Innocenzo Venchi, Renate L. Colella, Arnold Nesselrath,
Carlo Giantomassi and Donatella Zari

FRA ANGELICO AND THE CHAPEL OF NICHOLAS V

Photographs of the Chapel by
Alessandro Bracchetti, Attilio Maranzano, Pasquale Rizzi, Pietro Zigrossi

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THE CAPPELLA NICCOLINA, OR CHAPEL OF NICHOLAS V IN THE VATICAN:

THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ITS FRESCOES

by Renate L. Colella

The Cappella Niccolina, the chapel named after the Pope who commissioned its decoration from Fra Angelico in 1448, Nicholas V (1447-1455, fig. 1), arose in a period of wide-ranging ecclesiastical and spiritual change.

Nicholas V’s predecessor, Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447), had finally returned to Rome in 1443, after a personal exile from the Eternal City for almost a decade and an absence of the Curia from Rome which had (with some short intermissions) lasted over 130 years. When Eugenius died not long afterwards, on 23 February 1447, he left behind him a Church confronted with the problems of schism, conciliarism and the encroaching interests of the secular powers.

The reputation and authority of the papacy had been badly damaged; papal supremacy over the Church had been placed in question and threatened.¹

The unexpected election of Tommaso Parentucelli from Sarzana (in Tuscany), Archbishop of Bologna, who had only been called to the College of Cardinals a few weeks earlier (December 1446), was to mark a turning-point in the history of the papacy: Nicholas V, as the new Pope chose to call himself, succeeded in renewing the authority and restoring the reputation of the Church, and in raising Rome to the spiritual and cultural center of Christianity.² The successful restoration of the papacy in Rome found a visible expression in an ambitiously planned and implemented renovatio urbis and in the intensive promotion of the arts and sciences within the Curia.³

The most important witness to these events was the Florentine humanist and secretary of Nicholas V, Giannozzo Manetti
(1396-1457), who wrote a highly panegyric Vita of the Pope shortly after Nicholas’s death. ¹

Manetti’s biography also contains, incorporated in the political testament of Nicholas V in Book 3 of the Vita, an ecphrasis of the Pope’s various building projects. ³ These projects ranged from restoration work on all the important sacred and profane buildings of the city to an ambitious plan for the reconstruction of St. Peter’s Basilica, the Borgo and the papal palace in the Vatican. Large parts of this plan, which was intended to form the centerpiece of the Pope’s renovatio urbis, such as the erection of extensive new quarters for the spiritual and secular representation of the papal court, were never realized, others were discontinued by Nicholas V’s successors or replaced by new buildings, such as the reconstruction of the tribune in the old Constantinian basilica of St. Peter under the direction of Bernardo Rossellino. ⁴

Nicholas V’s plans for the Vatican, as transmitted by Manetti, are inseparably bound up with the transfer of the official papal residence from the Lateran to the papal palace adjacent to St. Peter’s Basilica: a transfer which had begun before Nicholas’s time and was finally completed during this period. ⁵

The internal renovation of the already existing buildings at the Vatican also received a strong impulsive from this move.

The first step towards the restoration of the medieval Vatican palace, grouped round the courtyard known as the Cortile del Pappagallo, had already been taken by Nicholas V’s predecessor, Eugenius IV, who restored the chapel known as the capella parva. This chapel, which fulfilled not only a liturgical but a ceremonial function, and was used for the holding of consistories, was dedicated to St. Nicholas of Bari.

It served as the chapel for the Holy Sacrament. And for its frescoing with scenes from the Life of Christ and five portraits of important contemporaries Eugenius summoned to Rome in 1445 the well-known Dominican friar Fra Angelico, whom he had already got to know at the time of his exile in Florence. ⁶

On the death of Eugenius, presumably shortly before completion of his work on the chapel, Fra Angelico was immediately entrusted with further commissions by the new Pope, Nicholas V. They included the decoration not only of the chapel now known as the Cappella Niccolina, but also of the Pope’s studio (or private study) and the works in the choir of the old St. Peter’s. ⁷

But, with the exception of the Cappella Niccolina, all these works fell victim to the various building measures instigated by Nicholas V’s successors: within a few decades of their completion they were demolished. ⁸

