beyond argument the centrality of Rome and the Pope in popular Catholicism.” His canonization of St. Bernardino of Siena, the highly controversial Franciscan preacher, cleverly allied the papacy with the current of popular religious feeling.

According to the 17th-century guidebook Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta, during the pontiff’s visit to the tomb of Francis, the saint appeared before him, standing with his hands crossed over his chest, showing the stigmata. A miraculous perfume emanated from the sacred corpse. When he left, Nicholas could not hide his joy and spread the news of his encounter. The explanation of Orta’s Chapel XVIII in another 17th-century guidebook, the Instruzioni Al Divoto Lettore Che Desidera Visitar Il Sacro Monte Di S. Francesco D’Orta, begins with a quote from the biblical book of Sirach, in order to make the comparison between Francis and Elisha: “In death he performed miracles” (48:14). The introduction emphasizes that like the great prophet of the Old Testament, Francis remained a herald of God and miracle worker even in death. The pilgrim’s goal remained viably attainable (at Orta or Assisi) through mediation of the long dead saint.

At the center of the chapel there is an upright statue of the dead Francis, miraculously standing with his eyes turned to heaven, his arms crossed on his breast, in penitential repose. Before Francis is the kneeling figure of Pope Nicholas V. Just as in Mark of Lisbon’s account, two additional figures join the Pope to make a group of three. According to the report, the Pope then clipped some of Francis’ hair to keep as a relic.

The tomb of Francis at Assisi is a scurolo, that is, a place where the relics of the saint were preserved and venerated. Orta strives to be the scurolo of that other tomb and to vicariously hold the relics of Francis. The twin tombs of Francis allow an immediate participation in the events of his death; his death was an imitation of the passion of Christ, and thus individuals are called to intense devotion, to imitating Christ through Francis. Chapel XVIII gives a powerful answer to the critiques of veneration of the saints, since it demonstrates the salvific function of the saints and the concomitant importance of the relic as a central object of faith. Added to this is a glorification of the role of popes and the glory of Rome. In the Counter Reforma-
tion culture, Nicholas V epitomizes all that is grand and praiseworthy of the papacy.

The Franciscan chapels at Orta tell the life of Francis, but with a distinctive didactic agenda. The Tridentine reform program was aimed at achieving uniformity of practice and belief; it was also intended to affirm and underscore traditional Catholic practice and belief, such as the mediating role of the saints and the cult of relics. Despite his many individualistic gestures, Francis was theologically orthodox, and thus proved an excellent model for upholding, or perhaps reclaiming, the faithful during the religious struggles of the Early Modern period.
Endnotes

1 A version of this chapter was previously published: Cynthia Ho, “Closing the Borders: St. Francis at Orta,” in Identity and Alterity in Hagiography and the Cult of Saints, eds. Ana Marinković, Trpimir Vedriš, and Ildikó Csepregi (Zagreb: Hagiotheca, 2010), 245–60.


5 Ibid., 3:810–11.


7 For an early version of the prophetic dream, see Legend of the Three Companions, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 297–98.

8 Francesco Bartholdi della Rossa, Tractatus de Indulgentia S. Maria de Portiuncula, ed. Paul Sabatier (Paris: Fishbacher, 1900). The one-day indulgence on August 2 was later extended to all Franciscan churches, and in 1967, to all Catholic churches.

9 Documents Concerning the Portiuncula Indulgence (1277–1900), in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3:809.


14 In truth, Pope Sixtus IV granted indulgences to any variety of the rosary, even the very popular rosary of the Franciscan’s arch rivals the Dominicans, and their Confraternity of the Rosary founded in 1470. Like the Franciscans, the Dominicans too had a storied history of the rosary and each order claimed to be the authentic representative of the tradition. According to Dominican tradition, St. Dominic received the rosary as a divine gift to aid in combatting heresy. For both the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the rosary—popular and easy to use—remained important in spreading and maintaining devotion for the church of the post-Tridentine era. On the other hand, it was this same pope (Sixtus IV) who banned all images of the Dominican nun St. Catherine and her stigmatization. Another significant bone of contention between the two orders was the question of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. The rivalry between Franciscans and Dominicans has only abated in modern times. For additional context on the rivalry between the two mendicant orders, see Thomas McGrath, “Dominicans, Franciscans, and the Art of Political Rivalry: Two Drawings and a Fresco by Giovanni Battista della Rovere,” Renaissance Studies 25, no. 2 (2011): 185–207, and Thomas


