

of hierarchy is tyranny and conformity the ultimate vice. The solution for the modernist is the destruction of institutions by showing their inherent ridiculousness. In such a society there is no place for forgiveness and reconciliation, but only for revenge. Justice becomes the settling of old scores. Those who feel excluded may escape from their oppression by tearing down what is arbitrary and replaceable and in that way further the cause of liberation, but at the cost of creating a moral and psychological waste land. The deconstruction of dogma is part of a wider attempt to deconstruct meaning.

Over the next few years we may expect more, not fewer attacks on the Catholic Church and its teachings. There will be more disbelief and more ridicule. The battle for truth is still worth fighting not simply for the future of the Church but for the future of humanity. History shows us that where metaphysical bonds no longer count other ties cannot easily maintain themselves. In the end it is the truth that sets us free.

AJW

## A New Interpretation of Fra Angelico

Anthony Fisher OP

### Part II

In part I, I examined William Hood's recent attempt to understand Fra Angelico as a propagandist for the Observant reform in the Dominican Order. In his magisterial treatment of *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (Yale University Press, 1993) Professor Hood interprets each of the works against the background of its predecessors elsewhere in Dominican or other art, or elsewhere in Angelico's own corpus. His particular concern is with the *institutional* tradition out of which Angelico spoke: the spaces, spirituality and devotional practices of the friars, which conditioned the subject matter and significance of the works. He persuasively argues that Angelico's art is to be understood as an expression of a particular view of Dominican community and tradition. I proposed that Angelico's art would be better understood if there had

also been some examination of the *doctrinal* tradition out of which the painter preached: in particular its Scriptural and Thomistic Catholicism. Essential are some understanding of Angelico's aesthetic (its Thomist view of beauty, light, reality, analogy, the senses . . .), his understanding of the function of religious art (as worship, visualizing spiritual exercise, source of instruction, tool of preaching), and his theology of the Incarnation and the Passion as the way to the beatific vision for the various audiences to whom he preached. Admittedly very little has been written to date on Angelico's theology. Hood's book is a great jumping off point for such an endeavour.

### **A sensational altarpiece**

On the Feast of the Epiphany 1443 the high altar of San Marco was consecrated in the presence of the pope and all the cardinals, patriarchs and bishops present at the Council of Florence. The importance of the Feast was acknowledged through elaborate celebrations, directed by the Company of the Magi, a confraternity of young men operating from San Marco. Every few years they produced an Epiphany pageant that told the story of the Kings' journey from Herod's Palace in Jerusalem (the Baptistery or the Palazzo della Signoria) through the Holy Land (Florence) to the stable in Bethlehem (the San Marco church). There were the Three Kings dressed to the nines, several hundred horsemen, floats, dumbshows and musicians. The Commune of Florence offered gifts of wax to the church for the ceremonies.

Hood explains well the strong political overtones of the Feast. In a culture which assumed that civic well-being depended on a right relationship with God, the offerings of the three kings signified the submission of earthly rulers (one would want to add: and commerce) to the divine kingship of Christ. The consecration of the church marked the climax of the 1443 Epiphany celebrations. It was, as Hood suggests, "the first public expression of San Marco's paradoxical nature as a foundation of the Dominican Observance, on the one hand, and as a focus for political developments that culminated in the person of Fra Girolamo Savonarola at the end of the century, on the other" (p. 97).

The focal point of the church and thus of this major civic celebration was a painting, the high altarpiece of the Dominican choir: a *Madonna and Child attended by Angels and Saints*. Pope-Hennessy has shown that it had been regarded as a commission of exceptional importance and competition for it had been stiff. Angelico proved more than equal to the task. The painting caused a sensation. It was as if people were seeing a vision. It was a tremendous work: in scale, gorgeous colouring, brilliant embroidery, perspective, use of devices

such as the drawn curtains and stage set, the *sacre conversazione*, the carpet, and many other innovations. It was immediately apparent that its spatial content was greater than any previous altarpiece, and it would be imitated by succeeding painters for generations (see, for example, Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*). Yet "the one thing Fra Angelico's painting did not do, of course, was to reinforce the sense of distance, and therefore of awe, that canons of altarpiece decorum had insisted on for nearly two centuries" (p. 98).

