

The Frescoes of Fra Angelico in the Chapel of Pope Nicholas V: Visual Persuasion in the Program of Nicholas' Pontificate

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Table of Contents

Chapter One. Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two. The Chapel of Nicholas V : Visual Analysis.....	3
Chapter Three. The Patron : Pope Nicholas V.....	7
Chapter Four. The Artist : Fra Angelico.....	20
Chapter Five. The Narrative Structure of the Chapel Frescoes.....	25
Chapter Six. The Chapel Frescoes : Saints Stephen and Lawrence.....	28
Chapter Seven. Papal Primacy.....	34
Chapter Eight. Charity.....	39
Chapter Nine. The Institution of the Church.....	43
Chapter Ten. The Doctors of the Church.....	49
Chapter Eleven. The Function of the Chapel of Nicholas V.....	51
Chapter Twelve. Conclusion.....	55
Bibliography.....	57
Illustrations.....	60

15. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. St. Stephen Distributing Alms

16. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. Dedication of St. Lawrence

17. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. Stephen Preaching

18. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. Stephen before the Sanhedrin

19. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. Lawrence Holding the Treasures of the Church

20. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. Lawrence Distributing the Treasures of the Church

21. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. Expulsion of Stephen from the City

List of Illustrations

1. Chapel of Nicholas V, Vatican Palace. *West Wall.*
2. Chapel of Nicholas V, *North Wall.*
3. Chapel of Nicholas V, *East Wall.*
4. Schematic diagram of Chapel of Nicholas V.
5. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Four Evangelists.*
6. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Leo the Great.*
7. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Ambrose.*
8. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Augustine.*
9. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Gregory.*
10. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Athanaseus.*
11. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Thomas Aquinas.*
12. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Jerome.*
13. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. John Chrysostom.*
14. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Ordination of St. Stephen.*
15. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *St. Stephen Distributing Alms.*
16. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Ordination of St. Lawrence.*
17. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Stephen Preaching.*
18. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Stephen Before the Sanhedrin.*
19. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Lawrence Receiving the Treasures of the Church.*
20. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Lawrence Distributing the Treasures of the Church.*
21. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Expulsion of Stephen from the City.*

22. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Martyrdom of St. Stephen.*
23. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Judgment of St. Lawrence.*
24. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Conversion of Hippolytus.*
25. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence.*
26. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Detail of Virtues in Niches, Martyrdom of St. Lawrence.*
27. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Window embrasures, West Wall.*
28. Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V. *Inlaid marble floor.*
29. Fra Angelico, Monastery at San Marco, cell 7. *Mocking of Christ.*
30. Fra Angelico, Monastery at San Marco, cell 11. *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints.*
31. Design for Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome.
32. Aurelian Wall, Rome.

Chapter One

Introduction

As he lay dying from a severe case of gout in March of 1455, Pope Nicholas V summoned together his College of Cardinals to give to them his final testament and charge. Present at this gathering was Gianozzo Manetti, Nicholas' personal biographer, who, in his recordings of it, noted Nicholas' reassertion of his association with Christ and subsequent authority in the Church. Manetti described the scene as redolent of Christ's final meeting with the apostles at the Last Supper. Like Christ, even the day before his death, the pope's concerns were for the Church. His thoughts focused on the perpetuation of sacred traditions, as well as on the changes made during his pontificate. These changes, part of his "renovatio urbis," he explained, were motivated by his desire to protect the Church and to increase devotion of the masses who, perhaps unable to comprehend the greatness of Rome and the papacy from ancient literature, would be informed of her glory by these great monuments.¹ Nicholas' words, recorded, document his penchant for proclaiming the eminence of Rome and the primacy of the papacy through visual persuasion. His unprecedented declaration of religious authority on such a grand scale through the humanistic resources of the arts distinguishes his pontificate and all of the projects executed during his reign, even those seemingly small, from those that came before it. His own private chapel, decorated with frescoes by artist Fra Angelico and located in the recesses of the Vatican palace, assumes its preeminent status within the realm of Nicholas' grand plan.

The Chapel of Nicholas V exhibits two narrative hagiographic cycles: one, the life and martyrdom of St. Stephen and the other, the life and martyrdom of St. Lawrence. The arrangement, treatment, and specificity of the scenes chosen distinctly reflect

specific papal rhetoric and ideas that correlate with the conception of the papacy that Nicholas hoped to convey to his viewers. The frescoes subtly highlight the ideals of primacy and charity, and convey the inseparability of these ideals from the Roman Church as an institution. Thus, the cycle effectively conveys a noble perception of the pontificate of Nicholas V. Although most powerful in the auspicious moment of their execution, the frescoes of this tiny Chapel in the Vatican continue to attest to their own power by their endurance throughout the centuries--provocative, but timeless, papal self-conception.

Upon entering the tiny space, one faces the South wall, in front of which stands the Chapel's altar. At one time, Vasari notes, an image of *The Enshrinement of Christ*, painted by Fra Angelico, the center of the accompanying fresco cycle, adorned the altar, but that image has since disappeared.¹ It has been suggested that an apse once contained the altar, but Julius II replaced it with the large window that now fills much of the wall. The altarpiece may have been destroyed during this renovation.

The other three walls contain the pictorial cycle of scenes from the lives of Saints Stephen and Lawrence. These episodes are separated into two registers with the six narrative episodes of Stephen filling the top register within three arched lunettes, and the five narrative images of Lawrence filling the lower register within the rectangular bays between halves of the three lunettes. This arrangement gives precedence to the scenes of Lawrence, the patron saint of the Chapel, as they are more easily viewed.

The West wall, to one's right upon entering the Chapel, contains the first episode of the narrative (fig. 1). The lunette is divided into two scenes in the top register, the *Ordination of Saint Stephen* by Piero (fig. 1a) followed by *Saint Stephen Preaching*, by

The West wall, to one's right upon entering the Chapel, contains the first episode of the narrative (fig. 1). The lunette is divided into two scenes in the top register, the *Ordination of Saint Stephen* by Piero (fig. 1a) followed by *Saint Stephen Preaching*, by

¹ Charles L. Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome* (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1985) 157.

Chapter Two

The Chapel of Nicholas V : Visual Analysis

The Chapel of Nicholas V remains intact since the time of its decoration on the second floor of the Palazzo Vaticani, although the floor plan of surrounding rooms has been altered over the years. The Chapel now stands adjacent to a room used in the sixteenth century as the bedroom of Pope Julius II. At one time, the Chapel was entered from this room, but Julius walled over that entrance so that now one accesses the Chapel from the Sala dei Chiaroscuro (the former Sala del Pappagallo) through a door in the Chapel's North wall.

Upon entering the tiny space, one faces the South wall, in front of which stands the Chapel's altar. At one time, Vasari notes, an image of *The Entombment of Christ*, painted by Fra Angelico, the author of the accompanying fresco cycle, adorned this altar, but that image has since disappeared. It has been suggested that an apse once contained the altar, but Julius II replaced it with the large window that now fills much of the wall. The altarpiece may have been destroyed during this renovation.

The other three walls contain the pictorial cycle of scenes from the lives of Saints Stephen and Lawrence. These episodes are separated into two registers with the six narrative images of Stephen filling the top register within three arched lunettes, and the five narrative images of Lawrence filling the lower register within the rectangular bottom halves of the three lunettes. This arrangement gives precedence to the scenes of Lawrence, the patron saint of the Chapel, as they are more easily viewed.²

The West wall, to one's right upon entering the Chapel, contains the first episodes of the narrative (fig. 1). The lunette is divided into two scenes in the top register: the *Ordination of Saint Stephen by Peter* (fig. 14) followed by *Saint Stephen Distributing*

Alms (fig. 15). Below these images and framed by two small windows in the wall's lower register, sits the scene corresponding to Stephen's *Ordination*--the *Ordination of Saint Lawrence by Pope Sixtus II*, with Sixtus portrayed deliberately with the facial features of Nicholas (fig. 16). The *Sermon of Saint Stephen* (fig. 17) and the *Dispute Before the Sanhedrin* (fig. 18) fill the top register of the North Wall lunette, while *Sixtus Entrusting the Church Treasures to Saint Lawrence* (fig. 19) and *Saint Lawrence Distributing Alms* (fig. 20), which correspond to *Stephen Distributing Alms* in the preceding West wall images, occupy the lower register.

The East wall displays scenes of the Saints' martyrdom, again mirroring each other in subject and arrangement (fig. 3). The sequential episodes of *Saint Stephen Being Led to his Martyrdom* (fig. 21) and the *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* (fig. 22) in which he is shown being stoned to death, occupy the upper section of this lunette. The wall's lower register portrays *Saint Lawrence Condemned by the Emperor Valerian* (fig. 23) and the *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (fig. 25), where the Roman deacon is shown being burned to death on a huge gridiron. Between these two episodes of Lawrence, Angelico depicted a narrow building dividing the two scenes and containing a painted window through which can be seen Lawrence converting the jailer, Hippolytus, to Christianity (fig. 24). In terms of the overall scheme of the cycle, Angelico strategically placed the scenes of martyrdom, the final episodes of the narrative, on the East wall that is situated next to the South wall containing the altar and the image of Christ's *Entombment*.³ Therefore, the deacon saints' martyrdoms allude to the sacrifice of Christ implied by the altar in a powerful completion of the cycle.

² Steffi Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes: The Early Renaissance, 1400-1470* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996) 205.

³ *Ibid.* 206.

Framing the two niches of the side walls, two narrow panels extend from the arched ceiling of the Chapel (fig. 5), on which is painted the four evangelists in the four sections of the groin vaulting, enclosing the narrative scenes below, though these embrasures are not aligned with the narrative registers. Within these panels, Angelico painted eight figures associated with the Church: six Fathers of the Church—the four Latin Fathers, Ambrose (fig. 7), Augustine (fig. 8), Gregory (fig. 9) and Jerome (fig. 12); the two Greek Fathers, Athanasius (fig. 10) and John Chrysostom (fig. 13); the saint, Thomas Aquinas (fig. 11); and the early Christian Pope, Leo X (fig. 6). This arrangement exhibits two representatives of the same Church hierarchical rank placed opposite each other, parallel to and flanking the hagiographic scenes on the East and West walls.⁴

The wainscoting of the Chapel extends approximately eight feet high and displays a wall pattern of pomegranates against a red background, along with Nicholas' coat of arms painted twice inside a laurel wreath. The top molding frieze exhibits alternating angel heads and papal symbols while the indented embrasures of the windows in the Chapel that once looked out to the Cortile del Pappagallo show rosettes, alternating floral motifs, and the portrait busts of various religious figures (fig. 27). Prophets frame the window on the left, the bust of Moses holding the Ten Commandments shown above, while Church saints frame the window on the right, the busts of Isaac and Abraham displayed above. The stained glass window once on this wall showed an image of Saint Stephen, but only a fragment of it remains today.⁵

A geometrical design inlaid on the Chapel's marble floor further embellishes its program (fig. 28). This scheme portrays the monogram of Saint Bernardino of Siena, canonized by Nicholas V in the Jubilee year of 1450, inscribed in a lavish border of coats

⁴ Roettgen 207.

of arms and vines, and placed at the center of a large rhombus shape. The subtle, but centralized inclusion of the symbol of this saint, as well as the name of Pope Nicholas inscribed four times around this monogram, reasserts the Pope's authority to ordain, and the importance of his celebrated Jubilee that brought the masses to Rome to view his great visual projects.⁶

The pairing of Saints Stephen and Lawrence, the central figures of the Chapel frescoes, was customary in hagiographic paintings from the early Middle Ages, but Angelico's cycle deviates from these earlier models by rendering only six, specifically chosen episodes from two extensive historical narratives. The particular episodes rendered, as well as the cycle's correlation of the Saints with various leaders of the Church, including Pope Nicholas himself, reveal a program specific to the papacy, particularly the *image* of the papacy that Nicholas wished to convey and emphasize during his pontificate. The artist depicts the Saints in a corresponding arrangement, deliberately illuminating their charitable actions as deacons of the Roman church, their obedience to higher Church authorities, and their inseparability from the Church as an institution. These images reinforce Nicholas' intentions to restore and renew a Rome and a papacy long-ravaged by political upheaval.

⁵ Roettgen 205.

Chapter Three

The Patron : Pope Nicholas V

Tommaso Parentucelli was a Cardinal for less than three months when he was elected Pope on March 6, 1447. His selection occurred at an auspicious moment in history: the conciliar movement that had promulgated the papal schism and been the papacy's primary opposition in the struggle for power was waning. A month before Nicholas' election, German princes had shifted their support for the Council of Basle and the anti-pope, Felix V, in favor of Pope Eugenius IV, Nicholas' predecessor.⁷ Eugenius abandoned rebellious Rome and fled to Florence, where he spent ten years. He had endured the Council of Basle's widely supported attack on papal primacy and offered frequent pronouncements contesting the Council's legitimacy, but it was not until 1447 that the Council dissolved, Felix V abdicated his position, and Nicholas V was able to take his place as pope.⁸ Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, witnessed the proceedings of 1447 and related them in a report to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. In this report, Piccolomini explained that in the first two ballots, Cardinal Prospero Colonna received ten votes, only two short of winning. Those closely associated with the late Pope Eugenius IV—Cardinal Francesco Condulmer and Cardinal Giovanni Berardi, expressed strong opposition to Colonna, remembering Eugenius' difficulties in wresting control of the Papal States from his Colonna predecessor, Martin V. To break the deadlocked proceedings, Berardi proposed Parentucelli, a candidate neutral in Italian and Roman politics, though strongly anti-conciliarist. This nominee won rapid approval and was elected on the third ballot the next morning, 6 March.⁹

⁶ Roettgen 207.

⁷ Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Jersey: Yale UP, 1997) 134.

⁸ Stinger 159.

⁹ *Ibid.* 84.

Politics aside, Parentucelli's meteoric rise to power reflects his own merits as a scholar. He had served as Secretary to Cardinal Albergati and had attended the Council of Florence in 1438. Eugenius later sent him to lobby German princes to back Eugenius during the Council of Basle. He became Cardinal of Bologna in 1446 and served for only two months in that capacity before being elected pope.¹⁰ Less confrontational than his predecessors, Nicholas set a tone for his pontificate from the start, articulating his intentions with a moderation that would prove effective in resolving still-lingering conflicts and in achieving his goals. In his coronation speech to an audience containing ambassadors from both Naples and Germany, Nicholas expressed displeasure with his predecessors who had "stretched their arms out too far, and have left scarcely any power to other bishops...."¹¹ His resolution to share his concerns with other bishops, conveyed deliberately at the beginning of his rule, illustrates Nicholas' insightful strategy for gaining appeal and for reinstating leadership, supremacy, and stability to an institution emerging from a stormy era of conflict. Within the next ten years of his reign, the major rulers of Italy would sign the Peace of Lodi (1454), evidence of the gradual repair of the network of rulers who had earlier opposed the papacy. Powerful in his role as mediator and successfully fulfilling his aims for peace, Nicholas V focused his attention on the project of restoring Rome to its earlier glory as the center of the world and, in particular, the official residence of the papacy.¹²

Nicholas' intention to renew the Vatican as the new sacred city and official residence of the papacy was a powerful symbolic act. From the time of Constantinople's formation, the official seat of the papacy had been the Lateran Palace. Nicholas' initiation of changing the papal center from the Lateran to the Vatican reflected his aims for the

¹⁰ Mary Hollingsworth, *Patronage in Renaissance Italy: From 1400 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994) 239.

¹¹ Duffy 136.

glory of Rome and for papal primacy. Gianozzo Manetti, a Florentine humanist and Apostolic Secretary to Nicholas from 1453-55, composed a laudatory sketch of the pope, outlining his intentions, achievements, and some personal memoirs. In it, Manetti compares Nicholas to the Biblical figure of Solomon: just as the projects instigated by Nicholas V in his restoration of the city, i.e. the new church and palace of St. Peter's, surpassed Solomon's projects, so the new Christian religion was superior to the old Jewish faith.¹³ Manetti's text justifies Nicholas' conspicuous expenditure on artistic and architectural commissions throughout his reign by asserting that they were "for the glory of the church."¹⁴

As a humanist pope, Nicholas placed Renaissance concerns at the center of his program. His love for, and belief in, ancient literature as a renewing force led him to create "for the common convenience of the learned, a library of all books, both in Latin and in Greek that is worthy of the dignity of the Pope and the Apostolic See."¹⁵ Nicholas' appetite for ancient literature (imbued, he believed, with such restorative powers) was whetted in his earlier years when he had served as secretary to Cardinal Albergati, who was commemorated in a portrait by Jan Van Eyck in the fifteenth century. During this employment, Nicholas made numerous journeys with his superior throughout Italy and across the Alps and had come across various important manuscripts, building up an impressive personal library through the years. Moreover, the future pope was retained by Cosimo de Medici to prepare a "canon," or list of desiderata, to expand the renowned library at San Marco. This collection contained a wealth of books acquired over a lifetime by humanist Niccolo Niccoli, particularly in the area of religious works.¹⁶ Thus,

¹² Hollingsworth 239.

¹³ Ibid. 243.

¹⁴ Ibid. 233.

¹⁵ Duffy 137.

¹⁶ William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1993) 38.

Nicholas' past experiences left him well-versed in his knowledge of ancient literature, and his ecclesiastical accession allowed him to *create* the library for which he had been a spectator and counselor for so long.

