

FRA GIOVANNI ANGELICO DA FIESOLE

"It is of its very essence that the recognition of beauty should satisfy the will."—ST. THOMAS.

IT is difficult to write about Fra Angelico without rhapsodizing. "He cannot be praised too much": the beauties of his pictures "baffle description": "his art was not only inborn and inspired but also exercised with singular care, ability and judgment." "He perfected the mystic poetry of art." These and suchlike phrases taken haphazard from sketches of his life, can be found in almost any book that speaks of him. One is almost tempted at the outset to shirk the effort of analysis with a Chaucerian "There is na more to say," for at the best words are inadequate expressions of the thoughts and emotions inspired by such a painter. Yet perhaps one can be forgiven for joining in the chorus of his praise by judging him from a somewhat unusual angle. Fra Angelico was not only a great Christian and religious painter, but he was essentially a Dominican friar with the very marked characteristics that distinguish the members of his Order.

There is an unusual consistency about Fra Giovanni da Fiesole: his life was a whole, like a masterpiece of art, and it will be my endeavour to show how his work—also a perfect unity—bears the stamp of a triple vocation, Christian, Religious, and Dominican; whilst, on the other hand, he does not disdain means which mark him as a Florentine artist of the fourteenth century.

He early dedicated himself and his powers to God in an apostolic, monastic and penitential Order, and he lived all his life in a few of its convents, mostly at Fiesole and Florence, conspicuous for his humility and submission, obedience, gentleness and spiritually-minded diligence. We are told he would never undertake a work without an obedience, but once that was given would comply with a ready and cheerful application. Vasari assures us "he was never seen to display anger among the Brethren of his Order

—a thing which appears to me to be most extraordinary, nay, almost incredible!” His devotion to duty and his humility are illustrated by two historical facts: when made Prior of Fiesole in 1450 he refused urgent and repeated invitations to paint at Prato, mindful that a prior should not be absent from his convent without grave need; and when Pope Eugenius wished to make him Archbishop of Florence, he not only excused himself but showed his wisdom and discernment in naming St. Antoninus as the more suitable man.

Fra Angelico, as his title implies, was not a monk but a friar. That is to say, he must not devote himself entirely to prayer and contemplation in retired and peaceful seclusion, but must also work actively for the souls of others. *Contemplari et aliis contemplata tradere* is the motto of his Order, and the means chosen for this end are not only penance, monastic discipline and prayer, but also stern study and incessant preaching. The Friar Preacher must preach, not necessarily by word of mouth; it does not matter *how*, so long as he does it *somehow*. Fortunately for the world the Saint who was Fra Angelico's Novice-master was blessed with discerning wisdom, and he realized that canvas and wall were to be this young friar's pulpit, even if he did not guess that the whole civilized world would be his audience.

“To contemplate”—we are told that he never took up his brush without a prayer, and that tears coursed down his cheeks as he painted a Crucifixion—“and to give to others the fruits of contemplation.” The mysteries he contemplated are made known to us in no uncertain terms: sound doctrine, the truths of Faith as set forth in the Rosary, and other scenes of Our Lord's life and of those of the saints: and like every good Dominican he preached more of heaven than of hell—better to do good things than merely to avoid doing evil things. *Sursum corda*: think of the joys of heaven: remember hell, but don't bother about it too much: if you concentrate on heaven you will be all right. That is what his paintings say. He finds it much easier to portray the heavenly ecstasy of love and sorrow, or love and joy,

than the contortions of anger and hatred. These things he has not yet contemplated; he has only given them a side-long glance, as it were, and turned away. Yet the souls of the damned in the Judgment scenes are horrible and terrifying, for it is Dante that helps to guide his brush in these pictures and inspires his portrayal of the blessed as well as of the damned: but one needs only to turn to Botticelli's somewhat pathetic efforts to illustrate the *Paradiso* to see that in allowing this we have not said all. Angelico has caught the joy and unstrained delight and ecstasy of the souls of the redeemed: his angels circling in dance with human souls express the same idea as Dante's scintillating and pirouetting lights: joy, delight, freedom and, above all, love. One feels that it would be good to join in the dance on the flowery mead and to meet all those well-loved friends; to be led by that idolized leader through the ordered ranks of saints and angels, midst enthralling music and song, whilst he opens to the delighted mind new truths and wonders; to be brought by him right up to the very Throne of God.