In its time the Cappella Niccolina was one project among several. But today it represents the only major example of the early renovation of the Vatican as the official residence of the popes in Rome after their return from their lengthy exile in Avignon. At the same time, its frescoes represent the most important testimony of the extensive late work of Fra Angelico, which corresponds in large measure with the various commissions he fulfilled in the Vatican. ⁹

The pictorial program of the Cappella Niccolina

The Chapel of Nicholas V was given a decoration of the whole of its interior in the form of a unified pictorial program by Fra Angelico and his workshop. With the exceptions of the altar wall, parts of the scene of the Martyrdom of St. Lawrence (plate 99) and the figure of the Greek Father Athanasius (plate 18) to the left of the altar, the pictorial program has for the most part been preserved intact. ¹⁰

The chapel’s pictorial decoration is distinguished by a clearly articulated and systematically applied arrangement of the frescoes. The layout of the frescoes is closely dependent on the architectural constraints of this small sacred space, which was created by amalgamating the two uppermost stories of a defensive tower built as part of the Vatican’s fortifications during the pontificate of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). ¹¹

Under Nicholas III (1277-1280) the tower, flanking the east wing of the Cortile del Pappagallo, was incorporated in the complex of private papal apartments installed in this area of the palace. It is presumable
that the space thus created by eliminating the ceiling between the two floors was already being used as a *cappella secreta* for the private devotions of the popes in the late fourteenth century. The chapel probably received its current form in the fifteenth century, shortly before its decoration with the frescoes of Fra Angelico.\(^\text{1}\)

In architectural terms the chapel consists, at the center, of a large, approximately square bay, roofed by a cruciform groin-vault. Two broad barrel-vaulted arches connect this central bay with the entrance wall to the north and with the altar wall to the south, and enlarge the space of the chapel to give it an overall oblong ground plan measuring 6.31 m in length and 4.21 m in width. The two barrel-vaulted arches project slightly into the room, so that the walls of the central bay are slightly recessed between them. The combination of groin-vault, central bay and lateral arches results in a rhythmical interchange of differently shaped wall surfaces in the elevation of the walls: four very broad arched or lunette-shaped wall surfaces below the central groin-vault alternate with the narrow elongated panels that encompass the two barrel-vaulted lateral arches in the corners of the side walls. The amalgamation of two different forms of vaulting and the incorporation of the two added barrel-vaulted arches in the north-south axis give rise to an articulation of the chapel’s walls into clearly separated and demarcated wall surfaces. Together with the embrasures of the two windows in the side wall to the right of the altar and the triangular vaults of the groin-vault, four different wall surfaces can be distinguished. And to each of these surfaces correspond one of the four different thematic units that comprise the chapel’s pictorial program.

The main part of this program consists of two superimposed narrative cycles with scenes from the lives of the holy deacons Stephen and Lawrence (plate 28, 41, 56 and 69, 80, 99). Placed over a high dado which runs uniformly round the chapel, these scenes fill the large round-arched wall surfaces below the groin-vault on the entrance wall and the two side walls. A fictive architectural cornice at the height of a small horizontal stringcourse divides these wall surfaces into two separate registers or tiers. The lower tier consists of a rectangular wall surface, the upper tier of a broad lunette. The upper tier is devoted to the life of St. Stephen, the lower to that of St. Lawrence. The cycle of Stephen consists of six scenes. Each of the three upper lunettes is filled with two of them, placed side by side. Starting out from the west side wall to the right of the altar, these scenes consist of the following episodes from the life of the Saint (reading from left to right): the *Ordination of the Saint as a Deacon* and his *Distribution of Alms to the Poor* (plate 28) on the right side wall; *Stephen preaching to the People and the Prosecution and Trial of the Deacon before the Sanhedrin* (plate 41) on the entrance wall; *The Expulsion of the condemned Stephen from the City* and *his Stoning to Death before the Gates of Jerusalem* (plate 56) on the left side wall.