Two circumstances aided Nicholas in his efforts to create a central library. The first was the financial outpouring caused by the Jubilee of 1450 that provided more money to purchase manuscripts. The second was the fall of Constantinople, which prompted the flow of Greek writings westward and the subsequent urgent cultivation of Classical studies in efforts to preserve the long lost, Hellenistic ideals now emerging. Of the 1150 volumes counted in an inventory taken by Giovanni Tortelli, supervisor of scholarly projects just after Nicholas' death, 350 or more were in Greek.¹⁷

Nicholas did not just acquire these texts; he also employed numerous humanist scholars to translate them. Leading intellectuals of the day like Lorenzo Valla, Guarino da Verona, Pier Candido Decembrio, and Poggio Bracciolini, were among those employed. These men translated classical poetry, history, and philosophy as well as religious writings by the Greek Church Fathers.¹⁸ In their cultivation of an understanding of both Classical and Christian historical sources, as well as of recent archaeological finds (pagan sculptures and Christian relics) humanists were able to envision Peter's life and martyrdom more tangibly, and thus enhance Nicholas' defense of papal primacy even more. This connection only strengthened the link between the mythical destiny of Rome and the Biblical destiny of the Roman church, an idea strongly promoted by Nicholas V.¹⁹

A staunch supporter of traditional Scholastic theological ideas of the early Christian fathers, Nicholas particularly identified with Saint Thomas Aquinas, with

¹⁷ Stinger 284.

¹⁸ Ibid. 284.

¹⁹ Ibid. 167.

whom he shared both the baptismal name, Tommaso, and theological ideas and convictions. Nicholas' election fell on the day before this saint's feast day, which he carefully orchestrated every year. Responsible for reconciling Aristotelian thinking with the Catholic faith, Aquinas provided ideas crucial to Nicholas V's religious and political intentions.²⁰

The pope venerated his patron saint by placing him among other Church Fathers in the niches of the panels adorning his chapel in the Vatican.²¹ His inclusion in this illustrious circle is significant since Aquinas, though canonized, was not named as a father of the Church until 1567, one-hundred and twenty years after the completion of the Vatican chapel's decorations. Though his placement in the Chapel is not conspicuous, sixteenth century documents report that the Chapel was often referred to as the "Thomas Chapel," indicating a general acknowledgment of Aquinas' correlation and importance to Nicholas. Moreover, Fra Angelico had previously portrayed Aquinas in a lunette in the monastery of San Marco in the same manner as in the Nicholas Chapel (Fig. 30). In both illustrations, Aquinas holds an open book in which are depicted the first words of his *Summa contra gentiles*, a text conveying ideas that were of great importance to Nicholas, and thus, an overt reference to their shared ideals.²²

Just as Nicholas justified the lavish, artistic expenditures of his pontificate by claiming they were glorifying the Church, so did he justify his sumptuous liturgical exhibitions, specifically noting the ability of liturgical ritual to convey the Church's power. Manetti acknowledged Nicholas' desire to "render the liturgical ceremonies ever

²⁰ Barbara Sabatine, "Pope Nicholas V's Chapel of Saints Stephen and Lawrence by Fra Angelico: An Historical Interpretation," diss., U. of Oregon, 1982, 85.

²¹ Stinger 143.

²² Roettgen 207.

more lavish and beautiful” as an observance at the heart of his papal aims.²³ To enhance liturgical practices, Nicholas requested that Petrus Burgensis, his Clerk of Ceremonies from 1445-69, produce a new version of the *Liber caeremoniarum*—the liturgical handbook for the papal court. This version would alter thirteenth and fourteenth century practices just enough to prompt more careful and elaborate observance of the ceremony. Sermons for the liturgical ceremonies recorded during Nicholas’ reign convey a deeper curiosity about the mysteries of the Christian faith: Creation, Incarnation, and the Immortal Soul. These sermons occasionally addressed the monarchical constitution of the Church by asserting monarchy as the principle of ecclesiastical order, a claim promoting the idea of the pope as supreme head of the Church institution. A liturgical sermon by Sanchez de Arevalo during Nicholas’ pontificate emphasized this idea of papal supremacy by denoting Rome as the See of Peter and thus, the center of Christendom in the world. This humanist treatment of papal primacy also emerged fittingly as a rhetorical topic, for the “Concerning the election of the pope” orations were delivered before cardinals entered the conclave.

Even more than the personal desire for the glory of the papacy, the liturgy expressed the recognition of the papal court as a reflection of the holy court of heaven. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles* reinforced the importance of the liturgy by according fundamental episcopal dignity to the bishop’s authority in liturgical service. Aquinas argued that “externals” were substantive to “jurisdiction” as the sacraments were consecrated for the priest by the bishop. Thus, the priest essentially derived his power from the bishop.”²⁴ This idea naturally led Aquinas to reason that the only logical form of government for the Papacy was monarchy since the head of the Church (as the

²³ Kevin Salatino, *The Frescoes of Fra Angelico for the Chapel of Nicholas V: Art and Ideology in Renaissance Rome*, diss., U. of Pennsylvania, 1992, (Michigan: Bell and Howell, 1992) 98.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 169.

successor of Peter) received his power directly from Christ. To Aquinas, to deny this idea would be a “presumptuous error,” heresy, to its supporters in the mid-fifteenth century.²⁵ Aquinas’ treatise as a visual manifesto of Nicholas’ pontificate could not have been more appropriate. Nicholas sought to reinstate and renew papal power with this Thomistic premise--primacy necessitated by sacerdotal authority--at its core. It is certainly no coincidence that Fra Angelico depicts Thomas Aquinas in the Nicholas Chapel holding the actual *Summa contra gentiles* in his hand—an overt testament to the importance of the ideas therein to Nicholas V (fig. 11).

The ‘personalization’ of the papacy, inherent in the idea of its equation with monarchy, distinguished Nicholas V’s pontificate as rooted in humanist ideals. The papacy’s focus began to shift to the moral behavior of the pope as it corresponded to that of Peter and Christ, and the frescoes of his private chapel reflect this dramatically different self-imaging of the pontiff.²⁶ Giovanni Torquemada promoted the personalization of the papacy and its conforming to a more monarchical constitution by claiming, “a supreme power cannot be except one, nor except in one.” He argued that the Church, collectively, could not receive the sacerdotal orders because the receptive agent of those orders must possess one soul onto which the gift of grace could be impressed. Because the Church as a whole could not be ordained, it could not have complete power. Only in one man could this authority be instilled. *Contra impugnantes sedis apostolicae auctoritatem*, an extensive defense of papal primacy written by Venetian humanist, Piero da Monte and addressed specifically to Nicholas V, connotes that the necessity of rule must be found “rooted in some one person,” that “one person” being the pope.²⁷ This dissolution of the distinction between the institution and its head gradually abetted

²⁵ Salatino 170.

²⁶ Ibid. 166.

²⁷ Stinger 167-68.

conciliarist theory and asserted Nicholas V's intentions for supremacy as grounded in his value of the liturgy.

As indicated in the frescoes of the Nicholas chapel, martyrdom received greater interest during Nicholas' reign. The increasing regard for patristic studies by humanist supporters of the papacy naturally legitimized primitive Christianity's importance to the Papal See. The perception of Peter as an historical Apostle increased in the mid-fifteenth century when he became understood as a disciple guided specifically by God to Rome, a city which he then made the eternal and sacred capital by his martyrdom. The perception of the Petrine succession then, shifted from the power of the papacy to the power of its founder, a personalization bringing archaeology and the "topographical mystique" of Rome and its deceased historical founders to the fore. Martyrdom became the means of Peter's holiness and a virtue to be manifested in the lives of his successors. For Nicholas, martyrdom served as a theme for the restored Roman papacy.

As evidenced in various writings, the importance of martyrdom had been emphasized during the reign of Eugenius IV, from whose court Nicholas V's own views evolved. Flavio Biondo's *Roma Instaurata*, a document on Roman topography composed in the mid-1440's, expressed martyrdom as the true foundation of the eternal city. It was not the blood of armies, Biondo argues, but the blood of Christian martyrs that established and consecrated the solid foundation for the glorious city of Rome. This foundation, along with its magnificent buildings and relics, distinguished Rome from other cities. Biondo went on to praise pilgrims who came from all over the world to view relics testifying to the city's sacredness and power. One of the primary sites commended

by Biondo as a tangible link to ancient martyrs and which he encouraged his readers to recall was the grill upon which St. Lawrence was martyred.²⁸

Just as Flavio Biondo expressed the importance of considering and visiting the sites of martyrdom and martyrs' relics, so Antonio Agli, a Florentine humanist, underscored the heroism of these religious figures by composing, at Nicholas' urging, a revised version of the lives of the Christian martyrs. Agli compiled material gathered from inhabitants of every district of Rome, recorded by notaries, to produce a work that he felt reflected Nicholas' focus on renewing the Roman church. Whereas ancient Roman historians documented the "blood, toil, and sweat" of the Romans in the military victories that helped establish their city as the center of the world, Agli illuminated those who helped raise up the foundations of the Church. "They," he claimed, "praise Julius Caesar as the progenitor of the Roman empire....I laud to the heavens Jesus Christ our Lord and Peter the Apostle, who established the Roman See...."²⁹ Clearly, the ecclesiastical authority of Rome began to emerge with greater emphasis through the revived interest in heroic religious figures.

Agli further conveyed Nicholas' interest in martyrdom by correlating the pope himself to the ancient Christian martyrs. He compared the suffering involved in the pope's responsibility as the head of the Church to the suffering of the martyrs themselves. Humanist biographer, Michele Canensi, reinforced this idea by asserting that Nicholas possessed the spiritual virtues of his forefathers--faith, love, charity, holiness, and, specifically, martyrdom. Nicholas clearly sought to found and erect the renewed papacy on the Tertullian idea that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."³⁰ He believed that martyrdom had built up the Ecclesia Romana, had consecrated her soil, and

²⁸ Stinger 171.

²⁹ Ibid. 172.

³⁰ Ibid. 173.

had provided the means for the restoration that Nicholas desired and implemented during his pontificate.³¹

The Jubilee year, which Nicholas instigated in 1450, to some extent, molded his “anguishing concern,” for the Church (a suffering elaborately conveyed by sermons during his reign), and his conscious regard for martyrdom as essential to the Church’s triumph. The Jubilee was a year set by the papacy during which pilgrims could come to Rome to receive a plenary Indulgence that would absolve all previous sins. Though Boniface VIII first instigated the Jubilee in 1300, the 1450 event was unprecedented in its expression of restored unity and peace, the head event of the Church sitting unchallenged by any other power. During this year, Nicholas ordered that the ancient Christian relics of Rome be exhibited every weekend so that each wave of pilgrims could view these sacred artifacts. The pilgrimage became so popular that eventually the Pope was forced to shorten the required stay in Rome from eight to three days to make room for the hordes of visitors. After the shock of the schism and the anti-papal sentiment of previous years, the Jubilee helped reinstate the importance and power of both Rome and the papacy. Nicholas reinforced this feeling by designating Whit Sunday as the focal point of the year, a day on which the canonization of St. Bernardino of Siena would be staged. Bernardino, who had died only six years prior to the Jubilee Year, had been a controversial Franciscan whose vernacular sermons rallying for revival had gained him popularity across Italy. Nicholas’ deliberate emphasis on re-enacting, and thus honoring, Bernardino’s canonization helped ally the papacy with popular contemporary religious sentiment, and assume a greater sense of charisma. The Jubilee further enhanced Nicholas’ pontificate by providing funds through pilgrim offerings for Nicholas’ various projects. The Pope was recorded to have held 100,000 florins in only one of his banks—

³¹ Stinger 177.

a third of his usual annual amount, and nearly as much as his entire revenue from the Papal States.³² This monetary increase for the papacy helped secure Nicholas' intentions for his "renovatio urbis."

The Jubilee provided a springboard for Nicholas' assertion of Rome's centrality and papal primacy. Nicholas extended this formative event by sending forth legates to preach reconciliation throughout Europe. These representatives reinforced the personal devotion exhibited in the Jubilee itself, but also enforced clerical reform and increased religious knowledge. Solemn processions and lavish ceremonies enhanced this evangelical veneration of the Church, underscoring Nicholas V's vision for the Holy City exhibited in his building program.³³

Though many of Nicholas' envisioned projects were never executed, in his deathbed testament in 1455, he emphasized the importance and strength of his vision. He acknowledged the necessity of majestic buildings as "sermons in stone, books for the layman"³⁴ for those uncultured ones who would not otherwise understand the authority of Rome. Sustained only by doctrine, faith will vacillate, he claimed, "but if the authority of the Holy See were visibly displayed in majestic buildings, imperishable memorials...belief would grow and strengthen like a tradition from one generation to another."³⁵

Nicholas outlined the two main purposes driving his architectural endeavors as an attempt to increase devotion, and a desire to protect the Church. Buildings would increase devotion as long as they were standing, continuously proclaiming the truth. Equally essential was their contribution to fortification. As the center of the Holy See, Rome warranted lavish restoration in appearance and security. Nicholas reconstructed

³² Duffy 139.

³³ Ibid. 140.

³⁴ Ibid. 139.

the walls of the city, most of the forty Station Churches around Rome, and the offices of the Curia in an adjacent district, Borgo Leonino; but his biggest and most important project was the transformation of the Vatican Palace and St. Peter's Basilica.³⁶

While Nicholas' intentions for St. Peter's basilica corresponded to traditional ecclesiastical principles, his project for the Vatican Palace conformed more closely to contemporary ideas about the appropriate setting for a secular authority. As the newly expected official residence of the pope, the Vatican renovation would maintain its traditional aspects--the extant constructions of previous popes--but also augment these constructions with imposing additions, re-centered structures, and decorations that, even as a whole, could be understood in each of its parts.

Nicholas worked from the site's original topography—the three distinct areas of the palace, basilica, and Borgo, and maintained the traditional uses of these three sections. He concentrated primarily on the public, ceremonial facilities of the palace and the private apartments of the pope, which included rooms for the activities of the papal Curia, as well.³⁷ His renovations to these private halls and apartments cause speculation about the audience and function of Nicholas' private chapel, situated on the top floor of this wing of the palace. On the ground floor of the complex was Nicholas' library, the *Sala Graeca*, accessible to the prelates by a corridor that he had opened. The floor above was Nicholas' bedroom and the *Stanza della Falda*, both of which he had decorated. In his bedroom, he had a bust of St. Peter holding the keys and a book painted in the center of his ceiling—an appropriate image for the pope to see as he began and ended each

³⁵ Duffy 139.

³⁶ Stinger 157.

³⁷ Carroll William Westfall, *In This Most Perfect Paradise: Alberti, Nicholas V, and the Invention of Conscious Urban Planning in Rome, 1447-55*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1974) 131.

day.³⁸ This floor also housed a series of larger, more public rooms in which the pope conducted ceremonies, interviews, and other official business. The *Sala del Paramenti*, a room for preparation, and the *Sala del Pappagallo*, a room once decorated with a painted frieze, were situated on this floor near the entrance. This level also contained a long *Galleriola* and the *Sala dei Pontifici* that was used as a consistory room. The uppermost level of the complex held Nicholas' small private chapel and studiolo, as well as a series of rooms used for activities related to internal papal affairs of the household. The first two rooms—the *Sala Vecchia degli Svizzeri* and the *Sala dei Chiaroscuri*—reveal the fragmented remains of what was once an extensive decorative painting program on its walls. This program, though damaged, reveals powerful papal imagery—birds, keys, the tiara—as well as images of the Virtues, a moralistic reminder to the ruler gracing its halls. The pope and his intimates primarily conducted business on the second and third levels of the complex.³⁹ In the inside wing of this level, taking up the fifth and sixth floors of what was once a small defense tower during the pontificate of Innocent III, the private Chapel of Nicholas V sits, decorated by Fra Angelico. Of the four fresco cycles executed by Angelico in the Vatican complex and Old St. Peter's basilica, the cycle of this tiny private chapel exists as the only surviving example from the Vatican's early renovation. Its endurance testifies to its power and appeal.⁴⁰

³⁸ Westfall 132.

³⁹ Ibid. 134.

⁴⁰ Roettgen 205.

Chapter Four

The Artist : Fra Angelico

Fra Giovanni da Fiesole, the artist known as Fra Angelico, was initially summoned to Rome by Pope Eugenius IV in late 1445 to undertake a painting commission in the Vatican. Eugenius had only recently returned from his nine-year stint in Florence, a period of exile during which the city had hosted the Council of Florence, an ecumenical council convened in 1438 which drew to the city intellectuals and religious scholars from all over Europe. Subsequently, artistic life in Florence flourished, its native artists reaping the benefits of this ecclesiastical exposure by winning various papal commissions. Among those artists was Fra Angelico.

Eugenius had most likely met Angelico at the consecration of the church of San Marco in an epiphany on January, 1443. The pope attended and participated in this ceremony and witnessed the dedication of its High Altar, which contained a retable painted by Angelico. Eugenius received further exposure to the works of this Dominican painter when he then spent the night in the cell of Cosimo de Medici, decorated with frescoes by Angelico, as was every cell in San Marco's cloister.⁴¹ Thus, familiar with the artists' work and prestige, Eugenius felt compelled to commission him for works in the Vatican.⁴²

Angelico had been painting for about fifteen years when he received his summons to Rome, his greatest project at that time being the frescoes of San Marco. The first evidence of Angelico's presence at San Marco dates to around 1441, before which he had been the Vicario of the Dominican convent at Fiesole for several years. Taken together, the paintings of San Marco represent the greatest amalgamation of works related to one

⁴¹ Roettgen 204.

⁴² Hood 12.

artist from the Italian Renaissance to remain almost fully intact.⁴³ The “realistic,” almost meditative, style of the frescoes places Angelico in a group of innovative artists (like Masaccio and Masolino) whose work reveals a respect for painterly traditions, but also an interest in experimentation resulting in highly developed expressions. Angelico’s art reflects a tension between subject and expression that penetrates a deeper psychological stratum and provokes religious impulses, both public and private.⁴⁴ His frescoes at San Marco convey the nature of the commission and reveal the importance of function over aesthetics (fig. 29). His simple scenes of spiritual figures and symbols were meant to quell distraction and décor and to evoke the religious imagination that would complete them. The images invited the friars to transcend reality through visual stimulation and to enter the spiritual realm. Clearly, his was a revolutionary style, and although perhaps unrecognized at the time, Angelico’s innovative ability to imbue representational forms with meaning marks an early example of ideas inherent in modern concepts of art and the artist.⁴⁵

In light of the simplicity and theological symbolism of Fra Angelico’s work at the convent of San Marco, it seems almost strange that this modest Dominican friar would have been chosen to fulfill a commission for the lavish decoration of the papal court in Rome. Why would the pope have summoned this sheltered painter from his comfortable, long-time residency in Florence to brave such a different world, such a different type of commission? Why not an artist already in Rome at the time? And why would Fra Angelico accept it? The answers to these questions testify not only to the *work* of Angelico, but also to his character.