All attention was drawn to the holy mystery: there were none of the customary distractions (separate panels, subspaces and subthemes). Richly embroidered gold curtains painted in the upper corners of the painting as if drawn back, unveiled the sacred drama. Pendulous painted rose garlands festooned the upper reaches of the work, seemingly caught on hooks attached invisibly to the back of the frame. The setting is a floral garden in a wooded glade at the edge of a tranquil sea. In the foreground are the Madonna and Child, flanked by angels and saints, holding court in a pavilion made of sumptuous hangings and carpets, marble and classicist architecture. Six saints are arranged hierarchically around the throne: Mark, the titular saint of the church; Dominic, the founder of the Order; John the Evangelist, patron of Giovanni de' Medici; Francis and Peter of Verona, patrons of Cosimo's eldest son Piero; and Lawrence, patron of Cosimo's dead brother Lorenzo and titular of their parish church. Each saint, of course, is identified by his particular iconography: Peter, for instance, a Dominican whose cult Angelico promoted, bleeds from his head, recalling his martyrdom. Cosimo's own patrons kneel in the foreground, dressed as mediæval Florentine physicians. St Cosmas turns and looks out of the painting pointing the Christ-child's attention to the viewer with his left hand and the viewer's attention to the Christ-child with his right; St Damian kneels in adoration, as if a member of the congregation at Mass, his hat respectfully removed and his back to the viewer and the world.

Hood provides a good account of the small panels which most likely filled the frame and predella (now scattered from Washington and Dublin to Paris and Florence): various saints and scenes from the life of Sts Cosmas and Damian following the *Legenda aurea* by the Dominican Jacopo da Voragine, not all reproduced here in colour. He notices that it was previously unprecedented in Dominican iconography to allow the patron's interests so thoroughly to dominate the main painting and predella scenes. "However, Fra Angelico managed to subsume this anomaly within the grander and more Dominican program of the altarpiece" (p. 100). The presentation of the Christ-child as ruler of heaven and earth, while reflecting Dominican iconography and city

festivals, “reminded the Florentine layman of the divine will that determined the political fortunes of a city over which Cosimo was exercising more and more control” (p. 107).

Altarpieces for Dominican choirs had traditionally presented three themes: the protection of Mary the patroness of the Order; the salvific action of Christ’s Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection and their extension into time by means of the Eucharist; and the specifically Dominican mission in direct succession to the apostles who spread the gospel through their preaching. Angelico’s creation reflects all three customs.

The Virgin is dressed in red and blue, the expensive colours Angelico canonized for her. She is grave yet tender. Her mantle bears inscriptions from the book of Ecclesiasticus (which Hood rather anachronistically labels apocryphal) which occurred in the Little Office: “I am the mother of pure love, of awe, of knowledge, and of holy hope”; “Like a vine I caused loveliness to bud, and my blossoms became glorious and bore abundant fruit.” The cedars, cypresses, palms, olives, oranges, pomegranates and rose garlands are all reified quotations from the same source, used in the tradition to praise her beauty, virginity and dignity. The painting sings a litany: Mary is Mother of God, Queen of Heaven (enthroned here in her court), Ever-virgin (hence the *hortus conclusus*), Star of the Sea (hence the lake), Protectress of the Order (she looks towards Dominic), Seat of Wisdom (upon whom Wisdom sits), Queen of Angels, Mother and symbol of the Church. Such Marian piety, Hood rightly observes, softened the friars’ Christocentric asceticism; it also allowed Angelico to speak directly to the memories and imaginations of an audience thoroughly ‘infected’ by the lyrical poetry and hymns of medieval Marian piety.