The cycle of St. Lawrence similarly consists of six episodes from the life of the Saint, similarly leading from his ordination as deacon to his martyr’s death. The six scenes fill the oblong panels of the lower register. On the right side wall of the chapel this tier is interrupted by the two narrow round-arched windows by which the wall is pierced. The wall surface available as a pictorial space was as a consequence significantly reduced: it only provided sufficient space for one scene and determines a different arrangement of the following scenes. The various episodes from the life of St. Lawrence are as follows: the *Ordination of Lawrence as Deacon* (plate 69); *Sixtus II handing over the Treasures of the Church to Lawrence* and the Saint’s *Distribution of the Treasures of the Church to the Poor* (plate 80) on the entrance wall; and *Lawrence appearing before the Emperor Decius, his Blessing of an Old man in Prison* and *his Martyrdom on a gridiron* (plate 99) on the left side wall.

The original decoration of the altar wall no longer survives. Vasari’s *Vita of Fra Angelico* testifies to a *Deposition from the Cross* in this area.\(^\text{1}\) This painting over the altar, also presumably painted in fresco, was replaced by a panel painting by Vasari in 1725.\(^\text{1}\) Representing the *Stoning of St. Stephen*, this latter painting was until recently in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, but following its recent restoration has now been restored to the chapel and placed over its altar (fig. 2).
The narrative program of the decoration of the chapel is complemented by a series of individual figural representations. Selected Doctors of the Latin and Greek Churches — Ambrose, Athanasius, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Leo the Great and Thomas Aquinas (plates 11, 18, 12, 13, 21, 22, 10, 19) — are set in fictive canopies in the narrow oblong fields formed by the barrel-vaulted lateral arches that run round the altar and entrance-walls. These lateral wall surfaces are also divided above the dado into two superimposed registers. In the area of the impost zone, i.e. clearly above the fictive architectural cornice that separates the two cycles of scenes from the lives of St. Stephen and Lawrence, narrow ornamental friezes divide the barrel-vaulted lateral arches on each side into two tall and narrow oblong fields (plates 25 and 26). The full-length figure of a Doctor of the Church is set in each of the eight fields thus formed. They stand under late-gothic architectural canopies, adorned with Renaissance elements; the base of these fictive canopies is inscribed with the name of the Doctor of the Church set within it. All eight figures, dressed in liturgical vestments, hold open books in their hands which they appear to be reading or which they present to the onlooker. Two of them — John Chrysostom and Thomas Aquinas — point to short inscriptions in their open books: Thomas Aquinas to the verse “Veritatem meditabitur guttur meum, et labia mea detestabuntur impium” from the Book of Proverbs (Pro 8:7),” which alludes to his Summa contra gentiles; John Chrysostom to a verse which has still to be identified: “Attende tibi ipsi ne forte fiat in corde tuo occulta impia cogitatio”. The splayed embrasures of the windows are painted with roundels containing, in alternation, decorative rosettes and the busts of fourteen Old Testament prophets and patriarchs. Of these latter only Moses with the Tablets of the Law (plate 112) and Abraham with Isaac can be clearly identified: they are placed respectively at the apex of each window (plate 118).

Lastly, the four triangular compartments of the groin-vault (plate 5) are each frescoed with one of the four Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with their respective symbols (plates 7, 6, 8 and 9).
The individual components of the narrative and figural program are knit together by a coherent overall decorative system consisting of fictive architectonic and plant-like framing elements, interspersed with emblematic, floral and ornamental motifs. In the vertical framing of the scenes the decorative system follows the structural articulation of the walls created by the joints between the central bay and the two barrel-vaulted arches by which it is flanked. The barrel-vaults of the latter are framed by narrow bands of foliage which extend into the dado below. The cruciform ribs of the groin-vault and the round arcades of the upper lunettes are similarly ornamented with narrow friezes of laurel wreaths. But in the lower tier of frescoes, that of the cycle of St. Lawrence, the ornamentation gives way to the fictive architectural form of pilasters adorned with foliated ornament. The horizontal framing of the scenes and figures also reflects the architectural articulation of the chapel’s walls, as is especially apparent in the coincidence between the height of the doors and that of the dado. The dado is topped by a classical entablature and hung with red, yellow and green fictive brocade hangings with the coats of arms of Nicholas V (plates 123, 124, 125, 126). The frieze of the entablature is adorned with festoons of fruit suspended on miniature heads of putti and medallions (plate 123), they also containing the coat of arms of Nicholas V, with the crossed keys placed under the tiara. A fictive architectural entablature horizontally separates the two cycles of Saints at the center of the wall. But this is significantly narrower than the entablature above the dado, and its frieze is more simply adorned with a plain horizontal floral wreath of red and blue blossoms (plate 96 and 97). With the exception of the ceiling vault, in which framing elements formed of floral and ornamental motifs predominate, the decorative system reveals a notably architectonic character. It serves not only to articulate and frame the pictorial decoration and the individual components of the decorative program, but also to interpret the architectural space of the chapel itself. The former chamber in a defensive tower appears in Fra Angelico’s decoration as a festive sacred space, to which an important role of expressing the prestige of the papacy was attached. This clearly transcended the chapel’s character as an oratory purely for the private prayer and meditation of the pope, and is indicative of the aims that lie behind the fresco program.

