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ANDERSON ANTONY

**“Art and Theology in Dialogue:
Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas on
the Mystery of the Last Judgment”**

**Final Dissertation under the supervision of:
Professor João Norton de Matos**

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"In true beauty, we begin to experience the desire for God."

- POPE FRANCIS

Word of Gratitude

First and foremost, I give thanks to God Almighty, the greatest Artist of all creation, who enlightened me to choose this topic and guided me throughout this journey. He is the source of all beauty and wisdom, and in this humble work I have sought to extend my passion as a reflection of His gifts.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the Christian doctrine of the Last Judgment through a comparative study of St. Thomas Aquinas's theological writings and Fra Angelico's artistic representation in his *Last Judgment* panel at the Museo di San Marco, Florence. The research aims to highlight the complementarity of theology and art in the transmission of eschatological truths. It comprises three chapters; the first chapter provides an iconographic and theological analysis of Fra Angelico's painting. Through its rich symbolism, heaven in radiant harmony, the open tombs signifying resurrection, the communion of saints, and the torments of hell, the work functions as a visual catechesis, communicating complex theological ideas in a universal and accessible language.

The second chapter examines St. Thomas Aquinas's systematic theology of the Last Judgment as presented in the *Summa Theologica* (Suppl., qq. 88–99). Aquinas develops a coherent vision of Christ as Judge, the resurrection of the body, the beatific vision, and the eternal separation of the damned, grounding these doctrines in Scripture, tradition, and rational argument.

The third chapter presents a comparative synthesis, showing how Aquinas provides doctrinal precision while Fra Angelico conveys the same truths through beauty and imagination. The study concludes that art and theology are not rivals but complementary paths: theology secures truth, while art universalizes its meaning, making it accessible to all. This interplay highlights the pedagogical and catechetical power of sacred art within the life of the Church.

Keywords

Fra Angelico, St. Thomas Aquinas, Last Judgment, Iconography, Eschatology, Beatific Vision, Resurrection of the Body, Heaven and Hell, Communion of Saints, Sacred Art and Catechesis, Dominican Spirituality, Theological Aesthetics

Resumo (Português)

Esta tese aborda a doutrina cristã do Juízo Final através de um estudo comparativo entre os escritos teológicos de São Tomás de Aquino e a representação artística de Fra Angelico no seu painel do *Juízo Final*, atualmente no Museu de São Marcos, em Florença. O objetivo é evidenciar a complementaridade entre a teologia e a arte na transmissão das verdades escatológicas.

O primeiro capítulo oferece uma análise iconográfica e teológica da pintura de Fra Angelico. Através da sua simbologia, o céu em harmonia luminosa, os túmulos abertos da ressurreição, a comunhão dos santos e os tormentos do inferno, a obra funciona como uma catequese visual, capaz de comunicar ideias teológicas complexas numa linguagem universal e acessível.

O segundo capítulo analisa a teologia sistemática de São Tomás de Aquino sobre o Juízo Final, tal como apresentada na *Summa Theologica* (Suplemento, qq. 88–99). Aquino desenvolve uma visão coerente de Cristo como Juiz, da ressurreição dos corpos, da visão beatífica e da separação eterna dos condenados, fundamentando estes ensinamentos na Escritura, na Tradição e na razão.

O terceiro capítulo propõe uma síntese comparativa, mostrando como Aquino oferece precisão doutrinal, enquanto Fra Angelico transmite as mesmas verdades através da beleza e da imaginação. Conclui-se que a arte e a teologia não são rivais, mas caminhos complementares: a teologia assegura a verdade, enquanto a arte universaliza o seu sentido, tornando-o acessível a todos. Esta interação revela a força pedagógica e catequética da arte sacra na vida da Igreja.

Palavra chaves

Fra Angelico, São Tomás de Aquino, Juízo Final, Iconografia, Escatologia, Visão Beatífica, Ressurreição do Corpo, Céu e Inferno, Comunhão dos Santos, Arte Sacra e Catequese, Espiritualidade Dominicana, Estética Teológica

Signs and Abbreviations

a.	Article	Rev.	Book of Revelation
CCC	catechism of the catholic church.	Rom.	Romans
Cf.	confer	Trans.	Translated by
Ch.	Chapter	Vol.	volume
Cor.	Letter to Corinthians	S T	Summa Theologica
Ecl.	Ecclesiastes (Qohelet)	S T S	Summa Theologica Supplement
Ed.	Edited by		
hrs.	hour of search.		
Ibid.	Ibidem		
Is.	Book of prophet Isaias		
Jn.	Gospel of John		
LG	Lumen Gentium		
Lk.	Gospel of Luke		
Mt.	Gospel of Mathew		
n.	number		
NRSV.	new revised slandered version		
p.	page number		
PL.	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> / Latin patrology		
Pt.	part		
q.	(<i>quaestio</i>) question		
qq.	(<i>quaestiones</i>) questions		

Summary

This thesis, entitled “*Last Judgment in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and in the Work of Fra Angelico: A Comparative Study*”, investigates the Christian doctrine of the Last Judgment through two complementary lenses: the theological precision of St. Thomas Aquinas and the artistic vision of Fra Angelico, particularly his famous *Last Judgment* panel preserved at the Museo di San Marco in Florence. The central aim of this work is to show how theology and sacred art, though distinct in form, converge in the service of faith by illuminating the mysteries of Christian eschatology.

Chapter One: Fra Angelico and His Work

The first chapter focuses on Fra Angelico, his biography, vocation as a Dominican friar, and his contribution to the artistic and spiritual culture of the fifteenth century. Known as the “Painter of Angels,” he lived his art as a form of prayer and catechesis. Special attention is given to his *Last Judgment*, analysing its iconographic and theological dimensions. The painting is studied in detail: the heavenly court with Christ at the centre, the Virgin and apostles in hierarchical order, the resurrection of the dead emerging from open tombs, the blessed ascending to heaven, and the damned descending into hell under the dominion of Satan. The symbolism reveals a profound catechetical intention: through colour, form, and harmony, Fra Angelico communicates eschatological truths in a way accessible even to the illiterate, making art a universal language of faith.

Chapter Two: The Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas

The second chapter examines the systematic theology of the Last Judgment as developed by St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* (Supplementum, qq. 88–99). Aquinas discusses Christ’s role as the Judge of the living and the dead, the resurrection of bodies, and the destinies of the blessed and the damned. His teaching on the *doctes* (gifts) of the glorified body—impassibility, clarity, agility, and subtlety—offers a rational and theological foundation for Christian hope in eternal life. The punishments of the damned are described with equal precision: the eternal separation from God as the greatest pain, and the diversity of torments according to guilt. This chapter highlights the coherence of Aquinas’s theology, rooted in Scripture, Tradition, and Aristotelian philosophy, which provides intellectual clarity and doctrinal security to the Church’s eschatological teaching.

Chapter Three: Comparative Study

The final chapter offers a comparative synthesis of Fra Angelico's artistic vision and Aquinas's theological doctrine. The two approaches are distinct yet complementary: Aquinas expresses the truth of the Last Judgment in words, concepts, and rational argumentation, while Fra Angelico communicates it through images, beauty, and symbolic imagination. This comparison reveals several key insights:

1. Art as a universal language – while theology requires literacy and intellectual formation, art can speak directly to the heart and imagination of every believer.
2. The creative and interpretive power of art – Fra Angelico's painting allows viewers not only to receive but also to participate in interpretation, making it a dynamic catechetical tool.
3. Theological precision and artistic universality – Aquinas offer doctrinal clarity, while Fra Angelico opens theological truths to a wider audience through beauty.
4. Catechetical value of sacred art – the Last Judgment painting functions as a visual catechism, showing how art can teach faith in a way accessible to all cultures and generations.

Conclusion

This research concludes that sacred art and theology must not be seen as separate domains, but as complementary paths towards the same truth. Aquinas provides the intellectual architecture of eschatology, while Fra Angelico brings it to life in colors and forms that transcend linguistic boundaries. Together, they demonstrate that the doctrine of the Last Judgment is not only a matter of faith and reason but also of imagination and beauty. This interplay between art and theology enriches the Church's catechesis, ensuring that the mystery of the Last Judgment remains alive in the minds and hearts of the faithful.

General Introduction

The doctrine of the Last Judgment has occupied a central place in Christian thought and imagination from the earliest centuries of the Church. It encapsulates the conviction that human history is oriented toward a definitive consummation in which Christ, the risen Lord, will come again to judge the living and the dead.¹ This eschatological event functions not merely as an isolated theological theme but as a synthesis of Christian faith itself: it affirms the sovereignty of God, the moral responsibility of humanity, and the promise of final justice and mercy.² Patristic authors such as Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, and Bede the Venerable consistently stressed that the Last Judgment stands as the ultimate revelation of divine providence and as the horizon against which all human history and action must be measured.

Within the medieval period, the most systematic and enduring account of the Last Judgment is offered by St. Thomas Aquinas. His treatment of eschatology, particularly in the *Supplementum* of the *Summa Theologiae*, constitutes a theological framework in which resurrection, judgment, heaven, and hell are articulated with scholastic precision.³ Aquinas integrates scriptural revelation, patristic tradition, and rational argumentation, thereby presenting the Last Judgment not merely as a *dogmatic datum*⁴ but as the necessary culmination of divine justice and the rational ordering of creation.⁵ His thought remains decisive for Catholic theology, shaping both doctrinal teaching and the liturgical imagination of the Church.

Concurrently, the Last Judgment became a prominent subject in Christian art, especially in the medieval and Renaissance periods. Among the most influential visual interpretations is the work of Fra Angelico, whose panel painting *The Last Judgment* translates theological content into a visual catechesis. Fra Angelico's art is not reducible to aesthetic value; it represents a form of visual theology, where colours, forms, and symbols communicate the realities of heaven, hell, and divine judgment in ways

¹ Cf. Mt 25:31–46; Rev 20:11–15; 1 Cor 15:23–28

² Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XX, Ch. 20–21, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 939.

³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Supplementum*, Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947) qq. 88–99.

⁴ Cf. *dogmatic datum* means a foundational point, fact, or belief

⁵ Cf. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 314–322.

accessible to both the learned and the simple faithful.⁶ His integration of Dominican spirituality, biblical motifs, and artistic innovation makes his rendering of the Last Judgment a privileged site for studying the interaction between theology and art.

This thesis, entitled “*Art and Theology in dialogue: Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas on the mystery of the Last Judgment*” aims to bring into dialogue scholastic theology and visual iconography. By analysing Aquinas’s systematic exposition of eschatology and Fra Angelico’s artistic representation, the study will explore how two complementary modes of Christian expression, speculative reason and sacred image converge to illuminate the mystery of the Last Judgment. This approach is not merely comparative but integrative: Aquinas provides the doctrinal structure, while Fra Angelico demonstrates how that structure can be translated into visual and devotional form. Together, they exemplify the unity of Christian tradition in which theology and art are not opposed but mutually enriching.

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary methodology, which draws upon theology, philosophy, and art history. In an age when eschatological hope is often eclipsed by secular narratives of history, revisiting the Last Judgment through Aquinas and Fra Angelico serves not only to recover a central Christian doctrine but also to highlight its enduring relevance for questions of justice, destiny, and meaning. Moreover, this thesis situates itself within recent scholarly currents that emphasize the sacramental and pedagogical role of sacred art, affirming Hans Urs von Balthasar’s insight that the “glory of the Lord” is revealed not only in concepts but also in forms.⁷

The general structure of the thesis reflects this dual focus. Chapter One situates the theme of the great painting of Fra Angelico and its interpretations. Chapter Two develops a systematic analysis of Aquinas’s eschatology, with particular attention to the resurrection of the dead, the heavenly court, heaven and hell, and the consummation of history. Chapter Three turns to the comparison of both the ideas of Fra Angelico’s art form of theology and the written form of Aquinas theology on the concept of last judgement. Finally, the conclusion draws together the theological and artistic strands, underscoring the enduring significance of the Last Judgment for Christian faith and culture.

⁶ Cf. William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 58.

⁷ Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. I* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 19–34.

In this way, the thesis seeks to demonstrate that the Last Judgment, far from being a merely distant or speculative doctrine, remains a living reality at the heart of Christian tradition a reality that has been expressed with equal depth by the scholastic rigor of St. Thomas Aquinas and the sacred artistry of Fra Angelico.

The fundamental intention of this thesis is not to put down or make a comparative study to prove who is greater. But to understand the way how they both tried to transmit their theological ideas and in which level both succeed in it. I also tried my level best to find and evaluate the limitations and advantages of both methods or dynamisms of transmitting theological materials.

The language and structure of this thesis have been simplified as much as possible so that anyone with a basic understanding of English and a general theological background can follow it. I have endeavoured to employ simplified theological language in order to ensure that the content is accessible to all readers. Furthermore, brief explanatory notes have been provided in the footnotes for certain complex and Latin terms. The sections on theology and historical biographies have been simplified with the assistance of artificial intelligence applications such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini. Some theological documents originally published in Latin and Italian were translated using Microsoft Word's document translator, and their grammar was subsequently revised with the help of ChatGPT. Since I had the opportunity to visit Fra Angelico's original works in Florence, I have also included my personal observations in the first and third chapters to aid in the interpretation of his art.

Chapter 1: Fra Angelico and his work

*“God is the source of all beauty, of all noble and pure expression; beauty itself is a divine attribute. But beauty is only divine, as far as man is concerned, when he does not make an idol of it. To express beauty is to do sacred work; the artist's gift is to be able to capture and reveal his mark, which is the mark of God, in nature.”*⁸

Fra Angelico, as a great artist, dedicated his entire life to exploring this source of beauty that is God. We can see a mutual union of art and holiness in the life of Fra Angelico of whom those who lived with him called him Blessed Fra Angelico. His life was a perfect expression of divinity in the language of art.

This chapter offers a systematic and multi-dimensional reading of that work. It begins with the life and formation of the artist, since biography and vocation frame the hermeneutical key to his pictorial choices: the Dominican spirituality of poverty, preaching, and contemplation is evident in compositional restraint, gilded hierarchies, and the didactic clarity of his figures. Next, following the typology of extant *Last Judgment* panels (San Marco; the Berlin variant), the chapter situates the San Marco painting within Fra Angelico's corpus and the broader iconographic traditions of late medieval eschatology (sections 1.2–1.3). Technical aspects (tempera on panel, gesso ground, water-gilding, brushwork, and proportional schemes including Fibonacci/golden-ratio considerations) are examined to show how material technique and theological program cohere (section 1.3.1). Finally, the chapter gives sustained attention to the painting's theological reading: heaven, open tombs, hell, the communion of saints, and the ecclesial and biblical meanings that those motifs carry (sections 1.4–1.4.3). Each reading combines formal analysis (line, colour, space), iconographic method (attributes and typology), and theological exegesis (patristic and scholastic resonances), so as to treat the panel as both artwork and doctrinal statement.⁹

Here in this chapter, we deeply analyse the life of Fra Angelico and his great work the “last judgement” which is presently in the museum of San Marco, Florence. The basic

⁸Cf. João Gonçalves Gasper, *A Igreja e a Arte de Roma, pela Europa, até Aveiro* (Aveiro: Núcleo de Estudos Aveirenses), 11.

⁹ cf. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 13.

intention of this chapter is also making a deep study on the painting or in other ways make a systematic reading of this painting in the background of eschatology. A small historical based study also I have made to prove the importance of the language of art can more effectively helped the people to understand the theological concepts than written doctrines, namely here the last judgement. The language of art is more universal and has the capacity to talk with all kind of people without the block of language.

1.1. The life and legacy of Fra Angelico

Fra Angelico, born with the name of Guido di Piero di Gino, stands out as one of the most iconic figures of early Renaissance art. When he joined the Dominican order, he was also known as Fra Giovanni da Fiesole. His fusion of deep spirituality with artistic genius made him a model of the ideal Christian artist. Known posthumously as *Beato Angelico*, a title officially recognized only in 1982 by Pope John Paul II, he has long been admired for his luminous depictions of sacred subjects. Angelico's art was not simply an aesthetic exercise; it was a means of prayer and spiritual elevation. As Giorgio Vasari wrote, Angelico's figures were so devout that they looked more holy than painted images.¹⁰

Fra Angelico's legacy extends beyond his artwork into the spiritual realm. He never made any painting without saying a prayer.¹¹ He was not just a painter, but a man of faith whose devotion shaped every brushstroke. His canonization process and historical commendations illustrate the Church's esteem for his holiness, reflecting a broader tradition in which holiness and creative expression were seen as mutually enriching.¹²

1.1.1. Early life and education

Angelico's year of birth is still a controversial subject and he was probably born between 1395 and 1400 in Mugello, near Vicchio in Tuscany. Contrary to Vasari's claim

¹⁰ Cf. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, edição de Gaetano Milanesi (Florença: G. C. Sansoni, 1906), vol. 2, 363.

¹¹ Cf. Christopher Lloyd, *Fra Angelico* (Londres: Phaidon press limited, 1993), 5.

¹² Cf. Pope John Paul II, Address on the Beatification of Fra Angelico, 1982.

that he was born in 1387¹³, (The exact date of birth is not known, but Vasari mistakenly asserted that Fra Angelico was 68 when he died in Rome in 1455, thus implying a birth date of 1387.)¹⁴ documentary evidence places his layman's status until 1417, when he was referred to as "Guido di Piero dipintore del popolo di San Michele Visdomini".¹⁵ He was active as a painter before entering religious life, receiving payments for an altarpiece in 1418 for the Gherardini Chapel in Florence.

It is likely that Angelico trained with Ambrogio di Baldese¹⁶, an Italian painter, known for his altarpieces and miniatures. He may also have been influenced by Battista di Biagio Sanguigni, a notable manuscript illuminator, suggesting a dual basis in panel painting and miniature lighting.¹⁷

1.1.2. Vocation and Studies

Angelico's transition from artist to friar began between 1418 and 1421, when he joined the Dominican convent of San Domenico in Fiesole. He adopted the religious name Fra Giovanni da Fiesole. The first record of this name appears in 1423 when he painted a Crucifix for Santa Maria Nuova. During novitiate, Dominican norms would have prohibited artistic activity, indicating that his profession likely followed shortly after 1421.¹⁸

As a member of the Dominican Order, Angelico integrated his artistic vocation with his spiritual calling. He regularly attended conventual meetings, and by 1433, he had become Vicario of San Domenico, reflecting his growing leadership role within the community. His artistic activity continued alongside his religious duties, suggesting that for Angelico, painting was a form of contemplative devotion.¹⁹

¹³ Cf. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Ed. de Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1906), vol. 2, 502–508.

¹⁴ Cf. Christopher Lloyd. *Fra Angelico*. (London: Phaidon press limited, 1993), 7

¹⁵ Cf. State Archives of Florence, Compagnia di San Niccolò Records, 1417

¹⁶ Cf. Ambrogio di Baldese (1352 – 1429), who lived in Florence and contributed to the Florentine school of art.

¹⁷ Cf. Luciano Bellosi, *Fra Angelico: The Dawn of the Renaissance* (Milão: Electa, 1998), 27-34.

¹⁸ Cf. William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 12–15

¹⁹ Cf. John Pope-Hennessy, *Fra Angelico* (London: Phaidon, 1952), 18–22.

1.1.3. Artistic Formation and Early Works

Angelico's early works exhibit a blend of Gothic stylization with increasing naturalism, aligning with the transition from Medieval to Renaissance art. His altarpiece commissions and the 1423 Crucifix reveal a style marked by vibrant colours, serene figures, and theological clarity.

