

FRA GIUSEPPE AND THE FRANCISCANS IN GRAVINA

In the church adjacent to our cloister, there is a painting dedicated to Saint Sebastian. From the signature left by the painter, we can deduce his name, his birthplace, where he lived for a certain period, and the year the canvas was painted: "*Frater Joseph a Gravina pingebat 1678.*"

Fra Giuseppe worked tirelessly as a fresco painter in Nardò, Galatina, and in other convents of the province. No written historical source speaks of him, but we can attribute to him the frescoes of our cloister by comparing them with those in the convent of Galatina, which share many similarities and still bear the date (1696) and his signature.

Among the heraldic emblems, Fra Giuseppe included that of Vincenzo Maria Orsini, bishop from 1675 to 1724. This allows us to date the possible start of the works to 1675. We can consider 1696 as a possible end date, since the more refined stylistic solutions in Galatina suggest that those frescoes came later.

Faith, values, dreams, experiences, readings, and above all the deep love he poured into his Franciscan Order — the pride of belonging, the desire to inspire awe by recounting the heroic choices of his confreres, their doctrinal learning, and the service they rendered in various forms, both men and women, to the Church and the world — are all present in Fra Giuseppe's frescoes. Dozens of itinerant Franciscans resorted to oral storytelling in homes, squares, and streets to keep heresies at bay, bring people closer to the truths of faith, and propose moral precepts or simply sound models of behavior. Fra Giuseppe, too, had formative goals: with his frescoes, he sought to strengthen the faith of his confreres or of those visiting the cloister by shedding light on the excellence of Franciscanism — popes and cardinals, theologians and preachers, blessed and saints, martyrs and ascetics, devoted to chastity, penance, prayer, and charity. Their doctrine, their search for God, the heroic degree of their virtues, and their miracles — constantly remembered — would immerse the visitor (and hopefully today, the reader) in a dramatic, distant, but wondrous and edifying atmosphere. To achieve this, he used frescoed images accompanied by brief captions that helped (not only those unfamiliar with books) to know or recognize scenes that told ancient stories still full of meaning and fascination. In the 8th century, Saint John of Damascus wrote: "If a pagan comes and says to you: Show me your faith [...] take him into the church and show him the decoration with which it is adorned and explain the series of sacred pictures." Let us imagine a friar engaged in storytelling while inviting people to observe the frescoes, perhaps accompanied by music and the chants of praying friars. An engaging communication — today we might call it a multimedia presentation, an early PowerPoint, and one in excellent taste.
