THE STORY of
ST. FRANCIS of ASSISI
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION xi

NUMBERED SCHEMATIC ILLUSTRATING THE PLACEMENT OF THE FRESCOES xxxii

Scene One
FRANCIS HONORED BY A SIMPLE MAN 1

Scene Two
FRANCIS GIVES HIS CLOAK TO A POOR MAN 4

Scene Three
THE VISION OF THE PALACE FULL OF WEAPONS 7

Scene Four
THE PRAYER IN SAN DAMIANO 10

Scene Five
RENOUNCING WORLDLY POSSESSIONS 13

Scene Six
THE DREAM OF INNOCENT III 16
Scene Seven
THE CONFIRMATION OF THE RULE
19

Scene Eight
THE VISION OF THE CHARIOT OF FIRE
22

Scene Nine
THE VISION OF THE HEAVENLY THRONES
25

Scene Ten
CASTING OUT THE DEMONS FROM AREZZO
28

Scene Eleven
THE TRIAL BY FIRE BEFORE THE SULTAN
31

Scene Twelve
SAINT FRANCIS’S ECSTASY
34

Scene Thirteen
THE MANGER SCENE OF GRECCIO
37

Scene Fourteen
THE MIRACLE OF THE SPRING
41
Scene Fifteen
PREACHING TO THE BIRDS
45

Scene Sixteen
THE DEATH OF THE GENTLEMAN
OF CELANO
48

Scene Seventeen
SAINT FRANCIS PREACHING BEFORE
HONORIUS III
51

Scene Eighteen
THE APPARITION OF SAINT FRANCIS AT
THE CHAPTER MEETING IN ARLES
54

Scene Nineteen
THE SAINT RECEIVES THE STIGMATA ON
LA Verna
57

Scene Twenty
THE DEATH OF SAINT FRANCIS
61

Scene Twenty-One
THE VISIONS OF BROTHER AGOSTINO AND
OF THE BISHOP OF ASSISI
65

Scene Twenty-Two
THE ASSISIAN NOBŁE MAN GIROLAMO
BECOMES CONVINCED OF THE REALITY
OF THE STIGMATA
67
Scene Twenty-Three
THE CLARETIANS’ MOURNING OVER THE SAINT’S REMAINS AT SAN DAMIANO
70

Scene Twenty-Four
THE CANONIZATION OF SAINT FRANCIS
73

Scene Twenty-Five
THE APPARITION TO GREGORY IX
76

Scene Twenty-Six
THE INSTANT HEALING OF A MAN DEVOTED TO THE SAINT
79

Scene Twenty-Seven
THE CONFESSION OF A WOMAN RAISED FROM THE DEAD
81

Scene Twenty-Eight
THE FREEING OF THE REPENTANT HERETIC
84

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS
87

NOTES
89
INTRODUCTION

“The grace of God, our Savior, in these last days appeared in his servant Francis. . . .”

In these first words of the *Life of St. Francis* written in 1260–1263 by the Franciscan Bonaventure di Bagnoreggio we find the key to the cycle of frescoes done thirty years later in the basilica dedicated to this saint in Assisi. It is a key that points to Christ: Bonaventure’s words in fact rework a New Testament statement alluding to the Savior’s entry into history: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all” (Titus 2:11–12). This phrase is particularly familiar to Christians because it opens a reading that from the earliest Christian times until now the Church proclaims in the liturgy of Christmas.

The theologian Bonaventure introduces Francis as closely linked to Christ, that is, identifying the saint’s life with that of the Savior born of Mary. In the same way, the cycle of frescoes commissioned—as Bonaventure’s text had been—by the Franciscan Order in the city of Francis’s birth and in the church that holds his mortal remains shows the divine grace that “appeared” in this man who was already considered *alter Christus*, another Christ: Francis. The cycle of scenes depicting episodes from his life in fact illustrates Bonaventure’s narrative, and beneath twenty-seven of the twenty-eight frescoes paraphrases of
the relevant passages in Bonaventure’s text are still legible. These “captions” are reproduced in English translation in the part of the present volume dedicated to the individual frescoes, and further citations of Bonaventure’s Life are furnished in the discussion of each scene.