One notable act was his role as assessor in 1434 alongside Rossello di Jacopo, evaluating a painting for San Niccolò Maggiore. This reflects not only his artistic standing but his trustworthiness in doctrinal matters. His ability to fuse liturgical content with artistic innovation laid the groundwork for his later fresco cycles.²⁰

1.1.4. His Life as a Dominican Monk and Artist

Fra Angelico remained in Fiesole even as many friars moved to San Giorgio sulla Costa in 1435 and San Marco in Florence in 1436. Only in 1441 is there evidence of his presence at San Marco, which became the site of his most iconic work: the fresco decoration of the convent's cells and corridors. These frescoes serve both as theological reflections and meditative aids, embodying Dominican spirituality.²¹

In 1443, Angelico held the office of sindaco (financial administrator), further indicating his prominence in the community. Around 1445, he was summoned to Rome by Pope Eugenius IV, a significant acknowledgment of his artistic and spiritual authority. During this time, he may have been offered the Archbishopric of Florence, which he declined and likely supporting the appointment of Fra Antonino Pierozzi instead. This episode reflects the respect Angelico garnered not just as an artist but as a man of wisdom and discernment.²² In 1450 Fra Angelico was appointed Prior of San Domenico at Fiesole, where he succeeded his own brother I'ra Benedetto.²³

1.1.5. Major Commissions and Artistic Philosophy

In Rome, Angelico decorated chapels in the Vatican and Orvieto Cathedral, illustrating his status as a pan-Italian religious painter. His approach to art was deeply

²⁰ Ibid., 24–27.

²¹ Cf. William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 45–71.

²² Cf. Domenico da Corella, *De Vita et Obitu B. Mariae*, 15th century.

²³ Cf. Christopher Liyod, *Fra Angelico* (London: Phaidon press limited, 1993) 8.

spiritual. Vasari and others recount that Angelico never painted without prayer and often wept while depicting Christ crucified.²⁴ Such testimony may seem hagiographical, yet it illustrates the widespread belief in the sacramental dimension of his art. His style, marked by calmness, clarity, and radiant holiness, was not meant to impress but to invite contemplation. The frescoes at San Marco are particularly notable for their didactic simplicity and are ideal for fostering meditation among friars Legacy

Fra Angelico's art became a touchstone for spiritual beauty and devotional art. His reputation grew in later centuries through Vasari's *Lives*, Dominican hagiographies, and even Romantic writers. His life exemplified how art, faith, and virtue can merge to elevate both religious experience and artistic heritage.

His figures, Vasari wrote, resembled true saints, and legend has it he prayed before painting and wept while portraying Christ. While such accounts are devotional in tone, they reflect the consistent perception of Angelico as an artist who painted with the soul, not just with skill.

1.1.6. Final Years and Death

Angelico returned to Florence in 1450, serving as Prior of San Domenico. In 1452, he was invited to decorate the choir of Prato Cathedral, but negotiations fell through, and the task went to Fra Filippo Lippi. In his final years, Angelico remained active in ecclesial and artistic circles, possibly returning to Rome in 1453 or 1454. He died in Rome in February 1455, just before the death of Pope Nicholas V.

He was buried in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, where his tomb was decorated with inscriptions by humanist Lorenzo Valla, celebrates both his art and sanctity.²⁵

1.1.7. Posthumous Reputation and Canonical Recognition

After his death, Fra Angelico's name became synonymous with the idea of the holy artist. Dominican sources like Domenico da Corella and Leandro Alberti emphasized

²⁴ Cf. Vasari, *Lives* just after a half century of Fra Angelico, that time was also known as "Fra Giovanni da Fiesole."

²⁵ Cf. Lorenzo Valla, *Epitaph for Fra Angelico*, 1455. (refers to the epitaphs written by the humanist Lorenzo Valla for the artist Fra Angelico, who died in 1455)

his virtue. Vasari's famous book *Lives* enshrined his legacy with stories that inspired later Romantic ideals of the spiritually inspired genius.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Angelico became a symbol for those seeking a fusion of faith and aesthetics. His beatification in 1982 affirmed his sanctity officially, and he was named patron of Catholic artists by Pope John Paul II. His works are studied not only for their beauty but for their capacity to foster spiritual reflection, aligning with the Church's understanding of sacred art.²⁶

1.2. The Last judgement or Last judgements

Fra Angelico, the angelic artist has drawn various paintings in the same title called last judgment. In the museum of San Marco, we can find two of his last judgments. One among them is a single panel painting and another one is a compilation of different paintings including the last judgement. Another or third painting of final judgement of Fra Angelico can be found in Gemäldegalerie Museum in Berlin.²⁷ All these works are entitled in the same way but the uniqueness and diversity of presenting ideas are distinct in nature. The last judgement of San Marco is more captivating from my personal opinion, because the second painting which is San Marco has very little information and also very small in size (figure 1).

The second one that we found in Berlin museum, (figure 2) has more information like the other painting of San Marco (with which I am trying to explore the inner meanings). All three paintings are very deep in its artistic and theological importance. The artist used a fine and quality wood to realise all these three paintings and that is why the paintings are still we have with its perfect physical condition. In a general enquiry Fra Angelico has worked each of his painting with deep meditation and meaningfully arranged in a proper method.

²⁶ Cf. Congregation for the Causes of Saints, *Beatification Decree of Fra Angelico*, 1982.

²⁷ Cf. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_Angelico_-_The_Last_Judgement_%28Winged_Altar%29_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (07-08-2025. 22:31 hrs)

1.2.1. The Last judgement of Museo di San Marco

In San Marco Museum we can even find two paintings of Fra Angelico with the same title, but here I will talk about Fra Angelico's second painting which is not a single painting, but a set of the other sequences in the same panel. (Figure 1) The panel has 11 different episodes from the life of Christ, namely:

- 1, Christ bearing the cross.
- 2, The soldiers who poured out of Christ
- 3, Crucifixion of Christ
- 4, Burial of Christ
- 5, Went down to the mansion of the dead
- 6, angel informing the resurrection of Jesus
- 7, Mother Mary and 11 disciples are reunited with two angels
- 8, Descent of the Holy Spirit
9. Last judgment
- 10, Coronation of Our Lady
- 11, the angels with different scrolls and a minor with twelve names

Looking to the other last judgement of Fra Angelico the painting in the figure.2. has its own speciality. Jesus is not sitting within the mandorla, but in the other two paintings Jesus is placed within it. The hierarchical order of the mother Mary, St. John the Baptist, Apostles and saints are almost following the same order. The heavenly body of the angels with the trumpet and other body of angels are absent here in this painting. The open tombs are present in all three paintings. But in this painting, we can see specifically the resurrection of the body from the tomb, and even an angel dragging a resurrected sinner to the hell.



figure 1. Last judgment of San Marco Museum.²⁸



Figure 2, The Last judgement painting alone.²⁹

²⁸ Mobile Photography by Anderson Antony. 29-12-2025.

²⁹ Mobile Photography by Anderson Antony. 29-12-2025.

1.2.2. The Last judgement of Berlin Museum

The Last judgment of Berlin Museum is very much informative and deeply rich in theology. This painting also comes under the category of panel painting and the medieval style of realistic church painting. This panel painting is also he has made in fine wood. The painting is divided in three parts, technically speaking it is triptych in nature. The part central as we see in the figure 2, the image of Jesus is places in the centre top inside the mandorla (almond shaped aureole of divine light³⁰), raising His right hand in blessing while lowering His left in judgment. This dual gesture reflects His dual role as *Salvator* and *Iudex*, mediator of mercy and justice.³¹ Surrounding Him are angelic choirs and apostles, forming a celestial hierarchy that reinforces scholastic notions of order and divine symmetry.³²

Beneath Christ, angels with trumpets summon humanity to judgment. To His right (our left), the blessed are guided into paradise, where they engage in the dance of the elect a motif emphasizing eternal joy and harmony. This imagery connects to both medieval visions of heaven as communal festivity and the Dominican emphasis on communal salvation.³³

To Christ's left (our right) unfolds the contrasting drama of damnation: the wicked are dragged into Hell, depicted with grotesque demons tormenting the lost. Fra Angelico's rendering follows medieval traditions of infernal imagery but avoids excessive sensationalism, instead presenting Hell as the logical counterpart of divine justice.³⁴ The triptych's overall composition reflects Dominican devotional pedagogy: paradise and damnation serve as moral exempla, urging the viewer toward repentance and the imitation of Christ. Its didactic clarity corresponds with the Order's preaching mission in Florence,

³⁰ In Christian iconography the mandorla shape is interpreted as 1, Divine glory and uncreated light i.e. showing Christ as the eternal judge and ruler. 2, The meeting of heaven and earth i.e. a liminal space between the material and spiritual. 3, Eternal perfection i.e. since the shape encloses Him in timelessness.

³¹ John Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 215–218.

³² Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 45–49.

³³ Cf. Evelyn Welch, *Art and Society in Italy, 1350–1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88–91.

³⁴ Cf. Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 176–180

where the frescoes and altarpieces of San Marco were intended to guide both friars and lay patrons in meditation on salvation history.³⁵



Figure. 2. Last judgement of Fra Angelico in Gemäldegalerie Museum, Berlin.³⁶

1.3. The Last Judgement of Museo di San Marco

When I started this enquiry, I was not knowing that Fra Angelico has drawn three paintings with the same titles, when I found he has drawn more than one I started investigated more on it. Fra Angelico has drawn at least three paintings in the title of “last judgment”, obviously with different intentions. Fra Angelico’s *Last Judgment* (c. 1431, Museo di San Marco, Florence) represents one of the most theologically rich and visually compelling treatments of eschatology in early Renaissance art (figure 3). He painted it for the church of Santa Maria Degli Angeli in Florence, the work is both a devotional image and a doctrinal statement, reflecting Dominican spirituality and the wider cultural

³⁵ Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 129–133.

³⁶ Cf. Internet picture, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2d/Fra_Angelico_-_The_Last_Judgement_%28Winged_Altar%29_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (07-08-2025. 23:09 hrs.)

concerns of Quattrocento Florence.³⁷ At the heart of the composition, Christ sits enthroned in majesty within a radiant mandorla, surrounded by angelic hosts and saints. His gesture of blessing with the right hand and condemnation with the left reflects the dual aspects of the *iudicium universale* (universal judgment): mercy for the elect and justice for the damned.³⁸ Below, the resurrected rise from their graves, separated into the blessed, who are guided into paradise with angelic escort, and the condemned, who are driven into the infernal abyss.

The painting reflects not only a biblical narrative but also a theological exegesis of Matthew 25:31–46 (“The Sheep and the Goats”), a passage frequently invoked in Dominican preaching.³⁹ The representation of paradise as an ordered community of saints engaged in harmonious communion underscores the Dominican conception of heaven as the *civitas Dei* (*City of God*). Conversely, the vivid imagery of Hell, with its hierarchical registers of punishment, serves as a didactic tool, reminding viewers of the consequences of sin and the need for repentance.

Within the intellectual framework of early 15th century Florence, Fra Angelico’s *Last Judgment* serves as a visual summa: a synthesis of scholastic theology, devotional practice, and artistic innovation. Its theological importance lies in its clarity of eschatological teaching, aligning with the Dominican mission to instruct both friars and lay faithful in the mysteries of salvation. Thus, the painting functions simultaneously as aesthetic contemplation, doctrinal teaching, and spiritual exhortation, placing it at the intersection of art and theology in Renaissance Florence.⁴⁰

Actually, from here I am going to deeply entering the various theological and artistical dimensions of this great work of Fra Angelico. The techniques and the materials that he used for his work and the minute elements were studied by the scholars are taken into consideration.

³⁷ Cf. The term “Quattrocento” refers the art and culture of the 15th century in Florence, Italy, a period known as the Early Renaissance

³⁸ Cf. Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 176–180.

³⁹ Cf. John Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 214–219.

⁴⁰ Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 129–135



Figure. 3. The last judgement of Museo di San Marco.⁴¹

1.3.1. The material and techniques of his paintings

As I mentioned earlier the work is single piece wooden panel painting with a triangular wooden frame in it as a border, sized: 105x210 cm. Fra Angelico employed tempera on a wooden panel,⁴² a medium widely used in 14th and early 15th century Italy before the spread of oil painting. The technique involved mixing ground pigments with a binding agent typically egg yolk to create a luminous, quick drying paint that enabled fine detail and brilliant colour saturation.⁴³ (Figure 4 and 5.)

The wooden support, often made from poplar in Tuscany, was carefully prepared with layers of gesso (a mixture of gypsum and animal glue) to produce a smooth, absorbent surface. Onto this prepared ground, Angelico applied an underdrawings, likely executed with charcoal or metal point, to establish the composition before the application of paint.⁴⁴ One of the defining features of this work is its extensive use of gold leaf, (figure 6.) applied to the background and halos. Gold was affixed using the water gilding technique, where thin sheets of gold leaf were laid over a bowl (a reddish clay base) and then burnished to create a radiant, reflective surface. This gilding not only emphasized

⁴¹ Cf. The permission of using this image in the study purpose is guaranteed by the Museo di San Marco, can be find in the last section of the annex.

⁴² Cf. "Tempera on a wooden panel" refers to a painting technique that uses powdered pigments mixed with an egg yolk binder, applied to a wooden surface prepared with layers of gesso

⁴³ Cf. Cennino Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook (Il Libro dell'Arte)*, trans. Daniel V. Thompson (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 35–42.

⁴⁴ Cf. Luciano Bellosi, *Fra Angelico* (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 1998), 76–78.

the celestial dimension of the subject but also reflected candlelight in the liturgical setting, enhancing the spiritual atmosphere of the work.⁴⁵

Fra Angelico's brushwork demonstrates the delicacy and precision characteristic of his devotional style: fine lines define the faces of saints and angels, and subtle layering of tempera achieves a jewel like luminosity. The strong hierarchical organization of Christ enthroned in a radiant mandorla, the saints arrayed in ordered rows, and the stark separation of heaven and hell all that was enhanced by the technical clarity afforded by the tempera medium.⁴⁶

Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* is a tempera on panel, and while we do not have exact workshop records for this specific work, scholars reconstruct his materials and methods from technical studies of contemporary Florentine paintings and treatises like Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'Arte*. In Tuscany, the most common support was poplar wood, due to its availability and stability in the local climate.⁴⁷ Panels were made by joining multiple planks, carefully seasoned to reduce warping, then covered with layers of gesso. Painters of the Quattrocento typically used brushes made from animal hair, such as hog bristles for broader strokes and softer hairs (squirrel, marten, or goat) for fine detail.⁴⁸ Fra Angelico's delicate rendering of faces, garments, and gold tooling suggests the use of extremely fine soft-hair brushes.

The precise duration of work on the *Last Judgment* is unknown, but a complex panel of this size, involving extensive gilding, burnishing, and multiple tempera layers, could easily have required several months to a year to complete, especially when considering workshop assistance. Fra Angelico, as a Dominican friar, also balanced artistic work with religious duties, which likely extended the timeframe.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Cf. Miklós Boskovits, *Italian Paintings of the Fifteenth Century* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 21–25.

⁴⁶ Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 141–145.

⁴⁷ Miklós Boskovits, *Italian Paintings of the Fifteenth Century* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 23–25.

⁴⁸ Cf. Cennino Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook (Il Libro dell'Arte)*, trans. Daniel V. Thompson (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 64–70.

⁴⁹ Cf. Luciano Bellosi, *Fra Angelico* (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 1998), 77–79.

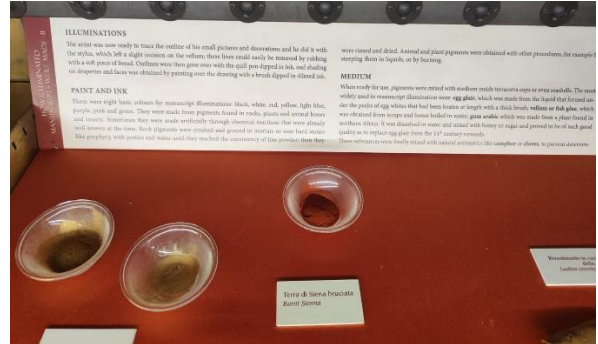


Figure. 4 & 5. The paint materials and brush, photography from Museo di San Marco.⁵⁰



Figure. 6. The paint materials, brushes and gold leaf.⁵¹

1.3.1.1. The Fibonacci dimension of the painting

Ates Gulcugil, a Turkish cartoonist, who studied this painting in relation with the Fibonacci numbers⁵² and he presents different technical interpretations based on his studies. The term “Fibonacci layout” is commonly used in design, art, and architecture to describe a compositional arrangement based on the Fibonacci sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, ...), where each number is the sum of the two preceding numbers. When these numbers are translated into proportional dimensions, they approximate the golden ratio ($\phi \approx 1.618$), which has been historically associated with harmony and balance in visual composition. For example, 89 is a Fibonacci number and when its preceding number

⁵⁰ Cf. Author: Anderson Antony (mobile photography)

⁵¹ Cf. Ibid.

⁵² Cf. The author's page: <https://independent.academia.edu/AtesGulcugil>

144 was divided by the pervious number it gives a value of 1.618 and it is called perfect golden ratio.

A Fibonacci layout typically refers to organizing visual elements according to this sequence often visualized through the Fibonacci spiral, created by drawing quarter circle arcs inside squares whose side lengths follow the Fibonacci sequence. This method helps direct the viewer's gaze naturally across the composition, creating a sense of order and aesthetic appeal.⁵³

*“The Fibonacci layout is a compositional structure derived from the Fibonacci sequence, in which visual elements are arranged according to proportional relationships that approximate the golden ratio, thereby producing balance and harmony in design.”*⁵⁴

Now lets us see the implication of Fibonacci numbers in the beginning and how it later turns into a golden ratio in the painting of Fra Angelico according to Ates Gulcugil. The total dimension of the painting is: 105x210 cm and he divided the height of the painting into 55 modules (M), the measurement of a modules he has described as the smallest dimension that can be used in the layout. Fra Angelico accepts the half-width of the frame as 1 module. 1 is a Fibonacci number.⁵⁵ Likewise he has divided vertically 110 M and horizontally 55M (figure.8.).

Here the first golden ration points perfectly in the bottom of the mandorla where Christ is perfectly placed. That is number 34 which is also a Fibonacci number that perfectly reaches the rectangular part of the canvas. And the top of the rectangular has 21M which is also a Fibonacci number. Ates Gulcugil takes his investigation into a next level by stating the artist may use more small value to each M to reach more perfect golden ratio. He also proves it by drawing the circles in the value of 13M as the Radius in the centre top and that perfectly matches with the canvas and two other circles with the measurement of 34 M of diameter that is also a Fibonacci number and perfectly matching with the canvas. (Figure. 8)

⁵³ Cf. Mario Livio, *The Golden Ratio: The Story of Phi, the World's Most Astonishing Number* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 103–108.

⁵⁴ Cf. Keith Devlin, *The Man of Numbers: Fibonacci's Arithmetic Revolution* (New York: Walker & Company, 2011), 212–215.

⁵⁵ Cf. Gulcugil Ates, *Fra Angelico, The Last Judgement (San Marco), Golden and Fibonacci Layouts* (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2022), 20.