⁴³ Hood 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 8.

⁴⁵ John Pope-Hennessy, *Fra Angelico* (New York: Riverside, 1981) 24.

At the time of his summons to Rome, Angelico was one of few renowned Florentine artists suitable for Eugenius' commissions. All of Angelico's contemporaries and potential rivals in Florence had died by 1430: Don Lorenzo Monaco in 1425, Gentile da Fabriano and Masolino in 1427, and Masaccio in 1428. Angelico was the only painter left in the city who, as attested by his work at San Marco, could render works capturing the dialogue between artist and viewer and the expression of the spiritual realm in the act of visualization itself.⁴⁶ What better artist to decorate the inner chambers of the Apostolic See than one who could so poignantly execute profound spiritual truths and the deeper intention and function of his commission? In selecting Angelico, Eugenius was not only honoring an acquaintance, but an artist known for his obedience and devoted service at San Marco. The employment of such a modest figure for such a great commission would, to some extent, legitimize the assertion of papal power expressed in that commission. His work would assert power indirectly by denying it.⁴⁷ Not only Angelico's treatment of his subject, but also his reputation, enhanced the images of service and charity in the Nicholas Chapel, regardless of the frescoes' lavishness and his change in style.

Eugenius was certainly aware of Angelico's status, as he is rumored to have offered the position of archbishop to the friar in 1445, having disallowed several other nominations six months earlier. Angelico modestly declined the nomination, but was supposedly instrumental in securing the appointment of Fra Antoninus, as affirmed by six witnesses to his canonization. Clearly, Fra Angelico was much more than a painter. He was a man held in high esteem, considered capable of managing an archdiocese and even of advising the Pope himself. Giorgio Vasari's biography of Angelico in his *Lives of the*

⁴⁶ Hood 12.

⁴⁷ Salatino 160.

Artists reads like the “apology of a saint.”⁴⁸ He argues that the saintliness of the artist cannot help but cause his paintings to be saintly, his naturalistic style corresponding, rather than clashing, with religious ideals. Eugenius certainly considered the influence of Angelico’s respectability on his employment at the papal court.⁴⁹

Often called “the Aquinas of painting,” Angelico’s works have been regarded to some extent as an exposition of the concepts laid down by Thomas Aquinas centuries earlier. His paintings reflect Aquinas’ reconciliation of Christianity and the humanist ideals of historical Rome—religious humanism. Coincidentally, Angelico was painting the halls of San Marco right next to the extensive library of the convent that would have housed the writings of Aquinas, and his access to these works supports the theory of their correlation.⁵⁰ Moreover, Angelico’s status as a high-ranking Dominican associated him with a religious Order which, at that time, was fighting to assert and solidify the authority and morality of the Church. His painting not only conveys a progressive spiritual sense, but also his inherent monastic and ecclesiastical foundations.⁵¹ Angelico’s rapprochement of modernist, experimental concepts of painting and his awareness of the historical function of his works, made him a prime candidate for the Vatican commission, whether Eugenius knew it at the time or not.

Eugenius IV commissioned Fra Angelico to produce two fresco cycles in the Vatican: the Chapel of the Sacrament and the choir of the basilica of St. Peter. The artist finished the first just before Eugenius’ death in February of 1447 and, according to reports in the diary of Stefano Caffari, the pope was carried to the chapel and laid in it

⁴⁸ Giulio Carlo Argan, *Fra Angelico: Biographical and Critical Study*, trans. James Emmons (Geneva, Switzerland: Skira, 1955) 11.

⁴⁹ Pope-Hennessy 3.

⁵⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago, Illinois: U. of Chicago Press, 1995) 18.

⁵¹ Argan 14.

upon his death.⁵² According to an account by Vasari (confirmed by the Codex Magliabechiano), the chapel was later destroyed in 1538 by Pope Paul III to make room for the *Scala Regia*, a renovation which left no traces of Angelico's works.⁵³ The artist began work on the choir Chapel of St. Peter in March, 1447, a project commissioned by Eugenius, but carried out under his successor, Nicholas V.⁵⁴ Thus, one reason for Fra Angelico's employment to paint the Chapel of Nicholas V may simply have been that he was already at work in the Vatican finishing the commissions of Nicholas' predecessor and, thus, naturally assumed further projects under the new pope. Moreover, Nicholas was most likely acquainted with Fra Angelico, as he had been a member of Eugenius' papal court in Florence, and therefore had been in contact with various artists and humanists there. He had even been employed to rearrange the library of San Marco at the same time Fra Angelico was painting the convent's walls with frescoes.⁵⁵ Certainly Nicholas was at least familiar with Angelico's work, and most likely with the artist, as well.

⁵² Sabatine 17.

⁵³ Ibid. 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 14.

Chapter Five

The Narrative Structure of the Chapel Frescoes

Angelico began work on the Chapel of Nicholas V by February, 1448. The profound concepts underlying the narrative convey Nicholas' desire to restore papal authority in Rome. The narrative structure of the chapel's pictorial program has received less attention than its content since it appears merely to provide an organizational framework for the narrative genre of painting. Yet, not everyone agrees with this rather simplistic interpretation: Angelico's method in the Nicholas chapel has been noted by scholar Marilyn Lavin as an "ultramodern version of continuous narrative."⁵⁶ Lavin observes that Angelico constructed his scenes as flowing within a single visual field, but in such a way as to retain distinct autonomy. The artist's integration of definitive moments within specific episodes conveys the importance of those scenes depicted and the symbolism therein.⁵⁷

In the cycle of the life of Stephen, correlations can be discerned which suggest the pairing of scenes. In Stephen's *Ordination*, the apostle second in line from the right in the scene looks away from the ceremony before him and gestures to the right as if he knows what will occur in the next scene (fig. 14). Likewise, in *Dispute Before the Sanhedrin* (fig. 18), the vision which Stephen describes to the Sanhedrin (according to the scripture on which this scene is based) asserts the importance of evangelism and the spreading of the gospel to the people. These virtues are being manifested in the actions depicted in the preceding episode, the *Sermon of St. Stephen* (fig. 17), in which the saint preaches to the masses. Though the two events adhere to the natural structure of time and the order of events, each corresponds to the other in such a way that they seem to take

⁵⁵ Roettgen 204.

⁵⁶ Salatino 48.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 48.

place simultaneously. In the last lunette of the Stephen cycle, one of the witnesses of Stephen's stoning looks back through the city gate toward the previous scene of Stephen's being expelled from the city (fig. 22).⁵⁸ The witness possesses a perspective that transcends sequential time, even as he appears to exist at the scene of Stephen's martyrdom.

The Lawrence cycle also exhibits this manipulation of time in the episodes of Lawrence's condemnation by Emperor Decius and his martyrdom. The reflective figure on the far right of the Condemnation episode—the center of the wall's depiction—stares outward, not toward the martyrdom or any other specific event, but rather toward the real altar of the chapel (fig. 23). His gaze, thus, penetrates real time and space, revealing the Chapel's brilliant confluence not only of specific episodes, but of the entire cycle and the realm of reality.⁵⁹

Fra Angelico's brilliant narrative method suggests more than just the illustration of time unified in all its tenses—past, present, and future. Angelico's technique conveys time in unified multiplicity, the "present" of each tense merging in seamless progression from one scene to the next. The apostle recognizes Stephen's post-ordination actions *while* he witnesses the actual Ordination itself; the witness of Stephen's martyrdom appears absorbed by the saint's expulsion; and the contemplative young man watches Lawrence's sentencing, oblivious to past and present, and then acknowledges Lawrence's forthcoming martyrdom in the future, as well as Christ's sacrifice from the past. Salatino has suggested that this program visualizes a definition of time called "temporal integration" postulated by Augustine, one of the eight fathers of the Church depicted in the Chapel.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Salatino 48.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 49.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 49.

Though speculative, this assumption is not completely out of the question as Nicholas, the Chapel's patron, had a specific interest in Augustine's writings. The pope had been exposed to his ideas through his extensive education in humanist and religious studies, as well as through his interaction with learned humanists in his court. This idea is, of course, contingent on the assumption that Nicholas advised Angelico in his work on the cycle, and it is not out of the question that Angelico, well-versed in the writings of the saints, expressed this Augustinian mode of thought in the narrative himself. Regardless, the program exhibits Augustine's three phases of the mind: it "looks ahead, it attends, and it remembers—in such a way that what it looks forward to passes through what it is attending to into what it is remembering."⁶¹ Angelico's figures fulfill this concept as time blurs into a continuous narrative sequence in the fullest sense possible. Moreover, the "end" naturally implied by the life-story of the martyr provides a spiritual basis for Angelico's treatment of time and narrative with the "martyr as witness to his pre-ordained death."⁶² Thus, Angelico's method effectively condenses his deliberately selected scenes with a confluence that negates the need for the other episodes of the narrative to portray the story in its entirety. This method represents a brilliant breakthrough in the narrative painting genre for Angelico personally, as well as in the history of artistic achievements thus far.

⁶¹ Salatino 51.

Chapter Six

The Chapel Frescoes : Saints Stephen and Lawrence

Fra Angelico's images in Nicholas' private chapel convey the ideals of the pope through narrative structure, but even more overtly through content: the episodes of the saints' lives therein. Angelico expresses those particular ideas both by the inherent associations of St. Stephen and St. Lawrence, and through his deliberate rendering of their lives and deaths.

Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, deacon, and apologist for the Church possesses a position of prominence in the Chapel as the higher narrative of the two cycles. His life is recorded in the book of Acts in which Luke identifies him as a Hellenist, Jewish convert to Christianity whose ability to speak Greek enabled him to preach to and convert other Greek-speaking people as well. When the issue of equal distribution of goods to the poor was brought to the attention of the apostles, they decided that they could not compromise their commitment to evangelism in order to attend to that concern. Thus, they selected seven men "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" to take care of these duties, and this group included Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:3-5).⁶³ These seven were the first deacons ordained by the apostles and, together, they sparked the rapid dissemination of the word of God so that "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). The apostles specifically chose the title "deacon," meaning "to minister," to refer to this group since they exemplified service and charitable acts. The Bible specifically mentions Stephen as one performing great miracles among the people, such that opposition arose among the elders of the synagogue in Jerusalem and they accused him of blasphemy toward God and Moses. They then seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin where false

⁶² Salatino 52.

witnesses testified against him. The Bible refers to those present as looking at Stephen during his trial and seeing "that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:11-15).

Stephen's defiance to the Sanhedrin holds particular significance for the Christian church, as his speech to them asserts the universality of Christianity and the mission of evangelism for believers. Stephen argued that God is not confined to one sacred place, but can reveal himself to anyone, in or out of the temple. He indicted Israel for their resistance to God throughout history and then, looking to the heavens, claimed that he could see Christ at the right hand of the Father. This claim prompted angry Jewish leaders to cast Stephen from the city and stone him to death. During his own martyrdom, Stephen prayed as Christ had on the cross: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:56-59).⁶⁴ Stephen's death was not in vain as his followers, Jewish Hellenists, continued to preach the Gospel after his death (Acts 8:1-8). His adherents' missions extended as far as the coast and included Rome, where they established a colony inside the city that would one day become the center of Christendom. Stephen's life and martyrdom ostensibly mirrored that of Christ and his legacy was that of the foundation of Rome, proving him to be an appropriate subject for Nicholas' private chapel in the Vatican.⁶⁵

The cycle of the life and martyrdom of St. Lawrence occupies the register below the lunettes portraying Stephen. Lawrence had gained particular popularity in Rome as the first *Roman* martyr, a fate admirably connecting him to the apostles Peter and Paul, who had also been martyred in the Eternal City. Unlike Stephen, Lawrence's martyrdom is not recounted in the Bible, but is illuminated by written sources of the fourth and fifth centuries, especially those of Pope Damasus I, St. Ambrose's *De officiis ministrorum*,

⁶³ Sabatine 90.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 96.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 99.

Prudentius' "Hymn to St. Lawrence," and other sources from various Church Fathers.⁶⁶ According to these texts, Lawrence was brought to Rome by Saint Sixtus II who then ordained him as deacon upon Sixtus' election as pope in 257. Shortly before Sixtus' pontificate, the Emperor Valerian had issued an edict prohibiting Christians from worshipping Christ, insisting instead that they worship pagan gods. Sixtus ignored this edict and continued to preach to the Christians. Valerian intensified his command in 256 by decreeing that any bishop, priest, or deacon who disobeyed his order would be put to death. Sixtus continued preaching secretly, assembling Christians in obscure locations, and was eventually apprehended, tried, and put to death. According to fifteenth-century legend, just before Sixtus' arrest, he passed on the treasures of the Church to St. Lawrence, charging him to sell them and dispense the wealth to the needy. Lawrence fulfilled his charge, distributing alms and ministering to the poor according to their needs.⁶⁷ Hearing of Lawrence's actions and wishing to obtain money for himself, Emperor Valerian addressed Lawrence, telling him that by his own Church doctrine he was required to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's, and therefore should give the treasures of the church to the Emperor.

In response, Lawrence rounded up the poor and ill of the entire city before Valerian, identifying them as the treasures of the Church. Enraged, the emperor placed Lawrence in jail to await his sentence of death. While in jail, Lawrence continued to minister to those in need, converting two pagans to Christianity, restoring sight to the blind prisoner, Lucillus, and converting the jailer, Hippolytus, in the process. Even prison could not contain Lawrence's devotion and ministry.⁶⁸ He was soon seized,

⁶⁶ Renate L. Colella, "The Cappella Niccolina, or Chapel of Nicholas V in the Vatican: The History and Significance of its Frescoes," *Fra Angelico and the Chapel of Nicholas V* (Vatican City State: Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 1999) 29.

⁶⁷ Sabatine 102.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 106.

stripped and bound to a large gridiron, and slowly roasted to death on it. With his face described by witnesses as “emanating a beautiful aura,” Lawrence asked his executioners to turn him over and cook both sides, afterwards claiming, “It is cooked enough, you may eat.”⁶⁹ He then prayed for the conversion of the entire city and the dissemination of Christianity around the world, gave up his spirit, and died.

In light of Lawrence’s prayer for Rome, Aurelius Prudentius identified him as “dux Christi,” a representative and leader for Christ whose sacrifice achieved the final conversion of the city. This triumph, Prudentius asserted, completed the mission initiated by Peter and Paul and thereby linked the deacon with the apostles as venerated champions of Christianity for the city of Rome. St. Ambrose’s hymn furthered this idea, even equating Lawrence with the princely apostles, but by his martyrdom rather than through his ecclesiastical rank. Augustine noted the burials of the three figures in Rome as validation of the city’s leadership in the Christian Church. The cult of St. Lawrence in Rome prospered, widely supported by the masses, as demonstrated by the presence of over twenty churches and chapels dedicated to the saint in the city and becoming even more pronounced when Nicholas dedicated the Vatican Chapel to Lawrence.⁷⁰

Nicholas’ probably based his decision to exhort Lawrence not only on Lawrence’s status as the first Roman to be martyred, but on his status as the patron saint of the papal chapel at the ancient church of St. John Lateran, the oldest shrine in the then papal palace. This chapel had, since at least the ninth century, been the site of some of the most important ceremonies of the papal calendar and had long housed many of the most valuable relics of the Church, earning it distinction as the “Sancta Sanctorum.” Moreover, the Lateran contained the *Constitutum Constantini*, or Donation of Constantine, a symbol of the Church’s political autonomy and spiritual authority. The

⁶⁹ Sabatine 107.

transfer of the official residence of the pope from the Lateran to the Vatican during Nicholas' pontificate accorded greater meaning to Nicholas' dedication of his private chapel to St. Lawrence. The veneration of the saint that had been carried out in the oratory of the Lateran thus continued in the Vatican, and thereby honored papal tradition by acknowledging the enduring importance of the Lateran, despite the transfer of power from it.⁷¹

The pairing of Stephen and Lawrence in the Nicholas Chapel was not by mere happenstance. The two were commonly associated in Roman tradition, a connection based on their shared burial place at San Lorenzo fuori le Mura and the legend tied to the transfer of their relics to that place. The cult of St. Stephen did not officially develop until the discovery of his relics at Kaphar Gamala, a site near Jerusalem, in 415.

Augustine served as an especial exponent of this cult, as did the Emperor Theodosius II (408-450). At that time, Stephen's bones were relocated from Jerusalem to Constantinople, but Theodosius intervened to authorize their transfer to Rome. His motivation was the belief that this transfer would effect the healing of his daughter, Eudoxia, who was plagued by poor mental health. In return, the relics of St. Lawrence were to be transferred from Rome to Byzantium, but, as the legend goes, when the clerics transporting the relics arrived at the Church of San Lorenzo to retrieve them, the horses that were supposed to transfer Stephen's bones to San Pietro in Vincoli would not budge. The relics were then placed in front of the altar of San Lorenzo and Eudoxia was led before it and healed upon touching them. When another group of men designated to take the bones of St. Lawrence from Rome to Byzantium tried to move the bones, they fell dead. The Pope and other clerics took this as a sign that Stephen and Lawrence were

⁷⁰ Colella 29.