Bonaventure’s book is comprised of fifteen biographical chapters with ten others narrating Francis’s miracles. Officially accepted at the general Chapter of the Order in Pisa in 1263, it was called Legenda maior, the “Greater Legend.” In medieval Latin the term legenda did not have the meaning that this word has assumed in modern languages—of “legendary,” “fictitious,” “fantastic”—, preserving rather the literal meaning of the Latin verb “to read,” leggere, which in gerund form implied a necessity, almost an obligation: “something that absolutely must be read.” In the same way the cycle of frescoes of the upper basilica is presented as “something that absolutely must be seen” in order to become familiar with the life of Francis.

In addition to the Legenda maior, two other texts shed light on the scenes from the saint’s life: the Old and the New Testaments. On the same walls where the twenty-eight frescoes telling Francis’s story appear in the register nearest the viewers, above them two other series of images are painted: Old Testament subjects on the north side, and, across from these, on the south side, scenes from the Christian Gospels. This grandiose Scriptural program, executed before the cycle depicting Francis, invites us to see the entire life of the saint as a modern extension of the Biblical historia salutis, the history of salvation. Some of the twenty-eight frescoes...
scenes showing Francis in fact relate him to personages from the Old Testament and to Christ in person, as our remarks on the individual frescoes make clear.

It was above all Francis’s identification with Christ that the Order wanted to communicate in the cycle of the upper basilica. This theme is implicit in images for Franciscan churches from the very beginnings of the Order, and in a work painted barely nine years after the saint’s death—a panel signed by the Lucchese master Bonaventura Berlinghiero and dated 1235 (fig. 4). The central figure’s hieratic pose, and the way in which he salutes showing the wound of the stigmata in his right hand, configure an “icon” that is manifestly Christlike. In a work done a quarter century later, the so-called Bardi Panel (fig. 5), the identification with the Savior is further heightened by the fact that Francis’s right hand is not greeting but blessing, evoking the image of Christ the priest offering himself on the altar of the cross. In Francis marked by the stigmata the Franciscans in fact saw the physical fulfillment of St. Paul’s mystical assertion: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:19–20).

Christ lives in me: in these two examples of early Franciscan iconography, in addition to the hieratic figure of Francis who greets or blesses, there are also small scenes that narrate biographical episodes, as if to insist that Christ was present in the saint not only at the end of his journey but also at each moment of his human life. Comparing the 1235 panel with that of circa 1260, we find a noteworthy reinforcement of the biographical

Figure 4. Bonaventura Berlinghiero, illustration from 1235 with Francis and six stories from his leggenda, Pescia, San Francesco.
element, which from a mere six episodes of Francis’s life has become twenty! The new interest in the life of the saint was to be the basis for the cycle of the upper basilica.

As we look at the two panels, we see that the criteria for selection and organization were also evolving: whereas in 1235 there were scarcely two episodes that can be called “biographical,” the receiving of the stigmata and the preaching to the birds, with the other four scenes narrating post-mortem miracles, in the Bardi Panel fully fifteen scenes illustrate the life of the saint and only five show his miracles. Neither of these works respects the chronological sequence of the events depicted, although in the Bardi Panel at least the first scenes follow the order of Francis’s life, suggesting a desire to reconstruct its historical development. Sequential chronology was not considered to be an absolute requirement, and in the Legenda maior Bonaventure admits that he has not “always woven the story according to chronological order,” preferring at times “an arrangement that is more suited to bring out the concatenation of the facts.” The same organizational freedom is evident in the fresco cycle telling the story of Saint Francis’s life in the upper basilica.

Whether in the writings or in the images that tell Francis’s story, the intention of the Order was not only to present “the facts,” but also to interpret in words and images something of the vibrant humanity of that extraordinary man. Toward that end Franciscan writers invented a style that had both popular appeal and refined psychological penetration: even before Bonaventure’s Legend the two Lives of the saint written by Brother Thomas

Figure 5. Maestro della Palla Bardi, illustration (ca. 1260?) with Francis and twenty stories from his leggenda. Florence, Santa Croce.
of Celano bear witness to this new literary style. An analogous direction is evident in paintings commissioned by the Order, but not in the first place in depictions of Francis, which for a long time remained linked to Byzantine stylistic elements, as is clear in the two panels just discussed. In the Franciscan context the humanizing impetus that would later transform European art appears first in the depiction of Christ, and especially in the suffering Christ. If we compare, for example, the archaic painted cross before which Francis had prayed in the church of San Damiano (fig. 6), and the cross made for a church of the Order around 1260, now in Perugia (fig. 7), the conceptual and stylistic differences speak for themselves.4

The cross of San Damiano, dateable to the middle of the twelfth century, presents Christ as impervious to pain and open-eyed: the Christus triumphans of early Christian tradition. By contrast, the later work presents him as suffering, a Christus patiens with figures of Francis and another friar at his feet in adoration. “You were left with his wounds, so fully did you have him in your heart!” a contemporary poet said to Francis, alluding to the stigmata,5 and here the image has a similar ambition: it wants to mark the hearts of those who see it with a wound, just as Francis was “marked.”