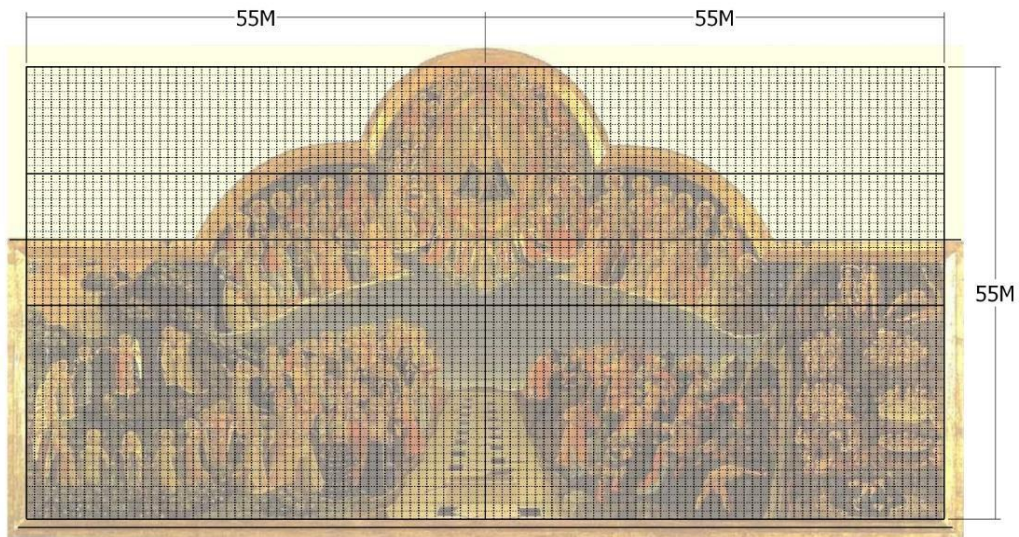


Figure. 7. The Fibonacci division of the painting.⁵⁶

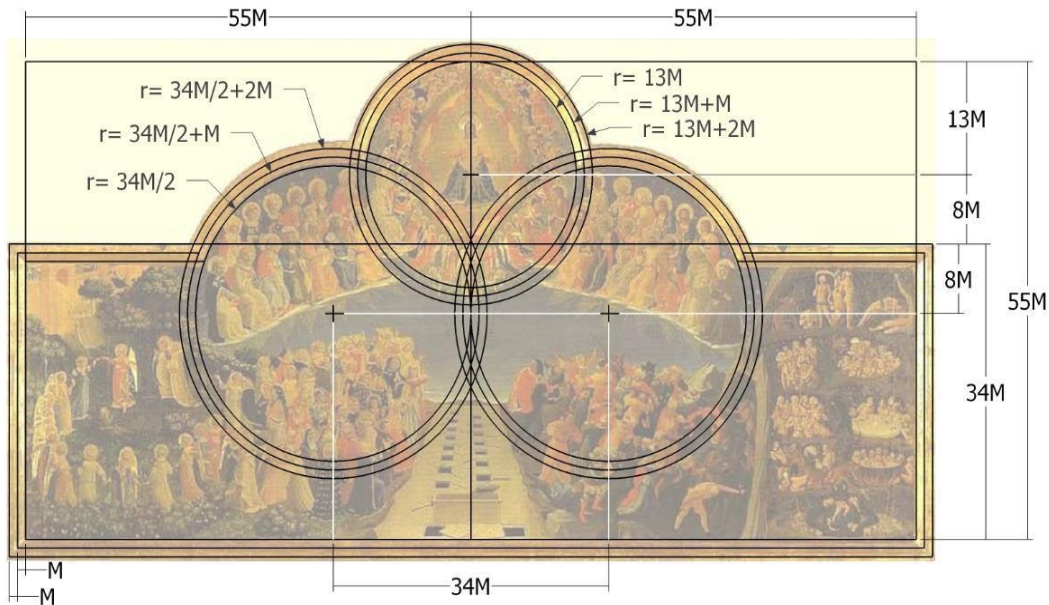


Figure. 8. The golden ratio frame by using three circles.⁵⁷

1.3.1.1.1 The Fibonacci dimension or Golden Ratio?

The author tried to prove the painting is not only following the Fibonacci number sequence but also goes perfectly with the golden ratio i.e. correspondence of the value of $\phi \approx 1.618$. Fra Angelico used five different Fibonacci dimensions to construct the layout of the frame.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ibid. 27.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ibid, 32.

- i. The half-width of the frame: $1M$
- ii. The distance of the centres of the circles of the lunette to the top edge of the frame of the rectangular part of the canvas: $8M$
- iii. The radius of the top circle of the lunette: $13M$
- iv. The height of the top edge of the frame of the rectangular part of the canvas and the distance between the centres of the two lower circles of the lunette: $34M$
- v. The height of the canvas: $55M$

In the demonstration so far, to enable the reader to visually confirm the dimensions by counting the squares of the grid, the smallest possible set of Fibonacci numbers has been employed.⁵⁸ In the figure 9 he just changed the value from $1M$ to $3M$ and which resulted more closer to the golden ratio value, instead of $8M$ - $13M$ he changed to $21M$ - $34M$ and in the next level $89M$ - $144M$ which is closely matched with the golden ratio i.e. $144/89 = 1,6179$.

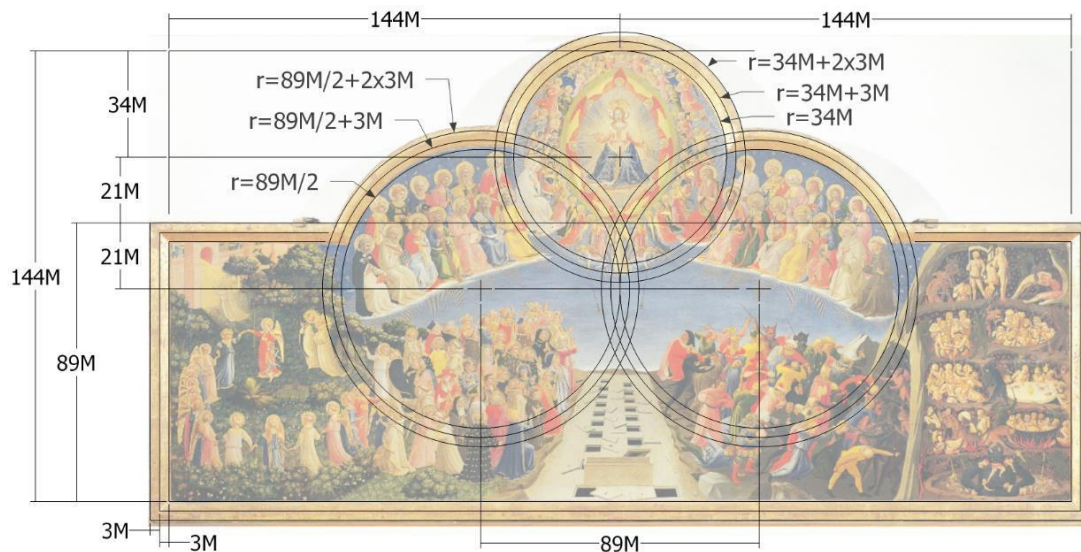


Figure. 9. The Fibonacci dimension set used: 1-2-3-5-8-13-21-34-55-89-144-233...

In order to have a perfect golden ratio he has taken it to the next level by changing the value into $1M$ to $5M$ that give a perfect sequence in the end as a Fibonacci value of $233/144 = 1,6180$ and that is perfect golden ratio. In the figure. 10.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ibid. 36.

1.4. Theological Reading of the Last Judgement

Speaking generally the prime intentions of the paintings of Dominicans namely of Fra Angelico in San Marco is to help the monks to have a spiritual atmosphere for practicing their vows. Their meditations on the theological mysteries and important episodes of the life of Christ etc were the main theme of the painting of Fra Angelico.

*The most admirable demonstration of these criteria is provided by the series of frescoes executed by Fra Angelico, with his workshop assistants, on the upper floor of the convent of San Marco (Plates 28-31). These frescoes were painted in the corridors of the convent and the individual cells of the monks. They were intended to assist the monastic community in fulfilling their religious vows.*⁶⁰

Likewise, the specific painting, the very icon of my studies, (is a panel painting is commonly believed to have crowned the backrest of the priest's sedilia for the Missa Cantata, through uncertainty still surrounds its original function.)⁶¹ has its specific intention too. The deepest understanding and interpretation of this great work has more closed and specific theologies and in which some of them a person who has no knowledge about bible and Christianity cannot understand. And the monks and other people passes through the church may very well understand the concept of last judgement.

The painting was originally painted for the church of Camaldolese Convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence.⁶² And was placed as a alter piece of his church.

1.4.1. General understanding of the painting

In the early times, especially in the medieval or ancient times the social understandings regarding the concept of life, death or after death or before death are not same as we think or understand today. Alison Morgan an independent researcher has quoted rightly about the mentality of the common people in that medieval period in Europe or more specifically in Italy as:

⁶⁰ Cf. Christopher Liod. *Fra Angelico* (London: Phaidon press limited, 1993) 19.

⁶¹ Cf. Restoration plate before the original work, rotary year 2017-2020.

⁶² Cf. Ibid.

...We cannot really understand the thought that lay behind these images unless we can recapture the attitude that their creators had towards death itself. We live in a society where death is something detached from life, something which we expect to happen to us at a time in the distant future, something we prefer not to think about. We put the terminally ill in hospital, and protect our children from exposure to the funeral. But think yourself back six hundred years. In 1348 bubonic plague wiped out a third of the population of Europe. There were no antiseptics, no penicillin, no antibiotics, no anaesthetics. Death was unpredictable. It was as likely to strike at the young as the old. It could not be concealed, hidden away, ignored. It couldn't come as a tragedy or as a surprise. It was part of life, and it was the most important moment of your life, not just that which ended it. And when you died, you would be judged. And the question which the church wanted to keep constantly in your mind was this: on that last day, when the great judgment would take place, where would you be? To Christ's right, here, by Fra Angelico in a 15th century altarpiece: ...⁶³

It is here the last judgment painting is rightly placed before the public to understand the importance of hope in Christ in his second coming. All the pain and suffering or even our proper death will come to an end before His second coming. Here let's start a voyage to interpret the inner meaning of the painting. It is true and rightly depicted in the museum of San Marco that:

"Like all classics, to paraphrase Italo Calvino, Beato Angelico has not yet finished saying what he has to say."⁶⁴

But with our given source and help of the holy spirit let's try to make a better reading.

1.4.2. The iconographic interpretation of the work.

The theme of last judgement has its original root from the sacred scripture itself. Throughout the centuries people have turned to the Gospel of Mathew as their main authority concerning the end of time. In chapter 25th of Mathew records these words spoken by Jesus on the Mount of Olives:

⁶³ Cf. Alison Morgan, *the last judgement in Christian iconography* (public lecture given in the university of Cambridge, 1987) 5.

⁶⁴ Cf. <https://museodisanmarco.blog/2022/05/27/il-giudizio-universale-di-beato-angelico-restaurato-un-nuovo-quaderno-di-studi-del-museo-di-san-marco/comment-page-1/?unapproved=18289&moderation-hash=81cab25586658d97b577de4da978e3c9#respond>

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. (...) Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (...) And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

It is the basic and fundamental idea of the last judgement we have. Even though the concept of last judgment was existed from the early Christian tradition the artistical representation was not existed in the early church and was not used in the ancient church as a tool of evangelization. Considering the scientific study done by Alison Morgan, specifically to the history of the representation of last judgement arts in the catholic church her refers that:

“There is some debate as to what constitutes the first Christian representation on of the Last Judgment but it is generally agreed to have appeared sometime between the 4th and 6th centuries. But the Last Judgment only became an established subject for the visual arts in Europe in the eleventh century. It became increasingly common in the twelfth, and by the thirteenth century it was almost standard practice to decorate the West wall of churches with a painting of the Last Judgment, often as part of an overall decorative scheme.”⁶⁵

Many circumstances the form of art communicate very faster than written form, the form of writing and reading has always the disadvantages like the medium, namely the reader should basically know the original language of writing, and many times the reader may not be aware of the technical terms are used by the author. When we specifically speak to the theological treaties it has also got the theological terms which is not at all familiar to the normal or common people. And specifically speaking to the historical point of view in the fortieth century the literacy rate of the people was very

⁶⁵ Cf. Alison Morgan, *The last judgement in Christian iconography* (public lecture given in the university of Cambridge, 1987) 8.

pathetic and certainly they can't depend on the written form of theological understanding. It is here the importance of the artistic forms helped the majority of the people to understand the fundamental theological ideas like creation, annunciation, crucifixion, resurrection last judgement etc.

The prime intention of that art is to help the faithful to understand the theological teachings with more facility. These forms of art were also very helpful to those faithful who were incapable of reading and writing.⁶⁶ May be this was also a reason for the fine perfection of the medieval paintings, that they were perfect in realism and so clear in communicating the proper expressions.

After understanding the importance of art form of communication the theologies, now let us specifically try to interpret the various fundamental element depicted in the painting of Fra Angelico.

1.4.2.1. The heaven

In the idea or the representation of the paradise was not existed in the first century or in the beginning of the second century in the form of art. In the ancient catacombs were having a kind of paintings that is similar to garden to represent paradise or the concept heaven. The term heaven in the Latin terminology is used as *Caelum*, (which is in the second declension neuter noun). The term also signifies sky or heaven. In Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment*, the depiction of Heaven is a carefully structured vision of the *Civitas Dei* (*City of God*), deeply rooted in Dominican theology and Augustinian eschatology. Situated on the left side of the panel and extending upwards to the mandorla of Christ, Heaven is presented as a realm of harmony, order, and eternal joy, contrasting sharply with the chaos of Hell on the right. The city of God is places on the top surrounded with the blue sky.

The representation of Heaven in Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* is strategically positioned at the top centre of the composition, ensuring it captures the full attention of the spectator. This section is highlighted through the most elaborate use of gilding and precious decoration, which serves to draw the viewer's gaze upward. Beyond its visual prominence, the theological intention of the artist is clear: to emphasize that the second

⁶⁶ Cf. Ibid, 4.

coming of Christ is both glorious and radiant, compelling all human eyes to focus on Him. This theme resonates with Revelation 1:7:

"Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him". This event will result in a separation, with some being gathered to Christ in glory and others facing judgment. The Bible depicts this as a moment of great power and glory, where Christ will reign and judge the living and the dead."

The blessed are shown ascending toward Christ, escorted by angels, and entering into the celestial court. At the summit, Christ enthroned within a radiant mandorla presides as Pantokrator, surrounded by choirs of saints and apostles in ordered tiers. The balanced, symmetrical arrangement underscores the theological idea of Heaven as the realization of divine order. The figures participate in a communal dance of salvation, a motif that visually expresses eternal beatitude as harmonious concord rather than individual reward.⁶⁷

The garden like landscape in the lower left, populated by saints in bright garments, evokes the new Eden a visual reminder that salvation restores creation to its original state of innocence. Fra Angelico employs both natural and supernatural elements: flowering meadows symbolize regeneration and eternal life, while the golden haloes and celestial radiance point to divine transcendence.⁶⁸ Heaven in Fra Angelico's vision is not a distant abstraction but a visible embodiment of eschatological hope. Drawing from Mathew 25:34 ("Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you"), the painting makes Heaven tangible as a kingdom of peace and unity. The emphasis on angelic mediation reflects Dominican spirituality, where angels guide the soul in its ascent to God. Furthermore, the ordered hierarchy of saint's mirrors Thomas Aquinas's conception of Heaven as structured by degrees of glory, each soul perfectly fulfilled according to its capacity yet united in common beatitude.⁶⁹

Thus, Fra Angelico's iconography of Heaven unites biblical imagery, scholastic theology, and Dominican pedagogy: it functions not only as eschatological promise but

⁶⁷ Cf. Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 47–50.

⁶⁸ Cf. Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 178–182.

⁶⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, «S T S» 6646.

also as moral exhortation, urging the faithful toward the imitation of the saints and communion with Christ.

1.4.2.2. The Earth and opened tombs

In his *Last Judgment*, the earthly realm is situated in the lower register of the composition, functioning as the transitional space between the celestial judgment above and the infernal punishments to the right. Within this realm, the motif of the opened tombs occupies a central theological and iconographical role. The resurrection of the dead, signified by figures emerging from their sepulchres, directly reflects the biblical eschatology of the *General Resurrection*. This moment illustrates the universal scope of Christ's second coming, when "all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out."⁷⁰

The iconography of the opened tombs underscores the liminality of human existence: the earthly body, once subject to decay, is reanimated not by natural forces but by divine command. Fra Angelico's representation aligns with patristic interpretations, particularly those of Augustine, who emphasized that the resurrection body, though transformed, remains continuous with the earthly body as a sign of divine justice and identity preservation.⁷¹ The careful rendering of individuals climbing from their tombs in the painting thus affirms both the corporeal nature of resurrection and its theological necessity for judgment.

Moreover, the placement of the tombs at the very centre of the earthly plane invites the viewer to contemplate the universality of death and resurrection. Unlike the glorified Christ and saints above, or the damned cast into Hell, the resurrected figures here are in a moment of suspense awaiting their final destiny. This intermediate position reflects the scholastic theology of the *resurrectio carnis*, where the final separation of the just and unjust only occurs after the summoning of all humanity before Christ's throne.⁷²

Fra Angelico's choice to depict the tombs as open cavities in the earth rather than architectonic sarcophagi also bears iconographic significance. The "gaping earth" recalls apocalyptic imagery from Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–14), where life

⁷⁰ Cf. The Holy Bible, John 5:28–29 (NRSV).

⁷¹ Cf. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XXII, Ch. 19–21.

⁷² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q.75–85, on the resurrection of the body.

emerges from the dust as a divine act of re-creation.⁷³ Thus, the world itself becomes a stage for eschatological renewal, affirming the integral unity between creation and salvation history.

In the book of Revelation 20:13, also states: "The sea gave up its dead, and death and the grave gave up their dead, and all were judged according to their deeds". While this verse speaks of the sea and the realm of the dead (Hades, or the Grave) returning their dead, here the graves or tombs are also mentioned in a specific way. It doesn't explicitly mention the Earth giving up bodies in the same breath, though the larger context of Revelation 20 describes the resurrection of the dead for judgment. The opening of the tombs is also mentioned in the gospel, the event of tombs opening and bodies of saints being resurrected after Christ's death is mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. Specifically, the account can be found in Matthew 27:52–53, where it states that an earthquake split the rocks, broke open the tombs, and raised many dead saints who later appeared in the holy city after Jesus' resurrection.

In sum, the earth and opened tombs in Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* visually articulate the theological mystery of resurrection. The collaboration of the created earth to its master at the time of judgement. They serve as a reminder that earthly existence is transient, yet divinely destined for transformation and judgment. The artist combines scriptural exegesis, patristic theology, and eschatological hope into a coherent iconographic program that links the earthly world with its eternal consummation.

1.4.2.3. The Hell

In Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment*, the depiction of Hell is positioned on the right-hand side of the panel, in accordance with traditional Christian iconography where the *damned* are placed at Christ's left (from His perspective), echoing Matthew 25:41:

*"Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."*⁷⁴

This spatial placement itself communicates a theological message of exclusion from the heavenly order and the reversal of divine light into darkness.

⁷³ Cf. Ezekiel 37:1–14, on the vision of the valley of dry bones.

⁷⁴ Cf. Mt. 25:41 (NRSV).

The iconography of Hell in this work is elaborate and multilayered, reflecting both biblical teachings and medieval theological imagination. Within the dark cavernous sections, Angelico renders a series of compartments or dungeons, each filled with writhing, naked souls. These groupings suggest the *categorization of sins*, akin to Dante Alighieri's hierarchical vision of Hell in the *Divine Comedy*, although Fra Angelico's presentation is more didactic than literary.⁷⁵ Looking to others medieval last judgment paintings we could figure out more horrible writhing human bodies even the other painting of last judgement of Fra Angelico also makes such a horrible depiction of hell. Each man in the hell receives the punishments according to the sins which they have committed.

One of the most striking symbols is the figure of Satan at the base, seated monstrously with a grotesque body, devouring the damned in an eternal cycle of consumption and excretion. This imagery directly recalls medieval sermons and illuminated manuscripts, where Satan's voracious appetite represented both sin's insatiability and its punishment.⁷⁶ The damned are tormented by demons wielding instruments of torture chains, flames, and claws signifying the eternal bondage of sin and the justice of divine retribution.

Fra Angelico also employs fire and darkness as dual symbols: fire, representing both divine wrath and purification turned to punishment, and darkness, symbolizing the absence of God's presence. The flames in the compartments engulfing sinners recall Revelation 20:14–15, where the "lake of fire" is described as the second death.⁷⁷ This part of the scripture also describes the final destruction of death and Hades (the grave) by being cast into a "lake of fire," which symbolizes total and permanent destruction or the "second death" from which there is no resurrection.

Angelico's rendering of Hell functions not merely as a literal representation but also as a moral warning to the faithful. The visual contrast between the harmonious dance of the blessed on the left and the chaos of Hell on the right emphasizes the binary choice between salvation and damnation. By placing Hell in such stark juxtaposition, the artist reinforces the eschatological urgency of repentance and the sacramental life within

⁷⁵ Cf. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1982) 45.

⁷⁶ Cf. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 118–120.

⁷⁷ Cf. Rev. 20:14–15 (NRSV)

Dominican preaching tradition.⁷⁸ Thus, Hell in Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* serves as both a catechetical image and a theological statement. It conveys the consequences of sin, the justice of divine judgment, and the eternal separation from God, while simultaneously urging the viewer to orient life toward the radiant Christ enthroned in Heaven.