16 “In particolare fu concessa la famosa grazia dell’indulgenza data da Dio per l’intercessione della Sua Gloriosa Genitrice a Francesco che pregando per la salvezza delle anime supplicava che tutti i fedeli, che visitassero quel Sacro Tempio il du di Agosto, potessero ricevere la remissione di tutti i peccati, l’assoluzione dalla colpa e dalla pena, secondo le condizioni che il Papa vorrà disporre e confermare per questa Indulgenza Plenaria.” See Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta, 96–97. The pope did indeed ultimately confirm the indulgence, but limited it to August 2 of each year. Note also that the guide states that pilgrims “could receive the remission of all sins, absolution from guilt and punishment,” which is a very distinctive claim for an indulgence which usually applies only to remission of temporal punishments for sins already absolved through the Sacrament of Confession. A second guide, the Instruzione Al Divoto Lettore Che Desidera Visitare Il Sacro Monte Di S. Francesco D’Orta, specifies that only those pilgrims who received the sacraments of confession and holy communion are eligible. Instruzione al divoto lettore che desidera visitare Il Sacro Monte di S. Francesco d’Orta, in Antiche Guide del Sacro Monte di Orta, 189. All other textual evidence indicates that the Porziuncola Indulgence conforms to the traditional parameters of indulgences, despite the claim of the Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta.

17 Subsequent modifications of the Porziuncola Indulgence expanded its scope to include any Franciscan church. Moreover, the faithful may earn more than one plenary indulgence at that annual occasion, depending on the number of times that person fulfills the prayerful obligations. See Raphael Mary Huber, The


18 Instruzione al divoto lettore che desidera visitare Il Sacro Monte di S. Francesco d’Orta, 189–90.

19 Annabel Wharton, Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 141.

20 Instruzione al divoto lettore che desidera visitare Il Sacro Monte di S. Francesco d’Orta, 191.

21 Chapel XVIII is also called the “Cappella Canobiana” because it was paid for by Abbot Amico Canobio, a nobleman from Novara and supervisor, designer, and a principal promoter of the Sacro Monte.

22 Bernard of Besse, A Book of the Praises of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 367.

23 In 1476, the tomb of the saint was sealed and hidden. Later, in 1818, Pius VII ordered the tomb excavated and exhumed. To make room for pilgrims, a neo-Classical crypt was built; this was replaced by a simpler, neo-Romanesque tomb in 1925–32. In 1939, Francis of Assisi was declared the patron saint of Italy. In 1978, the tomb was reopened for study of the remains. On the history of St. Francis’ tomb, see Rosalind Brooke, “The Rediscovery of St Francis’ Body,” in The Image of St. Francis: Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 454–71.

24 Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta, 115.

25 Nicholas III (1225–80) was especially well disposed to the Franciscans, since his father was a friend of Francis and belonged to his third order. He stands out in the early Franciscan documents for his support of Francis’ Rule. But he definitely was not in Assisi in the fifteenth century. The account of Nicholas V’s vision was first published in the Chronicles of Mark of Lisbon. See Mark of Lisbon, Croniche degli ordini instituiti dal P. San Francesco. Prima parte divisa in dieci libri che contiene la sua vita, la sua morte e i suoi miracoli, composta dal R.P. Fra Marco da Lisbona, traduz. dal portoghese (Naples, 1680), 302.

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Spiegazione Delle Sagre Capelle Fondate Sopra Il Monte D’Orta, 121.
30 Instruzione al divoto lettore che desidera visitare Il Sacro Monte di S. Francesco d’Orta, 229. In this guidebook, Chapel XVIII is numbered XXXI in accordance with the original scheme.
31 Mark of Lisbon, Croniche degli ordini instituiti dal P. San Francesco, 302. Interestingly, paintings of Pope Nicholas’s encounter with Francis became the vogue in the seventeenth century. Three important painters, Antonio Montúfar, Francisco de Zurbarán, and Jacques Blanchard, all rendered the same newly popular story of Pope Nicholas V’s vision in the mid-1600s.