BYZANTINE ICONS, FRANCISCAN PRAYER:
IMAGES OF INTERCESSION AND ASCENT IN THE
UPPER CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO, ASSISI

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The Deesis vault has justly been called the key and culmination of the entire conceptual program of the Upper Church of San Francesco at Assisi (Figs. 1, 3, 4).1 Its significance is indeed manifold. In a program whose purpose is to present the entire salvation history of mankind and the mission of the Franciscan order within that history, the Deesis is an image of the celestial Christ, accompanied by a hierarchy of saints and angels. On its golden vault, the Deesis suggests the transcendent Church Triumphant, the heavenly counterpart of the Church Militant, which is represented on earth by the physical church of San Francesco itself. In the Deesis, Francis, titular saint of the Basilica, is raised to glory, joining John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary as primary advocates for mankind. And, seen in conjunction with the vaults at the west and east ends of the nave, painted with the Evangelists and Doctors of the Church, the central Deesis pictures Christ as the divine source of the church’s wisdom and teaching (Fig. 3).2 Yet, while all of these concepts have validity, our understanding of the Deesis can be still further enriched by considering the key position of the image within a physical space devoted to prayer.

Although the Upper Church is visually dense, covered with pictorial imagery on practically every surface, the space is nevertheless dominated by focal images of Christ. The transcendent Christ of the

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Deesis is placed in the third of the church’s five square bays, its importance evident from its commanding, central position (Figs. 2, 3). Its visual prominence was matched in the thirteenth century by that of three other large images (only two of which survive), each depicting Christ on the cross and each associated with one of the Basilica’s three altars (Figs. 2, 8, 9, 11). The significance of the Deesis in San Francesco can be explored through its relationship to these images of the crucified Christ, considering issues of architectural space, Franciscan theology, and Byzantine artistic models.

For the primary images of Christ at Assisi—the Deesis and Christ on the cross—were adapted from Byzantine art, a fact that is often noted but which still raises fundamental questions about the Franciscans’ appreciation, understanding, and refashioning of models imported from the east. A short essay cannot survey the full extent and significance of Byzantine art at Assisi, but, through analysis of Assisi’s primary images of Christ, I will suggest that the designers and artists of the Upper Church skillfully manipulated images taken from Byzantine iconography in order to enhance a worship-space that in many respects was unprecedented: the first monumental church built for the Franciscans and the “head” and “mother-church” of a new religious order. Even though the architecture and decoration of San Francesco were firmly rooted in western, especially Roman, traditions, by coordinating the placement of the Deesis with images of Christ on the cross, the designers of the Upper Church created something new. “Imported” Byzantine images of Christ effectively modify the dynamics of the western, basilican architectural space in a way that alters the meaning of the Byzantine image and subtly, yet clearly, suggests the dynamics of Bonaventure’s theology of prayer and salvation. The result is a Franciscan sacred space, expressive of Franciscan theology, and fostering Franciscan prayer.

My analysis follows the lead of others who have interpreted the decoration of the Upper Church in relationship to theology. My perspective, however, is somewhat different, asking how the dominating, Byzantine-inspired images of Christ might have enhanced the

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3 According to Gregory IX’s bull of 1230, *Is qui Ecclesiam*, the Basilica was to serve the Order as “caput et mater.” For the significance of this phrase, which implicitly compares San Francesco to the Lateran church in Rome, see Belting, *Die Oberkirche*, pp. 24–25, who stresses the innovative character of San Francesco’s architecture and decoration, pp. 9–29.