⁷¹ Ibid. 29.

meant to be buried together in San Lorenzo in Rome, and their remains were allowed to stay where they were and where they can still be seen together today.⁷²

The Roman Church's acquisition of Stephen's relics held great importance due to his status as the first Christian martyr. The linking of this highest esteemed Saint with Lawrence, a Roman archdeacon, accorded Lawrence an equal status with Stephen in their common veneration. Moreover, Stephen's transferal was regarded as his choosing the city of Rome over Jerusalem and Constantinople, a direct reinforcement of the legitimate authority of the city of Rome, as well as its link to Lawrence and the apostles Peter and Paul.⁷³ Nicholas confirmed the value in these claims when, in July 1447, the first year of his reign, the monks of Santa Maria in Aracoeli claimed possession of the true relics of Stephen and Lawrence in their own church. They attested to this claim after finding remains of two bodies, one of which seemed to have been badly burned. Nicholas immediately responded by sending a commission to San Lorenzo fuori le Mura to confirm officially that its relics were authentic. His action attests to the importance of the relics and the associations of these Saints to the Papal See and the city of Rome, as well as the motivation behind their inclusion in the Chapel of Nicholas V.⁷⁴

⁷² Colella 34.

⁷³ Ibid. 34-35.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 35.

Chapter Seven

Papal Primacy

The images of St. Stephen and St. Lawrence in Nicholas' Chapel differ markedly from traditional images of the saints from the medieval period which focus on apocryphal and posthumous facets of their lives. These medieval images illuminate the Sainthoods of Stephen and Lawrence: the rewards of the afterlife that their mortal experiences achieved for them, and their roles as saintly intercessors. Angelico's images focus rather on the mortal lives of the saints, and the thematic formulation of these lives to convey the revisionist ideals and intentions of Pope Nicholas V. One of the central messages of the cycle is papal primacy and the supreme authority of the Roman Church. Angelico conveys this idea not only by the particular scenes portrayed, but also in their deliberate organization.

The Chapel's overall framework shows symbolically the transmission of God's word from the evangelists who received it, to the eight doctors of the church who interpreted it, to the martyrs who defended and disseminated it.⁷⁵ The theme of this transmission of his word, this "ever-coursing flow of grace,"⁷⁶ continues in what has been called the "wall of primacy"⁷⁷—the wall containing the images of the Saints' Ordinations. These images reinforce papal primacy by implication of the pope's claim to apostolic succession and therefore his status as the promulgator, by God's grace, of the Church's good works.

The arrangement and connection of the Ordination scenes to each other and to subsequent episodes reveal the idea of ministerial succession and papal supremacy (fig.4). Stephen's ordination by St. Peter is painted at the top of the lunette on the "wall

⁷⁵ Sabatine 76.

⁷⁶ Salatino 178.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 178.

of primacy” next to the scene of Stephen giving alms. The power of Peter is then symbolically channeled down to the image below, within the lunette, of St. Lawrence’s *Ordination* by Sixtus II. The actions of Lawrence and Sixtus precisely duplicate those of Peter and Stephen above through the placement and pose of the central figures, and in pictorial themes of the handing over of chalice and paten.⁷⁸ This visual repetition and the arrangement of episodes chronologically from top to bottom imply papal authority passed directly from Peter in the first Christian community in Jerusalem to his successors in the Roman Church without an intermediary.

Angelico further emphasizes the idea of ministerial succession by references in the ceremonial, liturgical setting of the scenes. Both *Ordination* episodes are set in a basilica similar to Old St. Peter’s and thus, to the first Church of Christ founded on the rock of Peter. In Stephen’s *Ordination* scene (fig. 14), the other apostle-witnesses wear timeless garments, appropriate to Angelico’s merging of Biblical and present time in the frescoes. Only Peter wears anything remotely liturgical in the form of the insignia on the sash around his neck, the pallium signifying papal authority to ordain. The apostles who stand behind Peter and act more as passive witnesses than participants in the ceremony accentuate his distinctiveness. Peter serves as the dominant figure in the scene, central in his size and stature—the true personification of the rock of the Church. His magnanimous representation may well be understood as a refutation of contemporary arguments made by conciliarists against the pope. The image reflects the Biblical interpretation of Peter’s role from Matthew 16:18-19 as the Prince of the Apostles, the shepherd of the Church given exclusive authority by Christ Himself in Matthew 16:18-19 and not, as conciliarists maintained, merely the representative of *all* of the apostles.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Colella 37.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 38.

The programmatic purpose of asserting the primacy of Peter finds even more powerful reinforcement in conjunction with its parallel, the *Ordination of St. Lawrence*. In contrast to Peter and the apostles in Stephen's Ordination scene, Pope Sixtus II and witnesses in the *Ordination of St. Lawrence* (fig. 16) are all portrayed in full liturgical vestments according to ecclesiastical rank—priest, deacon, subdeacon, or acolyte—each characterizing his particular liturgical function in the ceremonial process. The deacon standing directly behind Lawrence holds a Bible; a subdeacon carries both a censer and an incense boat; and Sixtus wears his full papal garb—a purple cloak bearing the symbols of the tiara and pallium asserting papal supremacy and the authority to ordain.⁸⁰ This idea gains particular significance when seen in light of Fra Angelico's rendering of Sixtus II with the facial features of Pope Nicholas V—a portrait of the reigning pope receiving his authority directly from St. Peter, the founder of the Roman Church. In this way, Nicholas subtly postulates the legitimacy of papal primacy and the pope's exclusive authority.

The idea of the pope's authority to ordain and oversee liturgical functioning extends as well to his authority to administer to the needs of any and every Christian with the immediacy with which his power is received from Peter. The relationship exhibited between the pope and the Saints illuminates the pope's role in the Church's charitable services. According to the theory postulated by Kevin Salatino, Stephen and Lawrence perform their acts of service (in images immediately following the Ordination scenes) with power invested by the pope without mediation. The pontiff—Peter/Sixtus II/Nicholas V—represents the “origin of all ecclesiastical orders”⁸¹ who endows his saints with the diaconate and qualifies them to behave accordingly in services that culminate in their common martyrdom. Angelico, then, links the martyrs

⁸⁰ Colella 39.

transcendentally to each other and to the papacy itself as the pope may be seen literally to act through these, his agents, and even to function in their place. Thus, Stephen and Lawrence become substitutes for the pope himself in a powerful reinforcement of papal primacy—the inseparable and profound correspondence between God and pope, pope and deacon.⁸² Moreover, the actions of the saints begin with the pope who, therefore, instigates the flow of grace and the flow of the narrator. Peter and Sixtus execute their rites in front of altars painted at the exact place where the fresco begins, against the left edge of the wall on which the chapel's real altar would have been, and the true origin of the cycle in every sense. Thus, the narrative “begins with an altar (fictive) and ends with an altar (real),” suggesting Christ as beginning and end, and the pope, empowered by Christ, as the sanctioned author and progenitor of the Church's good works.⁸³

The assertion of papal primacy in the frescoes of the Chapel of Nicholas V differs from the assertions of primacy in traditional, pre-Avignon and post-conciliar images in its avoidance of blatant self-aggrandizement. Though Angelico portrays Sixtus II with the features of the reigning Pope Nicholas, the pope's power is rooted in his identification with two martyred saints. As suggested by Salatino, the Chapel's overall program personalizes the papacy by conveying its power in its morality (manifested in its identification with Saints Stephen and Lawrence) rather than asserting its power by traditional self-imaging papal “propaganda.”⁸⁴ The papacy is presented less as an abstract office and more as a person holding that office—the person of “Nicholas” who identifies personally with his predecessors, Peter and Sixtus, and abstractly with the martyrs who act according to his conception of the papacy. The conveyance of power through martyrdom, the most humble of actions, reveals a modest approach that takes

⁸¹ Salatino 178.

⁸² *Ibid.* 179.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 181.

possession of the concept of service in a paradigm that converges the realities of primacy and the ideals of service to declare that every spiritual enterprise emanates from the pope.⁸⁵

The issue of asserting power by defining the sacred became an explicit moment in the history of the papacy. Michel was just embarking on his reformation of the papacy after the papal schism and, subsequently, was undertaking the pacification of the papal territories. By usurping this definition of service to himself through the *Rescript* of his private chapel, Nicholas not only claimed the conciliar platform and thereby defeated it, but also corrected his intention to establish a new definition and perception of papal authority through charity.⁸⁶ The importance of this conviction as critical to papal primacy in the interconfessional transfers of the papacy was not a coincidence. The dispute over papal primacy addressed symbolically to the freestates' corruption of papal authority to the detriment of the decisions of the Church, was resolutely *inside* of the Church, where the nature of the pope's relationship to the Church and to the clergy arose. Thus, it was the clergy, not the laity, to whom the papacy needed to reassert its claim of supremacy and its active support for this ideal, heralded and promoted by Nicholas V's pontificate.⁸⁷

Charity serves as possibly the most important, certainly the most evident, theme of the *Chrysostomus* of Nicholas V. Not only the virtue central to the perception of the papacy that Nicholas hoped to convey, but also the mode of asserting the power of the papacy, charity which vitiated conciliarist counterclaims of a primacy. Angelus correlates charity to personified by St. Basil and St. Lawrence in every aspect of the narrative, as well as in the other, less centralized decorations of the chapel. Angelus correlates charity as the mother of all virtues and one most important to papal rule.

⁸⁴ Salatin 161.

Chapter Eight

Charity

The tactic of asserting power by denying it succeeded because it was exhibited at an auspicious moment in the history of the papacy. Nicholas was just embarking on his restoration of the papacy after the papal schism and, subsequently, was undertaking the pacification of the conciliar faction. By usurping this definition of service to himself through the frescoes in his private chapel, Nicholas not only claimed the conciliarist platform and thereby defeated it, but also conveyed his intention to establish a new definition and perception of papal supremacy through charity.⁸⁶ The installation of this conventional assertion of papal primacy in the innermost chambers of the papal palace was not a coincidence. The dispute over conciliarism, addressed symbolically in the frescoes' correlation of papal authority to the ordination of the deacons of the Church, was essentially *inside* of the Church, where discussions of the pope's relationship to the Church and to the clergy arose. Thus, it was the clergy, above all, to whom the papacy needed to reassert its claim of supremacy and so achieve support for this ideal, heralded and promoted by Nicholas V's pontificate.⁸⁷

Charity serves as possibly the most important, certainly the most evident, theme of the Chapel of Nicholas V. Not only the virtue central to the perception of the papacy that Nicholas hoped to convey, but also the mode of asserting the power of the papacy, charity subtly vitiated conciliarist counterclaims of supremacy. Angelico connotes charity as personified by St. Stephen and St. Lawrence in every aspect of the narrative, as well as in the other, less centralized decorations of the chapel. Angelico portrays charity as the mother of all virtues and one most important to papal rule.

⁸⁵ Salatino 141.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 141.

⁸⁷ Colella 39.

The first scenes of the chapel narrative portray the Ordinations of Saints Stephen and Lawrence in which they both receive the chalice of the Eucharist. From the Charity of the blood of Christ flows the Charity of the Church: as the pope's power derives immediately from Peter and is then given to the other apostles by the pope, so is the power of the blood disseminated.

Empowered by the sacred blood given in ordination, Stephen and Lawrence then exhibit the charity of preaching—ministering to the poor through the distribution of alms and of the treasures of the Church. The episode portraying Stephen's giving alms can be interpreted as revealing the theologically outlined effects of almsgiving which are threefold. The first effect is physical—the giving of alms as a physical relief to the poor who receive them. The second effect is spiritual—the alms are given in compassion for the love of God for mankind. The third effect is also spiritual—almsgiving moving the one who receives the alms to pray for the one who gave it to him. The frescoes exhibit these effects in the image of *St. Stephen Distributing Alms* (fig. 15) which depicts the benefactor--St. Stephen, the beneficiaries--the praying man, and the poor.⁸⁸

Lawrence exhibits the charity of almsgiving in Fra Angelico's frescoes in the second and third episodes of his life (fig. 19, 20). Angelico depicts Lawrence receiving from the hands of Pope Sixtus II the bag of coins that he, then, in the following scene, distributes to the poor. These poor, imbued with the flowing impulse of charity implied in the transfer of alms from giver to receiver, assume a "splendor of dignity," as observed by Pope Pius XII, a "spirit enriched with serenity and hope."⁸⁹ These images were intended to convey figuratively the spirit of charity of the papacy and its power therein,

⁸⁸ Colella 14.

⁸⁹ Rev. Innocenzo Venchi, "The Blessed Angelico and the Chapel of Nicholas V: Fra Angelico's Theology of Art," *Fra Angelico and the Chapel of Nicholas V* (Vatican City State: Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 1999) 14.

but also literally to pay a veiled homage to Nicholas himself, who was known for feeding at least 900 needy people every week.⁹⁰

The last scenes of Fra Angelico's painted narrative in the Chapel of Nicholas V depict the charity of martyrdom. The frescoes show Stephen first before the Sanhedrin—the place of his condemnation just before his execution (fig. 18). He preaches there about figures from history chosen by God to lead, particularly Abraham and Moses. Stephen points up to indicate the origin of his words and the reason for his coming sacrifice, but receives no response from his icy audience. He is then dragged out of the city and stoned to death, dying, like Christ, just outside the walls of Jerusalem while praying for the forgiveness and salvation of his persecutors (fig. 22). Angelico depicts Lawrence, too, before the tribunal that condemns him to death (fig. 23) and then in the midst of his martyrdom (fig. 25). The two scenes, set clearly in the city of Rome, are divided by a narrow tower in which Lawrence was imprisoned before his death and where he ministers salvation to others in the jail (fig. 24).⁹¹ The martyrdoms of Stephen and Lawrence convey perhaps the most profound and obvious example of charity, for there is no sacrifice greater than death.

The idea of charity does not end with the pictorial cycle's last episode, but extends to the fourth wall, above the altar, on which once was an image of the Deposition from the Cross, an image noted by Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*, but later destroyed. This image existed not as a separate entity of the chapel, but as a completion of Angelico's narrative cycle. The artist certainly conceived the lives of Saints Stephen and Lawrence in close accord with the *Deposition* in reference to Christ's martyrdom. The death of Jesus is seen as a "continuous mystery of redemptive charity, which flows through the centuries of the Church and of which all believers, represented in the images

⁹⁰ Venchi 15.

and stories of various saints, are the beneficiaries.”⁹² The altar and *Deposition*, then, signify the ultimate act of charity and serve as a point of confluence for all the paintings in the Chapel.

The theme of charity can be explained even from the ceiling and fictive paneling of the Chapel which depict images of the four Evangelists and the eight fathers of the Church (fig. 5). This is the charity of Doctrine. By the time the Chapel was decorated, the Councils of Constance and of Florence had confirmed the idea of the pope as one entrusted with the truths of Christ. Those truths, carried in God’s word, are symbolically transmitted from the Evangelists, the recorders of God’s word, painted in the groin-vault of the chapel, to the chain of Church Fathers descending down the wall in the paneling framing the chapel’s narrative. Each holds a symbol of their doctrine as a seeming homage to Nicholas V, the bibliophile and theologian. The arrangement of Church Doctors and Evangelists reveals the authority of the Bible over other sacred doctrine, while still honoring religious study based on faith in the Scriptures. Moreover, in the indented embrasures around the chapel’s windows, Angelico rendered fourteen busts of Biblical figures, patriarchs of the Old Testament including Abraham and Moses. As a whole, the Chapel of Nicholas V represents a compendium of doctrine from the Old and New Testaments and the religious writings of the Doctors of the Church. The Chapel conveys a correlation between the study of truth and the exaltation of the first truth—God the Father. Through the exercise of the evangelic word extends Christian charity, embodied by the Church.⁹³

⁹¹ Venchi 16.

⁹² Ibid.17.

⁹³ Ibid. 18.

Chapter Nine

The Institution of the Church

Fra Angelico deliberately binds the ideals of primacy and charity, reflected in the frescoes of Nicholas' private chapel, to the framework of the institutional church through the specific architectural settings of certain episodes. In this way, he specifically validates Nicholas' intentions for Rome and the papacy. Architectural setting, composition, and contextual significance highlight the Saints as figures fulfilling religious doctrine by the governance of the Church.⁹⁴ Moreover, these architectural settings particularly reflect and reinforce the architectural plans enacted in Nicholas' "renovatio urbis," headed by artist/architect/author, Leon Battista Alberti, who was working in the papal court at the same time as Fra Angelico.⁹⁵ The particulars of these backdrops reveal the virtue of Saints Stephen and Lawrence not as inherent to them as individuals, but rather as inextricable from their ministry, a ministry exercised in and through the Church.⁹⁶

In the first scene of St. Stephen's Ordination, the saint kneels before St. Peter in front of a "ciborium-surmounted altar of the Constantinian basilica of St. Peter's."⁹⁷ The basilica seems to be presented not in the form of the contemporary Old St. Peter's of the mid-fifteenth century, but the basilica after its remodeling according to the plan then being considered (fig. 31). The architecture of the building appears relatively homogeneous and expansive, filling the entire backdrop of the scene. Its classical order of Corinthian columns, complete with detailed entablature and massive symmetrical proportions, leaves no doubt as to its realistic architectural setting and to the influence of

⁹⁴ Westfall 164.

⁹⁵ Pope-Hennessy 108.

⁹⁶ Colella 47.

Nicholas' court architect, Alberti. Richard Krautheimer views this painted architectural setting as Nicholas' "go-ahead" for the reconstruction of the actual basilica.⁹⁸ St.

Lawrence's Ordination also occurs before a distinctly Roman basilica. Its long nave with a colonnade of varying Corinthian and Composite capitals and vague foliated ornament, reveal its somewhat idealized, but familiar, form resembling the updated construction of St. Peter's.⁹⁹ Clearly, Nicholas sought to bind the ideals expressed by the protagonists of the Chapel frescoes to the Ecclesiastical Institution—a connection established explicitly through the architecture of the painted narrative.