1.4.2.3.1. The placement of Satan at the bottom

At the very lowest point of the infernal composition sits Satan (or Lucifer), enthroned grotesquely amidst the damned. Unlike Christ, who presides in glory at the highest and most luminous centre of the painting, Satan is confined to the shadowy depths. This vertical opposition visually represents the theological principle of the *privatio boni* (privation of the good), so central to Augustine and Aquinas: evil has no substance of its own but is parasitic upon good, thus its “place” is always a distorted mirror of divine order.⁷⁹

Fra Angelico emphasizes Satan's inversion of kingship: while Christ is radiant, majestic, and life-giving, Satan is monstrous, deformed, and devouring the lost souls. His placement at the bottom reflects scholastic theology's insistence that the devil is not a ruler by right but only a usurper, confined and ultimately subordinated to divine judgment.⁸⁰ It also denotes that from the last judgement there is no place for the evil, like the famous irony when the sun rises the dark goes aside, likewise the evil goes a side in the presence of glory of justice, the ruler of eternal justice.

1.4.2.3.2. The Hierarchical Compartments of Torment

When we look the surrounding of Satan are a series of rectangular compartments or “cells” where specific punishments are enacted upon the damned. These are arranged in a hierarchical order, reflecting the medieval tradition of the *tormena infernalialia*, corresponding to the seven deadly sins and other grave offenses.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Cf. Timothy Verdon, *Art and Prayer: The Beauty of Turning to God* (Boston: Paraclete Press, 2014), 87–89.

⁷⁹ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XI, 9; see also: Thomas Aquinas, *S T*, I, q. 48, a.1 (evil as privation).

⁸⁰ Cf. Aquinas, «S T» q. 64, a. 2: the devil retains natural power but is entirely under divine providence.

⁸¹ Cf. Binski, Paul. *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*. London: British Museum Press, 1996, pp. 124–130.

1. **Upper compartments:** Here, sinners are punished with fire and scourging demons, often showing writhing human figures engulfed in flames. This corresponds to the more general sins of negligence and unbelief.
2. **Middle compartments:** These scenes show demons binding, mutilating, and dragging souls. Some are being hanged, pierced, or devoured, they all symbolize the sins of the flesh like lust and gluttony.
3. **Lower compartments near Satan:** The torments intensify closer to the devil. Here we find extreme mutilations, gnashing monsters, and the complete annihilation of human dignity reserved for the gravest sins: pride, blasphemy, and heresy.

This descending order reflects the *ordo peccatorum*: the more serious the sin, the deeper the soul is cast into torment, in line with Aquinas's doctrine of differentiated punishment (*poena damni* and *poena sensus*).⁸²

1.4.2.3.3. Symbolism of Fire, Darkness, and Demonic Tortures

Fra Angelico employs fire as the most dominant element not just as physical torment but as a theological symbol of divine justice. Fire purifies in heaven (as seen in the golden light surrounding Christ), but in hell it destroys and consumes.⁸³ The colour tone is given to the fire of hell is different from the golden colour surrounding Christ. The fire which gives perfect light and never consumes the matter.⁸⁴

The dark compartments and claustrophobic boxes visually echo the biblical theme of "outer darkness".⁸⁵ The imprisonment in "cells" is not accidental: it mirrors scholastic descriptions of hell as eternal confinement without hope of release.

The demons themselves serve as both executioners and tormentors, a theme rooted in medieval preaching traditions: fallen angels, who rebelled against God, now serve unwillingly as instruments of divine justice.⁸⁶

⁸² Cf. Aquinas, «S T S» q. 97–99; see also Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, Book IV, Dist. 44.

⁸³ Cf. Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990, pp. 256–258.

⁸⁴ Cf. Fire we also find in the Old Testament, Moses and burning bush.

⁸⁵ Cf. Mt 8:12

⁸⁶ Cf. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, XXXIV, 6; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 64, a.4.

1.4.2.4. The Saints, Apostles and Mother Mary

Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* presents a perfect organized heavenly court, it conveys both a *theological statement* (about Christ's role as judge and head of the Church) and a *devotional instrument* intended to form the beholder's imagination of salvation, intercession, and ecclesial continuity.

1.4.2.4.1. The hierarchical order of heavenly court

Reading the upper section (Christ's court) as an enactment of the *communion of saints* brings together three interlocking registers:

1. Christ the Judge enthroned in the mandorla.
2. The Virgin and the John the Baptist, the Forerunner (the primary intercessors) placed in immediate proximity to Christ.
3. The assembled apostles, martyrs, confessors and founders (the Church triumphant) who act as witnesses and intercessors for humanity. This syntagm is visual, doctrinal, and functional: it instructs, reassures and models intercessory life for the viewer.

1.4.2.4.1.1. Dominant Centre

In the centre top of the dominant spot Fra Angelico placed Christ and his immediate attendants. Fra Angelico places Christ in a luminous mandorla at the apex. Immediately adjacent to him are the Virgin and a principal male Forerunner figure (traditionally read as John the Baptist), who function visually and theologically as the prime intercessors on behalf of the human community. The arrangement of the supreme judge at the centre, with intercessors and then ranks of saints on either side is canonical in Western Last Judgment iconography and in this painting is emphasized by hieratic placement, gilding and spatial compression of the heavenly bank.

Blessed virgin Mary is placed very near to Christ with the angels surrounded in the mandorla. Mary as *Theotokos* and principal intercessor, her placement at Christ's side visually asserts two complementary claims: that she is *Theotokos* (mother of God) and that she is the paramount intercessor on behalf of humanity. In devotional practice she mediates mercy by her petition; visually, her posture and proximity to Christ perpetuate

the medieval trope of the mother pleading for her children (the humanity) a trope that medieval viewers would immediately recognize. Scholars have repeatedly emphasized how Angelico's Marian figures function simultaneously as doctrinal sign and devotional model. Her posture of the hands and the bending of the heads also symbolize the complete surrender to God's divine plan or the posture of humility and obedience she showed through her life.

In the other side of Mother Mary Fra Angelico places the "Forerunner" is obviously John the Baptist, also known as the primary intercessor and preacher in the New Testament, who prophesies the coming of Christ. In the painting, he is often depicted on Christ's right, a traditional placement for him as the great prophet who paved the way for Jesus's arrival. He is the figure who prepared the people for the coming of Jesus by preaching about repentance and baptizing those who believed. Looking to his appearance he is vested red implies or symbolises the way he died or his martyrdom for the testimony of truth. John the Baptist was also given in the prime importance in a top hierarchical level because Jesus himself gave testimony by stating that "*among those born of women, there is no one greater than John,*"⁸⁷

1.4.2.4.1.2. Tiered court: Apostles, Prophets and Martyrs.

In the third tiered court Fra Angelico placed apostles, prophets and martyrs as "witnesses." The saints are arranged in tiers and in two mirrored tribunals which incline the eye back toward Christ. Their gestures (books, palms, turned faces) establish a liturgical choreography: they read, intercede, point, and turn toward the centre. The visual choreography thus makes the saints active participants in the judicial act rather than passive ornament. This is visually expressed by repeated spatial rhythms (rows of seated figures on clouds) that frame the central event.⁸⁸

The presence of apostles (Peter, Paul, Andrew, etc.) signals the foundational continuity of the institutional Church. The inclusion of particular founders and local saints for example, Camaldolese or mendicant founders) signals the commission context (Santa Maria degli Angeli; Ambrogio Traversari) and anchors the universal Church in the local religious family. In Fra Angelico's panel, the mixture of apostles, Old Testament

⁸⁷ Cf. Mt. 11:11 and Lk. 7:28

⁸⁸ Cf. <https://museodisanmarco.blog/2022/05/27/il-giudizio-universale-di-beato-angelico-restaurato-un-nuovo-quaderno-di-studi-del-museo-di-san-marco/> (14/08/2025, 22.14hrs)

precursors and religious founders can be read as an ecumenical and historically layered testimony to salvation history: God's action from Israel through the apostles to the medieval orders is one continuous economy. By analysing the symbological presentation almost all the saints appears in the painting is identified.⁸⁹

Fra Angelico uses conventional attributes (keys, sword, book, martyr's instruments, Dominican and Franciscan habits) that allow contemporary viewers and modern scholars to identify many of the principal figures. Where the attributes are clear, identification is straightforward; where details are now worn or were painted by workshop hands, identifications remain probabilistic and must be checked against museum catalogues and restoration reports.⁹⁰ Even he placed deliberately some Dominican monks in the main court of saints near apostles and places saint Dominic de Guzman and saint Francis Asis (the great founders of congregations of Franciscans and Dominicans) also to emphasise the importance of religious life.

The painting stages the medieval and patristic doctrine that the whole Church past, present and future forms one body in Christ, that is Eucharistic communion with Christ made visible ecclesial unity. In late medieval devotional theology, the *communion of saints* meant primarily, the sharing of spiritual goods (prayers, merits), and secondly, the moral example and intercessory role of those already glorified. Fra Angelico converts these abstract theological propositions into a visible "convocation": the saints surround Christ, intercede, and thereby make the heavenly economy intelligible to the spectator. This resonates with doctrinal formulations that would later be incorporated in magisterial texts.⁹¹

1.4.3. The biblical and ecclesiastical understanding of the painting

Fra Angelico tried to make a deep theological portrait through his painting with the fundamental basis of scriptural and ecclesiastical doctrines. He translates biblical eschatology, namely the main topics such as the second coming, resurrection of the dead, final separation of just and damned into an iconographic program that also reflects the

⁸⁹ The names of the saints and other studies are attached in the Anex 2 & 3 just before the bibliography.

⁹⁰ Cf.

https://catalogo.cultura.gov.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/0900191241?utm_source=chatgpt.com

(14/08/2025 22.50hrs)

⁹¹ Cf. LG, Ch. 7.

medieval Church's institutional, catechetical and liturgical identity. All the basic concept of the painting is a perfect communication of Christian theology.

When we speak of biblical framework, we have to consider the important scriptural episodes that underlines the theological concepts of last judgement such as:

1. Christ the Judge (Matthew 25:31–46).

At the painting's summit, Christ enthroned in a mandorla visually enacts the Matthean scene of the Son of Man coming in glory with His angels to judge the nations. His raised right hand of blessing and lowered left hand of rejection correspond to the division of sheep and goats.

2. Universal Resurrection (John 5:28–29; Revelation 20:13).

The lower register shows graves opening, bodies rising, and angels directing souls. This visualizes the biblical doctrine that all the dead, righteous and wicked alike, will rise to face judgment.

3. Heavenly Communion (Revelation 7:9–10).

The radiant upper court Christ surrounded by the Virgin, apostles, martyrs, and saints illustrates John's vision of the multitude before the throne, clad in white, with palm branches in hand. This expresses the victory and unity of the redeemed.

4. Hell, and Damnation (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:14–15).

On the right, demons drive the damned into fiery torments. Fra Angelico follows traditional iconographic conventions, but with theological precision: punishment is not arbitrary but corresponds to moral failure, echoing patristic exegesis that hell represents separation from God.

Conclusion

The study of Fra Angelico's life, vocation, and artistic legacy, together with the iconographic analysis of his *Last Judgment*, reveals the inseparable unity between art, theology, and spirituality in the early Renaissance. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Fra Angelico did not approach painting merely as an artistic profession but as an extension of his Dominican vocation: his works were conceived not only to adorn sacred spaces but to instruct, inspire, and draw the faithful toward contemplation of the mysteries of

salvation.⁹² His biography, marked by fidelity to religious life and artistic excellence, explains why posterity has often remembered him not simply as a painter, but as the *pictor angelicus*, the “Angelic Painter.”⁹³

Within this context, the *Last Judgment* stands as a visual summa of Fra Angelico’s theological vision. The careful use of gilded background and radiant colour serves to elevate the spectator’s gaze toward the heavenly sphere, emphasizing the glory of Christ the Judge. The structural division of the painting namely, heaven above, earth and open tombs in the centre, hell to the side reflects not only the biblical imagery of Matthew 25 and Revelation 20-21 but also the theological categories familiar to the Dominican intellectual tradition. Fra Angelico’s use of geometry and proportion, including traces of the Fibonacci ratio, further indicates that beauty and order were not accidental features but deliberate choices designed to reflect the harmonious order of divine providence.⁹⁴

The iconographic details enrich this theological narrative. The vision of heaven, radiant with angels and saints, communicates the beatitude of the elect. The depiction of the earth and open tombs recalls the universality of resurrection, uniting all humanity in a common destiny. The portrayal of hell, with fire, darkness, and demonic figures, serves as both theological assertion and pastoral warning. The communion of saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs, and the Virgin Mary, arranged in hierarchical order around Christ, reflects the ecclesiastical and biblical tradition that situates the Church triumphant as both witness and participant in the judgment.⁹⁵

Taken as a whole, Fra Angelico’s *Last Judgment* is not a mere didactic image but a catechetical and contemplative vision. It makes visible the core truths of Christian eschatology: the sovereignty of Christ, the seriousness of human freedom, the reality of resurrection and judgment, and the eternal destinies of heaven and hell. At the same time, it offers a liturgical dimension, inviting the faithful not only to learn but to participate spiritually in the mystery it represents. In this sense, the painting exemplifies what Hans

⁹² Cf. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (New York: Knopf, 1996), 248–251.

⁹³ Cf. Pope John Paul II, Homily at the Beatification of Fra Angelico, 3 October 1982.

⁹⁴ Cf. James Beck, *Italian Renaissance Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1999), 97–104

⁹⁵ Cf. Thomas da Costa Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister, and City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe 1450–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 61–65.

Belting has called “*the image as theology*” a form of visual doctrine that complements and reinforces written theology.⁹⁶

This chapter has thus demonstrated that Fra Angelico’s work cannot be understood apart from its theological, biblical, and ecclesiastical foundations. By examining his life, artistic formation, and iconographic method, we have seen how the *Last Judgment* crystallizes both Dominican spirituality and Renaissance artistic innovation. More importantly, it has become clear that Fra Angelico’s vision provides a visual counterpart to scholastic theology, anticipating many of the systematic questions later addressed in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Accordingly, this prepares the way for the next chapter, which will turn to Aquinas’s theology of the Last Judgment. If Fra Angelico offers a vision in colour and form, Aquinas supplies the doctrinal architecture that sustains such a vision. Together, they reveal the depth and coherence of the Christian understanding of the Last Judgment not only as a theme of art and speculation but as the ultimate horizon of faith and salvation.

⁹⁶ Cf. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 382–389.

Chapter 2: Last Judgment in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas

In this chapter we discuss about the doctrine of the Last Judgment, which is one of the fundamental principles of Christian eschatology, deeply rooted in Sacred Scripture and systematically developed by the Fathers of the Church and theologians. Since our study has a comparative nature, we only concentrate the theological ideas of last Judgement proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas in relation to the painting of Fra Angelico. Among the doctors of the catholic church, he provides one of the most comprehensive theological treatments of this doctrine, most notably in his *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

I have chosen him because of two important reasons. Primely he is a Dominican saint and theologian who has dealt about almost all the doctrines of Christian theology (obviously the last judgement also) so that I had the idea that he is very appropriate to put together with the theology of Fra Angelico. Both lived historically, religiously⁹⁷ and geographically in a same circumstance. Fra Angelico born around 121 years after the death of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Secondly Fra Angelico was known as “Angelic artist”, because of his saintly life and pure dedication to art, and in the same way saint Thomas Aquinas also known as “Angelic doctor” who dedicated his life to contribute philosophically and theologically to the doctrines of the church. Drawing inspiration from both the biblical revelation and philosophical reasoning, Aquinas places the Last Judgment in the larger framework of divine justice, human destiny, and the ultimate fulfilment of God's providential command.

Aquinas also discusses Christ's role as the supreme judge, drawing on biblical passages such as Matthew 25:31-46 and John 5:22, emphasizing that Christ, in His human nature, will exercise judgment on both the righteous and the wicked.⁹⁸ He also explains the participation of the saints in the judgment, not as independent judges, but as those who will partake of Christ's authority, and testify to His divine righteousness.⁹⁹

His doctrines and theological teachings are deeply related to logical background. Since he is also a great philosopher, he uses the possibilities of philosophy in construction of the theological doctrines. The doctrine of the Last Judgment, as articulated by Aquinas,

⁹⁷ Both are Dominican monks.

⁹⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T*, Pt. III, q. 59, a. 1-2.

⁹⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 88, a. 2. P. 6598.

not only serves to reaffirm Christian hope in divine justice, but also invites believers to live with a deep sense of moral responsibility. His synthesis of biblical exegesis and scholastic reasoning provides a theological foundation that has influenced Christian thought and artistic depictions of the Last Judgment, including those of Fra Angelico. This chapter will explore Aquinas' teachings on the Last Judgment in detail, examining their biblical basis, theological implications, and their enduring significance in Christian eschatology.

2.1. The Life and Legacy of Saint Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas Aquinas is one of the most influential theologians and philosophers in Christian history. His synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine profoundly shaped Catholic theology, particularly in the areas of metaphysics, ethics, and eschatology. His teachings on the Last Judgment, found primarily in his *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, remain foundational to Catholic eschatological thought. Understanding Aquinas's life, intellectual development, and theological contributions is essential to contextualizing his doctrine on the Last Judgment.

2.1.1. Early life and education

Thomas Aquinas was born around 1225 in Roccasecca, near Aquinas, in the Kingdom of Sicily (present day Italy). He belonged to the noble Aquino family, which had close ties to the Hohenstaufen dynasty in power. As a young man, he was sent to the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, where he received his early education. His family probably intended for him to become a Benedictine monk, possibly even the abbot of Monte Cassino, a position of significant influence within the Church and society.¹⁰⁰

However, in the early 1240s, following military conflicts in the region, Thomas was transferred to the University of Naples, where he was introduced to the works of Aristotle, which would later form the philosophical basis of his theology. It was in Naples

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. by Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 3-5.

that he met the newly created Dominican Order and resolved to join it, despite strong opposition from his family.¹⁰¹

2.1.2. Dominican vocation and studies in Paris and Cologne

In 1244 Thomas joined the Dominican Order, and it was against the wish and will of his family. His family, alarmed by his decision, reportedly kidnapped him and imprisoned him for nearly a year in an attempt to dissuade him. According to tradition, during this period of captivity, he devoted himself to prayer, the Scriptures, and study. Eventually, his family relented, and he was allowed to continue his religious vocation.¹⁰²

Thomas was then sent to study in Paris and later in Cologne, under the tutelage of Saint Albert the Great, one of the most important scholars of the time. Under Albert's guidance, Thomas deepened his knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy and its application to Christian theology.¹⁰³ His intellectual abilities soon became evident, and in 1256 he obtained his master's degree in theology at the University of Paris, where he began lecturing on the Sentences of Peter Lombard.¹⁰⁴

2.1.3. Major works and theological contributions

Over the next two decades, Aquinas produced some of the most significant theological works in Christian history. His *Summa Theologica*, written between 1265 and 1273, is his most famous work, offering a systematic exposition of Christian doctrine. Another important work, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, aimed to provide a rational defense of the Christian faith, particularly in dialogue with non-Christians. In both works, Aquinas extensively discusses eschatological themes, including the Last Judgment.¹⁰⁵

Aquinas's theological methodology was characterized by the use of reason to elucidate the faith, integrating Aristotelian logic with Christian revelation. This synthesis earned him admiration and criticism, especially from theologians who were suspicious of

¹⁰¹ Cf. Fergus Kerr, *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

¹⁰² Cf. James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 29-31

¹⁰³ Cf. Richard E. Rubenstein, *Aristóteles's Children: How Christians, Muslims, and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated the Dark Ages* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003), 172-174.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 21-23.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 132-136.

Aristotelian influence. However, his works gained widespread recognition, and he was consulted on various theological and political matters by the papacy.¹⁰⁶

2.1.4. Final years and death

In 1274, Pope Gregory X summoned Aquinas to the Second Council of Lyons. However, while traveling, he fell ill and was taken to the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, where he died on 7 March 1274.¹⁰⁷ His death marked the end of an era, but his theological legacy endured. Fifty years later, in 1323, he was canonized as a saint by Pope John XXII, and in 1567 Pope Pius V declared him a Doctor of the Church.¹⁰⁸

2.1.5. Legacy and influence

Aquinas' theological system, later known as *Thomism*, became the cornerstone of Catholic doctrine. Its teachings were officially endorsed by the Church, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Pope Leo XIII promoted Thomism as the basis of Catholic philosophy and theology.¹⁰⁹ His eschatological doctrines, including his insights into the Last Judgment, continue to be studied in theological institutions around the world and have profoundly influenced Christian thought, as well as artistic depictions such as those of Fra Angelico.