The narrative program: the life and deeds of the holy deacons
Stephen and Lawrence

The source for the cycle of episodes from the life of St. Stephen represented in the upper lunettes of the Cappella Niccolina is The Acts of the Apostles (chapters 6-8). According to this account, a dispute within the original Christian community in Jerusalem lay behind the appointment of Stephen as a deacon. The dispute was triggered off by the alleged neglect of the widows of the “Hellenists” (i.e. the Greek-speaking Christians) in the daily distribution of food to relieve the poor, and was resolved by the election of seven men “of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and with wisdom” to whom this task of distributing charity to the poor was specifically devolved. Apart from the relief of the poor, the tasks of the deacons also included pastoral care and missionary activity. The success Stephen enjoyed in disseminating the faith among the people by his preaching and good works soon aroused the envy and the resentment of the Synagogue. Stephen was slandered and accused of blasphemy before the Sanhedrin.

Stephen, in self-defence, made a long speech denouncing the many transgressions of the people of Israel against the law of God (Acts 7:1-53). Infuriated by Stephen’s accusations, the members of the council rushed at him, seized him, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death before its gates.

In the case of the cycle of St. Lawrence, in the lower oblong tier of frescoes, no particular hagiographical source can be cited among the rich medieval literature devoted to recounting the legend of Lawrence. As in the cycle of St. Stephen, that of St. Lawrence also begins with the Saint’s ordination as deacon, by Pope Sixtus II. This is followed by two scenes that show the Saint’s charitable activity in aid of the poor: shortly before Roman soldiers break into the papal palace to arrest Sixtus II, the Pope hands over to Lawrence the treasures of the Church, instructing him to distribute them to the poor. Entrusted with this task,
Lawrence gathers together the poor, the cripples and beggars of Rome and shares out the money between them. After the Pope had met a martyr’s death, the emperor Decius claimed the treasures of the Church for himself, ordered the arrest of Lawrence and demanded that he surrender them to him. Lawrence steadfastly refused, despite torture and imprisonment. Thereupon he was, on the emperor’s orders, tortured to death on a red-hot gridiron.

In the choice and juxtaposition of the episodes recounted in the frescoes, both cycles display considerable thematic coincidences: the lives of the two deacons follow a parallel course, from ordination to martyrdom. This impression of an inherent symmetry between them is reinforced by the arrangement of the cycles in two superimposed horizontal tiers. Key scenes in the two cycles, such as the ordination of the two saints as deacons, not only coincide in content, but are directly superimposed over each other or placed in close juxtaposition. In this way they invite comparison and prompt meditation on the analogies drawn between them.

The evident concern to underline the parallels between the two cycles is accompanied, however, by a contrary tendency in the pictorial narration. Both cycles are characterized by their own narrative procedure. The cycle of St. Stephen reveals a sequential narrative mode with a compositional arrangement from left to right, in the order in which the onlooker is invited to ‘read’ the scenes. In the cycle of St. Lawrence, by contrast, the individual compositions are more markedly centralized and self-enclosed. This differentiated narrative mode is achieved by means of a different structuring of the settings in which the actions are placed and the position and pose of the protagonists in the individual scenes.

In the cycle of St. Stephen, the pairs of scenes, each set in one of the lunettes, are represented continuously in a single pictorial space, without any separating frame between them. The visual links between the three pairs of scenes realized in this way are further reinforced by the figural compositions, in such a way as to underline the sequential continuity from one lunette to the next. We may mention in this regard the pose in profile of the protagonists to the far left or right of each of the lunettes: this compositional device sustains the continuous flow of the pictorial narrative. The protagonists (Stephen and, in the first scene, Peter too) form prominent fixed points, through which the narrative thread is continued from one scene to the next (plate 28).