The Mysteries of the Rosary greatly influenced the subject matter of Angelico's pictures. And it is significant that the Rosary was the chief means used by St. Dominic to teach ignorant souls the truths of the Faith, for he was convinced that ignorance of these was the chief cause of all heresy and knowledge of them the cure; and the Rosary is a "weapon" used still by his sons (who wear their beads on the left side as a sword) in their preaching and teaching to-day, no less than in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These things and kindred subjects Angelico preached, and he preached nothing else, faithful to the ideal set by his beloved Father of whom it was said: "He always spoke either to God or of God."

Though the spirit of Fra Angelico's work was one and undivided, it is possible and usual to divide his actual paintings into three periods: the early Fiesole period, the Florentine and the Roman periods.

In the first period, 1418-1437, he was working in Fiesole and Cortona, and seems to have come under the Gothic and

miniaturist influence: and to this, perhaps, he owes the care and delicacy in detail that characterizes all his work. He shows interest in nature, but his landscapes are conventional and scenery all according to type in these early pictures. Little of the work of this period remains, owing to the zeal of Napoleon's myrmidons, but there is an exquisite Annunciation, the first of several, happily preserved.

Secondly came the San Marco period in Florence—to many the most attractive work—showing a certain neo-classical influence through the Florentine sculptors and architects, and the influence of Massaccio's and Masolino's painting.

In the final or Roman period the frescoes in St. Nicholas' Chapel show a greater mastery of, and concern for, perspective and architectural background. But in the Cortona "Annunciation," which is one of the earliest paintings we have, the artist and the personality of Fra Angelico are as much in evidence as in the Vatican frescoes; the style and the drawing are certainly different, but what makes Angelico to be the painter he is, the essential Angelico, is present as much in the one as in the other.

It is commonplace for critics to say that in dwelling on the spirituality of Fra Angelico one is apt to overlook the great excellency of his technique. His compositions are masterly, his colouring superb; the delicate hues of Italy's fair skies and countryside and the luminous haze that hangs over the city on a hot day as one looks down on it from Fiesole, have permeated his whole mind. If his drawing is sometimes faulty and out of perspective, at other times it is near perfection; if bodies do not live underneath his draperies, he is on the other hand no mean artist of the nude, as is clear from the Crucifixion in the Cloister of San Marco and the Deposition of Santa Trinita. The fact is that these things do not matter;¹ he has caught the spirit, he has embodied the idea, his sermon (we might say) has "unction,"

¹ The mediaeval artist "was most concerned to prevent anyone supposing that a tree was only a tree, or the mother and child merely what they seemed" (*Social Theories of the Middle Ages*, Fr. Bede Jarrett, O.P.).

even if it should on occasion seem to lack eloquence or grace in delivery.

We can agree, with Crowe and Cavalcaselli, that Angelico was a painter who never changed. The varying influences of Giotto, Orcagna, Masolino, Massaccio and the early Renaissance sculptors, only prove him to have been an artist who took his vocation in earnest. He was a Florentine, it is true, and therefore keenly alive to all that was new and interesting; but more important still, he was a Dominican who was eager to learn all that human art could teach him so that he could dedicate it to God and be a fitter instrument for His work. To this end he diligently sought out the best human means that he could find, whether old or new, that he might the better deliver his message, knowing full well, however, that these things were means only, and so not valuable for their own sakes. In support of this idea we have the tradition that a painting once finished was never retouched.

Son of St. Dominic, that genius for organization and brother of Thomas of the marvellous "Summae," Angelico set out his work systematically. The Church and Convent of San Marco were handed over to him with blank walls for his pulpit, and beginning at the Incarnation (the Madonna and Child over the High Altar in the church) he preached to his Brethren "Christ and Him Crucified." St. Dominic kneels below the Cross in the fresco that fills the wall at the end of the cloister, as if the painter would tell them to learn from him how to pray. "Look to the rock whence you are hewn." Three lunettes nearby set forth the threefold character of the rule they have embraced: St. Dominic bears the discipline as symbol of penance, St. Peter Martyr in remembrance of his heroic silence under unjust accusation symbolizes the self-sacrifice that perfection demands, and St. Thomas with his open book calls them to study. In the Chapter room, a whole wall is devoted to the mystery of the Crucifixion, contemplated by a company of Saints. In the dormitory, of course, true to custom and rule, Our Lady comforts and protects the brethren, bringing to their minds the lovely stories of her care and of St. Dominic's visions in the early days of the Order. Within the cells Angelico has set forth,

in an unforgettable series of frescoes, the whole panorama of Christ's Life and Death and Resurrection.