The focus of the picture, however, is undoubtedly on the Christ-child. Again Angelico paints a complex theology or litany of praises. Christ is here Priest, as he blesses the congregation, indeed the viewer, with his right hand. He is King of the earth, holding the globe in his other hand, this orb painted with a map of the world and the Holy Land in the centre, indicated by a star (the star which brought the three kings to Bethlehem?); he is King of heaven surrounded by his attendant angels. He is the Crucified One, as is indicated by the crucifixion inset, the angels holding the instruments of the Passion, the cruciform halo, the plaintive look on Cosmas’ face, the central predella scene of the *Lamentation* (now in Munich), and the surrounding panels in which his disciples suffer martyrdom. He is the Eucharistic sacrifice, as attention is drawn to the naked body of the child, the crucified body in the inset, and the more dramatic (and closer) body in the predella *Lamentation*.

Hood has little more to say about Angelico's Christology: he is more interested in his theory of religious life.

I have already noted something of Angelico's specifically Dominican, Thomist, theology of the Incarnation and Redemption. Sts Dominic and Thomas had particular devotions to the crucifix, and St Catherine to the precious blood, which show themselves in many of Angelico's works: here we find a crucifixion scene inset at the base of the painting to take the place of the crucifix on the altar. Aquinas taught that Christ's headship makes him the perfect mediator of divine grace to his body the Church, and his high priesthood makes him the go-between between God and his people: the two aspects are displayed in the San Marco Christ-child. Hood notices that the ghost of Angelico's most beautiful landscape can still be discerned in the background of this work, despite the nineteenth-century cleaning (with caustic soda!). Why is it there? He reads it as a purely Marian allusion. But surely it is also a hint of the new Eden won by the Redemptive Incarnation of Christ.

The whole of this theology is presented using the grammar of a sacred drama. Angelico uses a stage-setting with curtains, arch, carpet and raised platform for his *tableau vivant*. Cosmas appears as an almost choric figure, the *festaiuolo* who acted as a kind of mediator between cast and audience, catching their eyes, establishing a relationship with them, inviting their involvement, admonishing and instructing them. Angelico uses this device here to wonderful effect, drawing in the viewer as a kind of active accessory to the sacred play. The use of the rhetoric of a drama has another significance: immediately below the altarpiece the greatest sacred drama of all will take place, the commemoration of the Lord's Supper and his saving death, in the Eucharist. And joining the throng around the throne will be those who, closest to the altar (the clerics, friars and patrons), are drawn into the heavenly liturgy of the painting through the earthly liturgy of the hours and the Mass.

Hood does not notice here Antoninus' particular—clerical rather than Dominican—reason for favouring the Madonna and Child as an altarpiece subject:

What a salutary idea to put the picture of the Madonna and Child on the altar so that when the priest celebrates the divine sacrament, looking at Mary, he will be moved to reflect upon who that person was, of whom it was asked, by just one word, to make the Word flesh; and what kind of person the priest needs to be, who must with his words (or, rather, with the words of Christ uttered by him) make present the body and blood of Christ from the substance of bread and wine. Furthermore, from the example of humility and from the

purity of Mary the priest should learn to keep his spirit chaste and humble, and he should know how to invoke her as *Mediatrix*, so to obtain from her the grace of administering worthily and faithfully such a great sacrament. (*Summa Theologica*, IV, col. 1101).

The eucharistic function of the work also sheds some light on the presence of the courts of angels and saints: according to the tradition, a vast multitude of angels attended upon every Mass; and through the sacrament the Church militant on earth attained union with the Church triumphant in heaven, the communion of saints.

Hood's particular contribution to the reading of the painting comes when he suggests that the passion motifs of the painting are not merely evidence of the mediæval preoccupation with the Passion, but of an ensemble of ideas at the heart of the Observant Dominican vocation about Christ's passion, the Eucharist, and the friars' pursuit of personal holiness through prayer and penance. "Although the full reward of Heaven might have to be postponed until his journey was finally over, each traveller could anticipate its delights during the times of the liturgy of the hours . . . [and] the Eucharist" (pp. 110–111). Thus the painting is a supreme example of Angelico's propaganda for the Observant cause. As Hood observes, the altarpiece would only occasionally have been visible to lay people (apart from major patrons and pilgrims?). Where Christ the king was, there was his kingdom: among Dominic, Peter of Verona, and the Dominican friars in choir.