The scenes of charity following Stephen's and Lawrence's *Ordination* scenes particularly portray the deliberate connection between the saints' virtuous acts and the Church. Stephen is shown distributing alms to the poor in front of a non-specific city with no conspicuous ecclesiastical signs (fig. 15). The connection of this scene of service to the Church is evident only when viewed in conjunction with its preceding episode—St. Stephen's Ordination (fig. 14). The Ordination, set in what is ostensibly the basilica of St. Peter's, as mentioned above, extends over into the scene of almsgiving. As he gives to the needy, Stephen stands with his back against the pillar that separates the two scenes within the lunette and is part of the basilica's end-wall. In this position, Stephen appears to stand on an extension of the floor of the basilica itself, thus linking him to the interior of the church that stretches out behind him. Angelico visually suggests a continuation of activity inside and outside of the basilica. Stephen advances from the basilica to fulfill the charitable duties with which he has just been invested at his Ordination. Moreover, the subdeacon assisting Stephen in distributing alms holds a long list, seemingly of the

⁹⁷ Arnold Nesselrath, "Fra Angelico's and Benozzo Gozzoli's Composition in the Murals of the Private Chapel of Pope Nicholas V in the Vatican," *Fra Angelico and the Chapel of Nicholas V* (Vatican City State: Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 1999) 77.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 77.

⁹⁹ Stinger 173.

names of the poor and the amount of alms each should receive. This detail adds a dimension of order and proficiency to the scene, implying that the act is one designated by, inseparable from, and enacted in the name of the Church. The deacons perform their services as directed by the pope: Stephen assumes the same stance in his distribution of alms as does Peter in the preceding ordination scene, and also wears a yellow mantle symbolic of the first Apostles. The repetition of pose can be attributed to compositional similarities and the sequential narrative mode of the cycle, but Stephen's wearing of St. Peter's yellow mantle is unprecedented in hagiographic cycles of the saint. The garment has an Old Testament association as well, recalling the story of Elijah draping his mantle over Elisha in a gesture just before Elijah's death, designating Elisha as his disciple, to perpetuate Elijah's ministry as a prophet. This story provides an appropriate analogy to Stephen, appearing immediately after his ordination in the mantle of Peter, entrusted with a mission of ministry by the Prince of the Apostles. The association of this motif to stories from the Bible not only reinforces the profound religious implications and connections of the chapel's pictorial cycle, but its conveyed inseparability of charity and ecclesiastical institution.

Angelico also sets Lawrence's charitable service within the framework of the Church. In his *Distribution of the Treasures of the Church* (fig. 20), Lawrence (like Stephen) stands on an open portal in front of a large entryway, framed by elaborate pilasters, that opens into a magnificent receding nave of a huge basilica. This backdrop not only enhances the ceremonial, ecclesiastical aspect of Lawrence's action, but also conveys the inseparable connection between the deacon saint's charitable acts and the institutional church by its specific arrangement. The apse of the basilica frames the figure of Lawrence like a niche, confirming the idea of the Saint's incorporation literally and figuratively into the Church, and that institution as the setting for and source of his

charitable acts. In fact, of the three architectural settings of the cycle which represent church interiors—the Ordinations of the Saints and the scenes of Lawrence Receiving and Distributing the Church Treasures—all refer specifically to Rome in their architectural treatments. Their interiors do not exhibit the arcading characteristic of Florentine architecture, i.e. Brunelleschi's eminent standard seen in San Lorenzo and Santo Spirito in Florence, but rather unarcaded colonnades with "simple trabeation" and "full entablature."¹⁰⁰ This specific architectural treatment in all three examples reflects the basilicas of Early Christendom in Rome, and reinforces of the ideals of the Church as embodied in the papacy.

Lawrence's inseparable association with the Church encompasses his association with the pope as, like Stephen, Lawrence acts on papal direction and by papal empowerment. Lawrence first receives the treasures of the Church from Pope Sixtus before distributing them to the needy in the following scene. The pope raises his hand authoritatively as he passes down the treasures, and Lawrence kneels before him, obediently accepting his mission before going forth to do it himself. The repetition in pose and action of these two figures in sequential episodes emphasizes the necessity of the pope in the charitable actions of his deacon: Sixtus empowers and pledges Lawrence to his particular mission.¹⁰¹

The use of the architectural setting to define the space of the narrative episodes as distinctly Roman, and therefore, tied to the Roman Church, continues in the scenes of the Saints' martyrdom. The lunette containing *The Martyrdom of St. Stephen* (fig. 22) appears before what is seemingly a Tuscan landscape, presumably influenced by Fra Angelico's inherent Florentine associations; but prominently severing this landscape is a curving, turreted city wall whose crenellated towers and interior galleried walkways

¹⁰⁰ Nesselrath 80.

identify it undoubtedly as the Aurelian city walls of Rome (fig. 32). This wall divides the two episodes of Stephen's martyrdom—his expulsion from "Jerusalem," represented here as Rome, and his stoning outside the city walls.¹⁰² Thus, the episodic arrangement of Stephen's martyrdom, the greatest act of charity possible on behalf of the Church, alludes specifically to Rome and the papacy as the second "Jerusalem," the place of Stephen's martyrdom and burial, and the institutional representation of charity prompting his sacrifice.¹⁰³

The setting of *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* also ties the most valiant act of martyrdom to the charity of the Roman Church, as well as exhorting the saint's personal integrity. The palace wall serving as a backdrop to Lawrence's death contains five symmetrical niches (fig. 25, 26). Four of these contain a small statue personifying one of the four cardinal virtues—Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance, and Justice—and the fifth contains a statue of Hercules, the greatest personification of virtue. These personified virtues, placed deliberately in the context of martyrdom, allude to Lawrence's personal virtues, manifested most powerfully in his act of martyrdom. Moreover, the tiny image within the window of a protruding architectural construction that divides the scenes of Lawrence's judgment and his martyrdom, testifies to Lawrence's virtuous acts of charity. This construction represents the jail to which Lawrence was relegated before his death, and while there, he healed a blind man and brought two others, including the jailer, Hippolytus, to salvation.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the architectural constructions of this scene help to convey Lawrence's personal virtues, explicated on the palace wall, and manifested in his evangelical compassion and obedience unto death. These virtues are then naturally

¹⁰¹ Colella 46.

¹⁰² Ibid. 75.

¹⁰³ Stinger 173.

¹⁰⁴ Colella 44.

translated to the charity of the Church as well—the institutional seat of the pope who empowers Lawrence and on whose behalf he is killed.

The assertion of devotion to the welfare of the poor as a distinct aspect of the ecclesiastical ministry of the Roman Church's deacon saints, and therefore, an inseparable aspect of the ecclesiastical institution itself, reinforces its value of the virtue of charity. This correlation also effectively placates criticism of materialism in the church by implicating worldly goods as necessary for supplying that charitable activity. Peter and Sixtus, represented in the guise of Nicholas V, further this idea by revealing the source of charity as the pope himself, and thus, reinforcing the idea of primacy, the pontiff as the supreme head of the Papal See, the center of Christendom.

Chapter Ten

The Doctors of the Church

The figures contained in the framework of the narrative episodes of the lives of Saints Stephen and Lawrence further link the ideals conveyed in the narrative cycle to the institutional Church. These panels contain images of the Eight Doctors of the Church: in the upper register are St. Leo the Great, St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and St. Gregory the Great; the lower register, St. Athanasius, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Jerome, and St. John Chrysostom (fig. 6-13). Not all are Fathers of the Church, but various links correlate those chosen for representation, though there are no overriding links. As a whole, the choices are unorthodox, but the figures' theological significance is enough to validate their inclusion. Four of the eight—Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory, and Jerome—are Latin Church Fathers, while Athanasius and John Chrysostom are Greek Church Fathers. The inclusion of these representatives from both the Eastern and Western Church reflects the recent unification of the two, championed by none other than Nicholas V. The imbalance of members from the Greek and Latin Churches subtly asserts the primacy of the Western Church. Moreover, the two Greek Fathers represented are those frequently invoked by supporters of the papacy during both the Council of Florence and in the general vitiation of conciliarist claims to power as Greek Fathers who are witnesses to Roman primacy. Neither Pope Leo the Great nor Thomas Aquinas are Fathers of the Church, but each appropriately asserts papal power by his inclusion in the Nicholas Chapel. Leo, the early Christian pope noted for his defense of Rome against invaders in the fifth century, and Aquinas, the aforementioned patron saint of Nicholas V, are distinctly placed among the Church Fathers to reinforce the supreme authority of Rome and the papacy.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Roettgen 207.

The Eight Doctors depicted find a link in their common association as ranked ecclesiastical figures with the Church hierarchy. Two representatives of each rank are depicted opposite each other in the panels of the barrel-vaulted arches flanking the entrance and altar-wall. Their degree of rank increases from bottom to top, and from entrance to altar-wall with the priests, Jerome and Aquinas, being first, followed by the bishops, Augustine and Ambrose, the patriarchs Chrysostom and Athanasius, and finally Popes Gregory the Great and Leo the Great. The inclusion of these particular Church Fathers in the private Chapel of Nicholas V not only relates to their personal distinction as theological authorities, but also to their ecclesiastical association, a correlation that reinforces the ecclesiastical message conveyed in the hagiographical cycles which the Fathers frame.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Colella 49.

Chapter Eleven

The Function of the Chapel of Nicholas V

The profound ecclesiological implications of the Nicholas Chapel frescoes discussed in this paper are surprising for so small and private a chapel. Determination of the chapel's function, as far as it may be assumed from historical evidence, sheds light on the profundity and somewhat propagandistic nature of the frescoes. The location and size of the Chapel have led scholars to believe that it had limited access, perhaps was even used exclusively by the pope for private devotions. However, fragments of information from various pontificates, specifically that of Julius II, suggest that the chapel was used fairly frequently for particular Masses and ordinations, and thus, was seen by more than just the pope himself. Whether the chapel was viewed by many or by only Nicholas and his close associates, its conveyance of ideas specific to papal intentions at that time seems definitive, particularly in light of the auspicious timing of Nicholas' pontificate and his extensive plans for the Papal See.

Various historical records on the Vatican Palace specify that the Nicholas Chapel was used for the pope's daily celebrations of Mass. The diary of Paris de Grassis, the papal master of ceremonies from 1504-1521, reads, "Capellaa parva superior in qua papa quotidie parvam missam audit, quaeque dicata est S. Laurentio et S. Stephano."¹⁰⁷ This account asserts that an unspecified pope read Mass in the chapel of the upper floor of the Vatican Palace decorated with images of Saints Stephen and Lawrence.¹⁰⁸ Renate Colella attests that this record refers to Pope Julius II (1502-1513), but that this ceremonial function was most likely a tradition continued from the time of Nicholas V. A report written by Guido de Busco, the papal master of ceremonies from 1404-1431,

¹⁰⁷ Biago Biagetti, "Una Nuova Ipotesi Intorno Allo Studio E Alla Cappella Di Niccolo V Nel Palazzo Vaticano," *Atti Della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, Ser. 3, (1932-1933), 210.

¹⁰⁸ Sabatine 23.

notes use of the *capella secreta* of Pope Gregory XII (1406-1415) for the ordination of his nephew, Antonio Correr, as bishop. Moreover, this particular type of service, carried out in the papal private chapel, seems to have been customary as evidenced in Guido's *Responsiones*, records compiled about the use of chapels in the papal palace, which notes numerous receipts due to clerics for their participation in these ceremonies.¹⁰⁹ Though this record does not refer specifically to the Nicholas Chapel of the Vatican as Fra Angelico did not decorate it until 1449, the record does imply the preference and use of private chapels for routine liturgical services. Because the dates of these records cover a time span encompassing the pontificate of Nicholas V, they suggest that the general use and accessibility of the popes' private chapels continued as an affixed tradition through the reign of Nicholas V. Thus, it may be assumed that the frescoes of Fra Angelico, though viewed by an elite audience, *were*, in fact, seen.

The Feast Day Masses of St. Stephen and St. Lawrence that would have been read by Nicholas in his private chapel convey specific references to the chapel frescoes, which reinforce and convey the papal rhetoric being delivered. The Mass of St. Stephen, his Feast Day on December 26th, specifically mentions the saint's charitable deeds, persecution, and similarity to Christ. The *Introit* includes a Psalm beseeching God's help in the midst of persecution, a theme frequent throughout the Mass and specifically alluding to Stephen's extensive persecution. The *Collect* then offers a prayer asking for love for enemies, a strength exemplified by Stephen as he prayed for his own killers. The Mass then relates the story of Stephen from Acts: his duties of service, as ordained by the first Apostles, and his subsequent martyrdom. The gospel of Matthew is also cited, chapter 23, verses 34-39, which relate Jesus' speech to the Pharisees, reminding them that He will send to them prophets, wise men, and teachers whom they will persecute and

¹⁰⁹ Colella 50.

even put to death. Thus, the Mass recognizes that Stephen's martyrdom is legitimized by Christ's own words. The service concludes with recognition of Stephen's saintly intercession: that he who was made glorious by suffering may aid those devoted to him also to be beyond reproach.¹¹⁰ Clearly, the Mass of St. Stephen reinforces the importance of charity reflected in the Chapel frescoes: Stephen's literal charity in acts of service on behalf of the Church, and his love, by charity, for even his persecutors.

The Mass of St. Lawrence, read on his Feast Day on August 10th, also reinforces ideas conveyed in the Chapel's painted images of his life and martyrdom. The *First Vespers* of the service, performed on August 9th (the day before the actual Feast), immediately introduces the theme of Lawrence as martyr who gave sight to the blind and thanked God as he was martyred. This theme is expounded in the specific terminology of the *Collect*: the prayer asks God to "quench the flames of our vices; even as Thou gavest blessed Lawrence grace to overcome his fiery torments."¹¹¹ The Mass also frequently cites generosity and charity in giving the treasures of the Church, an allusion to Lawrence's good works. The Epistle relates II Corinthians 9: 6-10, which attests to God's love for the cheerful giver and the importance of giving to the poor. The prayer of the *Secret* beseeches God for Lawrence's intercession in the *Offertory*—that he consecrate the gifts given as an intermediary to the Lord. The predominant motifs in the prayers and scripture of the St. Lawrence Day Mass, then, deliberately emphasize Lawrence's charity and service on behalf of the Church, culminating in his greatest service of martyrdom.

The Masses of Saints Stephen and Lawrence both convey specific ideals associated with each Saint. The veneration of these saints in the images on the Nicholas Chapel walls is thus validated, in mutual reinforcement, by the texts of the Masses being

¹¹⁰ Catholic missal, 148-152.

read. The saints' worthiness, as substantiated by those virtues cited, elevates them into the role of intercessors for those hearing and seeing their homage in the text of Mass and the correlative frescoes of Fra Angelico. This interdependence further exhorts these saints as worthy religious figures for representing timeless religious ideals for the papacy, particularly in poignant testimony to Nicholas Vs' conception of the papacy in the late-conciliar period.

¹¹¹ Catholic missal, 1385.

Chapter Twelve

Conclusion

Understanding precisely the meaning behind the frescoes of Pope Nicholas' private chapel is an impossibility, for how can one small commission from the 15th century be comprehended, or the intentions of its patron be fully known? Although the Chapel's significance will always be subject to speculation, when the frescoes are viewed within the context of their execution—patron, artist, time, and place—the complexity of their inherent meaning is apparent. The reason for the Chapel's veneration of Saints Stephen and Lawrence is easily attributed to their popularity as artistic subjects in Rome at that time. Moreover, the pairing of the first Christian martyr (Stephen) and the first Roman martyr (Lawrence) fittingly corresponded to the Roman Church's auspicious assertion of the papacy as the central authority in Rome, and Rome as the central city over Christendom. When viewing the work as under the influence of these outside factors, its arrangement, rendering, and the specificity of episodes depicted assume a more polemical nature, and its meanings, a tone more profound. Primacy and charity emerge from these stylistic distinctions as the predominant themes of the cycle. This interpretation is confirmed further in the adherence of these particular ideals to Nicholas V's plans to reinstate the papacy as supreme authority in Rome and placate the still extant opposition arising during the papal schism which was finally drawing to a close at the time of Nicholas' pontificate. The correlation between the architectural backgrounds of the frescoes to specific sites in Rome effectively ties the ideals of primacy and charity specifically to the Roman Church. Thus, Nicholas' Chapel decorations convey a perception of the papacy that Nicholas wished to assert and to achieve during his pontificate. Whether the Chapel decorations were seen only by the pope or by others passing through the Palace corridors as well, is unknown, though Nicholas being the

Chapel's only audience throughout his entire reign is doubtful. Regardless, its scenes portray a powerful conflation of politics and aesthetics, rendered with impressive moderation, that subtly, but profoundly, reinforce a religious and institutional spirit long lost by the papacy. Thus, the three painted walls of Nicholas' tiny Chapel document his reformulation of papal ideology at a critical moment of transition. The frescoes attest to their own importance by surviving the passage of time, and conveying a favorable papal self-conception to the institution long after their purpose and patron had passed on.