The onlookers in these scenes teach special lessons too: St. Dominic is the favourite figure—and Angelico does not seem so much to draw attention to the way in which he prayed, as to remind them of the fact that these mysteries are not a thing of the past—historical events to which they looked back—but real, living realities here and now as truly as on Calvary or in Nazareth or Bethlehem. Angelico's teaching is that Christ's mysteries are ever being renewed in the members of the Church, His Mystical Body. So, St. Dominic contemplating the Scourging (cell 27) kneels with bared shoulders taking the discipline, in union with Christ's sufferings which are renewed in him. In another significant picture (cell 37), St. Dominic stands with outstretched arms before the Crucified Saviour who hangs between two thieves. The attitude is that of the Priest after the Consecration at Mass, according to the Dominican Rite. The cappa which falls back from the shoulders gives the impression of a Chasuble, the white habit beneath appearing as the Alb, and no doubt the lesson here implied is that the friars are to remember at that solemn moment that Christ Crucified lies before them on the Altar as truly as He was raised aloft on Calvary. This was how he preached, and we should remember his prayers and tears if we wonder that his sermons are so powerful.

It strikes one as a little strange that this enthusiastic Dominican, so full of the love of the Church, his Order and his own city, should have passed by almost unnoticed such a great figure as St. Catherine of Siena. Only one picture of her (apart from group paintings) has come down to us. But the memory of this great reformer, correspondent of Popes and Cardinals and chief mover of the reform in her own Order (embraced by Fra Angelico's own Community) must surely have been still in benediction, for she had died in 1380, only seven years before Angelico's birth. Surely the thought of Catherine, to whom Florence, among other great cities, owed so much, must have inspired her brethren and we should have been glad to have Fra Angelico's version of

Sodoma's great picture of the Stigmata.² But this reticence leads to another observation: Angelico is not nearly so successful with his women as with his men; they are much fewer, for one thing, and though occasionally he is completely successful in combining sweet and holy graciousness with character and firmness (as in some Madonnas, and the women at the Tomb in the Resurrection pictures), as a rule he does not convey human variety or depth of character in his female figures. Far otherwise is it with his men—as, for example, in that wonderful fresco in the Chapter room at St. Mark's. The scene is the Crucifixion, but the central mystery is not so important in this case as the figures that stand below. There is a marvellous depth of character and a variety and intensity of agony expressed in all those different faces on the right hand side. St. Dominic in the place of honour—the tense brow, the uplifted gaze and outspread hands express the all-absorbing anguish of his heart: St. Ambrose stands facing the others with finger pointed upwards as if he would tell them the significance of the scene: St. Thomas stands in the far corner with his book, earnestly and painfully penetrating to the depth of the mystery as far as human mind can reach: St. Benedict turns away and kneels facing outwards, one hand covering half his face, absorbed with thoughts and feelings inexpressible. And what shall be said of St. Francis? One hand supports his face as he kneels inclining forward, the signs of the sacred Stigmata coming from his breast, left hand and bared foot, as rays of light. If ever a soul can be depicted in ecstasy, here it has been done. Francis is no more—his spirit has disengaged itself from its natural commerce with the body. Words are useless to express the self-annihilation, suffering love, and heavenly peace and calm which Angelico has contrived to portray. This figure by itself would be sufficient to prove him one of the world's greatest artists. The other figures, Saints Jerome, Augustine, Romuald,

² In St. Domenico at Siena. It is interesting to note that Fra Angelico was eventually laid to rest in one of Rome's few Gothic churches—the Minerva—where St. Catherine lies beneath the High Altar.