In contrast, the figural compositions in the cycle of St. Lawrence are more markedly centralized. The protagonists are always given a position at the center of the picture, and frequently represented in frontal poses (plate 84). Moreover, the cycle of St. Lawrence displays a more manifest concern to separate the individual scenes. The scene of the deacon’s ordination is physically separated from the rest, since it occupies an isolated position between the two windows on the west wall. The scenes portrayed on the entrance wall are separated, in turn, by a framing element in the form of a narrow architectural element (plate 80). The last three scenes are distinguished from each other by the different architectural settings in which they are each placed.

A significant contribution to the compositional centralization and differentiation of the scenes in the St. Lawrence cycle is made by the architectural backdrops. Especially the basilicas represented in the scene of the *Ordination of St. Lawrence as Deacon* and that of *St. Lawrence distributing the Treasures of the Church*. Each of these architectural settings is markedly symmetrical in its centralized view of the nave of a basilica, its colonnades perspective diminishing to the apse in the background. By means of this symmetrical setting the narrative scene portrayed in it is contained in a compositionally enclosed frame. The two basilicas, however, do not just provide a frame for the actions taking place in them: they also provide a setting consonant with the dignity of the event and its protagonists. This concern to make the setting match the action is especially apparent in the scene of the *Distribution of the Treasures of the Church*: here the perspectival diminution of the nave of the basilica is constructed in such a way that the apse, the cultic center, seems to surround the Saint like a niche. This device recalls the ancient practice of placing cult images in niches, and should be understood as a hieraticizing motif: a way of underlining the Saint’s cultic significance and role (plates 80, 92 and 93).
The lavish decorative embellishment of the scenes of St. Lawrence fulfils the same function. In comparison with the St. Stephen cycle, there is a significantly richer use of gold leaf in the adornment of the garments of the individual figures; this is especially pronounced in the golden flames by which Lawrence’s dalmatic is spangled (plate 84).

Also aimed at emphasizing the material lavishness and splendor of the scenes are, first, the way that the protagonists are dressed in all’antica suits of armor and costly fabrics – gold brocades and damasks – and, second, the equally classicizing style of the architecture and its opulent embellishment with marble incrustation, with textile and sculptural decoration in the forms of wall-hangings, statues, busts and reliefs (plates 94, 95, 102, 104, 108).

The thematic parallels drawn between the two cycles of Saints, and the simultaneous striving towards formal differentiation between them, by which greater emphasis is placed on Lawrence than on Stephen, might (superficially considered) seem contradictory. But both aspects complement each other. They can be explained on the one hand by the patronage of the chapel itself – it was dedicated to Lawrence – and by the particular ideas associated with both Saints in Rome and in the Curia.

The tradition and significance of devotion to Sts Stephen and Lawrence in Rome and the Curia

The circumstances and intentions that inspired Nicholas V to choose St. Lawrence as the patron saint of his chapel and the combined Stephen-Lawrence program for its decoration, are not divulged by the sources. A wish on the Pope’s part to glorify his name saint, or to commemorate an important event for him which occurred on a feastday of both Saints, cannot be confirmed as a motive. Nor can the existence of any special relics of Sts Stephen or Lawrence in the chapel.

The motives that prompted Nicholas V to devote his private chapel to the celebration of these two saints must therefore be sought in a wider framework. Stephen and Lawrence hold a prominent position among Christian saints: both were martyrs to their faith, and both, independently of each other, enjoyed particular veneration throughout the Christian world: Stephen as the first martyr to Christ, whose death has scriptural authority, testified as it is by the Acts of the Apostles, and is inseparably linked with the life and action of the first apostles in Jerusalem; Lawrence, due to the particular gruesomeness of his martyrdom.

The cult of St. Lawrence

In Rome itself the cult of both Saints already had a long and important tradition when Nicholas V commissioned Fra Angelico to decorate his chapel. Lawrence in particular had grown close to the hearts of the Romans. For he had undergone martyrdom in the Eternal City itself and thus shared the fate of the princes of the apostles Peter and Paul: indeed, all three were regarded as the Roman martyrs par excellence.