Hood notices almost in passing that the Observants "served by obligating themselves to preach, and they structured their common life according to what they perceived as necessary for the most efficient exercise of that obligation". But he goes on to read the painting in terms of "the deep spring of mysticism [which] coursed through the ground of the Dominican observance and watered the roots of a commitment fundamentally pragmatic in its aims" (p. 111). Hood's friars are much more monks than preachers. He is certainly right to point to their more monastic, contemplative, mystical bent compared with the unreformed Dominicans: hence Angelico's St Dominic is always the contemplative, never out on the road preaching. *Contemplata aliis tradere* required the contemplation (not merely 'study' as Hood calls it: p. 112) before passing on its fruits to others. But the object, even for the Observants, was decidedly *the passing-on*. John Dominici, Antoninus and Savonarola are hardly to be understood as enclosed monks: they were men of affairs, active, fiery preachers, snatchers of souls. Angelico, as he went from city to city negotiating contracts, purchasing materials, fulfilling commissions, employing teams of assistants, choosing and executing themes with a view to his patrons' wishes, his likely audience,

and his own evangelical purposes, can hardly be characterised as an unworldly mystic shut away in the ivory tower of his monastery.

This painting is best read as a homily. St Mark holds open his Gospel at chapter six: Angelico the miniaturist ensured we could read the text. Hood notes that this is the Marcan commissioning text to the disciples to go out preaching, two by two, bound in poverty and empowered with the Holy Spirit. The critic suggests that the message is a simple one, in line with Angelico's usual propaganda: the friars are caught up in the apostolic preaching of the primitive church. And certainly he is right: San Marco was to be a 'preaching', a kind of living homily and centre of apostolic engagement. But what was to be the message they contemplated and preached? Hood does not tell us. Let us look at the text in question from verses 2 to 8:

And many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?"

to which the picture responds: yes, he is the son of Mary, and she is the Seat of Wisdom; yes, he works mighty deeds, for he has dominion over all creation. The Dominican theology of the Incarnation is alluded to here.

And they took offence at him. And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not honoured in his own town."

This too is reflected in the multiple hints of the Passion we have noted already. It could almost have been a prophecy of what is to come at the apotheosis of San Marco preaching: the execution of Savonarola. But certainly the Dominican doctrine of the Redemption is being recalled. The text continues:

And he called the Twelve to him and sent them out two by two . . .  
He charged them to take nothing for the journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money.

Hood is right to read here the commissioning of the San Marco Observants; but it is the mission of all the mendicants surely. Dominic, Peter of Verona, and Francis all appear in the work, and as Angelico surely knew this is the very text (or its Matthean equivalent) which spurred Francis to pursue Lady Poverty through the foundation of the Friars Minor. The contrast with the wealth of commercial Florence told

in the carpet (and with the wealth of the secular clergy, told in Lawrence's dalmatic?) could not have been greater. Here the mendicants, as poor as the naked babe of Bethlehem, are promised their heavenly reward. And here again the specifically Thomist interpretation of the babe comes to the fore: as Aquinas taught, commenting on this very text, Christ's poverty suited his life of preaching, "for a preacher of the word of God must be entirely free from the worldly concerns that accompany possessions" (*S. Th.* IIIa, 40).

Thus the painting can be seen as a thorough-going exegesis of the given text. This is the interpretive key to the theological themes of the work. Not that these were all that were expressed here. The most prominent figures in the painting after the Madonna and Child are Cosimo's patrons, who, along with the beautiful figure of his brother's namesake, St Lawrence, mediate between the viewer and the image. Hood might have said more about these figures. Cosimo's namesake, in particular, is not just one of the crowd. He looks towards the congregation, drawing their attention to the throne and interceding on their behalf; his plaintive look contributes to the highly charged emotional character of the work. Cosimo here is betrayed as a protector of the city, understanding its problems, assisting in their relief. He kneels on a rich Anatolian carpet marked all around with the red Medici *palle*, its very luxuriance telling of Medici and Florentine wealth (the two being deliberately identified). But the comparison and contrast with the wealth of nature in the landscape and the wealth of grace in the saints above would not be lost on the audience. The same commercial wealth which supported the restoration of San Marco and commissioned this very painting was the subject of some of the most outspoken criticism of the greatest moralist of the age, Antoninus. Even the rich and powerful are reminded that they must store up their treasure in heaven.