It is this need to transmit the sentiments experienced by the saint that changed Franciscan art. While on the old cross of San Damiano Christ remained a profile without plasticity, with muscles delineated in a conventional manner, this later one made around 1260 for the friars acquired real bodily weight thanks to its three-dimensional musculature modeled by light.

Figure 6. Anonymous, painted Cross known as “the San Damiano Cross,” Assisi, Santa Chiara.
This effect is even more pronounced on the back of the “Perugia cross,” where an extraordinary Scourged Christ (fig. 8) echoes the statuary of antiquity that, in that same year 1260, the sculptor Nicola Pisano began to imitate. In this figure the psychological and physiological dimensions in fact merge: the man bound to the column raises his head with a fluid and believable movement to look directly at the spectator, almost pleading for understanding and compassion. That is, the painter has succeeded in representing the Christ Francis saw: not a sacred character but a man of flesh who makes an appeal to other men on the basis of shared human feelings.

These early achievements of Franciscan art will be brought a new level of eloquence in the cycle of frescoes in the upper basilica, where the interactive humanity of the Christ portrayed on the Perugia cross becomes the hermeneutic key both of the protagonist, Francis, and of the secondary characters. The saint’s body, his moving gaze, his inner growth in the framework of interpersonal relationships, the specific relationship of Francis with Christ and his gradual “conformation” to Him: these are the thematic conductive threads that give visible and dramatic unity to the twenty-eight scenes on the walls of the nave, painted in the register nearest to the faithful.

Among other unifying themes that should be mentioned perhaps the first is the emphasis on “stage space.” In this age that reinvented in Christian terms several aspects of ancient theatre, and in the primary church of an Order that had begun to use sacred drama of its mission, it is indeed unsurprising that each

Figure 7. Anonymous, Cross painted on both sides: the front side with figures of Francis and Brother Leo at the feet of Christ. Perugia, National Gallery of Umbria.
fresco of the Life of Francis appears to be a “stage” of limited depth, with a backdrop of apparently habitable “scenery” buildings. These stages are then framed with illusionistic classical architecture of considerable elegance, projected in perspective and at times with coffered ceilings. This is done in such a way that for visitors who followed the narrative sequence, advancing from one to another fresco, the effect was similar to that of the large medieval stages erected on several sides of a piazza, with distinct areas designated as “mansions” and “buildings” for the successive scenes of the drama.6

This extraordinary novelty—coherent and continuous stage space—is linked to the cycle’s already mentioned physical and psychological emphasis. For in fact, if Francis had a real body and real feelings, it is clear that he must also have had real spaces in which to move. Thus, just as the sculpture of the time reactivated classic models in service of bodiliness, these frescoes draw on Roman pictorial prototypes from the age of the Roman empire in both their knowledge of perspective and in several specific “stage sets.” Other of the constructions portrayed—the majority in fact—suggest intense interest in modern architecture: in many scenes, for example, there are elegant Gothic exteriors and interiors. In the stupendous Manger Scene of Greccio such “building realism” embraces even the church furnishings: the ambo, the roodscreen, and the elegant canopy above the altar.

These objects have a completely new level of visual definition for painting of this period, as is clear if we compare the fresco of The Manger Scene of Greccio with a mosaic of the same period in

Figure 8. The same: the back side with the scourged Christ who is looking toward the spectator.
Santa Maria in Trastevere, in Rome: the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple designed by Pietro Cavallini (fig. 9). In both works a canopy covers the altar, but whereas Cavallini’s is generic, the canopy portrayed in the upper basilica fresco is practically a photograph of the ones created a few years earlier by Arnolfo di Cambio for the Roman basilicas of Saint Paul Outside the Walls and Saint Cecilia. So too the badalone (reading desk) with a list of chants attached to the side, and the reverse side of the large cross on the dividing screen, with its wooden framework accurately delineated. Even the mechanism for raising or lowering the reading desk is depicted, as is the support that holds the cross in an inclined position facing the nave—as if the birth of the Son of God that Francis dramatized with the manger had conferred new dignity upon every material thing—upon each object, each implement—, since Christ, their Creator, would himself use these things.