The intellectual legacy of Aquinas in the theological areas even today contribute a lot. The Thomistic way of doctrinal interpretation is widely propagated and still being propagated by the Dominican order. They even have Thomism in its modern form like YouTube channel, online debates, Thomistic institutions etc. to propagate and interpret the Thomistic theology.

And now this section provides a basis for understanding Aquinas's perspective on the Last Judgment, which will be explored in subsequent sections.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 188–90.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. James A. Weisheipl, *Frei Tomás D'Aquino* (New York: Garden City, Doubleday, 1974) 346–48.

¹⁰⁸ Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 298.

¹⁰⁹ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* (1879), in *The Papal Encyclicals 1740-1981*, edited by Claudia Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath, 1981), 108.

2.2. The Concept of the Last Judgment in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas

The doctrine of the Last Judgment occupies a central place in medieval eschatology and received one of its most systematic treatments in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). It is also good to know why it was very much important in that period. The social circumstances and political situations made the people more complicated in their normal life, the moral justice was not explicit among the normal people, the clerical power was more dominant and people were dying without the proper health, economic, political and ethical assistances. It is here the concept of last judgement made a great impact on the faithful people to relay on faith and suffer the daily problems with the hope in Christ.

For Aquinas, the Last Judgment is not merely a symbolic narrative but a necessary event within the divine order of justice, because, for him, the harmony of creation is restored and the definitive destinies of souls and bodies are revealed. His principal ideas about the last judgements are deeply rooted in Scripture, articulated in the Creeds, and deepened by patristic tradition, Aquinas situates the last judgment at the end of his theological system as the moment when Christ manifests His kingship and the truth of divine providence is publicly disclosed.

The biblical foundations for Aquinas’s reflections principally lie in texts such as Matthew 25:31- 46, which describes the separation of sheep and goats, John 5:28–29, affirming the universal resurrection, and Revelation 20–21, portraying the cosmic judgment and the heavenly Jerusalem. In his *Expositio Symboli Apostolorum*,¹¹⁰ Aquinas affirms the traditional formula: “*He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*” Here he insists on the certainty, equity, and universality of judgment, underlying both patristic authorities and conciliar teaching.¹¹¹

The most detailed explanation of the Last Judgment appears in the *Summa Theologica*, part three, questions 88–90. Although compiled posthumously from Aquinas’s earlier *Commentary on Peter Lombard’s Sentences*, these articles present a coherent eschatological doctrine. Aquinas asks whether there will be a general

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Commentary on the Creed*, a work by Thomas Aquinas where he explains the Apostles’ Creed (Symbolum Apostolorum), the foundational statement of Christian faith.

¹¹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Symboli Apostolorum*, a. 7, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 42 (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1970), 183–184.

judgment,¹¹² explores the form of Christ the Judge, the publication of each person's conscience, and the roles of angels and saints as participants in the tribunal.¹¹³

His answers not only reflect both biblical testimony and ecclesiastical authority but also reveal a consistent Thomistic principle: God's justice must be manifest not only privately but publicly, before the whole of creation. He also mentions that particular judgment of the soul happens at the time of our death. Our prime concern points its finger exactly at this theme of last judgement. Aquinas extends his reflections in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Book IV), where he argues for the rational necessity of resurrection and final retribution, accessible even to philosophical reason when illuminated by faith.¹¹⁴ St Thomas Aquinas, in his *Catena Aurea*,¹¹⁵ emphasizes patristic readings of this pericope, particularly considering that Christ as the supreme Judge or as a Redeemer: the One who died for us is also the One who publicly reveals the justice of God to humanity.

In This section, let's deeply look at the different important aspects related to the doctrine of last judgement namely: the resurrection of the body, the opening of the tombs as the universal revelation of deeds, the court of Christ and His saints, the eternal division into heavenly Jerusalem and hell, and the final manifestation of divine justice. These subtopics were also reflected in its iconographic interpretation done in the first chapter. This chapter will explore these themes systematically based on the insights from *Summa Theologica* and other Aquinas's writings, to show how his eschatological theology provides a profound interpretive lens for works such as Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment*, which visually embodies many of these same Thomistic concerns.¹¹⁶

2.2.1. Theological Foundations of the Last Judgment

The concept of last judgment in catholic understanding is purely an eschatological doctrine. And its fundamental roots are from the scriptural and patristical basis. Looking to the theological foundations of the last judgement along with the sacred scripture, we must also to consider the faith of the church namely the Creed, In which all Catholics

¹¹² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 88, a. 1, p. 6606-6671.

¹¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*, qq. 89-90.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, Ch. 91-97, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 15 (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1918) 91-97.

¹¹⁵ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas's *Catena Aurea* (Golden Chain) is a monumental commentary on the four Gospels, compiling excerpts from over eighty Church Fathers to create a continuous, verse-by-verse explanation of Scripture

¹¹⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 90, a. 1.

unanimously believe and recite “He will come again to judge the living and the dead”. The reflection of these foundations from the sacred scripture and the sacred tradition is deeply reflected in the works of Aquinas. Towards the end of this section I will discuss the theological reasons to answer the question of conformity of the need of last judgement. I have also tried to answer the question of “how and why” there can be a last judgement? Or on what basis we have to believe the necessity and certainty of judgement.

2.2.1.1. Scriptural Basis

Sacred Scripture is considered to be one among the basic, immediate and fundamental source of the faith of Catholic Church. It is also one among the pillar source of our faith. The Scriptural witness is the cornerstone of Aquinas’s doctrine of the Last Judgment. In his exegetical and theological works, Aquinas consistently grounds eschatology in the biblical texts. Among the most decisive passages is Matthew 25:31–46, where Christ describes His coming in glory, separating “the sheep from the goats.”¹¹⁷ Here in this gospel part Aquinas explains as:

“Further, in no judicial inquiry is the sentence carried out before judgment is pronounced. But the sentence of the Divine judgment on man regards the acquisition of the kingdom or exclusion from the kingdom (Mat. 25:34, 41). Therefore, since some obtain possession of the kingdom now, and some are excluded from it for ever, it would seem that there will be no other judgment.”¹¹⁸

The 88th question of *Summa Theologica* starts with addressing the question, whether there will be a general judgment? And this part quotes different biblical references, mainly Jn,5:29, Mt,12:41, Gn, 2:2, etc. while speaking about the judgement. He quotes also Jn,5:17 and states as follows:

“My Father worketh until now; and I work.” Hence, we distinguish in Him a twofold judgment, but in the reverse order. One corresponds to the work of governance which cannot be without judgment: and by this judgment each

¹¹⁷ Cf. Mt. 25:31–46

¹¹⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T*, q.88 p.6597.

*one is judged individually according to his works, not only as adapted to himself, but also as adapted to the government of the universe.”*¹¹⁹

The book of Revelation chapters 20–21 offers a cosmic and symbolic description of judgment, where scripture explains the opening of the scrolls, the resurrection of the dead, the lake of fire, and finally the descent of the New Jerusalem etc. Here, Aquinas interprets these apocalyptic images in a way consistent with scholastic clarity, underscoring the universality and equity of divine justice. For him, Revelation’s imagery confirms that divine justice is not hidden but manifested to all creatures, both angelic and human.

Finally, *1 Corinthians 15* provides the doctrinal basis for the resurrection, without which, as Paul argues, “our faith is in vain.” Aquinas devotes extensive attention to this chapter in his Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, highlighting the inseparable connection between Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of all humanity. According to him this passage that focuses on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the resurrection through Him for us believers. It begins by recounting the core of the gospel: Christ’s death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection on the third day, followed by His appearances to many witnesses. He also then explains the nature of the resurrected body, using the analogy of a seed growing into a plant, to illustrate that a physical body will be transformed into a spiritual, immortal one. The general resurrection, according to Aquinas, is a precondition for the Last Judgment, since judgment requires the full integrity of the human person body and soul united.¹²⁰

Looking towards his whole arguments and responses to each question he places with biblical references, we could conclude that his theology of resurrection is profoundly scripture based.

2.2.1.2. The Creed: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead”

The eschatological article of the Apostles’ Creed (“*Et iterum venturus est cum gloria iudicare vivos et mortuos*”) occupies a central place in Aquinas’s *Expositio Symboli Apostolorum*. In the proposition itself the creed directly refers that Jesus Christ will come again for both living and the dead. The dead already receive the particular judgement,

¹¹⁹ Cf. Ibid. q. 88 p. 6597.

¹²⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, «Super I ad Corinthios Lectura» cap. 15, lect. 2–7, in *Opera Omnia*, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/iopera.html>

immediately after the death. Based on this, Aquinas explains the three dimensions of the judgment:

(1) The certainty of the last judgement: Christ will indeed return, as affirmed by Scripture and the Church;

(2) The universality of the last judgment: all creatures, “the living and the dead,” will be judged;

(3) The equity of the last judgement: the judgment will be perfect, without error or injustice, since it will be executed by the omniscient Christ.¹²¹

For Aquinas, the Creed provides not only a doctrinal summary but also a pastoral exhortation: the faithful are called to live in vigilance and charity, knowing that every action will be revealed at the tribunal of Christ. He follows saint Augustine and saint Gregory the Great in interpreting this article as a call to conversion, rooted in the theological virtue of hope.¹²² Thus, the creedal formula is not a distant abstraction but an existential truth: every Christian lives in anticipation of Christ’s return.

When he speaks about the human rise, in the chapter of his book, *against Gentiles*, he underlines that we will rise immortal:

*“For the necessity of dying is a defect in human nature resulting from sin. But Christ, by the merit of his passion, repaired the defects of nature which resulted from sin. For as the apostle says in Rom. 5:15: Not as the offense, so also the gift. For if by the offense of one many died, much more did the grace of God, by the grace of one man Jesus Christ, abound to many. From which it is seen that the merit of Christ is more efficacious in removing death than the sin of Adam in introducing it. Therefore those who, having been freed from death by the merit of Christ, shall rise again, will suffer death no more.”*¹²³

Here, in this chapter Aquinas underlines the nature of the resurrection of the body in detailed and also explains the concept of first death and second death. It is a concept

¹²¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Symboli Apostolorum*, art. 7, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 42 (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1970), 183–187.

¹²² Cf. *Ibid.* See also Augustine, *City of God*, XX.20–21;

¹²³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Against the Gentiles*, Ch. 4 q. 82 n. 2.
<https://www.corpusthomicum.org/scg4079.html>

which he refer to those who are condemned, and that they will be contemned eternally, being in a state of eternal separation from God.¹²⁴

2.2.1.3. The Necessity and Certainty of Judgment

In the *Summa Theologica, Supplementum*, question 88, article 1, Aquinas poses the fundamental scholastic question: “Will there be a general judgment?” (*Utrum sit futurum generale iudicium?*). His answer is affirmative and he explains it further based on three theological principles.

Firstly, the manifestation of divine justice: while particular judgment occurs immediately after death, the deeds of human beings are often hidden or misjudged in this life. A general judgment is necessary so that God’s justice may be revealed to all rational creatures. This is why, Aquinas argues, judgment must be public: “because at the general judgment each man’s merits and demerits will be revealed to all.”¹²⁵

Secondly, the social and cosmic dimension of sin and virtue: Aquinas notes that human acts have consequences that extend beyond the individual, influencing others across time. For this reason, final justice cannot be fully rendered until history itself has reached completion. Only then will the full weight of human actions, both good and evil, be manifest.

Thirdly, the perfection of divine providence: the Last Judgment is not an arbitrary event but the final unfolding of God’s providential plan. Aquinas insists on the certainty of this event, appealing to both reason (divine justice demands public vindication) and revelation (Christ Himself has promised His return). Hence, for Aquinas, the Last Judgment is necessary in reason and certain in faith.¹²⁶

2.2.2. The Resurrection and the Open Tombs

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body (*resurrectio mortuorum*) forms the indispensable foundation for the Last Judgment in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, judgment requires the integral human person soul and body together, because moral actions are performed through both, and justice must be rendered to the

¹²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 88, a. 1.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*

human being in his or her fullness.¹²⁷ Hence, the resurrection is not only an eschatological promise but also a theological necessity, intrinsically linked to divine justice and providence.

The open tombs have also had another background in relation to the concept of resurrection of Jesus. Aquinas rightly place it as a 2nd objection of the 3rd article of the *summa Theologica*:

“Further, among the other miracles which happened during the Passion, it is narrated in the gospel of Mathew that *“the monuments were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had slept rose again.”*¹²⁸ Therefore, Christ was not the first to rise from the dead.”¹²⁹

Answering this objection Aquinas take the help from church fathers like St. Augustine and St. Jerome. There are two opinions regarding them who rose with Christ. Some hold that they rose to life so as to die no more, because it would be a greater torment for them to die a second time than not to rise at all. According to this view, as Jerome observes on Mat. 27:52,53, we must understand that “they had not risen before our Lord rose.” However, the Evangelist says that “coming out of the tombs after His Resurrection, they came into the holy city, and appeared to many.” But St. Augustine¹³⁰ while giving this opinion, says: “I know that it appears some, that by the death of Christ the Lord the same resurrection was bestowed upon the righteous as is promised to us in the end; and if they slept not again by laying aside their bodies, it remains to be seen how Christ can be understood to be ‘the first-born of the dead,’ if so many preceded Him unto that resurrection.”

...Now if reply be made that this is said by anticipation, so that the monuments be understood to have been opened by the earthquake while Christ was still hanging on the cross, but that the bodies of the just did not rise then but after He had risen, the difficulty still arises “how” is it that Peter asserts that it was predicted not of David but of Christ, that His body would not see corruption, since David's tomb was in their midst; and thus he did not convince them, if David's body was no longer there; for even if he had risen

¹²⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 88, a. 1.

¹²⁸ Cf. Mt. 27:52.

¹²⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T*, p. 5216.

¹³⁰ Cf. Augustine, Letter 164 to Evodius.

soon after his death, and his flesh had not seen corruption, his tomb might nevertheless remain. Now it seems hard that David from whose seed Christ is descended, was not in that rising of the just, if an eternal rising was conferred upon them. Also, that saying in the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:40) regarding the ancient just would be hard to explain, 'that they should not be perfected without us,' if they were already established in that incorruption of the resurrection which is promised at the end when we shall be made perfect": so that Augustine would seem to think that they rose to die again. In this sense Jerome also in commenting on Matthew (27:52,53) says: "As Lazarus rose, so also many of the bodies of the saints rose, that they might bear witness to the risen Christ." Nevertheless, in a sermon for the Assumption [Ep. ix ad Paul. et Eustoch.; among the supposititious works ascribed to St. Jerome] he seems to leave the matter doubtful. But Augustine's reasons seem to be much more cogent...¹³¹

The concept of risen Christ and opening of the tomb at the time of Christ's death is still a disputing episode. It is accurate in that the resurrection of Christ is a central tenet of Christianity, but the specific event of Saints rising from the tomb at Jesus' death is a less widely supported and therefore a more disputing aspect. While the empty tomb and the bodily resurrection of Jesus are accepted by many of biblical scholars and are considered historical facts by many, the supernatural opening of tombs and the appearance of resurrected individuals at the time of Jesus' death are more controversial, with some theologians and scholars questioning their historicity or interpreting them as literary devices rather than literal events

2.2.2.1. Resurrection of All, Good and Wicked

Aquinas affirms, following *John 5:28–29*, that all the dead shall rise, both just and unjust: "all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come out those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."¹³² In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he argues that since man's soul is naturally immortal and oriented to union with the body, the final state of human beings requires the

¹³¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, p. 5217.

¹³² Cf. *Jn.* 5:28–29.

restoration of this union.¹³³ For the wicked, this means a resurrection to shame and eternal punishment, while for the just it entails the glorified life of the blessed.

The universality of resurrection was emphasized by earlier Fathers such as St. Augustine, who declared: “All will rise, but not all will be changed into glory.”¹³⁴ Similarly, St. Gregory the Great interpreted the resurrection of the unjust as a manifestation of God’s equity, so that even the wicked though eternally separated from God will bear witness to divine justice in their restored bodies.¹³⁵ Aquinas synthesizes these patristic insights within a scholastic framework, stressing that resurrection is coextensive with human nature itself and therefore cannot be limited to the righteous alone.

It is here that he also states about the second life which is given to the chosen people after the resurrection and the second death is given to all those who are contempt after the resurrection. Those who are chosen will be enjoying the eternal life in the presence of God and those who are condemned will be in the state of eternal separation from God, that is in rigorous term he put as second death.¹³⁶

2.2.2.2. The Nature of the Resurrected Body

In the *Supplementum of Summa Theologica*, the questions between 82 to 85, Aquinas presents a systematic account of the qualities of the resurrected body, drawing on both Scripture and Aristotelian anthropology. The resurrected body, though numerically the same, is elevated according to its final destiny. For the blessed, the body will be endowed with four “dotes” or gifts:

1. Impassibility (incapacity to suffer)

The term impassibility is defined as the incapacity to suffer or die again. The glorified body is incorruptible, freed from illness, pain, and death. Aquinas grounds this in 1 Corinthians 15:42–43: “*What is sown in corruption will be raised in incorruption.*” He insists that impassibility does not remove natural bodily functions, but rather perfects

¹³³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Against the Gentiles*, IV, Ch. 79–97, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 15.

¹³⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Ch. 84, in *PL* 40:279.

¹³⁵ Cf. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, XIV, 53, in *PL* 75:1034.

¹³⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Against the Gentiles*, lib. Ch. 4, 82 n. 1-11.

them: the body retains its nature but is elevated beyond decay. “Impassibility excludes the possibility of suffering, as incorruption excludes the possibility of decay.”¹³⁷

2. **Clarity** (radiance of glory)

Clarity means the body will shine with radiance, beauty, and luminosity, reflecting the glory of the soul united to God. Scriptural basis: “*The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.*”¹³⁸ Aquinas notes that the degree of this brightness will correspond to the degree of glory in the soul, reflecting the “order of charity.” “Clarity is the resplendence of the soul’s glory overflowing into the body.”¹³⁹

3. **Agility** (freedom from physical limitation)

Agility denotes freedom of movement, perfect responsiveness of the body to the soul, and freedom from physical weight or slowness. Scriptural basis: “*They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*”¹⁴⁰ Aquinas compares it to Christ after His resurrection: appearing suddenly in the midst of the disciples, moving without hindrance.¹⁴¹ “Agility means that the body is wholly subject to the spirit, so that it can move instantly wherever the soul wills.”¹⁴²

4. **Subtlety** (perfect obedience to the soul).¹⁴³

The term subtlety signifies the body’s perfect obedience to the soul, free from material resistance. It is not immaterial, but perfectly spiritualized. Scriptural basis: is Christ entering the locked room after His resurrection.¹⁴⁴ Aquinas explains that subtlety allows the glorified body to pass through material obstacles without violence or contradiction, because matter itself is subordinated to the higher principle of spirit. “Subtlety does not destroy the nature of the body, but brings it under the complete dominion of the soul.”¹⁴⁵

This vision is both eschatological, anticipating the final resurrection at the end of time and Christological, patterned after the resurrection of Christ. The risen Christ is the

¹³⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 82, a. 1.

¹³⁸ Cf. Mt. 13:43.

¹³⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 85, a. 1

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Is. 40:31.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Jn. 20:19.