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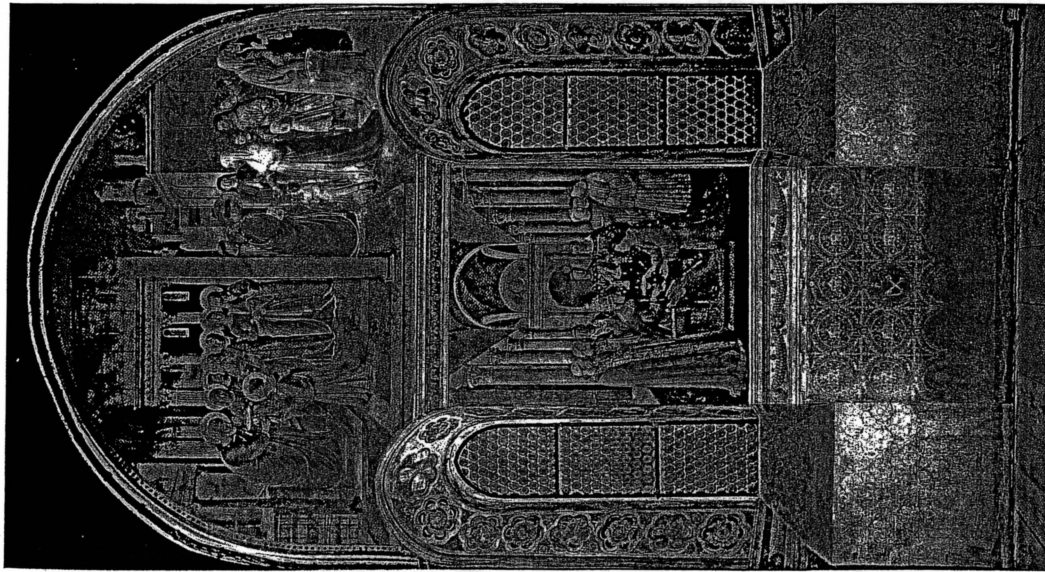


Figure 1

50 The three walls of the Chapel of Nicholas v with the fresco cycle: scenes from the lives of the archdeacons Stephen (lunette) and Lawrence (bottom register)

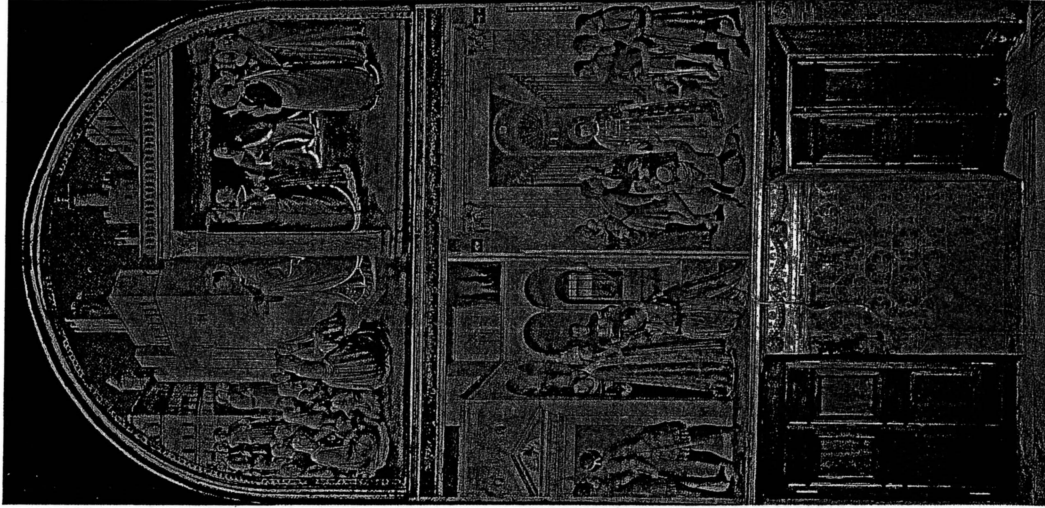


Figure 2

the chapel's painting, it cannot be mere coincidence that in August 1447 Pope Nicholas v confirmed the authenticity of the relics of St. Stephen preserved in that same church (see Borsook, 1980, page 103).

On either side of the scenes on the two long walls (east and west) there is a narrow panel containing only a single figure. These panels are actually inside shallow niches that extend beyond the original square space to the north and

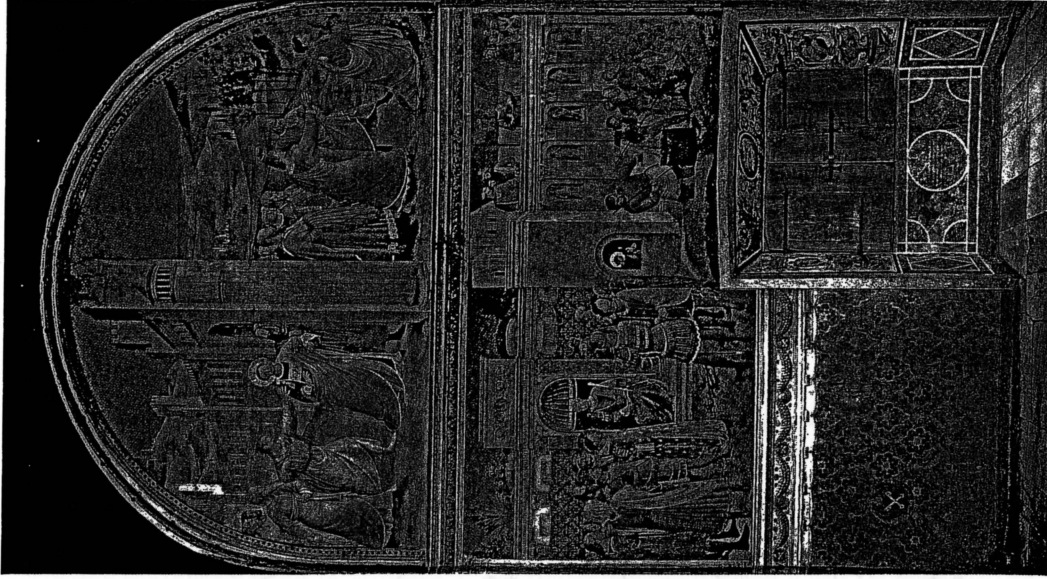


Figure 3

picture compartment of the north wall, above the entry. To the left of that scene St. Sixtus is entrusting the church treasure to Lawrence. Above, in the lunette, St. Stephen is seen preaching on the left, and on the right engaged in the dispute with the Jews that led to his condemnation.

On the third (east) wall, the narratives again run parallel. To the left in the lunette St. Stephen is being led to his martyrdom, and to the right we see him being crowned as David. To

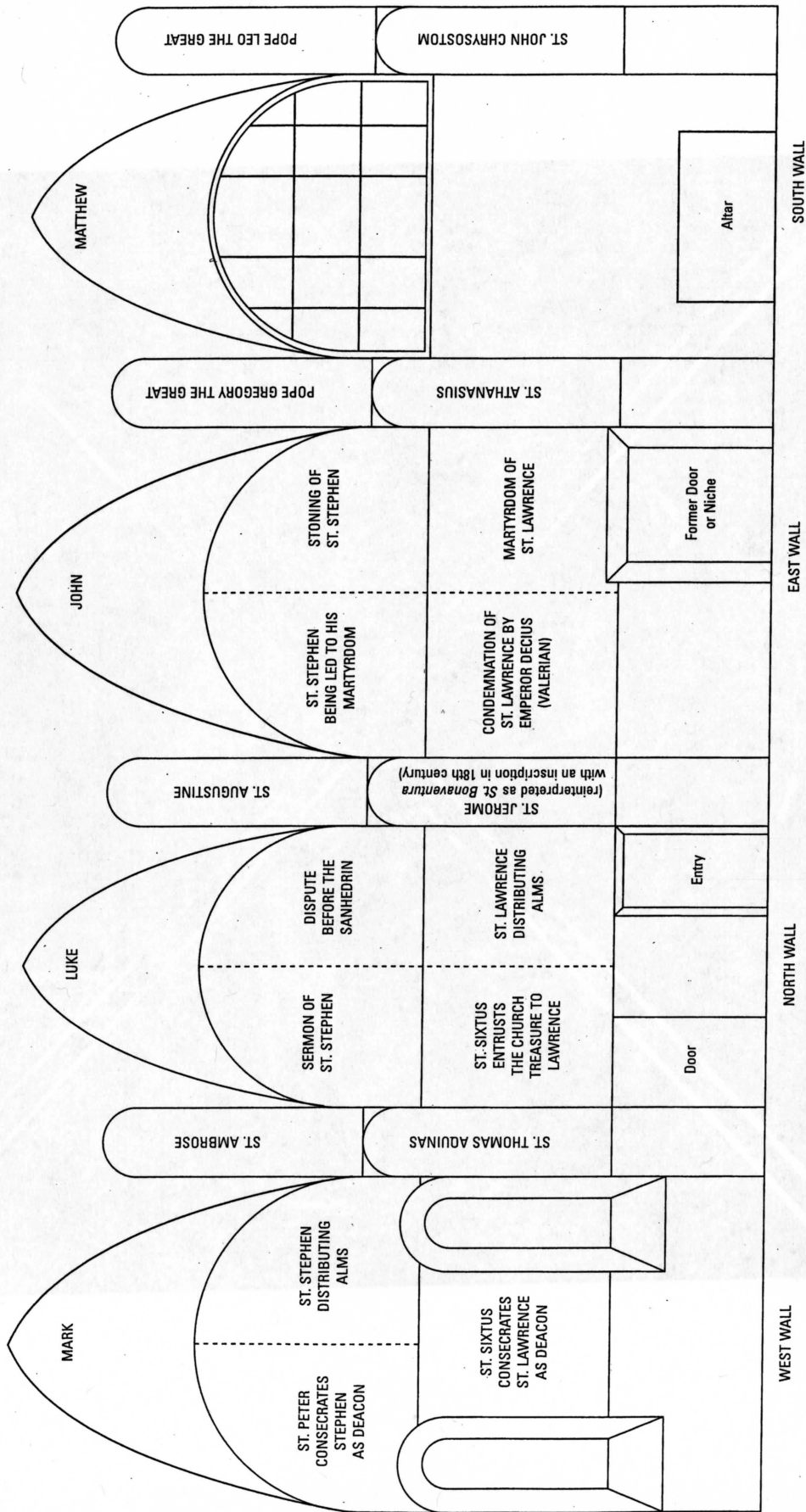


Figure 4



5

5. View of the groin-vault with frescoes of the *Four Evangelists*.

Figure 5

10-17. The Doctors of the Church (upper register).



10

10. St. Leo the Great.

11. St. Ambrose.

112

Figure 6

Figure 7



12

12. St. Augustine.



13

13. St. Gregory the Great.

Figure 8

Figure 9

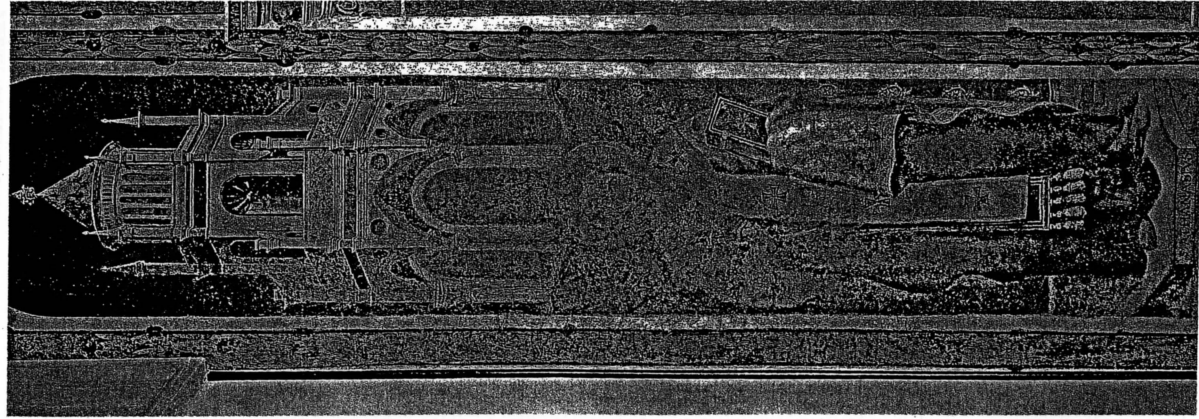


Figure 10

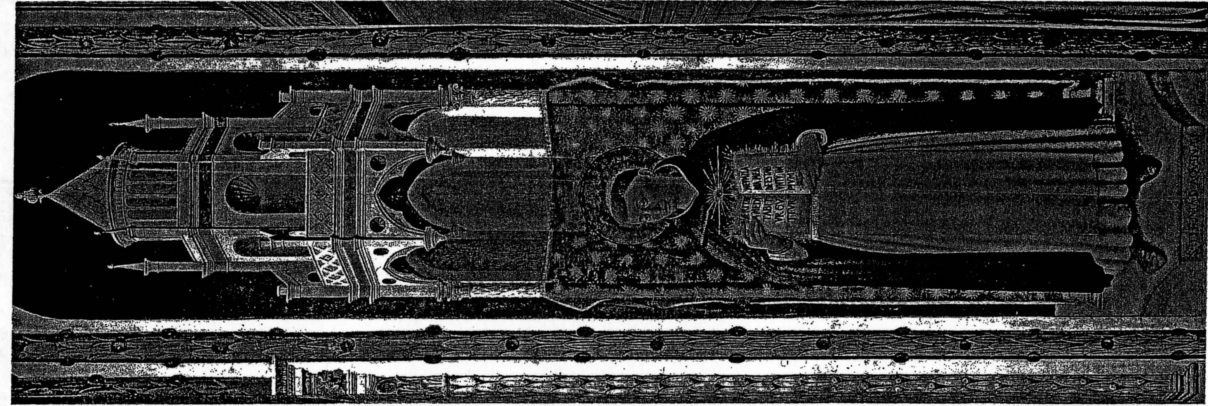
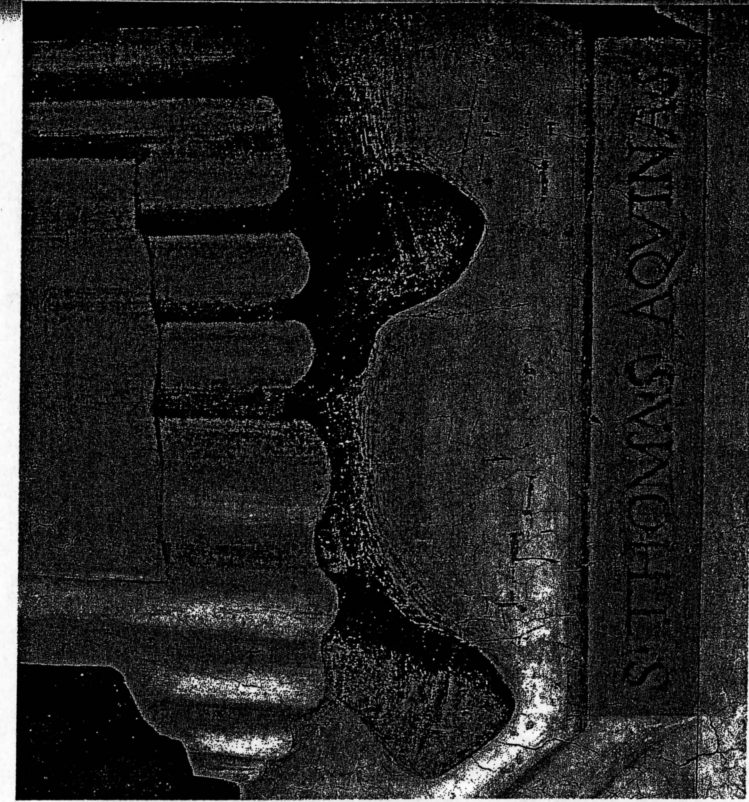


Figure 11



18-24. The Doctors of the Church (lower register).

18. *St. Athanasius* (repainted under Pope Gregory XIII).

19. *St. Thomas Aquinas*.