The structured chancel area visible in The Manger Scene of Greccio suggests another theme of the pictorial cycle: the internal and external magnificence of churches and palaces. This emphasis probably had political importance in the new Assisi basilica, whose sumptuous decoration created disagreement within the Order; in any case it documented the reality of papal Rome from Francis’s time onwards. In addition, along with the architecture of single buildings entire urban agglomerations are shown, making “the city” a theme: a novelty fraught with meaning in an age of urban expansion.

The countryside and animals also become themes in this cycle dedicated to this saint who loved nature—Francis, who gave

Figure 9. Pietro Cavallini, Presentation of Jesus in the temple, mosaic. Rome, Santa Maria Maggiore.
orders to a wolf and preached to birds. Very beautiful and entirely new is the fact that the two scenes staged in completely natural surroundings, *The Miracle of the Spring* and *Preaching to the Birds*, are painted one beside the other on the internal facade, to the left and right of the entrance. This pairing could not be casual, because the frescoes illustrate nonsequential episodes, distant one from another in the *Legenda Maior*, just as they are distant from the episodes that precede and follow them in the pictorial cycle. Why then would the only two scenes lacking architectural elements be placed on the interior wall of the facade? I believe that the primary reason is emotional: looking back from the altar toward the entrance we have the impression that the wall of the inner facade is not there—that is, that the basilica is open to the cosmos. The scenes above these frescoes, *The Ascension of Christ* and *Pentecost*, have vast stretches of open sky, which—together with the two scenes below them—practically dissolve the interior facade, giving an ecstatic vision of the natural world. The effect must have been especially striking when the large facade doors were open to the meadowland outside the church.

Both the inner facade scenes are famous, but Francis’s love for creatures has made *Preaching to the Birds* the virtual emblem of Assisi. In this fresco the character of the new pictorial style is moreover particularly clear. The same scene appears in the lower basilica, in a fresco from the 1250s (fig. 10), in which, however, the human body forms are flat and conventional, and only the birds seem to be alive! Forty years later, in the fresco of the inner facade, Francis and his companion have physical

Figure 10. Anonymous, fresco of the Preaching to the Birds, Assisi, lower basilica.
solidity and fluid movements. The folds of their clothing model their bodies, the trees have credible trunks and branches, and the birds themselves, more numerous than in the earlier work, almost have personalities: they seem to flock together to listen attentively to the words of the saint.

Let us note finally that in this scene in the midst of nature—as in others, placed in urban piazzas or inside buildings—Francis is shown in the company of his friars. Even in the moment of mystical contemplation at La Verna, when he receives the stigmata, a friar is shown near him. In these frescoes the friars appear as Francis’s disciples, companions, witnesses and heirs, and the spectator senses that one of the functions of the pictorial cycle is to extol and celebrate the entire Franciscan Order together with its holy founder. The friars were in fact the commissioners and the first public of the frescoes, as they had been of Bonaventure’s Legenda, whose full opening phrase is: “The grace of God, our savior, in these last days appeared in his servant Francis to all who are truly humble and truly friends of holy poverty.”

“Friends of holy poverty”: the allusion applies first of all to the saint’s followers who had taken “holy poverty” as their spouse. Thus, when Bonaventure explains the nature of his narration of the events, saying, “I have undertaken to not be concerned with literary elegance, considering that the reader’s devotion will benefit more from simple language rather than from a pompous style,” he is speaking of the option for “holy poverty.” And this literary confession provides a precious key to the pictorial naturalism of the frescoes based on his text. In fact it is obvious that the literary influence of the Legenda Maior and the patronage of the friars transmitted the same preference for “simple language.”
able to elicit fervor to the lay painters who, in the 1290s, created the frescoes. In this sense, the pictorial style they invented can and should be considered *Franciscan*.

Who were these painters? The historian Giorgio Vasari, writing in the middle of the sixteenth century, says that the Florentine Giotto di Bondone was “called by Brother Giovanni di Muro della Marca, at that time the general of the brothers of Saint Francis” to paint the entire cycle “in the upper church, under the corridor that spans the windows, on the two sides of the church.”

This affirmation, certainly based on older oral traditions, not only does not exclude but it even presupposes the collaboration of other master artists, and in fact even an untrained eye perceives such diversity of style as to spontaneously suppose that more than one artist executed these scenes. At the same time, however, the evident conceptual unity of the cycle makes clear that at the head of this team there must have been a single designer and director of the work. Today, after years of heated debate, most scholars have come back to identifying the principal artist of the Assisi cycle as the master painter named by Vasari, Giotto di Bondone. The many attempts to put this attribution in doubt have not in fact sustained prolonged critical assessment.

