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In Andrea da Firenze's fantastical fresco, the Dominican friars participate in the body of Christ on earth and in heaven.

Andrea di Bonaiuto (fl. 1346-1379), called Andrea da Firenze, ALLEGORY OF THE ACTIVE AND TRIUMPHANT CHURCH AND OF THE DOMINICAN ORDER (1366-1368). Fresco. Chapter House or Spanish Chapel, S. Maria Novella, Florence, Italy. Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library. Used by permission.

Working in Christ's Body

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The continuity of the Church triumphant is demonstrated in this Florentine fresco from the fourteenth century in the Dominican church complex of Santa Maria Novella. It is located in the Chapter House, or meeting room, adjacent to the nave of the basilica. Frescos on the other three walls further recognize and celebrate the Dominican order and the Church with scenes from The Passion of Christ, The Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas, and The Life of St. Peter Martyr. Both Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Peter Martyr, or Peter of Verona (1205-1252), had been prominent members of the order in its early years.

The Dominicans are a religious order of mendicant friars founded by St. Dominic (1170-1221) and sanctioned by the papacy in 1216.¹ Dominicans and Franciscans, as preaching orders whose convents were within cities, spread quickly throughout Medieval Europe. The Dominicans were especially attractive to devout Catholics because they set up not only the First and Second Orders (for men and women), but also a Third Order for laypeople who wished to dedicate themselves to a religious life. St. Dominic and his followers for generations were scholars and preachers. The order was highly educated, and as powerful patrons of the arts its members influenced the iconography used in art and architecture.²

A rich merchant Buonamico (Mico) Guidalotti, upon his death, left 200 of the 700 florins needed to build the Chapter House between 1343 and 1355. The payment for its decoration resulted from the sale of a house valued at 65 florins, as stated in the will. The Guidalotti family was permitted to use the chapel for burial and to have masses said daily for the salvation of their souls.³ Andrea da Firenze and his assistants frescoed the four walls of the Chapter House from 1366 to 1368.⁴ It became known as the Spanish Chapel in 1566 when the Spanish wife of Cosimo I de' Medici, Eleonora da Toledo, enjoyed praying there as well as using it for various celebrations.

On the right wall of the Chapter House are allegorical scenes of the *Church Militant and the Church Triumphant*, where St. Dominic and St. Thomas Aquinas are shown in five roles – as soldiers of the *militia Christi* who preach, defend, debate and expound the truth of the faith, and reconcile men. The worldly and ecclesiastical hierarchy is shown on the lower left of the fresco while the faithful enter paradise on the upper register. The not yet

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completed main cathedral or Duomo of Florence, S. Maria del Fiore, is seen in the left foreground, though it is neither pink nor had Brunelleschi's dome been built yet. The bell tower is also on the wrong side of the Duomo; it is by the western façade not the eastern apse. The archbishop of Florence was a Dominican at the time. The reigning pope, Urban V, is enthroned in the center of this area and flanked by other church ecclesiastics. This represented the power of the Church on earth and the power of the Dominicans in Florence.

At the lower right, Andrea da Firenze depicts a fierce fight between a pack of wolves that are trying to snatch sheep and the black and white dogs that are protecting them (see detail on p. 42). This is a metaphor for the friars' struggle against heresy. Dominicans are often represented as 'hounds of the Lord,' since the Italian *Domini cani* puns on their name. Dominic's first biographer, Jordan of Saxony, related that St. Dominic's mother had a vision of giving birth to a black and white dog with a torch in its mouth. Both Jordan and other authors saw the dog as the symbol of the preacher, while its bark was the sacred doctrine. Pedro Ferrando, Dominic's second biographer, contrasted the barking of the dog with the image of the heretics disguised as wolves used here by Andrea da Firenze.⁵

St. Thomas Aquinas is shown holding an open book to the right of the dogs attacking the wolves. The book, an attribute shared by many saints (especially founders of religious orders), is particularly relevant to St. Dominic and the Order of Preachers, as scholarship was part of their vocation. St. Dominic encouraged his friars to study, and he introduced study as a means to the ministry of the salvation of souls.

In the center of the composition, St. Dominic directs the faithful from earth to heaven. St. Peter, holding the keys, awaits those kneeling at the gate waiting to enter heaven in the upper left (see detail on p. 43). Those souls in the earthly realm (found in the middle right of the fresco, making music and dancing) can only enter heaven by receiving penance. The figure

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kneeling before a Dominican receives absolution just to the right of Dominic directing the faithful.

The Dominicans are present in both the heavenly and earthly realms of this fantastical fresco. They are not only working hard to protect God's sheep from heresy, they are also critical in getting the redeemed to heaven. The symbols of the four evangelists surrounding Christ (the angel for Matthew, winged lion for Mark, winged ox for Luke, and eagle for John) echo the importance the Dominicans place on scriptural teachings.

Though this fresco was created for the Dominicans and naturally highlights their particular mission and work, we are all part of the continuity of the Church that is depicted here. We all praise God and look towards the same Christ. Our membership in the Church, like that of the Dominicans, constitutes our participation in the body of Christ on earth and in heaven.

NOTES

1 Domingo de Guzmán (St. Dominic) was born to a noble family in Calerverga, a village near Burgos, Spain, and was educated at university in Palencia.

2 Domingo Iturgaiz, "Dominican Order," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T023204 (accessed March 5, 2014).

3 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 137, 143-44.

4 Musei Civici Fiorentini, Cappellone degli Spagnoli, museicivici-fiorentini.comune.fi.it/smn/CappelloneSpagnoli (accessed March 5, 2014).

5 Iturgaiz, "Dominican Order."