Bernard and Peter Martyr, are all distinct and vibrant characters; one can but conclude that the men are painted from life and the women from imagination. This is the more probable seeing that Angelico's life was evidently one of cloistered seclusion; painting was his work and he would not come much into contact with women since the actual ministry does not seem to have fallen to his lot. Hence his somewhat stereotyped images of feminine beauty have not the life and conviction that breathes forth from the strong masculine faces; and allowing for his idealizing capabilities, one thinks his models must have been men of character.

Both men and women, however, live by the spirit, and his Angels are the only ones—as it is somewhat vulgarly expressed—painted without stomachs! It is interesting to remark that Angelico's angels bear a strong resemblance to those of the Wilton Diptych, and I would like to think it possible that Fra Angelico had seen a copy of this beautiful Madonna³ who bears in her arms no stiff little Byzantine Babe, but a very human and charming Infant, for while His little arm is raised in blessing, His legs are stretched out in realistically childlike fashion (very much like the picture of the Presentation by Fra Bartolomeo), and the Angels who are grouped around in a semicircle, wearing rings of roses on their heads are completely at ease in their positions, arms interlinked or resting on each other's shoulders, high waists and feathery wings (more bird-like in the English paintings), sweet faces and easy grace depicted both by the artist of this Diptych and by Angelico bear a noticeable resemblance to each other. (How much of beauty must have been lost during England's vandal days!)

The subjects and the individual figures of the friar's paintings illustrate the mind and the training of a true Dominican, but still more are these qualities shown in the composition of his great pieces. Order and symmetry, com-

³ Such a thing is not impossible. Richard II (who appears in one part of the painting) was a great patron of the Order and built for it many noble churches. If the painting had any connexion with the Order it was quite likely that it would be known to Italian Dominicans.

bined with great charm and delicacy and scrupulous attention to detail are their salient features. In spite of the profusion of details and the repetition of subjects there is no sense of overcrowding or of weariness. The eye is ever refreshed with new details and the isolation and enlargement of any figure only adds to our appreciation. Angelico's pictures grow on the beholder; the more one knows them, the more they are loved and understood. Further, those which at first are even somewhat repulsive (as, for example, the face of St. Thomas in the lunette and in the Chapter room fresco at San Marco) end by exacting as much affection and appreciation as the rest.

These two somewhat opposite characteristics, sweeping design and meticulous detail, can probably be traced to one source of inspiration—the choral recitation of the Divine Office. No one who has not witnessed a choir of hooded monks or friars singing their psalms and hymns—solemn, majestic, tender or sometimes even gay—to the accompaniment of reverential ceremonial can realize the effect it produces. Fra Angelico not only saw all this with his artist's eye; he also shared therein and saw it with his spiritual eye; and as the panorama of Christ's life on earth and in heaven passed before him in the liturgical year, little wonder if at times he seemed uncertain whether he were in heaven or on earth, as his paintings seem to show. That, after all, may well be: as Dante tells, heaven can be begun on earth.

Moreover, the exact observance of pauses, inclinations, and other details, which collectively make up the beauty of choral ceremony, would school him in attention to detail even in his largest pictures, so that this trait need not be ascribed exclusively to the influence of the miniature school.

It must be admitted that the friar-preacher did his work well. His sermons have long outlasted the spoken and even written sermons of the greatest preachers of his age. We know that St. Francis, St. Anthony and St. Dominic drew crowds to listen to them for hours, yet little of what they said has come down to us, and of that little how few hear anything. But Angelico preaches still, even to those who have ears and hear not, or have eyes and see not. What can

be the reason unless it is that he used and cultivated all his talents for God? Having become Christ-like by a loving contemplation of the mysteries of Christ—"He who illustrates the life of Christ should be in Christ"⁴—through his own consecrated personality and through the sane use of all human means at his disposal, he gave forth to others what he himself had learned: "Contemplari et aliis contemplata tradere."

S. M. B., O.P.

NOTE.—*Edinburgh can boast of an original of Fra Angelico. It is an "Ecce Homo" on stone and is in the possession of the nuns of St. Margaret's (Ursuline) Convent.*

⁴ This is Fra Angelico's only remark, recorded by Vasari, as Fr. Bede Jarrett notes in his *Social Theories of the Middle Ages*.