Obviously at Assisi Giotto was not yet the painter who would decorate the Cappella Scrovegni or of the chapels in Santa Croce, but a still-young artist from Florence who had worked in Rome—just as the artist of the frescoes in the transept and apse of the upper church, the Florentine Cimabue, had done earlier. If then we recall that the building and decoration of the Assisi basilica were papal projects, it becomes reasonable to hypothesize that there were Roman as well as Tuscan masters among Giotto's
collaborators. Probably the new spaciousness and architectural interest are Roman elements, while the physicality and affective expressiveness of the personages depicted had Tuscan origins. To Giotto himself, beyond the general direction of the program, are due the fusion of these various orientations and the creation of a single formal and expressive language. In the frescoes of the upper basilica Giotto in fact took the first step toward what, a century later, became the Renaissance.
The cycle of frescoes in Assisi

14: The Miracle of the Spring
13: The Manger Scene of Greccio
12: Saint Francis’s Ecstasy
11: The Trial by Fire Before the Sultan
10: Casting Out the Demons from Arezzo
9: The Vision of the Heavenly Thrones
8: The Vision of the Chariot of Fire
7: The Confirmation of the Rule
6: The Dream of Innocent III
5: Renouncing Worldly Possessions
4: The Prayer in San Damiano
3: The Vision of the Palace Full of Weapons
2: Francis Gives His Cloak to a Poor Man
1: Francis Honored by a Simple Man
15: Preaching to the Birds

16: The Death of the Gentleman of Celano

17: Saint Francis Preaching Before Honorius III

18: The Apparition of Saint Francis at the Chapter Meeting in Arles

19: The Saint Receives the Stigmata on La Verna

20: The Death of Saint Francis

21: The Visions of Brother Agostino and of the Bishop of Assisi

22: The Assisian Nobleman Girolamo Becomes Convinced of the Reality of the Stigmata

23: The Claretians’ Mourning Over the Saint’s Remains at San Damiano

24: The Canonization of Saint Francis

25: The Apparition to Gregory IX

26: The Instant Healing of a Man Devoted to the Saint

27: The Confession of a Woman Raised from the Dead

28: The Freeing of the Repentant Heretic
THE STORY of
ST. FRANCIS of ASSISI
SCENE ONE

FRANCIS HONORED BY A SIMPLE MAN

A simple man from Assisi spreads his cloak on the ground before blessed Francis and gives honor to his passing. Inspired, he affirms, as is believed, that Francis is worthy of every reverence, because he will soon do great things and thereby should be honored by all.

—Legenda Maior I, 1
The visual narrative of the life of Saint Francis opens with an absolute novelty: a view of the principal square of Assisi, at the center of which rises the Augustan-age temple, traditionally called the “Temple of Minerva,” the most important monument of this small Umbrian city. Giotto thus insists on the verifiable historical content of the story that begins here, following Saint Bonaventure, who, in the prologue of the *Legenda Maior*, stated he had “gone to the places where [Francis] was born, lived, and died” in order to conduct “diligent inquiries into the facts with his surviving companions. . . .”11 Giotto, that is, gives the pilgrim, who has also “gone to the places where the saint was born and died” (and who perhaps has already seen the piazza and the temple), the sensation of conducting “diligent inquiries.” In this way, already in the opening episode, the artist situates his story in the realm of things worthy of faith because they are objectively verifiable, and indeed *seen*.

Bonaventure’s text, however, mentions neither the piazza nor the temple, whose portrayal in the fresco thus represents a “revision,” perhaps political in nature: in the second half of the 1200s the “Temple of Minerva” had been adopted as the seat of Assisi’s local government, and its inclusion here probably alludes to the relationship of the friars with the city, which—thanks to devotion to Francis—had become an important place of pilgrimage.

