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In *The Mocking and Flagellation of Christ with the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic*, Fra Angelico transforms a scene of humiliating violence into a meditative and contemplative image.

Meditating on Christ's Suffering

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Guido di Pietro, who became Fra Angelico when he joined the Dominican order in Fiesole, Italy, had worked as a painter in Tuscany and Rome. By their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Observants of the Order of Preachers (which is the true name of the Dominicans) gave up the right to own private property, to marry and have children, and to make personal and professional decisions on the basis of their own best interests.¹

Fra Angelico, together with his assistants, produced over fifty frescoes and tempera panels. This represents the largest body of monastic decoration from any period in the history of art. The artist was a monk in San Domenico in Fiesole, which was the parent community to San Marco, Florence, where this fresco, *The Mocking and Flagellation of Christ with the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic*, is painted in a monastic cell (single dormitory room).

Of all the religious orders, only the Dominicans considered visual images so crucial to prayer, meditation, and study that they mandated the use of images in their dormitories.² Fra Angelico presupposed that the beholder would instantly comprehend the relationship of his frescoes to the Dominican habits of prayer, liturgical customs, and practices of reading and studying.³

The cell of each friar in the monastery of San Marco was furnished not only with a bed, desk, chair, and prayer kneeler, but also a contemplative image of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or Saint Dominic. The frescos in the twenty cells on the east corridor were inspired by scenes in the life of Christ or the Virgin; they correspond to the major feasts of the liturgical year and invite meditative reflection on the mysteries of the faith. They led the friars to identify with the mystical life of notable forerunners, mostly Dominican, as they meditated on the liturgical texts associated with the major feasts of the church calendar.⁴ While these frescoes “may not precisely conform to the [Dominican] Constitutions’ dictates, they satisfy the spirit of those requirements and even go beyond them,” William Hood observes.⁵

The Mocking of Christ, one of Fra Angelico’s most famous and transcendent cell frescoes, is found in a senior cleric’s cell.⁶ Margaret Miles astutely notes that this depiction is like no other treatment of the biblical scene:

The monk is directed to identify with the blindfolded Christ as the scene takes place from Christ's perspective. The Dominican viewer sees only what Christ feels. No human being inflicts the blows Christ suffers. Only the body parts that strike, that spit, are shown. Christ holds the bat and ball his mockers have required in mockery of a scepter and globe. One mocker raises his hat in mock imitation of a gesture of respect as he spits. The monastic onlooker, Dominic, has closed eyes and a peaceful, even relaxed body, showing no visible emotion, while the Virgin exhibits a quiet sadness. They are not engaged in the emotions of the event, but in meditation on it.⁷

Even though the depicted acts of violence were intended to humiliate Christ, Fra Angelico portrays him as a figure enthroned in majesty. Perhaps this fresco will lead us, like the fifteenth-century clerics for whom the blessed Dominican friar painted the image, to meditate on the imitation of the suffering Christ.

NOTES

1 William Hood, *Fra Angelico: San Marco, Florence*, The Great Fresco Cycles of the Renaissance (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 25.

2 *Ibid.*, 34.

3 *Ibid.*, 6.

4 *Ibid.*, 34.

5 *Ibid.*, 40.

6 John T. Spike, "A Pauline Source for 'The Mocking of Christ' by Fra Angelico in Cell 7 of the Convent of San Marco," in Achim Gnann and Heinz Widauer, eds., *Festschrift für Konrad Oberhuber* (Milan, IT: Electa, 2000), 14-16.

7 Margaret Miles, "Achieving the Christian Body," in Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, eds., *Interpreting Christian Art* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 18-19.



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