Another theme in the painting is the Council of Florence which sought (and briefly achieved) the reunion of East and West and whose venerable capitulars were present at its launching. Zodiacal signs on the beautifully rendered carpet may indicate the beginning and end of the Council; whether or not this is the case, the carpet is decidedly Eastern in flavour, displaying a sensitivity to the visitors from the East.

Hood suggests that the political and ecclesiastical themes are here "gathered into and mitigated by the old Dominican custom of *traditio*" and "wholly subsumed" within the "overarching demands" of Dominican high altarpiece conventions (p. 116). But perhaps it would be better to view the *San Marco Altarpiece* as a many-layered work expressing concurrently and interdependently several motifs about theology, religious life, politics, society, church and culture. So it was that



Angelico preached his great homily on chapter six of Mark's gospel and on the Florentine world around him: that through the mystery of the incarnation, each person according to their station, from mighty city ruler to active preacher to novice in a monastery, can achieve heavenly bliss.

### **The Annunciation for public consumption**

Angelico painted many Annunciations in his life-time. He was, in fact, the inventor of this composition which, after about 1435, became the *typos* of fifteenth-century Florentine Annunciation scenes. His last one (painted around 1450) became his best-known and best-loved work. Hood suggests that the private frescos in the cells and the painting of the *Madonna of the Shadows* (he renames it *St Dominic's Curse*) spoke to the individual psyches neatly scored by the template of Dominican formation: they "addressed the friar's memory, as conditioned by the Order's liturgical traditions, and his imagination, as shaped by education in Dominican doctrines of both the method and purpose of mental prayer" (p. 262). The painter never intended the laity to see these works; only accidents of history and the all-seeing photographer's lens have made this possible. But the North Corridor *Annunciation* was intended for public consumption: it is outside the enclosure. Created in collaboration with the architect for that very spot, the work is flooded by an apparently invisible light source so as to give it an uncanny presence for viewers as they emerge from the darkness of the stairs. Hood provides a characteristically penetrating analysis of its composition and location, as well as useful photographs. He also makes helpful comparisons with other Annunciations of the period, whereby Angelico and his contemporaries helped displace the absolute iconographical hegemony of the famous fourteenth-century miraculous fresco at Santissima Annunziata.

Within an illusory frame and a garden and wood reminiscent of the Altarpiece a grand loggia stands two bays wide and three deep; in the background an open door reveals a small room and thence an open window. In the left bay the Angel Gabriel moves towards the seated Virgin, as if pronouncing his salutation, "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you." Echoing this motion is an instruction to the viewer across the edge of the loggia's floor: "When you come before the image of the Ever-Virgin take care that you do not neglect to say an 'Ave'." Angelico endowed the work with an "almost subliminal sense of movement" by mixing silica into the *intonaco* under the angel's wings so that they glitter, and by repeating the visual flutter of the wings in the alternating dark-and-light fin-shapes of the foreshortened vaults. All his skills from minaturist to architect, and above all as master of illusion,

are again employed. Hood comments:

In addition to the illusionistic effects of the frame, foreshortened through perspective and modelled with light and dark, the illumination falling across the picture surface is carefully controlled to mimic the effects of light on real architectural solids . . . the nuances of colour on the faces or the painter's use of light to carve out architectural space, combines with the relationship of the painting to the surrounding architecture to give it its sense of "reality". For this reason one notices much more slowly the myriad ways in which the painter denied or countered these commitments to empirical experience. The scale of the figures is gigantic in comparison with the architecture. The building itself is the fiction of a painter: the vaulting is completely inconsistent with the arcades, and the capitals across the front and terminating the return colonnade are Corinthian, although the two inner capitals on the orthogonal are composite Ionic . . . Notwithstanding these anomalies, the painting as a whole appears on first sight to be consistent with one's normal experience of reality. (p. 264)