¹⁴² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 84, a. 1

¹⁴³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 85, a. 1–4.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Jn. 20:19.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 83, a. 1.

exemplar of these four gifts: His glorious body after Easter manifests all of them, and the faithful are promised participation in His glorified state.¹⁴⁶

By contrast, the bodies of the damned, while incorruptible, will rise “unto corruption”,¹⁴⁷ deprived of these perfections and serving as instruments of eternal punishment.¹⁴⁸

Here Aquinas echoes the patristic tradition, especially St. Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*,¹⁴⁹ where Augustine describes the body of the blessed as transfigured by the soul’s beatitude, while the body of the damned is preserved by divine justice to endure everlasting torment.¹⁵⁰ Peter Lombard, whose *Sentences* Aquinas comments on, had already transmitted this Augustinian understanding to the scholastic milieu, insisting on the preservation of identity in the resurrection.¹⁵¹ Modern Thomists, such as Jean-Pierre Torrell, emphasize that Aquinas’s originality lies in his rigorous philosophical demonstration of why the body, as essential to human identity, must participate in final retribution.¹⁵²

2.2.2.3. The Opening of the Tombs as Sign of Universal Revelation

The opening of the tombs is not merely a physical resurrection but a symbol of revelation: the unveiling of hidden deeds and the full disclosure of human history. Aquinas writes that the resurrection is necessary “*ut opera singulorum publicentur*” so that the works of each may be made known.¹⁵³ This public manifestation ensures that divine justice is not only accomplished but also seen by angels and humanity alike.¹⁵⁴

Patristic exegesis frequently associated the image of open tombs with Matthew: “the tombs were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised”,¹⁵⁵ interpreted as a foretaste of the universal resurrection. Origen and St. Jerome saw in this event a sign of Christ’s victory over death and the anticipation of the

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* XIV, 55.

http://www.rhinosourcecenter.com/pdf_files/173/1735912438.pdf

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Rom 2:7.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 86, a. 1.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Augustine, *The City of God*, XXII.21, God XXII. 19.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.* 1052–1056.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, Book IV, dist. 44, in *PL* 192:886–890.

¹⁵² Cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2005), 298–302.

¹⁵³ Cf. Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 88, a. 1.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Jn. 5:28–29.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Mt. 27:52–53

eschatological unveiling.¹⁵⁶ Aquinas follows this line, giving it a scholastic formulation: the general resurrection “lays bare” the truth of each life, vindicating the just and exposing the wicked before all creation.

This theme has also been developed in modern theological reflection. Joseph Ratzinger interprets the resurrection and last judgment as the definitive unveiling of human truth: “In the last judgment, everything hidden will become manifest, not to humiliate but to reveal the definitive meaning of each life.”¹⁵⁷ Such interpretations resonate with Aquinas’s conviction that the resurrection of the body and the opening of the tombs are ordered toward the public revelation of divine justice, in which all creation participates.

2.2.3. The Court of Judgment

The Last Judgment in Aquinas’s theology is not merely a divine decree but a cosmic tribunal, where Christ presides in glory, the angels and saints participate as witnesses, and the conscience of every individual is laid bare. The scholastic imagery of a *curia caelestis* i.e. heavenly court is indebted both to Scripture and to the patristic tradition, while Aquinas develops it into a coherent theological structure. His concern is to demonstrate the equity and universality of the divine judgment: no one can escape its light, and no one can claim injustice, for the Judge is truth itself.¹⁵⁸

2.2.3.1. Christ as Judge in Glory

For Aquinas, the central figure of the tribunal is Christ Himself, the Incarnate Word who will return in majesty. He writes in the *Supplementum*: “*It belongs to Christ, as man, to judge, because He is the Head of the Church, and because in His human nature He suffered injustice for the sake of justice, and thus merited judicial authority.*”¹⁵⁹ Christ’s humanity, glorified after the Resurrection, is the visible sign of God’s justice: He who was judged unjustly by men will now judge all with perfect justice. Christ’s humanity, glorified after the Resurrection, is the visible sign of God’s justice: He who was judged unjustly by men will now judge all with perfect justice.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Origen, *Commentarium in Matthaem*, XXVII, in *PG* 13:1757–1760;

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1988), 203.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 88, a.3.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. *Ibid.* q. 88, a.3.

This doctrine draws directly from the gospel of Matthew: “*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit upon the throne of His glory.*”¹⁶⁰ The patristic tradition reinforced this Christocentric vision. St. Augustine insists that Christ must be the Judge precisely because He is also the Redeemer: “He who was judged is to be the Judge; He who stood before a human judge will Himself judge all humankind.”¹⁶¹ St. Pope Leo the Great adds that Christ’s visible humanity ensures that judgment will be manifest and undeniable: “All shall see the Judge in that nature in which He was crucified.”¹⁶²

Aquinas integrates these patristic insights within his scholastic framework: Christ judges in His divine nature by right of lordship, but He exercises judgment in His human nature so that the judgment may be visible, historical, and accessible to human beings.¹⁶³ Modern interpreters such as Brian Davies note that this point is central to Aquinas’s theology of history: divine justice is not abstract but embodied, revealed in the humanity of Christ as the universal Judge.¹⁶⁴

2.2.3.2. The Angels and Saints as Witnesses

Aquinas also teaches that the angels and saints will participate in the judgment as witnesses and, in a certain sense, as co-judges. He affirms: “*The saints will not judge by authority, but by approval of the Judge’s sentence.*”¹⁶⁵ Their role is not to rival Christ’s judicial power but to manifest the consensus of heaven with God’s justice. The angels, likewise, act as executors of the divine sentence, separating the just from the wicked and carrying out the eternal decrees.¹⁶⁶

Scriptural warrant for this teaching is found in the 1st letter to Corinthians: “*Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we are to judge angels?*”¹⁶⁷ St. Augustine interprets this as the saints sharing in Christ’s judgment by assent and participation, not by autonomous authority.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, St. Gregory the

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Mt, 25:31.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Augustine, *Sermon 18*, in *PL* 38:130–131.

¹⁶² Cf. Leo the Great, *Sermon 28: On the Nativity*, in *PL* 54:221.

¹⁶³ Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, Suppl., q. 88, a. 3.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 346–348.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, Suppl., q. 89, a. 8.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 89, a. 4.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. 1Cor. 6:2–3.

¹⁶⁸ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos 149*, in *PL* 37:1952.

Great describes the angels as “the ministers of divine justice, who gather the elect and drive the reprobate to their place.”¹⁶⁹

For Aquinas, this participation of saints and angels highlights the communal and ecclesial character of the Last Judgment. Justice is not revealed in isolation but in the context of the entire heavenly court. Jean-Pierre Torrell emphasizes that this reflects Aquinas’s sacramental and ecclesiological vision: the Church, consummated in glory, participates in Christ’s kingship and shares in His judicial manifestation.¹⁷⁰

2.2.3.3. Manifestation of Conscience before Divine Justice

One of Aquinas’s most profound contributions to eschatology is his doctrine of the manifestation of conscience at the Last Judgment. He argues that all the deeds, thoughts, and intentions of every human being will be made manifest before the whole of creation: “*The conscience of each will be laid bare, so that nothing of good or evil will remain hidden.*”¹⁷¹ This universal revelation is necessary so that God’s justice may be recognized by all rational creatures.

This teaching is rooted in Scripture, in the gospel of Luke: “*Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.*”¹⁷² The Fathers consistently affirmed this principle. John Chrysostom taught that conscience will act as a witness, “accusing or excusing” each person,¹⁷³ and that nothing will remain hidden in the tribunal of Christ.¹⁷⁴ Augustine, in *De Civitate Dei*, explains that the manifestation of conscience serves the purpose of vindicating divine equity: even the condemned will be forced to acknowledge the justice of their sentence.¹⁷⁵

Aquinas systematizes this insight by linking it with divine providence: because human actions affect not only the individual but also the community, their revelation is required for the perfect restoration of cosmic order. Thus, the publication of conscience is not humiliation but illumination the final unveiling of truth in which God’s justice shines forth. Joseph Ratzinger develops this point further, noting that the publication of

¹⁶⁹ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, Book XIV, ch. 53, in *PL* 75:1034.

¹⁷⁰ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2005), 312–314.

¹⁷¹ Aquinas, *ST*, Suppl., q. 90, a. 1.

¹⁷² Cf. Lk, 12:2.

¹⁷³ Cf. Rom 2: 15-16.

¹⁷⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 5, in *PG* 60:418.

¹⁷⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XX, ch. 14, 934–935.

conscience in judgment corresponds to the encounter with Truth itself: “Before the Judge, who is Truth, every mask falls away, and man is seen for what he is.”¹⁷⁶

2.2.4. Heaven and the Heavenly Jerusalem

In Aquinas’s theology, the Last Judgment is not only about the condemnation of the wicked but above all about the glorification of the just in the kingdom of heaven. For him, the final goal (*finis ultimus*) of the human being is the vision of God, the beatific vision which is granted to the saints in the eschatological fulfilment of history. This is represented in Scripture under the symbol of the Heavenly Jerusalem, and it is lived in the communion of saints, who together participate in a divinely ordered hierarchy of glory.¹⁷⁷

2.2.4.1. Beatific Vision as the Reward of the Just

For Aquinas, the beatific vision constitutes the supreme reward of the just. He affirms that “*man’s happiness is nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence*”.¹⁷⁸ This vision is immediate, intuitive, and perfect, surpassing every natural capacity of the human intellect. It is possible only because God elevates the created intellect by the “light of glory” (*lumen gloriae*), allowing the blessed to see Him “face to face”.¹⁷⁹

In the *Supplementum*, Aquinas reiterates that at the Last Judgment the blessed will enter into the fullness of this vision: “*The reward of the just will be the beatific vision, which exceeds every created capacity and constitutes the final end of human life.*”¹⁸⁰ The justice of the tribunal culminates, therefore, not in the mere acquittal of the righteous but in their perfect participation in divine life.

The Fathers of the Church had already anticipated this doctrine. St. Augustine taught that the blessed will “see God in that eternal truth, by which all things are rightly and justly ordered”.¹⁸¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa described the vision of God as the soul’s

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1988), 204.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. ST. 21.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T*, I–II, q. 3, a. 8.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. 1Cor 13:12.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 92, a. 1.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.29, 1060–1062.

endless progress (*epektasis*) into divine beauty.¹⁸² Aquinas systematizes these insights within his Aristotelian framework: happiness must correspond to the highest operation of man's intellectual nature, which is the direct contemplation of God Himself.¹⁸³

Modern Thomists such as Jean-Pierre Torrell and Brian Davies underline that the beatific vision is the key to Aquinas's eschatology: without it, heaven would be reduced to a created good; with it, heaven becomes participation in the very life of God.¹⁸⁴

2.2.4.2. The Heavenly Jerusalem

The symbol of the Heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21 provides Aquinas with the biblical imagery of the eschatological consummation. The city, descending from heaven adorned as a bride,¹⁸⁵ represents both the glorified Church and the ordered society of the blessed. Aquinas comments that the city's perfection lies in its divine foundation: "*The Heavenly Jerusalem is the society of the blessed, established in perfect order and in the vision of God.*"¹⁸⁶

The Heavenly Jerusalem symbolizes three essential aspects of glory:

1. **Perfection of union with God**, the city has no need of sun or temple, "for the glory of God is its light, and the Lamb its lamp."¹⁸⁷
2. **Perfection of order among the saints**, Aquinas emphasizes that the diversity of mansions reflects a graded hierarchy of participation in God's glory.¹⁸⁸
3. **Perfection of incorruptibility**, the city is eternal, unshakable, and radiant with divine permanence.

For Aquinas, this city is not a mere allegory but the eschatological reality of the Church Triumphant. St. Augustine had identified the Heavenly Jerusalem with the *civitas Dei*, the final society of love in contrast to the earthly city founded on selflove.¹⁸⁹ Aquinas builds on this vision, presenting the city as the completion of both grace and nature, in

¹⁸² Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II.239–242, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 63.

¹⁸³ Cf. Aquinas, *S T*, I–II, q. 3, a. 5.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, 358–363.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Rev. 21:2.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ch. 21, lect. 1, in *Opera Omnia* (Parma ed.).

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Rev 21:23.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 93, a. 2.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XI.1; XIX.17.

which the political and ecclesial orders are fulfilled in the eternal communion of the saints.¹⁹⁰

2.2.4.3. Communion of Saints and the Order of Glory.

Aquinas insists that salvation is not merely individual but communal, lived in the *communio sanctorum*. In the *supplementum* of the *Summa Theologica* question 93, he teaches that the saints will rejoice not only in their own reward but also in the glory of others, since charity in heaven is perfected and expanded.¹⁹¹ The blessed are united in a perfect order of glory: each receives a degree of participation in God proportionate to his merits, yet all share in the joy of the whole.

Scripture supports this in images of the many mansions and the different crowns promised to the faithful.¹⁹² Aquinas affirms: “*There will be inequality in glory, but no envy, for each will be content with his degree and rejoice in the happiness of others.*”¹⁹³

Patristic voices echo this teaching. Gregory the Great speaks of heaven as a place where diverse orders of angels and saints reflect the manifold wisdom of God, like a choir harmonized in diversity.¹⁹⁴ Patristic voices echo this teaching. Gregory the Great speaks of heaven as a place where diverse orders of angels and saints reflect the manifold wisdom of God, like a choir harmonized in diversity. Augustine stresses that the communion of saints is the true fulfilment of human society: “*In that city, love of God shall be perfected, and love of neighbour will find its eternal consummation.*”¹⁹⁵

Modern interpreters emphasize that this ecclesial dimension of heaven is crucial for Aquinas. Joseph Ratzinger argues that Aquinas’s theology of heavenly communion avoids modern individualism: salvation is always a “being with” with God and with others, in the one Body of Christ.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Cf. John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Aquinas and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 87–91.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T A*, q. 93, a. 1.

¹⁹² Cf. Jn. 14:2.

¹⁹³ Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 93, a. 2.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, Book XXXII, ch. 17 (PL 76:632).

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.27.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 216–219.

2.2.5. Hell, and the Punishment of the Damned

If heaven is the consummation of divine communion, hell represents the definitive exclusion from it. For Aquinas, the doctrine of hell is essential to the Last Judgment, since it safeguards the truth of divine justice and the seriousness of human freedom. In the *Supplementum* of the *Summa Theologiae*, questions 98–99, he systematically addresses the nature, eternity, and diversity of punishments for the damned.

2.2.5.1. Eternal Separation from God as Primary Punishment

For Aquinas, the primary punishment of the damned is the *poena damni*, or the eternal loss of the vision of God. He insists: “*The chief punishment of the damned is to be deprived forever of the vision of God.*”¹⁹⁷ This eternal exclusion constitutes the greatest suffering, since the human soul was created with a natural desire for God as its final end.

Aquinas explains that even if bodily torments are terrible, they are secondary to the loss of God. The *poena damni* is absolute, because it frustrates the fundamental orientation of human existence: “*In this consists the essence of damnation, that man is eternally separated from his ultimate end.*”¹⁹⁸

This insight echoes the patristic tradition. St. Augustine describes the damned as deprived of the supreme good, “banished from the vision of God, which alone is the true and perfect happiness.”¹⁹⁹ St. John Chrysostom emphasizes that hell is most terrible not because of fire, but because of exclusion from Christ’s presence: “Not to behold Christ is greater punishment than any fire.”²⁰⁰

Contemporary interpreters like Joseph Ratzinger reaffirm that Aquinas preserves the relational character of sin: damnation is not arbitrary but the self-exclusion of the soul from communion with God, which divine justice ratifies at the judgment.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 98, a. 1.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 98, a. 2.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.17, 1023.

²⁰⁰ Cf. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 23, in *PG* 57:329.

²⁰¹ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 217–219.

2.2.5.2. The Diversity of Punishments According to Guilt

Aquinas also argues that punishments in hell correspond proportionally to the gravity of guilt. In *Summa Theologica Supplementum*, question 99 and its 1st answer he writes: “*As the glory of the blessed is unequal, so also is the punishment of the damned unequal, according to the measure of their guilt.*”²⁰²

The Fathers reinforced this principle. St. Gregory the Great affirms that “just as there are diverse mansions in heaven for the blessed, so too there are diverse punishments in hell for the reprobate.”²⁰³ St. Augustine, in his *Enchiridion* 112, emphasizes that punishment must correspond to guilt, so that God’s judgment is manifest as both just and fitting.²⁰⁴

Modern scholars like Brian Davies note that this aspect of Aquinas’s doctrine reveals his profound commitment to the rationality of divine justice: even in damnation, God is not arbitrary but proportionate.²⁰⁵

2.2.5.3. Symbolic Imagery: Fire, Darkness, and Demonic Torments.

Finally, Aquinas considers the symbolic and sensible imagery of hell, most notably fire, darkness, and the activity of demons. In *ST Suppl.*, q. 97–98, he accepts the real possibility of material fire, though he interprets it within the framework of eschatological mystery: “*The fire of hell is not metaphorical only, but truly corporeal, though of a nature unknown to us.*”²⁰⁶

Fire signifies both the intensity of suffering and the consuming effect of sin. Darkness represents the absence of God’s light (cf. Mt 8:12: “the outer darkness”), while demonic torments express the disorder of creatures eternally separated from their Creator.

Patristic interpretations vary: Origen often interpreted fire spiritually as remorse of conscience,²⁰⁷ while Augustine insisted on its reality, warning against over-

²⁰² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 99, a. 1.

²⁰³ Cf. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, Book XV, ch. 53, in *PL* 75:1125.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 112, in *PL* 40:279.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 365–366.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 97, a. 5.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Origen, *De Principiis*, II.10, in *PG* 11:235–236.

allegorization.²⁰⁸ Aquinas synthesizes both tendencies: the imagery is symbolic, but it also points to real punishments proportionate to sin.

Contemporary theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar stress that these images should not be reduced to crude literalism but understood as expressions of the soul's existential alienation from God, a perspective that resonates with Aquinas's hierarchy of punishments.²⁰⁹

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Last Judgment in St. Thomas Aquinas represents one of the most profound syntheses of Christian eschatology in the medieval period. Drawing upon Scripture, patristic tradition, and scholastic reasoning, Aquinas weaves together a vision of the *eschaton* that is simultaneously juridical, cosmic, and deeply Christocentric. His treatment in the *Supplementum* (qq. 88–99), supported by earlier works such as the *Summa contra Gentiles* and his biblical commentaries, provides the Church with a systematic account of the final destiny of humankind and creation.

At the centre of this vision stands Christ in glory, the Incarnate Judge, whose humanity ensures the visibility and universality of judgment. As Aquinas explains, Christ exercises judgment as man so that divine justice may be made manifest to all rational creatures.²¹⁰ The heavenly court surrounding Him composed of angels and saints that reveals the judgment is not a solitary decree but a cosmic manifestation of God's equity. This public dimension is essential: as Aquinas teaches, the publication of conscience guarantees that God's justice will be universally acknowledged, even by the damned.²¹¹

The destinies of the blessed and the reprobate, presented in striking contrast, demonstrate both the justice and mercy of God. For the just, the beatific vision (the *poena lucis*) constitutes the supreme reward, fulfilling the natural desire of the intellect for God and consummating human existence in the communion of saints. For the damned, the loss of this vision (the *poena damni*) is the most terrible punishment, greater even than

²⁰⁸ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.9.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph. *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*. 48.

²¹⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 88, a. 3.

²¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 90, a. 1.

corporeal suffering. In this, Aquinas echoes St. Augustine's conviction that the essence of hell is exclusion from God.²¹²

The eschatological symbols of heaven and the Heavenly Jerusalem and hell with its fire and darkness are not mere rhetorical devices but theological expressions of ultimate realities. Aquinas insists that the order of glory and the proportion of punishments both manifest the rationality of divine providence: just as there are degrees of beatitude, so too there are degrees of damnation.²¹³ This reflects his broader metaphysical principle that God governs all things according to order and proportion, ensuring that justice is neither arbitrary nor opaque.

Finally, Aquinas situates the Last Judgment within the unfolding of sacred history: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The resurrection of the dead, the opening of the tombs, the revelation of conscience, the separation of the sheep and the goats, and the descent of the Heavenly Jerusalem — all these constitute a single drama culminating in the definitive triumph of Christ as Lord of history. In this way, Aquinas harmonizes the biblical apocalyptic vision (Mt 25; Rev 20–21; 1 Cor 15) with the creedal confession (“*He will come again to judge the living and the dead*”), grounding his theology in both revelation and reason. The enduring significance of Aquinas's teaching lies in its balance: it avoids the extremes of juridical severity and sentimental leniency, holding together the gravity of judgment and the hope of glory. His eschatology remains profoundly relevant, not only as a speculative theological system but also as a pastoral reminder that human freedom, grace, and responsibility are directed toward an ultimate encounter with God, in which nothing will remain hidden and justice will be perfectly manifest.

²¹² Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.17, 1023.

²¹³ Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, Suppl., qq. 93, 99.

