

Lunette C

SAINT FRANCIS AS ATLAS

INSCRIPTION:

BEHOLD WHAT BENEFIT THE SERAPHIC ATLAS HAS BROUGHT TO THE ALREADY CRUMBLING CHURCH THROUGH HIS SONS: WITH WHOM HE HAS GOVERNED IT WITH CAMAURES, PROTECTED IT WITH SCEPTERS, REGULATED IT WITH THE PURPLES, GUARDED IT WITH MITERS, IRRIGATED IT WITH BLOOD, ESTABLISHED IT WITH DOCTRINES, STRENGTHENED IT WITH CHAMPIONS, ADORNED IT WITH SO MANY FLOWERS OF PURITY AND CHASTITY: WHEREFORE WITH GREAT REASON INNOCENT III FORETOLD: **HIC CHRISTI SUBSTENTABIT ECCLESIAM** – "This man shall uphold the Church of Christ."

Thanks to the suggestion of the bishop of Assisi, Francis decided to leave with a group of friars to go to Rome and present his Rule to Pope Innocent III. It was the year 1209. It was not easy. Engaged in an unceasing struggle against monarchs, nobles, and heretics, the Pope was initially distrustful. However, even though he did not issue a written document, he recognized the great value of Francis's Rule, entirely centered on evangelical poverty and obedience to the Church and to the Pope, and allowed its "experimentation."

It is said that this change was made possible by a dream: the Pope saw the Lateran Basilica swaying on its foundations, so much so that it would have collapsed had a man not supported it with his shoulders. He recognized in the Basilica the Church, which was living through difficult days at the time, and in that man, the little friar from Assisi. He believed in him.

In the fresco, Saint Francis, a new Atlas, supports the Lateran Basilica; the group of Franciscans presents the Rule to the Pope (one of them carries a large book — the original Rule was actually quite short, but in art, size or height sometimes conveys importance); the friars are bowed, ready to kneel to emphasize their desire to obey; Pope Innocent, with the triple tiara and the large keys of Saint Peter — symbols of his authority — is speaking with a bishop. On the opposite side is a cardinal, whose galero is partially visible.

Francis arrived in Rome while Archbishop Guido of Assisi was in the Vatican. If the figure depicted to the right of Innocent is the bishop of Assisi, what might the Pope be telling him? Surely, his dream: Rome under attack (the arrows), the Lateran collapsing, Francis as Atlas. The Pope seems to whisper to Bishop Guido: "This man will support the Church of Christ." Naturally, none of the present figures is looking at Francis, who is a figment of the Pope's imagination.

In the inscription, Fra Giuseppe adds another dimension that is not present — or at least not clearly expressed — in the fresco. He describes how Saint Francis, and later the Franciscan Order, upheld the Church in the centuries that followed through their works. These few lines can be considered the content of Fra Giuseppe's poem — its latent structure, or, if you will, the key idea behind the images in the cloister.

The poor little friars in the fresco, with the tonsure that Innocent imposed so that they might be recognized as clerics — directly dependent on the Church and therefore authorized to preach in churches — eventually became popes (camaures), cardinals (purples), kings (scepters), bishops (miters), martyrs (blood), Doctors of the Church (doctrines), great preachers and missionaries, defenders of the faith (champions), ascetics and mystics (flowers of purity and chastity).

The cloister has a space dedicated to all, and all, together, ideally sing in a polyphonic choir — with all their differences — the Franciscan poem.



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