20. Detail of the vestment of *St. Thomas Aquinas*, with preparatory red brushstrokes.

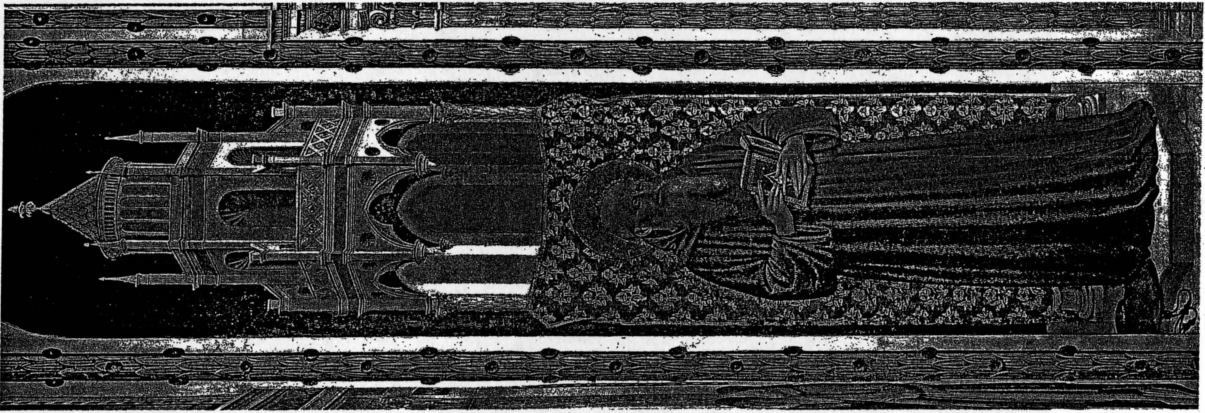


Figure 12

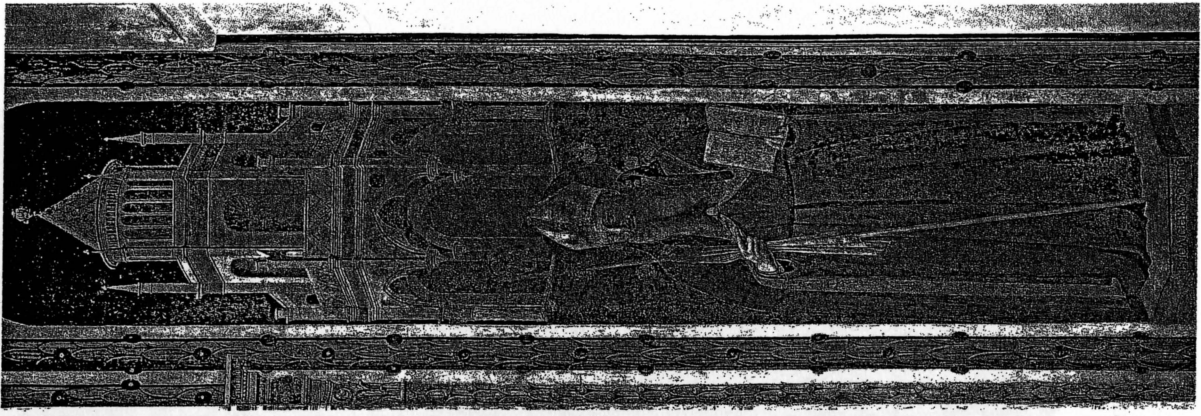


Figure 13

21. St. Jerome.

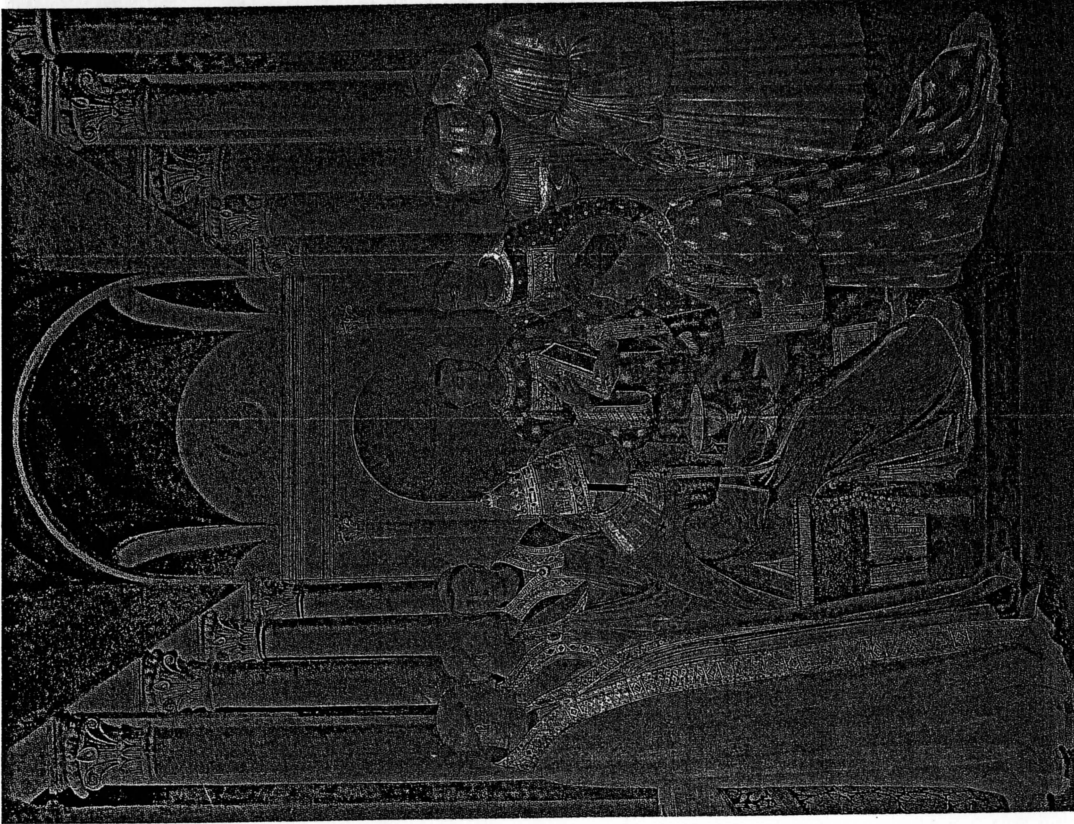
22. St. John Chrysostom.



28. Lunette of wall to the right of the chapel: *The Ordination of St. Stephen and St. Stephen distributing Alms to the Poor.*

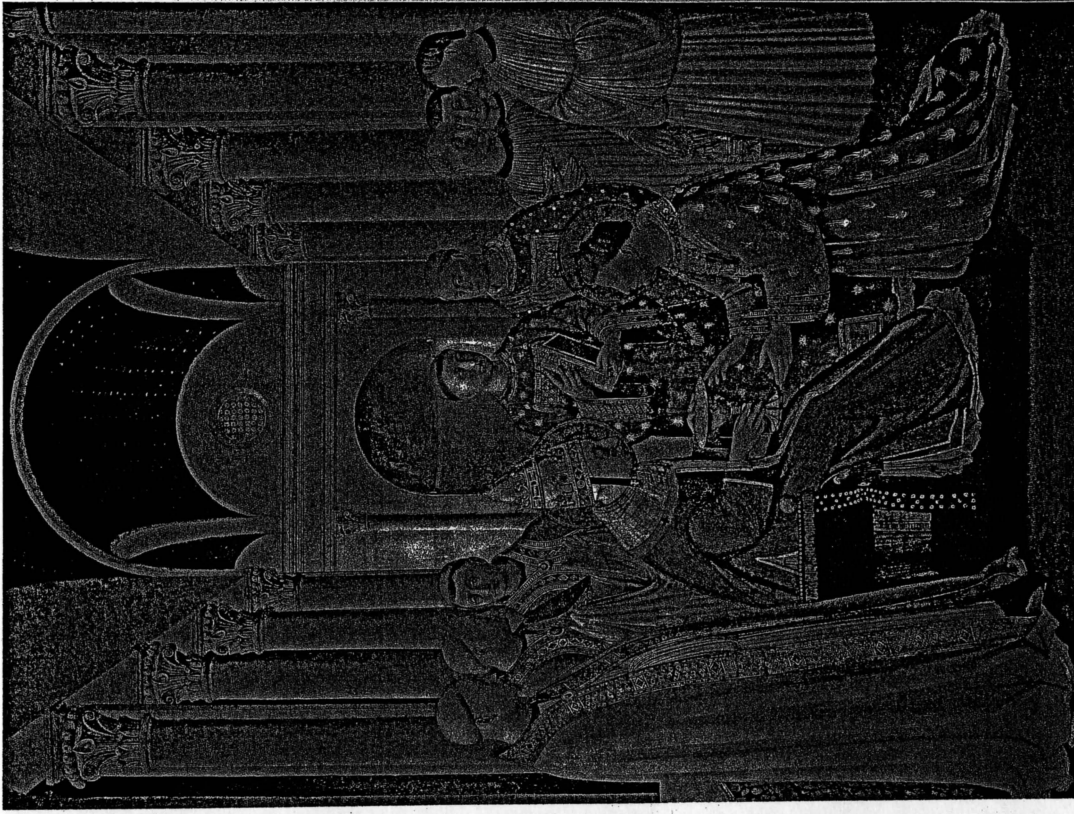
Figure 14

Figure 15



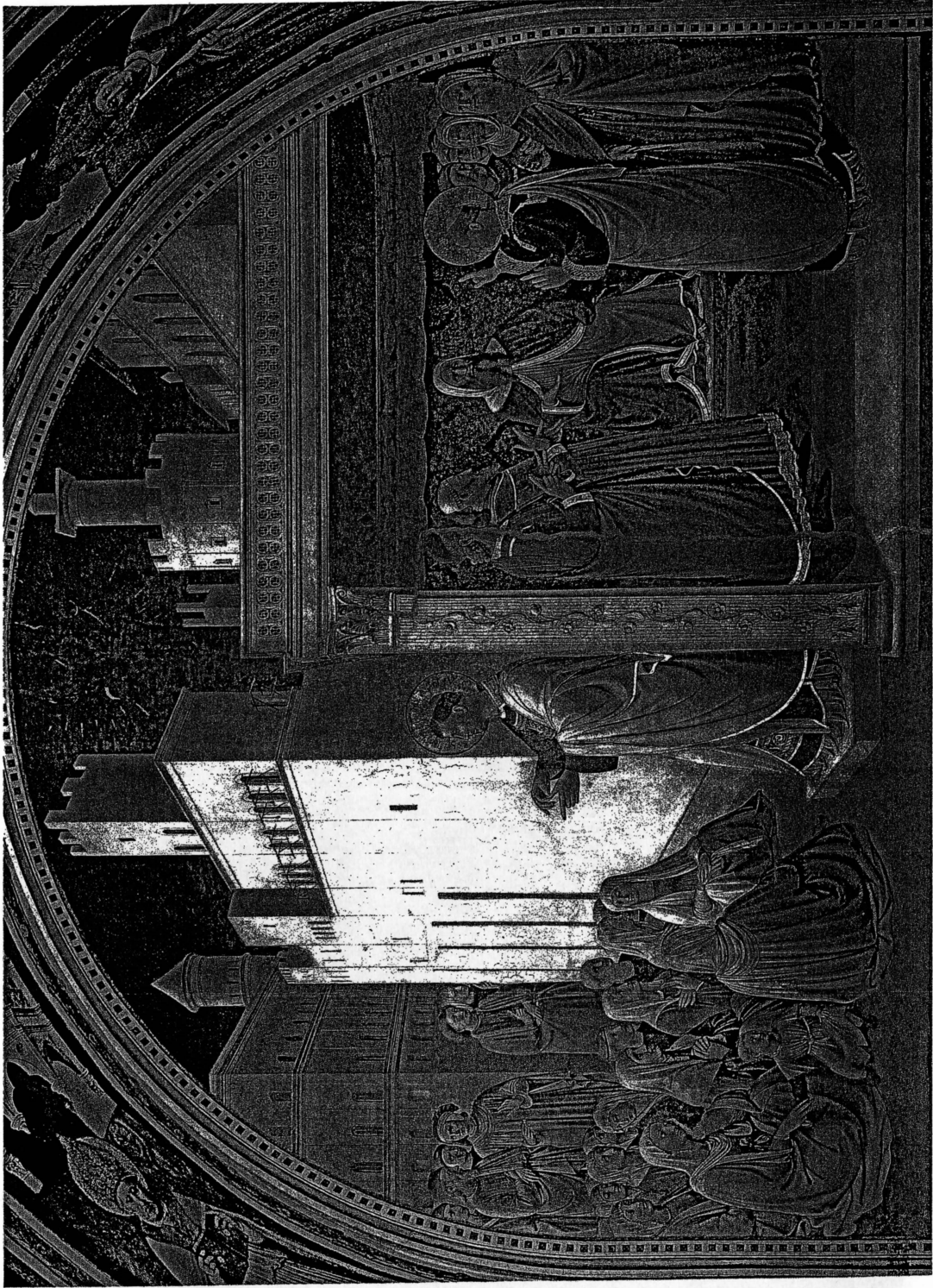
68

68. Wall to the right of the Chapel (lower register): *The Ordination of St. Lawrence* (before the restoration).



69. Wall to the right of the Chapel (lower register): *The Ordination of St. Lawrence*.

Figure 16



41

41. Lunette of entrance wall of the chapel: St. Stephen preaching to the People of Jerusalem and Prosecution and Trial of St. Stephen before the Sanhedrin.

Figure 17

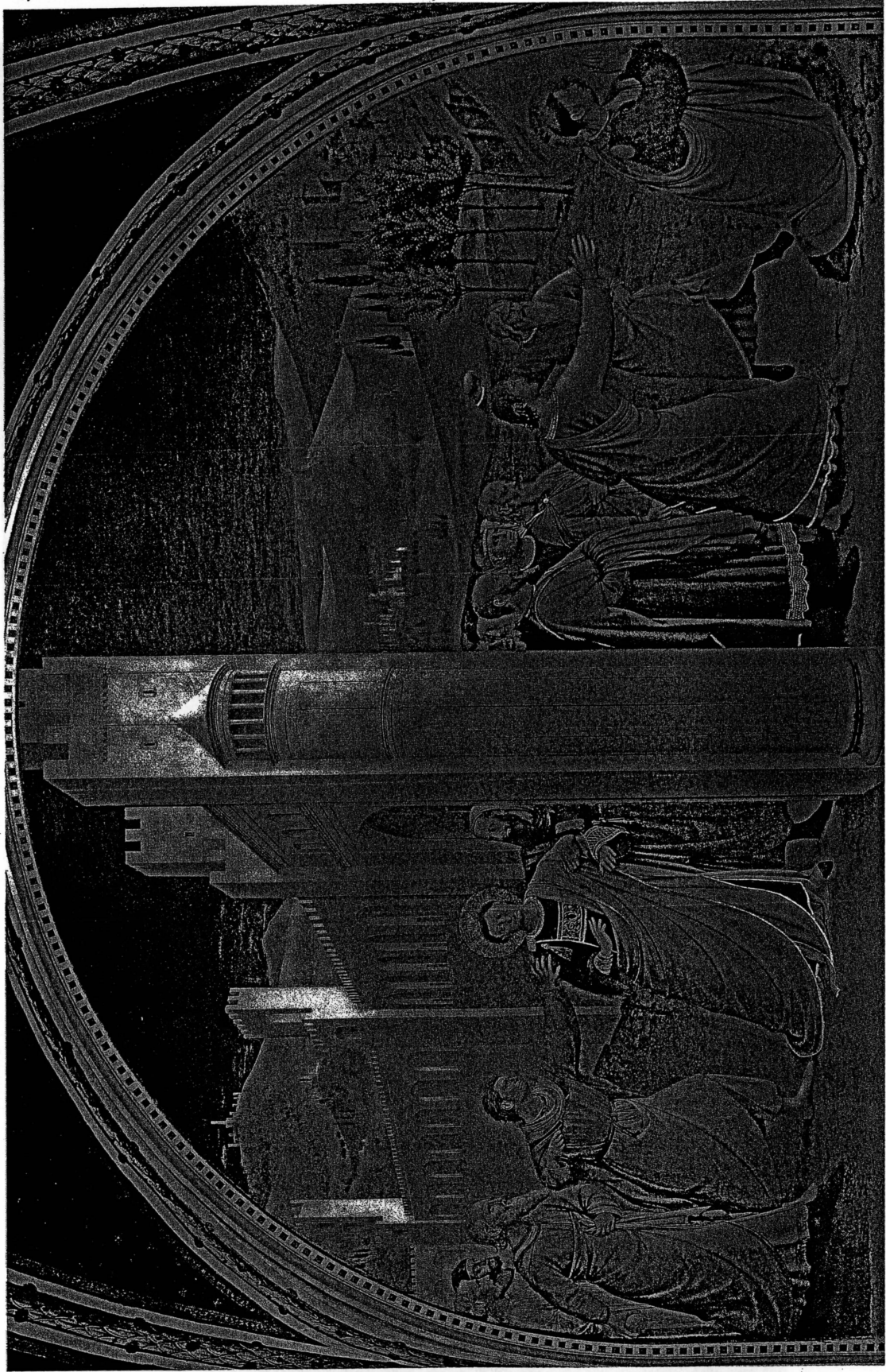
Figure 18



Figure 19

Figure 20

80. Entrance wall (lower register): St. Lawrence receiving the Treasures of the Church from Pope Sixtus II and St. Lawrence distributing the Treasures of the Church.