But the real subject of the fresco is the encounter in which Francis receives the homage of “a simple man” and hears the prophetic announcement of his own glorious future: the emotional center of the scene is the glance that passes between
the young saint and the man who, prostrate, spreads a white cloak before him. While bystanders discuss the gesture and the words that have been pronounced, Francis himself, understanding and benevolent before the handicapped interlocutor, remains transfixed, perhaps remembering that cloaks had been spread on the ground in front of Jesus as well, at his entry into Jerusalem preceding the Passion (Matthew 21:8). In young Francis’s gaze we read suspense: he hesitates and, still uncertain, opens himself up to the possibility that this man’s words might be true—Bonaventure says “inspired”—and thus, with his right foot already on the cloak, he starts down the road that will conform him to Christ. The empty space at the center of the composition—the distance that separates Francis from the improbable prophet of his future—has extraordinary dramatic power, and defines the psychological hermeneutic of the entire cycle. Here the image not only introduces Francis’s story, but reveals the inner drama experienced by this young man called by God.

This first scene of the cycle is half within the old chancel area of the basilica (toward the west), and half in the nave (toward the east). The corbel that protrudes over the front of the temple originally supported a beam that marked the separation of the two spaces. This beam, which must have resembled the one portrayed in a fresco on the south wall, number 22, served as an iconostasis and supported, in its center, a large painted cross. In this way the first step made by Saint Francis, in the opening scene, could already be read in relation to the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.
When blessèd Francis meets up with a knight who was noble but impoverished and badly dressed, and, moved with respectful compassion for poverty, immediately removed his own cloak and clothed the knight in it.

—Legenda Maior 1,2
The second scene of the cycle too describes an encounter: one that occurred in 1204, perhaps: the meeting of Francis with a poor man to whom the saint gave his cloak. Bonaventure recounts that the young Francis had been ill for some time, but “having regained his physical strength, he obtained, as was his custom, fine clothing.” As was his custom: the future saint was vain, that is, preoccupied with his own appearance. Bonaventure even alludes to Francis’s dissolute life, specifying that he “had not yet learned to contemplate the reality of heaven. . . .” But the young man was also sensitive and generous, and upon meeting a nobleman who had fallen on hard times, sympathized with him “with loving mercy and pity.” Giotto illustrates this capacity to deeply identify with another’s situation, putting at the center of the fresco a Francis who looks with emotion at the man born well off but reduced to a poverty that humiliated him.

The saint then removed the clothing he had procured for himself and gave it to the knight. This was a spontaneous gift: the man had not asked for anything and in fact seems astonished, almost unbelieving. Although spontaneous, however, Francis’s generosity replicated that of a hero of early Christianity, the soldier Martin of Tours, who, seeing one day a man suffering from the cold, divided his cloak in two to give the man half. Here Francis, giving his whole cloak, obviously surpasses Martin, and this fact would have struck medieval pilgrims. And even the gesture is merely instinctive; this first “disrobing” or “emptying” is charged with meaning, prefiguring the definitive renunciation of worldly possessions to which Francis would later commit, in the scene depicted in the next bay, in an analogous middle position. The one and the other
renunciation bind Francis to Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:6–7). 

Bonaventure does not say where this encounter took place, but Giotto stages the episode in the countryside, under the walls of Assisi and near a village. Guided by the friars, he may want to associate the gift of clothing with an experience described by Thomas of Celano in which Francis, leaving for the country after his illness, was astonished at not finding pleasure in nature. 

The man who would one day sing of nature’s beauties in fact was oppressed by the attachment to riches, from which he still had to be freed in order to penetrate the meaning of the Savior’s words: “And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28–29). Here, behind Francis who removes his clothing out of compassion, the boundless landscape becomes a metaphor for freedom.
The following night, as Francis slept, the Lord showed him in a dream a marvelous palace, with many weapons bearing the sign of the cross of Christ. . . . And when he asked whose weapons they were, the divine voice replied that they were all destined for him and for his knights.

— *Legenda Maior* XV,4
In the third and final scene of this first bay, Giotto suggests the impact of the preceding experience on the young Francis, introducing the theme of the *revelatory sleep*: the sleep, that is, in which, while the body rests, the soul’s questions receive answers. In Bonaventure’s climate of psychological inquiry, this theme of Biblical origin is fundamental, and Giotto will several times portray personages in the Assisi cycle in a deep sleep.

The dream in which Christ appears to Francis is again modeled on the legend of the soldier Saint Martin, to whom the Savior appeared in a dream in a similar way to reveal that the half of the cloak Martin had given the poor man had been really given to Him. The dream apparition was in fact a validation of the action that had been accomplished. Something analogous happens here: to a young man attracted by the knightly ideal, Christ shows a palace adorned with trophies marked by the cross. And, in answer to Francis’s question about the ownership of the weapons, Christ replies that they are for Francis himself and for his “knights.”

