Giorgio Vasari, *Saint Thomas of Aquinas and the Heretics*

**In the Chapel of Pius V: A New Discovery**

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_In memory of Wolfram Prinz, uomo docto_

After his election as pope in 1566, Pius V (Antonio Ghislieri, 1504–72, reigned 1566–72 (Fig. 1)¹ began a filial artistic connection with Giorgio Vasari (1511–74). His first commission for Vasari was to decorate the pope’s burial chapel at the church of Santa Croce in Bosco Marengo, his natal place. The chapel decoration consists of an _Adoration of the Magi_ and several other paintings, including New and Old Testament scenes as well as Dominican saints and martyrdoms, reflecting the pope’s affiliation with this religious order (Corti 130).² His other major papal commissions for Vasari were to decorate his apartment and three chapels in the Vatican in 1571–72 (Vasari 102–3).³ The result of these commissions prompted Pope Pius V to grant Vasari the highest honors in the _Cavalierato di San Pietro e Cavalier dello Speron d’Oro (Knight of the Golden Spur)_ a gold chain on top of remunerations totaling over a thousand scudi.⁴

In a letter from his friend Monsignor Guglielmo Sangalletti, Secret Treasurer to Pope Pius V, dated December 5, 1569, Vasari describes these commissions: an apartment with a gallery, two small rooms, and a chapel (Frey 471–73, 475–76, 485, 527, 547, and 882). Vasari and Federico Zuccaro (1540–1609) embellished the apartment with fresco decorations during the reign of the pope.⁵ An additional commission from the pope to decorate three chapels, which are located in the so-called Borgia’s Tower (Torre Borgia or Torre Pia, Fig. 2); they are architecturally designed in three levels, one above the other.

Vasari’s ricordi, or entries to his commissions—along with the writings of Paola Barocchi followed by the studies of Julian Kliemann and Laura Corti, which are based on the collected letters documented in Karl Frey’s epistolary and Alessandro del Vita’s inventories—explain the commissions. These accounts and historical notations assist in visualizing Vasari’s original design of these chapels, since they have been subject to many transformations and renovations through the years (Vasari 102–3; Frey 471–73, 475–76 and 882; Barocchi 68–70; Kliemann 96–7; Corti 138–40).⁶ The themes of chapels honor the triumphs of Saint Michael, Saint Peter Martyr, and Saint Stephen Martyr. The subject in each chapel expresses the spiritual Dominican affirmations of Pope Pius V in support of the Council of Trent’s edicts and his moral fortitude, on the renewal of the church’s pastoral mission, and the condemnation of heresy.⁷

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As a strong advocate of the Counter-Reformation, Pius V’s concerns were twofold: reforming the Church by combating the heretics and establishing the Holy League, an alliance of the Catholic countries, for a Crusade to defend Christianity against the Ottomans. His ambition was fulfilled with the victory of the Battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571. He attributed the success to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, and hence, instituting the month of October as the month dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary (Cheney, “Giorgio Vasari,” 385–403). Another ambition of Pope Pius V was to standardize the liturgy, forming a uniform recitation in Latin of the Roman Breviary, Missal, and celebration of the Mass. Along with these religious accomplishments, the pope ensured that the Roman catechism was completed and translated into many languages and that catechetical instructions were administered in the parishes. His greatest quest was to preserve the purity of the Christian faith. With this goal in mind, Pius V declared the greatest Dominican theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Doctor of the Church, Angelicus Doctor (“Angelic Doctor”) and canonized him as the fifth doctor of the Latin Church in 1567 (W. Durant, and A. Durant 238–9). As a result of this historical event, the pope sponsored the publication of an edition of Saint Thomas’s complete works in 1570. In these commissions, Vasari visualized and aggrandized the pope’s intentions in faithfully embracing the spiritual manifestations of the Counter-Reformation.

In Florence, on February 10, 1572, Vasari proudly wrote to the Tuscan prince Francesco I de’ Medici about the status of his labor for the papal chapels, saying that he created and designed them all by himself. He also notes he had completed numerous drawings, fifty-six cartoons containing twelve stories, and three painted panels for these chapels (Frey 556 and 558). Most of the drawings and cartoons for the commissions were executed in consultation with his humanist—and theologian—friend Vincenzo Borghini (1515–80), Prior of the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence (Scorza 68–122). Vasari composed most of the preparatory drawings for these chapels while in Florence. When painting them in situ in Rome, he was assisted by Jacopo Zucchi (1541–90). This Florentine painter of the Mannerist style trained in Vasari’s workshop in his early career and collaborated with the master in many of the decorations throughout his artistic career (Pillsbury).

In his Ricordo 360, Vasari outlined the design for the three chapels (Frey 96–97). The chapel of Saint Michael was the first chapel to be decorated. On December 2, 1570, Vasari noted that he was in Rome commencing the decoration of the first chapel, Cappella di San Michele (Frey 547). He further elaborates on the description of the imagery. He depicts stories of Saint Michael, alluding to the eponymous name, Michael, selected by the pope when he entered the Dominican order. In the vault, the chapel is decorated with Saint Michael leading an army of seven good angels against seven sinners, alluding to Saint Michael combating the revolt of Lucifer’s bad angels and seven deadly sins (Figs. 3, 4, and 5) (Jaffé 142). In the Holy Scriptures, Saint Michael is mentioned as the protector of the Church and Guardian Angel of the Pope, an iconography adhered by the pope’s mission of eradicating the heretics from the Christian (now Catholic) church.