56. Lunette of wall to the left of the chapel: Expulsion of St. Stephen from the City and The Stoning of St. Stephen.

Figure 21

Figure 22

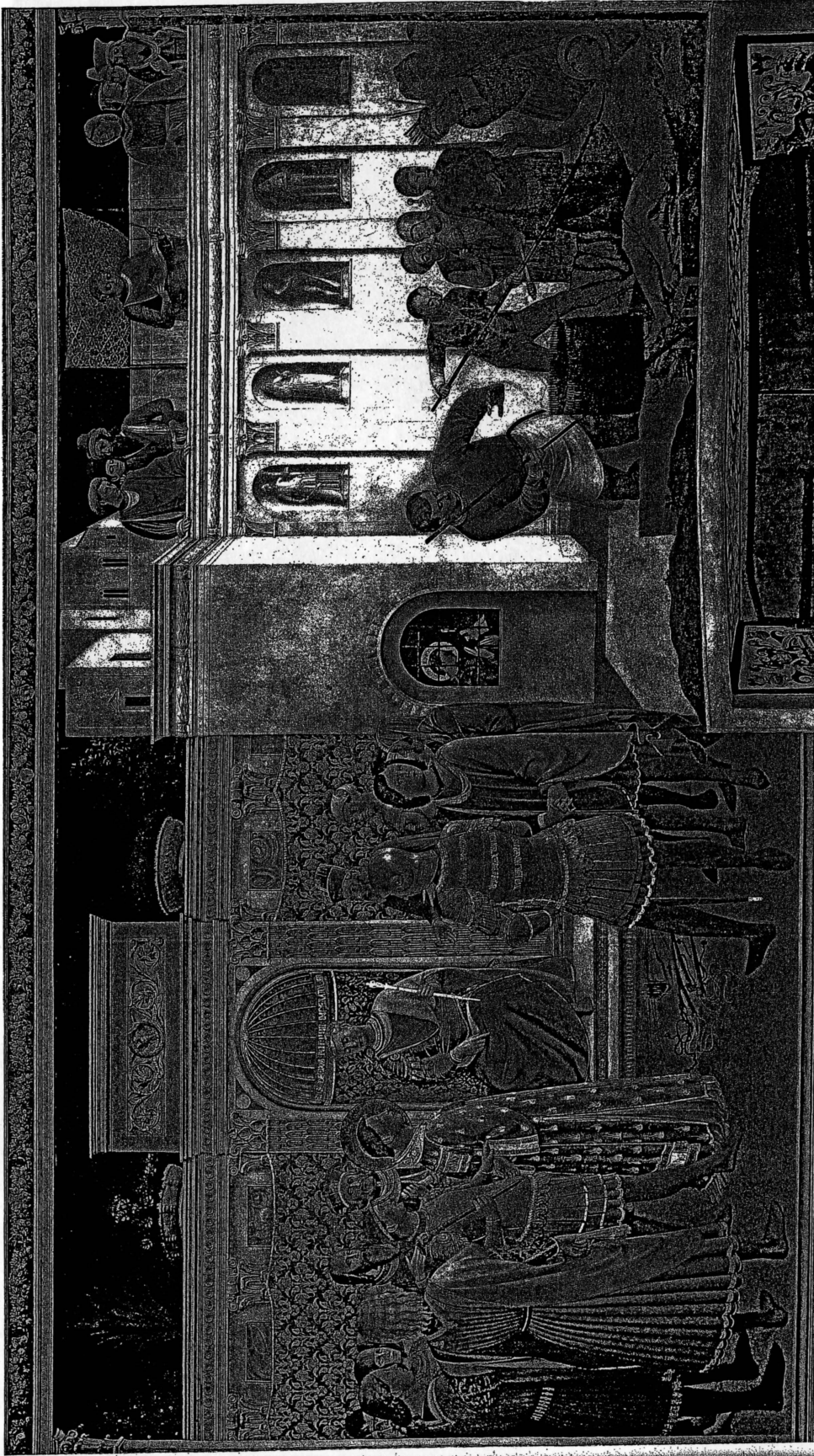
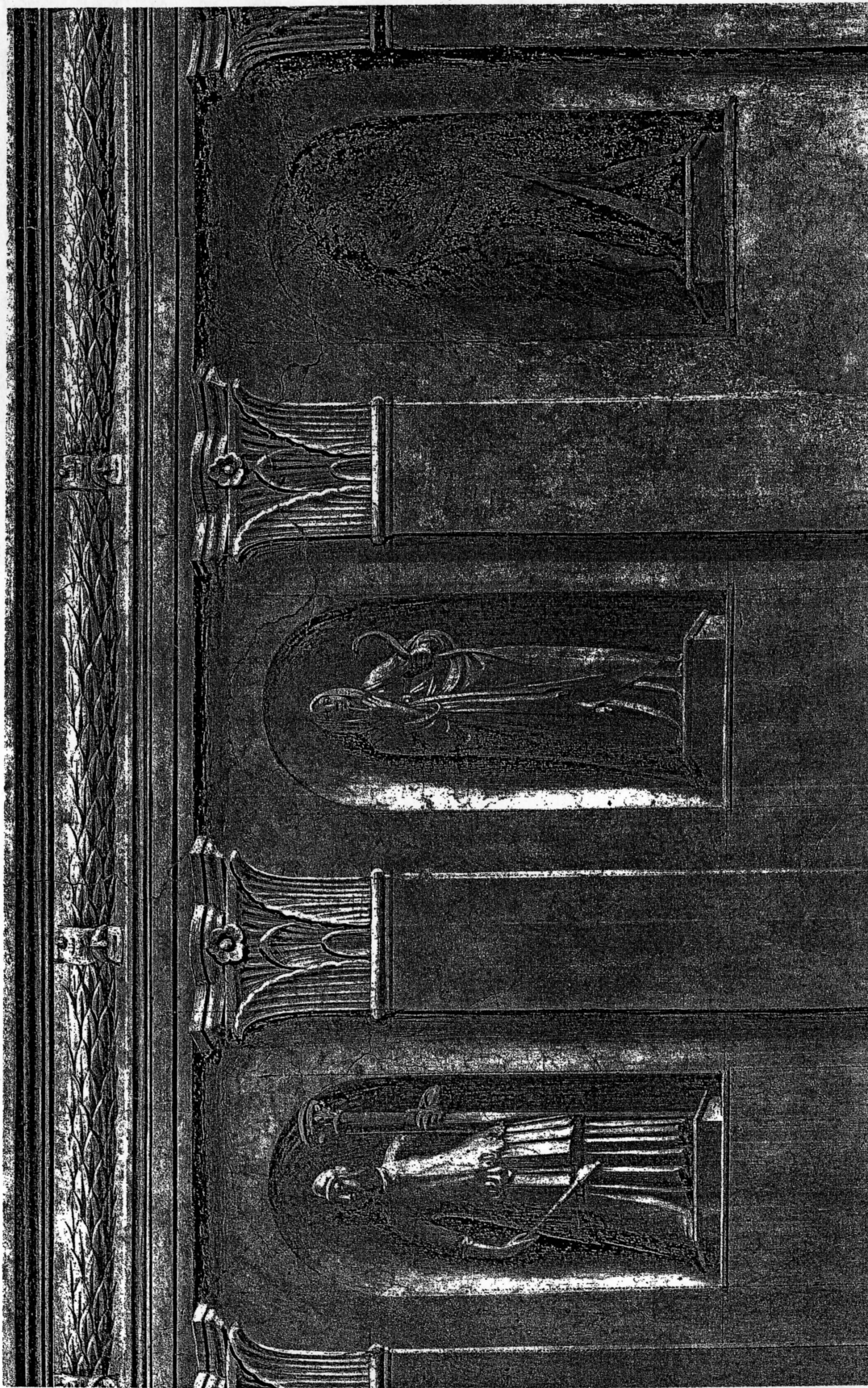


Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

99. Left wall of the chapel (lower tier, from left to right): *The Judgment of St. Lawrence before the Emperor Decius*, *St. Lawrence healing a Blind Man in Prison* and *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*.



108. *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*: detail of allegorical statues of the virtues in niches, *Hercules* to the right repainted during the pontificate of Pope Gregory XIII (late 16th century).

Figure 26



Figure 27

117. Western wall of the chapel: the window closer to the entrance with embrasures frescoed with the busts of prophets and patriarchs in roundels interspersed with rosettes.

118. Western wall of the chapel: the window closer to the entrance with embrasures frescoed with the busts of prophets and patriarchs in roundels interspersed with rosettes: detail of apex with roundel of Abraham and Isaac.

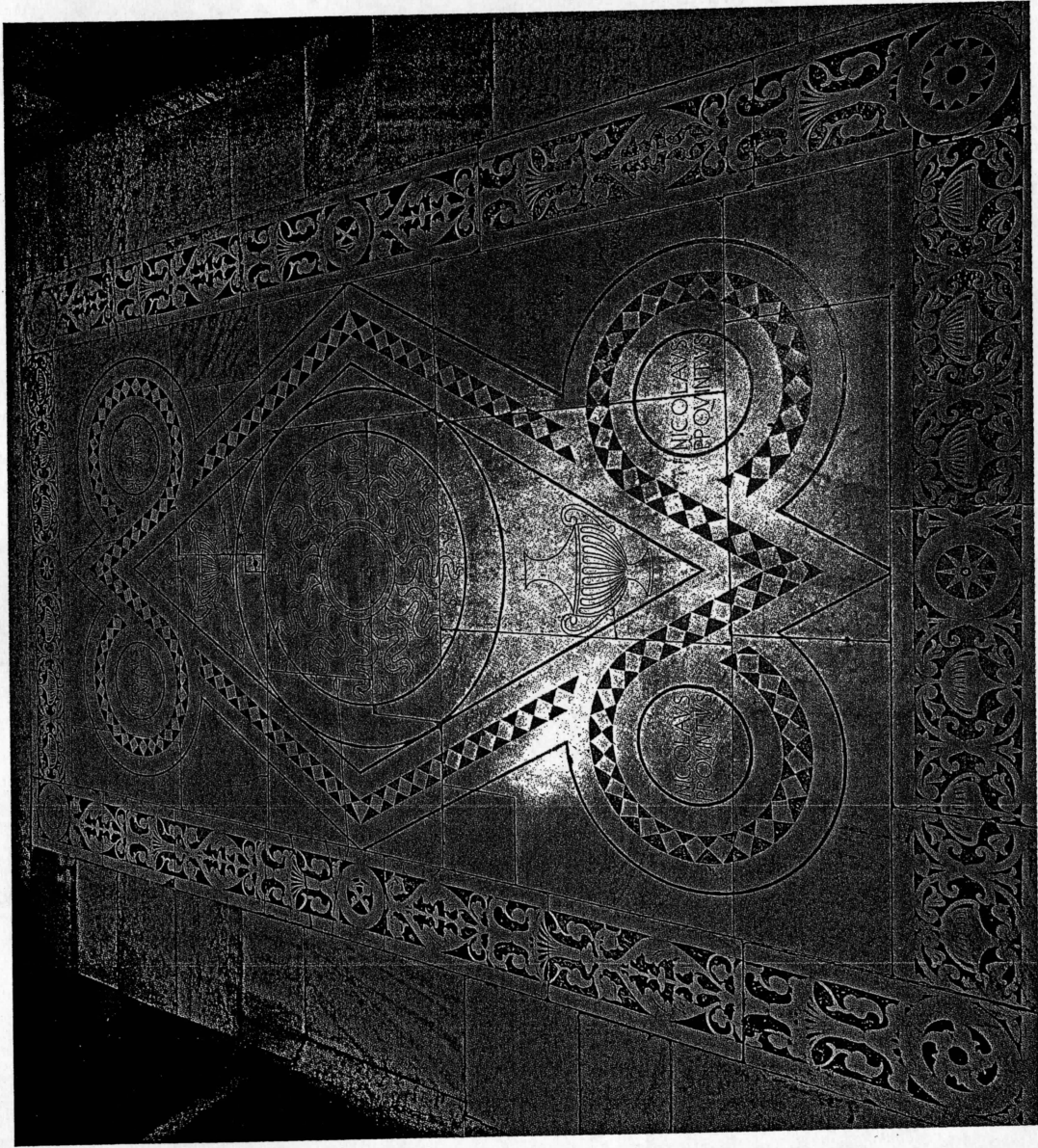


Figure 28
127. Chapel of Nicholas V: view of the inlaid marble floor.

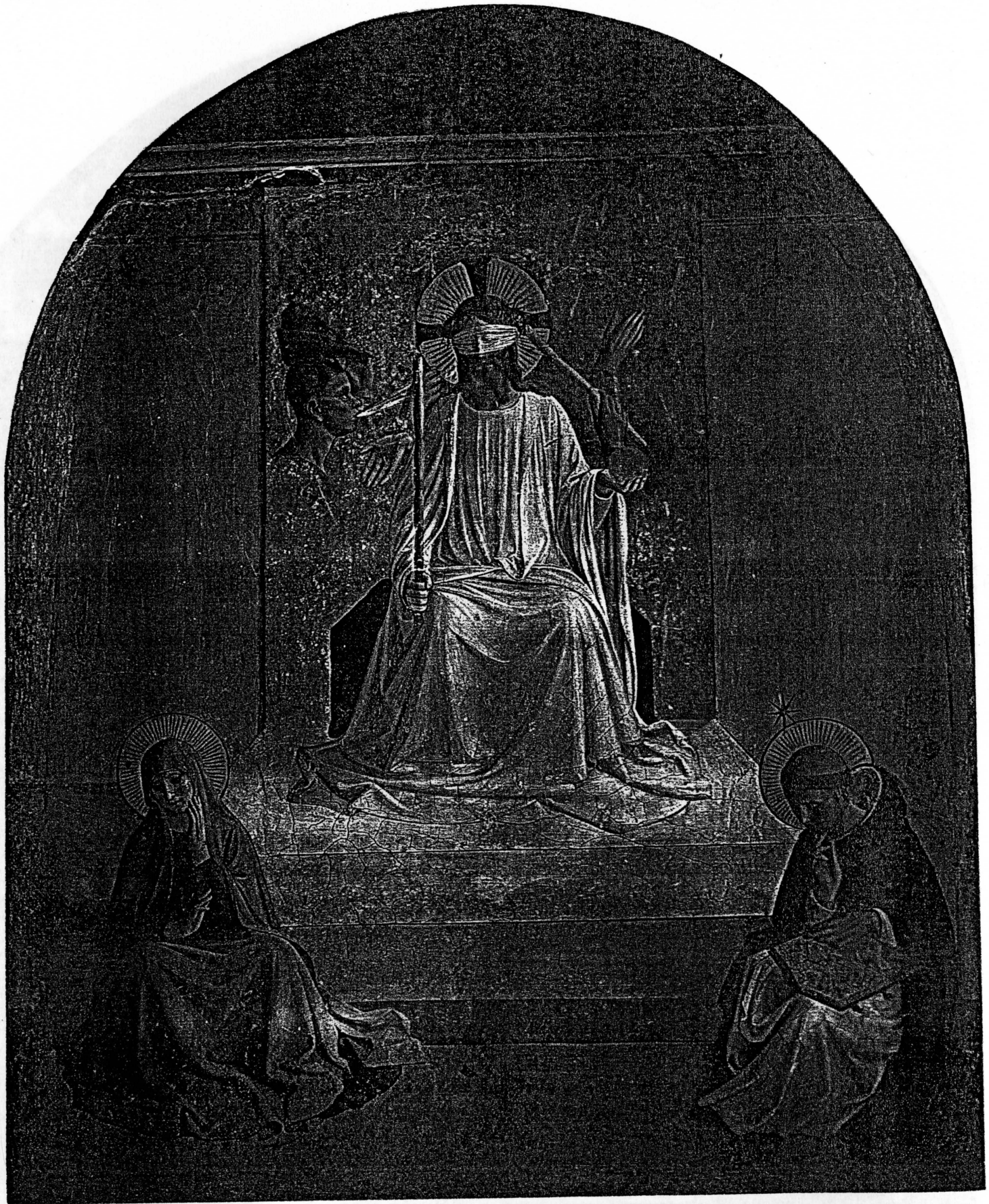


Figure 29

Mocking of Christ
1440-1
195x159 cm
Upper floor, cell 7, San Marco, Florence.



Figure 30

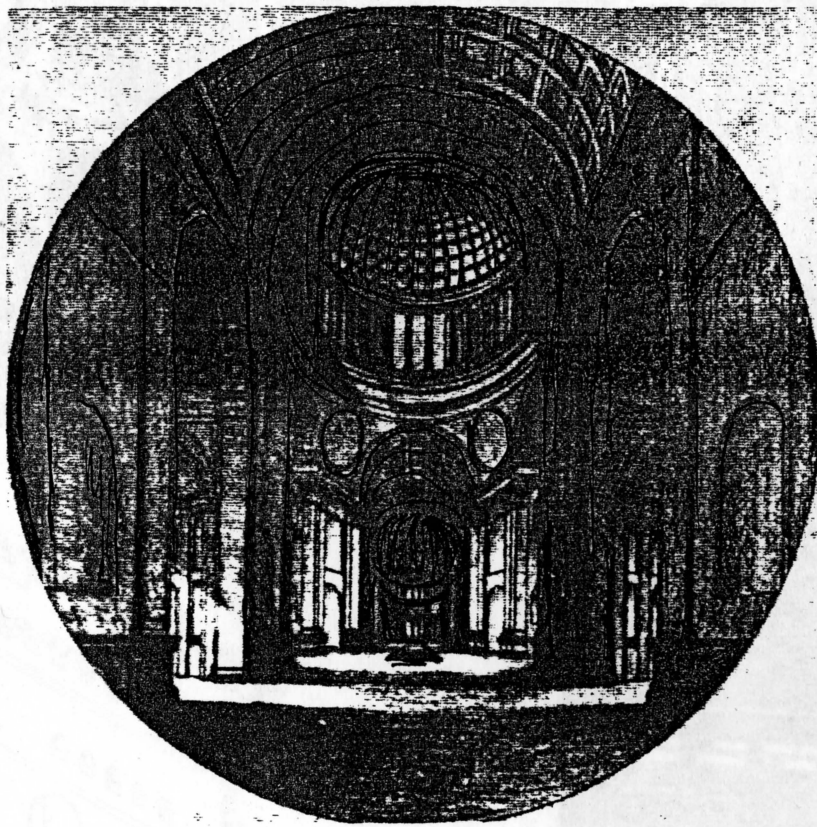


Figure 31

пано), as seen by examination.

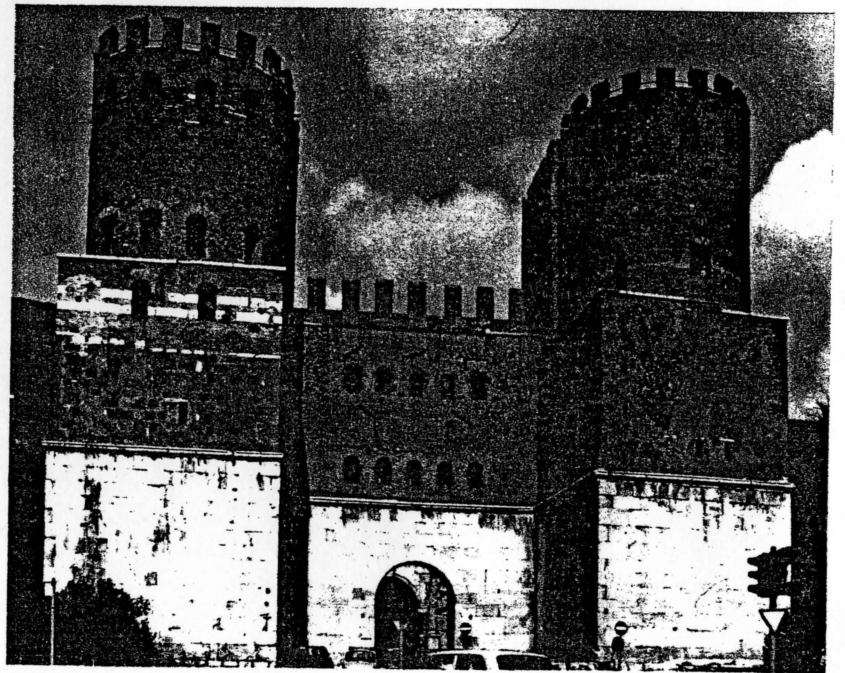
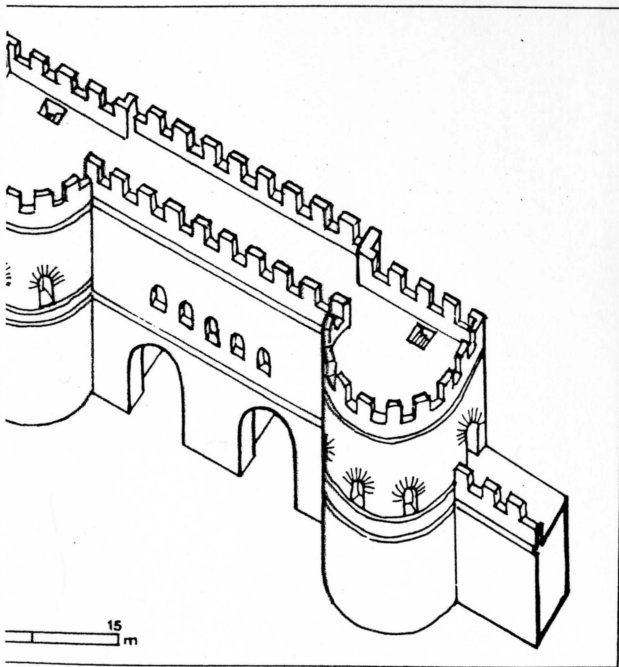


Figure 32