Gabriel humbly genuflects before the Virgin, his radiant face suffused with joy. Hood observes that while the Virgin interrupts the light with a deep shadow, the Archangel, being a disembodied spirit, casts no shadow at all. This is of course in agreement with Thomistic Angelology, about which much more could be said to cast light on these favourite subjects of both the Angelic Doctor and the Angelic Painter. Angelico's angels, after all, won his works the exalted status of calendar decorations. We have noticed already their place in his eschatology, as symbols of the good times ahead (he almost always painted the good angels; only rarely the fallen ones). Aquinas taught that there is a vast multitude of angels, that without those created intelligences the universe would be incomplete, and that their genuine existence was a conclusion of reason, as well as faith. Angels, then, were no mere symbols: they were every bit as real as human beings, and a crucial part of creation. Aquinas speculated more than any before him about their nature and activity, their location and movement, how it is that they know, love and choose, so better to understand not angels only but God and human beings. From his speculation he drew important conclusions for moral theology, anthropology, social relations, epistemology and philosophy of language. Angelico was heir to all this reflection. He also spoke from a world unpolluted by empiricist materialism: a thing did not have to be observable, measurable and exploitable to be true; there was more to this world than meets the eye. His was a culture with a much greater cosmological and ecological sensitivity and inclusiveness than our own,

manifest in a reverence for the whole of creation, including the angels.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the tradition on the created spirits to which we must advert if we are to understand this painting was that they are messengers, carriers of God's word, and thus preachers. Gabriel in particular was a patron for preachers for he it was who gave the first kerygma of the new covenant: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, Mary. . . and behold: you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" (Lk 1:35,31–32). The scene of the Annunciation invited the friar as he left or returned to his cell and cloister to join the angel in proclaiming the Incarnation.

Hood's analysis of Dominican Marian piety includes a long (and not especially helpful) excursus on mediæval and modern embryology. He attributes to Albert the Great and Aquinas the late mediæval emphasis on Mary's central place in Redemption, and to Antoninus its fifteenth-century revival. It should be said that Aquinas and the Dominicans who followed him were far from mariolatrous: they even denied the doctrine (not yet a dogma) of the Immaculate Conception promoted by the Franciscans. Aquinas taught instead that Mary was the closest creature to Christ, that she received from him fullness of grace and gave him nature and birth, bringing grace to all. Her greatest title for Aquinas was *Theotokos*, God-bearer; for Antoninus she was *Co-Redemptrix*; for all Dominicans she was *Mater misericordiae*, *Advocata nostra*, the clement, the loving, the sweet one praised in their *Salve* procession and contemplated in the emerging Rosary.

Angelico focussed on certain themes in all his Annunciations. In contradistinction to the *thaumaturgic* fresco in *Santissima Annunziata*, his annunciations take place in a cloister rather than a bedroom. The emphasis is thus on the Virgin as a contemplative ready to hear and respond to God's Word, rather than as a potential mother ready to receive and nurture the Word in her womb. The house-and-garden setting repeat the motifs of the enclosed garden and the Virgin's chamber common in mediæval lore. But the carpets of flowers in Angelico's gardens have a deeper theological significance: they remind the viewer of the Old Eden from which the first Eve had been expelled because of her sin, and of the New Eden won for us by the new Eve because of her assent. Dominicans celebrated the Annunciation not principally as a Marian feast, but as a solemnity of Christ, the feast of his conception, the beginning of the Incarnation and so of the Redemption. We have already noted something of what this meant. This particular work depicts the dawn of a clear day, the first of the new era

of grace, and the rising sun floods across the painting from the east (Hood attributes this theological device to Antoninus.)

The Virgin is humble and not presented here in all the glory of the *San Marco Altarpiece* or the various Coronations Angelico painted; yet she is literally larger than life, dwarfing the angel, the trees, the house, all of creation. Like the *San Marco Altarpiece*, the north-corridor *Annunciation* can thus be read as a Litany to Our Lady.