The purpose of this vision, Bonaventure explains, was to show Francis “in a visual form how the mercy that he had shown toward the poor knight, for love of the high King, would be repaid with an incomparable reward.” Thus the magnificent palace adorned with banners and armor—a sumptuous structure, Romanesque in the lower part, Gothic in the upper levels—is the real point toward which Giotto wants to attract our gaze, as is suggested by the eloquent gesture of Christ, who indicates it. With this vertical edifice on the extreme right of the image the artist in fact concludes the horizontal movement of
the first three frescoes: the saint’s solemn walk onto the simple man’s cloak in the first, and the transfer of his clothing to the impoverished nobleman in the second, now lead—beyond the body of Francis lying on the bed—to the palace symbolizing a future “reward.” In compositional and narrative features, that is, the first three scenes invite us to proceed toward the east, where in the successive bays the protagonist’s life will be progressively enlightened by Christ.
Prostrate before the image of the Crucified One, he began to pray . . . and he heard a voice, coming from the cross itself, which said to him three times: “Francis, go and repair my church, which, as you see, is completely in ruins!”, signifying by this the Roman Church.

—Legenda Maior, II,1
From the dream-vision of a fortified palace we now pass to the reality of a small ruined church, the true beginning of the “reward” promised to Francis. More or less a year has passed—a year in which the young man had been ever more active in helping the poor—, when one day, “having gone out into the country to meditate,” Francis felt himself spurred by the Holy Spirit to pray in the church of San Damiano “which threatened to fall into ruins, old as it was.” He fell to his knees before an image of the crucified Christ (according to tradition, the one reproduced in our figure 6, today preserved in the church of Saint Clare in Assisi), and “as he fixed his tear-filled eyes on the Lord’s cross, he heard with his physical ears a voice coming down toward him from the cross and telling him three times, “Francis, go and repair my church, which, as you see, is completely in ruins!”

Giotto—pushing his knowledge of perspective to the limit—shows us both the inside and the outside of San Damiano, even giving a glimpse of part of the inner ceiling through some beams exposed by the falling of tiles from the roof. The viewer grasps that before it fell into ruins this must have been a very beautiful church, with mosaic inserts in the cornices, on the partition screen, and on the altar on which the painted cross is enthroned.

The true subject, however, is neither the church nor the venerated cross but rather Francis, shown in intense prayer. It is in fact with this figure that Giotto introduces another of the cycle’s visual and narrative keys, “Francis in prayer,” a theme to which the artist will return in various ways fully nine times. Here the saint’s prayer is colored with emotion at hearing the heavenly voice, and the raised hands that Giotto gives him suggest the psychological
and physical state that Bonaventure describes: “Upon hearing that voice, Francis is astonished and trembles in every limb, for he is alone in the church, and, perceiving the force of the divine language in his heart, experiences a rapture beyond the senses.” This condition too—transfiguring ecstasy—will be the theme of several scenes of the cycle.
He stripped himself immediately of all his clothing and gave it back to his father . . . and turning to his father said, “From now on I can say with all truth, ‘Our Father who art in heaven,’ because Pietro di Bernardone has repudiated me.”

—Legenda Maior II, 4
The second scene in this bay also represents Francis with his hands lifted in prayer, this time not to Christ but to God the Father. More time has passed and the young man has become ever more detached from the world of his “fleshly father,” as Bonaventure calls the man who had sired Francis, one Pietro di Bernardone, a cloth merchant from Assisi. To finance the reconstruction of San Damiano, the future saint had in fact taken and sold expensive fabrics from his father’s shop, leaving his father’s house to live with the priest of San Damiano. Brought back and confined to the house by his father, he was subsequently freed by his mother.

The moment illustrated here is that in which, invited by his father to renounce his rights of inheritance, in early 1206 Francis not only appeared before the bishop to formalize this renunciation, but “allows no delay nor hesitation; he does not wait for anyone to speak; but immediately removes all his clothing and gives it back to his father.” This embarrassing stripping is not initially total, however, and Francis, “intoxicated with an admirable fervor of spirit, also removed even his underwear in front of everyone, showing himself completely nude and saying to his father, “Until now I have called you my father on earth; from now on I can say with all confidence, ‘Our Father who art in heaven,’ because in Him I have placed my every treasure. . . .”