Chapter 3: Comparative Study between Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas on the Last Judgment

In this concluding chapter let's take a look at the comparative study between two styles of representing the same theological doctrine namely, "*Last Judgement*" by two great theologians of the catholic church, Fra Angelico and saint Thomas Aquinas, they were also known as "*Angelic friar*" and "*Angelic Doctor*". The doctrine of the "*Last Judgment*" is always considered as the central theme of Christian eschatology, yet it has found different modes of expression in the theological tradition. In the case of St. Thomas Aquinas, the truth of judgment is elaborated through precise conceptual argumentation, drawing from Scripture, patristic authority, and Aristotelian philosophy. In the other side, Fra Angelico translates this same theological reality into an artistic vision, employing the immediacy of images, colour, and symbolic order to move the mind and the heart of the spectator.

Both the angelic writer and angelic painter lived almost same era and were the product of same Dominican congregation. And the theology of saint Thomas Aquinas obviously influenced the arts of Fra Angelico, because he was born 121 years after the death of saint Thomas Aquinas. The intention of the chapter is not to compare the calibre of the writer or the painter but to study the methods they employed for evangelization in their era and how they are effectively helping today. I also tried to compare them in that sense and not to weigh one against the other, but to recognize how theology and art, reason and imagination, collaborate in the service of truth.

Art has a universal language that transcends the boundaries of grammar, dialect, and culture. While Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* requires training in scholastic method and a knowledge of Latin (the original works of saint Thomas Aquinas were written in Latin language and it is certain that translation of these original works can not fully capture the original dynamism in its strict sense). Angelico's *Last Judgment* speaks to the eye and imagination of every viewer, whether learned or simple, rich or poor, older or younger etc. The spectator can grasp at once the radiant glory of heaven, the gravity of hell, and the solemnity of the court of Christ without needing translation. This universal accessibility does not mean simplicity, for the painting also contains layers of

iconographic and theological depth that reward careful contemplation, much like the scholastic method itself.²¹⁴

Fra Angelico thus communicates with a kind of immediacy that Aquinas cannot. Aquinas's strength lies in definition, logical clarity, and systematic ordering of truths; Angelico's gift is to embody these truths in a visual and affective form that stirs both intellect and emotion. In this sense, Angelico does not compete with Aquinas but complements him: where the theologian persuades by reasoned demonstration, the artist persuades by beauty. Both, however, are engaged in the same task of pointing the soul to God.

Moreover, Angelico's painting highlights the creative and imaginative power of art, which not only conveys meaning but also invites the participation of the spectator to enter into the imaginative world of the artist and add his/her imaginative interpretations and understandings about the content. The open composition of the *Last Judgment*, with its ascending saints, descending damned and opened tombs allows viewers to "enter" the narrative and place themselves within its horizon of decision. Unlike Aquinas's text, which demands logical adherence, Angelico's canvas leaves space for contemplative engagement, interpretation, and even self-examination.²¹⁵

At the same time, Aquinas offers something Angelico cannot: a conceptual framework that secures the truth of the doctrine against misunderstanding. Without Aquinas's precision, that is in the written form the contents is well-defined in a specific structure whereas form of art risks the spectator to being reduced to draw subjective impression. Without Angelico's vision, theology risks remaining abstract. Their synthesis therefore reveals the twofold way the Church has always communicated divine truth: through the rigor of theology and the radiance of beauty.

Thus, in this final chapter, the comparative study of Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas will not simply highlight contrasts between artistic and theological modes of expression but will undermine their mutual complementarity. Both paths the scholastic and the artistic converge in the proclamation of the same eschatological reality: that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and that every human destiny

²¹⁴ Cf. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17–20.

²¹⁵ Cf. Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 71–75.

is determined by this final encounter with the divine Judge. With these ideas of complementarity let's make our comparative study.

3.1. Comparing the Life and Legacy of Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas

Here let us look at the figures of Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas, and let us see two Dominican lives, were marked by a profound search for truth, but they may express that truth in very different ways. Both Fra Angelico and Saint Thomas Aquinas belonged to the same Order of Preachers, founded by St. Dominic in the early 13th century with the mission of preaching for the salvation of souls. Yet their vocations unfolded in two different ways: Aquinas through intellectual inquiry, Fra Angelico through artistic creativity.

When we think of St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the heart of the scholastic world, teaching in Paris, Naples, and Rome. His theological method was rigorous and related to the style of systematic and synthesizing Scripture, deeply rooted in the Patristic tradition, and Aristotelian philosophy. He always transmits his theology with a coherent vision of Christian truth. His legacy lies in his ability to articulate doctrine with clarity and depth, particularly in the *Summa Theologica*, where he developed his eschatological teaching on the resurrection, judgment, heaven, and hell. For Aquinas, theology was not merely an academic exercise but a service to the Church, a way of leading minds to God through reason illumined by faith.²¹⁶

On the other hand, Fra Angelico, who lived in Renaissance Florence, a period marked by artistic flourishing and renewed interest in the harmony of beauty and faith, was a master of combining beauty and art. As a Dominican friar at San Marco, he combined his monastic vocation with artistic genius. His works, particularly the *Last Judgment* panel which is now in the Museo di San Marco, reveal a profound theological vision translated into colour, form, and composition. His contemporaries remembered him not only as a gifted painter but as a holy man. He was often referred as “Blessed Fra

²¹⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, qq. 88–99.

Angelico” whose art was an extension of his prayer and whose legacy lies in showing that art itself can be a form of preaching.²¹⁷

Placed side by side, their lives and legacies highlight two dimensions of the Dominican mission: the pursuit of truth through reason i.e. Aquinas and the communication of truth through “*beauty*” i.e. Fra Angelico. Aquinas continues to shape the intellectual tradition of Catholic theology, while Fra Angelico continues to inspire hearts and imaginations across cultures. Both remind us that the mystery of the Last Judgment which is also a central eschatological doctrine of Christian faith, and which also requires not only theological definition but also visual mediation, so that it can be received by both the mind and the heart.²¹⁸

3.2. Christ as Judge

The prime and central concept of the last judgement of Christian eschatology is that our Lord Jesus Christ will come again with His full glory to judge the world. In the letter of saint Paul to Colossians says:

*“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to him-self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”*²¹⁹

The Christian eschatology deals with the concept of victory always related to the sambal of cross, the sign of sacrifice and the love of Christ to the humanity. Observing in a very strict and accurate way we could find an angel stand in the perfect centre of the painting of Fra Angelico with the cross which connects both Christs mandorla and the world.

3.2.1. Fra Angelico’s Iconography

In the painting of Fra Angelico, he places Christ at the absolute centre of the composition, enthroned within a radiant mandorla. This almond-shaped halo, glowing with golden light, not only marks Christ’s divine transcendence but also draws the eyes

²¹⁷ Cf. William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 15–32.

²¹⁸ Cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, 1–10.

²¹⁹ Cf. Col. 1: 19-20.

of the spectator irresistibly upward. His posture is solemn and extra ordinarily serene: seated in majesty, one hand raised in blessing (or welcoming, elevating the chosen people) and the other lowered in judgment (punishing the damned ones), echoing the dual verdict of salvation and damnation. The glory of the painting gives its spectators that they are really facing the second coming of our lord Jesus Christ with His glory.

The mandorla itself functions as a threshold between heaven and earth, signalling Christ's role as mediator and eschatological Lord between heaven and earth. As John Osborne remarks, Angelico's Christ "holds together in a single gesture the mercy of salvation and the severity of judgment," embodying visually what theology seeks to articulate in words.²²⁰ Between the inner and outer layer of the mandorla we could see 8 angels vested red, which symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ for the humanity and the cross which is perfectly touches the last angel who vested red and the cross extends to the earth.

3.2.2. Aquinas's Theology

Now looking to the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the prerogative of judgment belongs uniquely to Christ because of the hypostatic union: the one who judges humanity is both true God and true man. In the *Supplementum* of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argues that "it is fitting that judgment be exercised by Christ in His human nature, because He has been exalted above all creatures and has merited this authority by His Passion." Christ as universal Judge.²²¹

Jesus Christ, the supreme and glorious judge, is therefore both the standard of justice and the embodiment of mercy, since He shares the human condition yet reigns in divine authority. Aquinas underscores that Christ's judgment will be universal, extending to the living and the dead, and will manifest the truth of every human life before God.²²² Where he also underlines the necessity of Christ judging as fully God to humanity and fully Man to humanity.

3.2.3. Church Teaching

The Catechism of the Catholic Church echoes this scholastic teaching in a concise and powerful way. Citing Matthew 25 and Revelation 20 and where it affirms as: "Christ

²²⁰ Cf. John Osborne, *Early Christian and Medieval Art* (London: Penguin, 1986), 112.

²²¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., q. 88, a.3.

²²² Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 88, a.4.

is Lord of eternal life. Full right to pass definitive judgment on the works and hearts of men belongs to him as redeemer of the world”

... *“Then will the conduct of each one and the secrets of hearts be brought to light. Then will the culpable unbelief that counted the offer of God's grace as nothing be condemned. Our attitude about our neighbour will disclose acceptance or refusal of grace and divine love. On the last day Jesus will say: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”*

“Christ is Lord of eternal life. Full right to pass definitive judgment on the works and hearts of men belongs to him as redeemer of the world. He "acquired" this right by his cross. The Father has given "all judgment to the Son. " Yet the son did not come to judge, but to save and to give the life he has in himself. By rejecting grace in this life, one already judges oneself, receives according to one's works, and can even condemn oneself for all eternity by rejecting the Spirit of love.”²²³

The Catechism of the Catholic church also affirms both dimensions present in Fra Angelico’s painting and Aquinas’s theology: the glorious manifestation of Christ as Son of Man²²⁴ and the decisive separation of the righteous from the wicked.²²⁵ The Magisterium has consistently reiterated this teaching, notably in the *Creed*, which proclaims: *Et iterum venturus est cum gloria iudicare vivos et mortuos* “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” The explanation of the creed is as follow:

“On Judgment Day at the end of the world, Christ will come in glory to achieve the definitive triumph of good over evil which, like the wheat and the tares, have grown up together in the course of history.”²²⁶

This catholic teaching is perfectly depicted in the theology of saint Thomas Aquinas in his writings and the painting of Fra Angelico is also perfectly drawn in his icon.

²²³ Cf. CCC, n. 678-679.

²²⁴ Cf. Ibid., n. 680. *“Christ the Lord already reigns through the Church, but all the things of this world are not yet subjected to him. The triumph of Christ's kingdom will not come about without one last assault by the powers of evil.”*

²²⁵ Cf. Ibid., 682. *“When he comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, the glorious Christ will reveal the secret disposition of hearts and will render to each man according to his works, and according to his acceptance or refusal of grace.”*

²²⁶ Cf. Ibid., 681.

3.2.4. Teachings of Sacred Tradition or Patristic Sources on Last Judgement

Patristic views portray Christ as a glorious judge with dual roles, as a merciful saviour and just Judge. This dynamism also provides a crucial interpretive key. Augustine emphasizes that the same Christ who came first in humility will return in glory: “He who was judged unjustly shall come as Judge most just.”²²⁷

And also, the church father Gregory the Great, reflecting on Matthew 25, highlights the paradox that Christ reveals mercy through judgment itself: the blessed experience His compassion, while the damned encounter the justice of truth revealed. In this way, the Fathers anticipate both Aquinas’s scholastic precision and Angelico’s symbolic artistry, affirming that Christ’s judgment is not arbitrary but the consummation of divine love and justice.²²⁸

3.3. Heaven and the Communion of Saints

The theological concept of heaven is deeply considered as an eternal union with God. Theological doctrines underline this concept with regards to this relation between God and humanity more than a physical place. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

*“Those who die in Gods grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God forever; for they “see him as he is” face to face.”*²²⁹

Here the part eternity or eternal state of living with God and in the presence of God is also seen in both theologies of Fra Angelico and saint Thomas Aquinas. Now let us see specific similarities and differences.

3.3.1. Fra Angelico’s Vision: the radiant celestial court

Fra Angelico’s *Last Judgment* defines one of the most compelling visualizations of heaven in early Renaissance art. The upper part of the panel is flooded with gold, a

²²⁷ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XX, Ch. 1.

²²⁸ Cf. Vatican II, LG §48. the Church, while imperfectly holy in this life, will achieve its full perfection in the glory of heaven at the time of "the renewal of all things" (Acts 3:21).

²²⁹ Cf. CCC, 1023.

symbolic shorthand for divine light, in which the Virgin Mary, the apostles, martyrs, and confessors gather around the enthroned Christ. Their arrangement is orderly and tiered, suggesting that heaven is not chaos but in a state of harmony, a “heavenly court” where each saint occupies his or her rightful place in relation to God. The figures are not static: some are turned in gentle conversation, others gaze adoringly at Christ, and yet others extend gestures of welcome toward the blessed ascending from the earth. In this way, Angelico communicates that heaven is not only vision (*visio*) but also communion (*communio*): “the saints are united not only with Christ but also with one another”. The celestial court becomes a foretaste of the *civitas Dei* that Augustine described as the “society of the saints, bound together by the love of God.”²³⁰

3.3.2. Aquinas’s Theology: the beatific vision and hierarchy of glory

For Aquinas, the essence of heaven lies in the “*beatific vision* or the immediate vision of God”. A vision that is described as “face to face” with God.²³¹ In the *Summa Theologica* he explains that the human intellect is elevated beyond its natural capacity by the light of glory, enabling the blessed to see the divine essence itself.²³² This vision is perfect happiness, since nothing greater can be desired once the soul beholds God as He is. Yet Aquinas also insists on a certain hierarchy within heaven: although all the blessed possess perfect happiness, the degree of their glory corresponds to their capacity to receive God’s light.²³³ This explains why Angelico paints heaven not as a flat equality but as a structured order. And that order places the apostles near Christ, martyrs, virgins, and confessors following according to their importance in the the history of salvation. Here we can see that each reflects God’s glory in a unique way. For Aquinas, heaven is not uniformity but harmony, where diversity is perfected in unity.

3.3.3. Catechism: communion with the Trinity and the saints

The Catechism of the Catholic Church echoes this Thomistic vision, describing heaven as “the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness”.²³⁴ It insists that this happiness is essentially relational:

²³⁰ Cf. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIX, Ch. 17.

²³¹ Cf. 1Cor. 13:12.

²³² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, Q.3, a 8.

²³³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 92, a. 1.

²³⁴ Cf. ccc. 1024.

the blessed are “with Christ”²³⁵, and therefore also with all those who are united in Him. In other words, heaven is both vertical in the union with God and horizontal in the communion with the saints. The Catechism develops this further by grounding it in the mystery of the Trinity: to be in heaven is to share in the inner life of Father, Son, and Spirit, which is why the saints can intercede for those still on earth.²³⁶ Fra Angelico anticipates this teaching visually, by weaving the heavenly court into a single golden mandorla of divine light, within which communion becomes visible.

3.3.4. Tradition: Patristic and ecclesial insights

Patristic tradition frequently emphasizes this same twofold dimension of heaven. Saint Augustine describes in his Book XIX, *civitas Dei* as the society of saints bound in charity. The church father Gregory the Great speaks of the “choirs of angels and saints” arranged in ordered ranks, each reflecting the divine beauty in a different mode.²³⁷ Later, medieval liturgy would give this vision concrete form: every Mass, in the Preface, joins the earthly assembly to the “angels and archangels, thrones and dominions” in eternal praise. Vatican II took up this patristic intuition in *Lumen Gentium* numbers 48–50, affirming that the Church on earth is inseparably linked to the Church in heaven, and that communion with the saints is not an optional devotion but a constitutive dimension of Christian eschatology.

3.4. The Hell and the Punishment of the Damned

The doctrine of hell occupies a serious yet indispensable place in Christian eschatology. For theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas and artists like Fra Angelico, the reality of damnation is not merely a subject of fear, but a profound revelation of divine justice and human freedom. Hell represents the final consequence of a life definitively turned away from the love of God the absolute negation of communion with Him. Within this framework, both theological reflection and artistic imagination have sought to express the mystery of punishment as the necessary counterpart to the order of divine equity. The following subsections explore this reality through complementary lenses: the

²³⁵ Cf. *ibid*, 1025.

²³⁶ Cf. *ibid*, 1029.

²³⁷ Cf. Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels*, II.

visual language of Fra Angelico, the systematic theology of Aquinas, the doctrinal synthesis of the Catechism, and the enduring witness of the Christian tradition.

3.4.1. Fra Angelico's Iconography: the descent into torment

Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* is as much about warning as it is about promise. If the upper half of the painting radiates with light and harmony, the lower right plunges into shadow, chaos, and horror. At the very bottom, Satan is enthroned grotesquely, parodying Christ's majesty above. This inversion is deliberate: by placing the Devil beneath, Angelico makes a visual theology of hierarchy that is Christ reigns in eternal glory, while Satan, once a rebellious angel, is reduced to a prisoner presiding over destruction. Around him, compartments or "boxes" unfold with scenes of torment: sinners are dragged by demons, devoured by beasts, burned in fire, and hurled into darkness. The different "rooms" of hell convey not only the diversity of sins but also the particularity of punishments, echoing medieval imagination shaped by Dante and popular preaching. Angelico's message is clear: just as heaven is harmony, hell is disorder; just as heaven is communion, hell is isolation and degradation.

3.4.2. Aquinas's Theology: loss of God and degrees of punishment

For Aquinas, the essence of hell is not fire or physical pain but the *poena damni* the eternal loss of the vision of God, or eternal separation from God.²³⁸ This deprivation is the deepest suffering, since the human soul was created for God alone. Yet Aquinas also affirms the *poena sensus* i.e. pain of sense and positive punishments such as fire which correspond analogically to the guilt of sin.²³⁹

Like Fra Angelico's "boxes" at the right part of the painting, Aquinas insists on gradation: the severity of punishment matches the gravity and obstinacy of sin. There is order even in the hell but we cannot say it as harmony, but a kind of strict justice. While the blessed are adorned with gifts, the damned bear the inverse: corruption, confusion, and servitude to disordered desire. If Angelico paints hell as grotesque spectacle, Aquinas explains it as metaphysical necessity: separation from God entails the disintegration of all that gives life coherence.

²³⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 98, a.1.

²³⁹ Cf. *Ibid.* q. 99.

3.4.3. Catechism: definitive self-exclusion from God

The Catechism synthesizes this tradition by describing hell as “the state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed”.²⁴⁰ Like Aquinas, it insists that the primary suffering of hell is loss: “the chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God”.²⁴¹ At the same time, the Catechism retains the biblical imagery of “unquenchable fire” and “outer darkness”,²⁴² which serves not as literal geography but as symbolic representation of a reality that surpasses human imagination. Fra Angelico’s flames, demons, and grotesque punishments are visual equivalents of these biblical metaphors and pedagogical images that stir fear and move the viewer to conversion.

3.4.4. Tradition: Patristic and magisterial voices

The Fathers of the Church consistently balanced two emphases: the justice of God and the freedom of the human person. Augustine insists that hell is not imposed arbitrarily but is the just consequence of freely chosen sin.²⁴³ Gregory the Great likewise speaks of the diversity of punishments, matching vice with torment, but always underscores that the punishment is a manifestation of divine equity, not cruelty. Later magisterial teaching from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) to the *Catechism* also reaffirms the eternity of hell, while Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* number 22 reminds us that Christ died for all and that damnation is the result of human refusal, not divine will. Tradition, therefore, frames hell not as God’s delight in punishment but as the tragic possibility that love can be rejected.

3.5. The Resurrection and The Open Tombs

The concept of open tombs is a fundamental theme expressed by both theologians. In the painting of Fra Angelico, he placed the open tomb at the very centre of the painting. And the study of saint Thomas Aquinas he writes very much about the opening of the

²⁴⁰ Cf. CCC. 1033.

²⁴¹ Cf. Ibid. 1035.

²⁴² Cf. Mt. 25:41. See also Mt. 8:12.

²⁴³ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.

tomb in two different parts. One is at the time of Jesus's resurrection and secondly in the time of last judgement. Let's see these aspects more clearly.