Queen though she may be, the Virgin in Fra Angelico's north-corridor *Annunciation* is also a simple maid, and her guileless face, open and expectant, suggests that she is as it were at the beginning of a reign not yet fully realized. She is truly the Virgin Annunciate here, a person not an icon, a woman fully consenting to a course of action that will disrupt her life without her knowing in advance its purpose or end. But was not this readiness, even eagerness, to do God's will, no matter what it might cost, the ideal disposition of a Dominican friar? Was not this the very way in which a friar might identify with the Virgin herself? Fra Angelico evidently thought so, because for the only time in his life he showed Mary dressed in the black-and-white habit that she had given to the Preachers as a sign of her favour. In this way, he distinguished her as the abbess of the Dominican house of San Marco and enthroned her on a humble stool, where she could reign among her sons and keep them in peace. (p. 272)

This last passage strikes Keith Christiansen as evidence of Hood's charismatic enthusiasm. He declares himself "at loss to understand how the Virgin Fra Angelico shows in his celebrated fresco of the Annunciation wearing a blue cloak over a buff-coloured dress can be said to have donned the black and white habit of the Dominicans, as Hood maintains". Leaving aside the questions of what kind of black pigments Angelico used, how well they would have weathered the last five centuries, and any touching up they might have received along the way, the critic seems unaware that Angelico did not elsewhere dress the Virgin in "a buff-coloured dress" in public pictures, but usually in red, and not in simple costumes but in gorgeous fabrics. And how would the critic explain the decidedly bluish hues of the cappas of the Dominican saints in, for instance, *The Transfiguration* in Cell 6, *The Coronation of the Virgin* in Cell 9, and perhaps most clearly, in the Chapterroom *Crucifixion*? Hood demonstrates well that other Dominican associations are introduced into the work: the architecture echoes that in the priory itself so that the Virgin's house in Nazareth becomes the friars' house in Florence. One might add the Virgin's humble dress, the tiny room with a single window (a cell?), and the three-legged chair as evidence of her

place in a convent dedicated to poverty. So Hood's reading of the Virgin as dressed in Dominican habit is not out of the question.

The echoes of Michelozzo's cloister suggest a sacred space which is transtemporal: yet again the viewers are invited to import their own experience, to recognize the mysteries through the prism of their own culture, to see echoes of the architecture and scenery they knew and thus be 'at home' in the heavenly scene, at once transcendent and familiar. The inscription below the painting instructs the viewer to say an Ave before the image. He would, at least under his breath, mimic Gabriel's greeting, and like the angel he would be expected to genuflect as he said the words. Thus as Hood perceptively observes, the north-corridor *Annunciation* became a part of the liturgical life of the priory, drawing the friar back into sacred colloquy even outside the hours of the Divine Office. The reminders of the *San Marco Altarpiece*, such as the garden, also invited the extension of the sacral experience beyond the confines of the church.

## Conclusion

Angelico's painted preaching no longer resounds in a convent but in a museum, no longer in the fifteenth-century Florentine city-state with its peculiar religion, culture and commerce, but in a modern tourist town, no longer before an audience of Christians seeking perfection, but before half-comprehending spectators enjoying splashes of colour and quiet pieties of a by-gone era. This makes interpretation of his art much more difficult even for the most open-eyed, open-minded and openhearted. Hood's *Fra Angelico at San Marco* is a magisterial study, and the first to attempt "a credible account of his intentions, both as an artist and as a friar" and of his effect on his intended audiences. Perhaps if we had been given more about Angelico as a *preaching friar*, a presenter of Catholic doctrine, our understanding of his intentions and so of his works would have been fuller yet. But the book has so many strengths that it seems churlish to harp on this deficiency. As an analysis of the visual culture of Tuscany and of the Dominican Order from the 13th to the 15th centuries, and the institutional culture of San Marco, which together defined much of the matrix of Angelico's vision, this book illuminates the paintings as no book has done before. We can only hope that Hood will give us another study of Angelico's many works for outside the convent: this would show us a very different Angelico with presumably a different agenda or at least a different language. In the meantime, anyone who after reading this book did not long to visit San Marco must be short of sight, small of wit, or hard of heart.