This dramatic distinction is why Giotto splits the scene into two opposing parts, a compositional solution to which he will turn only one other time in the cycle, in the fresco portraying The Trial by Fire Before the Sultan. Here the vertical division separates his father’s populous bourgeois world, on the left, from the world Francis now chooses, on the right, whose
sparse members are the bishop of Assisi and a few clerics. The opposite characters of these universes are easy to read: while at our left the “fleshly father” trembles with rage and the crowd supports him, commenting on the scandalous event, at the right Francis—nude, as only Christ was shown at that time—places his trust in the heavenly Father, whose presence is indicated by the blessing hand on high. Bonaventure says that the bishop, moved by Francis’s faith, covered him with his own cloak, and Giotto also portrays this action, in view of the theme central to several of successive scenes: the active support the saint would receive from the ecclesiastical hierarchy.
The pope had seen in a dream as if the basilica of the Lateran was about to crumble when a man, poor and little, modest and unassuming, with his shoulder leaning against it, was holding it up so that it would not fall.

—Legenda Maior III, 10
Since Francis’s renunciation of worldly possessions more than three years have gone by, during which he has had various experiences, passing from his first idea of living as a hermit to one of going through the world preaching repentance. By this point he is wearing a religious habit and has gathered his first followers, for whom he has written a rule of life.

He decides then to seek papal approval of this project. The pope, Innocent III, plays for time though, seeing that some of his cardinals consider Francis’s program of life excessively severe; yet Innocent does not forget Francis, seeing him several times in dreams. When the strange supplicant succeeds in speaking to him again, and recounts “the parable of a rich man who with joy had married a beautiful and poor woman and from her had had children who had the same physical appearance as the king, their father . . .,” Innocent admits that in a dream he saw “that the Basilica of the Lateran was now at the point of falling into ruins, and that a poor fellow, small and contemptible in appearance, was supporting it, putting his shoulder to it so that it might not fall.” Giotto shows us the pontiff asleep in the Lateran palace, with two advisers at the foot of the bed, while next to the palace, the basilica, tilting dangerously, is being held up by Francis.

Bonaventure’s text and Giotto’s fresco synthesize a series of complex historical realities, among which are these: the contemporaneous multiplication of movements embracing poverty, seeking to lead the Church back to the simplicity of the Gospels; the suspicion and hostility that these movements aroused in the Roman Curia; and the extraordinary—some would say “miraculous”—openness of the higher clergy to Francis and his
friars, who become mediators between the reform demanded by common people and the conservatism of the ecclesiastical institution. The splendor of churches of the period and the magnificence of prelates’ palaces were notorious: Innocent III had mosaic decorations made for the old Vatican basilica and an entire new palace built “apud Sanctum Petrum” (next to Saint Peter’s), and the glittering decorations and marble columns with which Giotto embellishes the portico of Saint John Lateran and the pope’s pavilion, in the fresco, allude to the splendor found in similar Roman structures. In fact, at the time of this fresco the Lateran Patriarchate (then the official residence of the popes) had been modernized and enriched, so that the contrast that Giotto underscores between the “poor little man” and the luxury of the buildings dramatized the idea of a rich Church saved by Christ’s paupers.
The pope approved the rule, gave Francis the right to preach repentance and, for all the lay brothers who had accompanied the servant of God, he had them given small tonsures, so that they might freely preach the word of God.

—Legenda Maior III,10
This scene completes the meaning of the preceding one, showing Innocent III, who—after dreaming about the support that Francis could offer the Church—hands back the approved rule and imparts his blessing upon the handful of friars. What we just said of the magnificence of the papal court applies here as well: as the sumptuous curtains of the audience hall suggest, their luxury is in marked contrast with the coarse material of the Franciscans’ habits.

Here for the first time we sense the strength of the collective identity of the Order. The kneeling friars behind Francis are visibly animated by a single spirit, a single purpose, even if the careful differentiation of their faces suggests the broad gamut of personalities and characters typical of every religious family. Giotto puts them all in an attitude of prayer, so that the obvious difference between them and the high prelates surrounding the pope does not communicate challenge or threat but reverence. Between these two groups there is moreover a tangible link: the sheet on which the rule is written, which passes from the pope’s left hand to the right hand of Francis. With the approval of the new project by the Pontifex maximus the humanly irreconcilable distance between these two visions of the Church is “bridged.”

We should also note the relationship of this fresco with the Old Testament scenes on the wall right above it. Above the figure of the pope blessing Francis we see, in the middle tier, The Patriarch Isaac Who Blesses Jacob, and then in the uppermost tier, The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Earthly Paradise. It is not difficult to connect these themes: blessed by