3.5.1. Fra Angelico's Iconography: tombs bursting with life

In Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment*, the open tombs are placed at the middle base of the painting situated below the figure of Jesus, the supreme judge; it shows that the earth itself seems to open at Christ's command. In the lower part of the panel, graves are split apart, and in the other painting even Fra Angelico depicts as figures rise from their tombs. Some emerge peacefully, their faces turned toward Christ in hope, while others appear bewildered, even terrified, as they realize that their lives are being weighed before the eternal Judge. If we deeply evaluate, we can see there is a special opened coffin with three crosses depicted on it. It may be the tomb of Christ, the three crosses symbolize the holy Trinity. It also says that he is the first one who resurrected before all mankind and in him we will also rise.

Angelico does not simply decorate the scene with detail: he translates into image the dramatic words of Matthew 25, when the Son of Man separates the sheep from the goats, and also from the gospel of John, where "*all who are in their graves will hear his voice.*"²⁴⁴ The open tombs, painted almost as if they were miniature stages, remind the spectator that death is not the end. Every human life, however hidden or forgotten, is destined to be revealed before God.

He places the open tomb in the perfect middle of the painting, and it can also be read as a way to heaven. Between the tomb and heaven, he places a gap perfectly decorated with the sky.

3.5.2. Aquinas's Theology: the qualities of the risen body

Aquinas gives profound depth to what Angelico paints so vividly. In the *Supplementum* to the *Summa Theologica*, he explains that the resurrection restores the same body, but transformed according to its eternal destiny.²⁴⁵ For the just, the body is glorified, marked by the four gifts (*dots*):

²⁴⁴ Cf. Jn. 5:28-29.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S.* q.82.

1. **Impassibility:** freedom from suffering;
2. **Clarity:** radiance of divine glory;
3. **Agility:** freedom from the weight of matter;
4. **Subtlety:** complete obedience to the soul.²⁴⁶

Aquinas stresses that resurrection is not a metaphor but a real event, necessary because human beings are body and soul. Justice requires that the same body which acted in life should share in either reward or punishment. If Angelico shows us bodies emerging visibly from the earth, Aquinas gives the metaphysical explanation: resurrection is God's final act of restoring creation to its proper order.

3.5.3. Catechism: resurrection as the heart of Christian hope

The Catechism describes the resurrection of the dead as “the crowning truth of the Christian faith.”²⁴⁷ It draws directly from Scripture: “the dead will rise imperishable, and we shall be changed.”²⁴⁸ Like Aquinas, the Catechism also emphasized that it is the same body that will face its consequences during and after the time of last judgement. And also, it is this same body that will be transformed and will rise.²⁴⁹ Fra Angelico's painted tombs capture in miniature what the Catechism calls the “definitive victory” over death. His art thus functions as catechesis: the spectator sees what the Church proclaims that Christ's victory is not abstract but concrete, involving our very bodies.

3.5.4. Sacred Tradition: Fathers of the church about the open tombs

The Fathers of the Church spoke often of the open tombs as signs of God's justice and mercy. Augustine insists that resurrection is necessary, because otherwise God's judgment would be incomplete and he also states that the soul and body together must face the consequences of life.²⁵⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, reflecting on Paul, writes that resurrection is not merely the return of flesh but its transfiguration, so that “what is sown in weakness is raised in power” (cf. 1 Cor 15:43). Medieval preachers, drawing on these patristic insights, often dramatized the opening of graves to remind the faithful of both

²⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.* qq. 82-85.

²⁴⁷ Cf. CCC. 988.

²⁴⁸ Cf. 1Cor. 15:52.

²⁴⁹ Cf. CCC, 997-1001.

²⁵⁰ Cf. CG. XXII.1.

terror and hope: terror for those unprepared, hope for those in Christ. Angelico paints precisely this double truth as the same graves yield both the blessed and the damned.

3.6. The Communion of Saints and the Heavenly Court

The mystery of the Communion of Saints reveals the Church in her fullest reality, which is one body united across heaven and earth in the love of Christ. In the vision of the heavenly court, holiness is shown not as isolation but as perfect communion, where each saint participates uniquely in the divine glory. Both theology and art have sought to express this order of charity and splendour. Fra Angelico's luminous depiction of the blessed, Aquinas's theological account of participation in glory, and the witness of the Catechism and Tradition all converge to affirm that heaven is not a static reward, but a living harmony of love, worship, and intercession before the throne of God.

3.6.1. Fra Angelico's Iconography: the radiant assembly of the blessed

One of the most striking aspects of Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* is the splendid gathering of saints around Christ. Organized in ordered tiers, they radiate serenity and joy, their bodies clothed in glowing garments, their faces turned toward the Judge in adoration. The Virgin Mary occupies a privileged place at Christ's side, embodying her role as intercessor and Mother of the Church. The apostles, seated in dignity, recall Christ's promise that they would "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt 19:28). Surrounding them are prophets, martyrs, confessors, virgins, and holy men and women which gives a visual symphony of sanctity. Fra Angelico conveys not simply individuals, but the very idea of communion: holiness is never solitary, but always shared. His use of light and golden tones underlines that heaven is not merely reward but participation in divine glory.

3.6.2. Aquinas's Theology: order and participation in glory

St. Thomas Aquinas devotes careful reflection to the order of the blessed in heaven. In the *Summa Theologica*, he affirms that the saints will enjoy the "vision of God's essence", the beatific vision and that this vision will be shared according to degrees of glory. Each saint receives a reward proportioned to his or her merit, but all share in the

same essential happiness of God Himself.²⁵¹ Aquinas explains that this diversity does not diminish unity; rather, it enriches the heavenly community, just as varied notes enrich a symphony. Mary, he insists, has the highest place among the saints because of her perfect cooperation in Christ's work.²⁵² Saint John the Baptists and the apostles too hold pre-eminence as witnesses and foundations of the Church. What Fra Angelico paints as hierarchical rows of radiant figures is affirmed by the theology of Aquinas by expounding as the "order of charity" that binds heaven together.

3.6.3. Catechism and Magisterium: the communion of saints

The Catechism affirms that the Church is not divided between earth and heaven, but united in one communion: "The communion of saints is the Church."²⁵³ The saints in heaven intercede for us, encourage us, and are always there to unite us with Christ.²⁵⁴ This communion reaches its fullness in heaven, where the blessed form "the heavenly Jerusalem, the great multitude whom no one could number."²⁵⁵ Here the court of justice, including the communion of saints, become more valid and even catechism of the catholic church affirms as his painted court becomes not just a mere artistic convention but a catechetical proclamation of what the Church believes: that heaven is a living community of worship, love, and intercession.²⁵⁶

3.6.4. Sacred Tradition: patristic and medieval thought

The Fathers frequently described heaven as an ordered community. Augustine speaks of the heavenly city as a "society bound together by love of God."²⁵⁷ Gregory the Great portrays the saints as a choir, harmonizing their voices in eternal praise. Medieval commentators, following Aquinas, emphasized that the diversity of saints in glory reflects the manifold wisdom of God. Fra Angelico's composition is faithful to this tradition: he does not portray a chaotic multitude, but an ordered and luminous assembly, where each figure contributes to the harmony of the whole.

²⁵¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S T S*, q. 93. a. 1.

²⁵² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, III. q. 27. a. 5.

²⁵³ Cf. CCC. 946.

²⁵⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* 956-957.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Rev. 7:9.

²⁵⁶ Cf. CCC. 1045.

²⁵⁷ Cf. CG. XIX.17.

Conclusion

In this third and final chapter, we have brought Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* into dialogue with the systematic theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and the doctrinal documents of the Church. What emerges from this comparison is not a conflict of perspectives, but rather a profound complementarity: art and theology serve the same truth, though they speak in different languages.

Fra Angelico's brush and Aquinas's pen converge on the same mystery: the ultimate destiny of humanity before Christ the Judge. Yet their modes of communication highlight different styles and strengths. Theology, as in the writings of Aquinas, provides clarity, logical structure, and intellectual precision. It tells us why Christ is the Judge, why resurrection is necessary, and how heaven and hell correspond to divine justice. But Angelico's painting offers what words cannot: the immediacy of vision. His luminous Christ enthroned in the mandorla, the saints gathered in radiant order, the tombs bursting with life, and the torments of hell all translate doctrine into a universal language of colour and form that every person, regardless of education, can understand.

Art is universal because it speaks to the imagination and the senses, not only to the intellect. While theology can be limited by language, cultural barriers, or philosophical complexity, art can reach the illiterate peasant and the educated theologian alike. In Angelico's fresco, the catechetical power of art is made visible: the final separation of the just and the wicked, the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem, the communion of saints, and the punishments of hell are all present in ways that touch both the heart and the mind. As John Paul II would later affirm in his *Letter to Artists*, art has the vocation to make the invisible visible, and thus to become a path to truth and faith.²⁵⁸

The comparative study also shows that art does not compete with theology; rather, it extends it. Aquinas gives us the framework where he explains the necessity of judgment, the qualities of the resurrected body, the order of glory, and the justice of punishment. Fra Angelico fills this framework with life and colour, creating a visual theology that stimulates contemplation and interpretation. Moreover, the spectator is not a passive recipient: art invites participation. In contemplating the open tombs or the heavenly court,

²⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (1999), §6.

each viewer can place themselves within the narrative, drawing personal meaning and responsibility from the universal truths displayed.

Finally, this chapter has revealed the catechetical dimension of sacred art. For centuries, paintings such as Angelico's were not merely decorations, but instruments of teaching. They embodied the truths of Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium in ways accessible to all. Art therefore becomes a living catechism: while Aquinas explains that Christ is both merciful Savior and just Judge, Angelico allows us to see His gaze and gestures, and to feel their weight. In this way, theology and art together serve the mission of the Church, ensuring that the doctrine of the Last Judgment is not abstract speculation but a lived and imagined reality.

In conclusion, the comparison of Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas leads us to a deeper conviction: the doctrine of the Last Judgment cannot be confined to text alone. It is a truth that demands expression in beauty, imagination, and symbol. Art universalizes theology, making it graspable for all. Theology secures art within the bounds of truth, preventing it from falling into mere sentiment or fantasy. Together, they reveal the Christian eschatological hope in its fullness: Christ the Judge, the resurrection of the body, the communion of saints, the glory of heaven, and the reality of hell. In this convergence, we recognize that the Last Judgment is not only the subject of books and paintings but the destiny of every human being.

General Conclusion

The journey of this thesis has taken us from the luminous brushstrokes of Fra Angelico to the precise arguments of St. Thomas Aquinas, and finally to a comparative study that sought to bring these two voices into dialogue within the broader framework of the Church's tradition and teaching. Here both the angelic painter and the angelic doctor serve as two wings carrying the same truth, the doctrine of last judgement. The central theme, the doctrine of the Last Judgment is, one of the most profound and challenging aspects of Christian eschatology. It touches the destiny of every human being, the meaning of history, and the ultimate triumph of divine justice and mercy.

In the first chapter, we examined the *Last Judgment* of Fra Angelico at the Museo di San Marco, exploring its artistic, theological, and catechetical dimensions. Through iconographic analysis, we discovered how Angelico's visual language communicates the mysteries of heaven, hell, resurrection, and the communion of saints. His work demonstrates that art can make theological truths accessible to all: the open tombs show the universality of resurrection; the radiant saints manifest the beauty of holiness; the abyss of hell communicates the seriousness of sin and divine justice. Fra Angelico does not reduce theology to decoration; rather, he elevates it into a language of beauty that is both contemplative and didactic.

The second chapter led us into the theological system of St. Thomas Aquinas, particularly his reflections in the *Summa Theologica* (Supplementum). Here we encountered a rigorous and ordered account of the Last Judgment: the scriptural foundations in Matthew 25, Revelation 20-21, and 1 Corinthians 15; the creedal affirmation that Christ will return to judge the living and the dead; the necessity and certainty of judgment; the court of Christ with angels and saints as witnesses; the qualities of the resurrected body; the beatific vision and the Heavenly Jerusalem; and finally, the eternal separation of the damned from God. Aquinas's voice gives us precision, coherence, and an assurance that the truths symbolically expressed in art rest on solid theological reasoning.

The third chapter wove these two perspectives together. In Fra Angelico, Christ is visually enthroned in glory; in Aquinas, Christ is theologically justified as Judge of all. Angelico shows us the saints in golden tiers; Aquinas explains their degrees of glory.

Angelico paints tombs breaking open; Aquinas reasons why resurrection is fitting and necessary. Angelico depicts the fires of hell; Aquinas clarifies the nature of eternal punishment. In conclusion, we can see that art and theological writings emerge as a profound harmony or in other words art and theology are not rivals, but companions. Theology secures the truth of art, while art expands the reach of theology, giving it universal accessibility.

From this comparative reflection, several key conclusions can be drawn:

1. **Art as a universal theological language.** While theology depends on words, concepts, and linguistic precision, art speaks to the senses, the imagination, and the emotions. Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* communicates to scholars and simple believers alike, transcending cultural and educational barriers.
2. **The creative and interpretive power of art.** Angelico's work not only transmits doctrine but also invites interpretation. Viewers are drawn into the scene, they can see themselves among the saved or the damned, among the saints or the judged. In this way, art does not simply illustrate theology but becomes a participatory experience of faith. The spectator becomes the participating person or personally makes dialogue with the art.
3. **The catechetical dimension of sacred art.** The Church has long recognized that visual art plays a vital role in teaching doctrine, especially in contexts where literacy is limited. Fra Angelico's painting functions as a living catechism: the truths articulated by Aquinas and the Magisterium are made visible in a way that educates and moves the faithful.
4. **The complementarity of art and theology.** Aquinas shows that faith seeks understanding, while Angelico demonstrates that faith also seeks beauty. The two together embody the unity of truth and beauty in the Christian tradition, reminding us that God is both the source of truth and the fullness of beauty.
5. **The enduring relevance of the Last Judgment.** Whether through theological treatises or artistic masterpieces, the doctrine of the Last Judgment continues to speak with urgency. It is not a relic of medieval imagination, but a perennial reminder of human responsibility, divine justice, and ultimate hope in Christ.

In the end, this thesis has shown that the Last Judgment is best understood when art and theology meet. Angelico and Aquinas, each in his own way, testify to the same mystery: Christ will come again in glory, the dead will rise, the just will be rewarded, and the wicked judged. The Church, through its Catechism, Magisterium, and Tradition, affirms this with authority. But it is art, perhaps more than words, that allows this truth to become universal, touching every human heart.

Thus, the study of Fra Angelico and St. Thomas Aquinas brings us to a final recognition: theology explains, art reveals, and together they form a single witness to the Christian hope. The Last Judgment, far from being only a doctrine or a painting, is a living reality that calls every generation to conversion, to hope, and to the vision of God's eternal glory.

Anex: 1.



Ministero della Cultura

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Firenze,
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andersonantony2013@gmail.com

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In riferimento alla Sua richiesta, nostro prot. n. 9008 del 3.12.2024, visto il D.Lgs. del 22 Gennaio 2004 n. 42, agli artt. 106, 107 e 108, integrati dal D.M.108 del 21.03.2024 "Modifiche al decreto del Ministro della cultura 11 aprile 2023", rep. N. 161, recante "Linee guida per la determinazione degli importi minimi dei canoni e dei corrispettivi per la concessione d'uso dei beni in consegna agli Istituti e Luoghi della Cultura statali", dato il carattere scientifico della richiesta, si **concede l'immagine** del Giudizio Finale di Beato Angelico, conservato nel Museo di San Marco, per motivi di studio.

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Dott. Stefano Casciu

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Elisabetta Mari



Direzione regionale Musei nazionali Toscana
Piazza de' Mozzi, 2 - 50125 FIRENZE
Tel. 055-5389100
pec: mbac-drm-tos@pec.cultura.gov.it
E-mail: drm-tos@cultura.gov.it



Firmato digitalmente da Casciu
Stefano
C = IT
O = Ministero della cultura

Anex: 2.

SCHEDA



CD - CODICI

TSK - Tipo Scheda	OA
LIR - Livello ricerca	C
NCT - CODICE UNIVOCO	
NCTR - Codice regione	09
NCTN - Numero catalogo generale	00191241
ESC - Ente schedatore	L. 41/1986
ECP - Ente competente	S417

OG - OGGETTO

OGT - OGGETTO	
OGTD - Definizione	dipinto
SGT - SOGGETTO	
SGTI - Identificazione	Giudizio Universale

LC - LOCALIZZAZIONE GEOGRAFICO-AMMINISTRATIVA

PVC - LOCALIZZAZIONE GEOGRAFICO-AMMINISTRATIVA ATTUALE	
PVCS - Stato	ITALIA
PVCR - Regione	Toscana
PVCP - Provincia	FI
PVCC - Comune	Firenze

LDC - COLLOCAZIONE SPECIFICA

LDCT - Tipologia	convento
LDCQ - Qualificazione	domenicano
LDCN - Denominazione attuale	Convento di S. Marco
LDCC - Complesso di appartenenza	Chiesa e convento di S. Marco
LDCU - Indirizzo	P.zza S. Marco, 3
LDCM - Denominazione raccolta	Museo di S. Marco
LDCS - Specifiche	ospizio dei Pellegrini, parete di fondo

UB - UBICAZIONE E DATI PATRIMONIALI

Anex: 3.

RSTE - Ente responsabile	SBAS FI
RSTN - Nome operatore	Lo Vullo G./ Del Vivo N.
RST - RESTAURI	
RSTD - Data	1965
RSTE - Ente responsabile	SBAS FI
RST - RESTAURI	
RSTD - Data	1970
RSTE - Ente responsabile	SBAS FI
DA - DATI ANALITICI	
DES - DESCRIZIONE	
DESO - Indicazioni sull'oggetto	NR (recupero pregresso)
DESI - Codifica Iconclass	11 U 1
DESS - Indicazioni sul soggetto	Soggetti sacri. Personaggi: San Domenico; Santo Stefano; San Pietro apostolo; Madonna ; Dio Padre ; San Giovanni Battista; San Paolo apostolo Sant'Andrea apostolo; San Romualdo ; San Francesco d'Assisi; Lucifero. Figure maschili: Santi; Beati; Dannati. Figure femminili: Beate; Dannate. Figure: Angeli; Diavoli. Abbigliamento: all'antica; contemporaneo. Oggetti: gigli; chiavi; spada; croce. Architetture: cerchia muraria merlata. Oggetti: trombe; lance; avelli; sarcofago; brocca; piatti; bicchieri; tavolo.
NSC - Notizie storico-critiche	Secondo l'Orlandi la tavola deve essere messa in relazione sia con l'eredità venuta dal monastero di Santa Maria degli Angeli da Andrea di Filippo degli Scolari, vescovo di Varadino, morto il 26 gennaio 1426, e da Matteo di Stefano degli Scolari morto anch'egli nella stessa città il 13 gennaio di detto anno, in seguito, molto probabilmente, all'elevazione ad abate generale dell'ordine camaldolese di Ambrogio Traversari, avvenuta nell'ottobre del 1431 . Infatti nel documento del 31 agosto 1431 si ordina che si faccia un oratorio con un coro adeguato e tutte le altre cose a discrezione dei monaci. La coincidenza della data proposta dalla critica, 1430-31, della eredità dei due personaggi della famiglia Scolari, dell'accordo, se non definitivo, almeno orale tra i consoli dell'Arte di Calimala e il monastero per la costruzione di un "coro decente", e l'elevazione di Ambrogio Traversari, il maggior lustro che mai il monastero avesse avuto, fa credere giustamente che il solenne sedile, sulla cui spalliera fu posta la tavola dell'Angelico, fosse ordinato e fatto in tale circostanza. Una datazione intorno al 1431 è accettata dal Pope Hennessy che comunque considera l'opera copia di un originale perduto fatta da Zanobi Strozzi oppure limita l'intervento dell'Angelico ai cartoni preparatori ed attribuisce la stesura pittorica allo stesso Zanobi.
TU - CONDIZIONE GIURIDICA E VINCOLI	
ACQ - ACQUISIZIONE	
ACQT - Tipo acquisizione	soppressione
ACQN - Nome	convento camaldolese di S. Maria degli Angeli
ACQD - Data acquisizione	1810
ACQL - Luogo acquisizione	FI/ Firenze
CDG - CONDIZIONE GIURIDICA	
CDGG - Indicazione generica	proprietà Stato

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