The reasons why Lawrence was so highly esteemed are elucidated by a series of written sources from the late fourth and early fifth centuries: an epigram of Pope Damasus I, two passages in Ambrose’s De officiis ministrorum, the “Hymn to St. Lawrence” in the Peristephanon of Aurelius Prudentius, and a number of sermons and hymns of the Church Fathers Ambrose and Augustine, Maximinus of Turin and Petrus Chrysolorus.

Since, in contrast to Stephen, no authentic passio for Lawrence has been transmitted, these texts (which contain only occasional references to the Saint) also represent the most important sources for the early form of the legend of St. Lawrence. According to these texts, Lawrence served Pope Sixtus II as archdeacon and fell victim to the persecutions launched against the clergy under the emperor Decius on 10 August of the year 258, three days after Sixtus himself. Lawrence is said to have been condemned by the emperor Decius to a long and agonizing martyrdom on a red-hot gridiron, since he had steadfastly refused to hand over to the emperor the treasures of the Church that had been entrusted to him by the Pope and instead led the beggars and cripples of the city before the imperial throne as the “true treasures of the Church.” A complete description of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence is contained in the “Hymn
to St. Lawrence’ in the Peristephanon of Aurelius Prudentius. He provides a justification for the particular rank Lawrence enjoyed in the Roman Church. Lawrence is presented by Prudentius as “dux Christi”, who by his martyr’s death had achieved the final conversion of the city.® The martyrdom of Lawrence marks, in this interpretation, the end of the mission begun by Peter and Paul, and links the holy deacon closely with the princes of the apostles in his significance for the victory of Christianity. A similar significance is accorded to the martyrdom of Lawrence in Ambrose’s hymn “apostolorum supparem” and in a sermon devoted to Peter and Paul by Augustine.® Both Church Fathers closely associate Lawrence with Peter and Paul and accord him an almost equivalent rank. In the first verses of his hymn Ambrose praises the archdeacon as a Saint who is almost the equal of the apostles, not in his ecclesial office, but in his death through the crown of martyrdom.® In Augustine’s sermon Lawrence stands out even more pronouncedly from the ranks of the Roman martyrs, and placed on an equal footing with the apostles themselves: the reference to the tomb of Lawrence together with the tombs of Peter and Paul, i.e. the existence of these three burials in Rome, serves Augustine as an argument to justify Rome’s claims to leadership in the Christian Church. This conception was decisive for the cult of the Saint. It was founded above all on Lawrence in his role as martyr and was preponderantly concentrated on Rome itself, where the cult of the Saint was especially well developed: it is calculated that over twenty churches and chapels dedicated to Lawrence existed in the Eternal City in the Middle Ages.® Devotion to the Saint was, however, in no way limited to the urban cult. It played an important role in the Curia too, and must have significantly influenced the decision to dedicate the Chapel of Nicholas V to Lawrence.

From the Lateran to the Vatican

Lawrence was the patron saint of the papal private chapel at the Lateran, the highest ranking and presumably also the most ancient shrine of the old papal palace. Legend attributes its foundation to Pope Sylvester I (314-335) as an oratory consecrated to the Roman archdeacon, and explains the choice of patron saint on the grounds of the chapel’s alleged proximity to the archive and library of the popes, the scrinium lateranense, that is said to have been placed under the protection of the Saint in his role as defender of the worldly goods of the papacy and patron of libraries and librarians.

At least since the ninth century the oratory of San Lorenzo at the Lateran had served as a private chapel.® As such it was exclusively reserved for the use of the pope and high-ranking dignitaries in the Curia, but it was in no way excluded from the great public ceremonial of the papal liturgy. Indeed it assumed a key role in some of the most important liturgical ceremonies of the church calendar.® It also housed the Church’s most important collection of holy relics, to which it owed the honorary title “Sancta Sanctorum” which it still enjoys to this day (figs. 3-4).®

So when Pope Nicholas V erected his chapel in the Vatican and dedicated it to St. Lawrence, he was setting no precedent, for Lawrence had served for centuries as the patron saint of a papal private chapel. It may be presumed, therefore, that the choice of Lawrence as the patron saint of the Cappella Niccolina derived its justification from the model of the Lateran, though without this implying any purpose to transfer, or usurp, the special status of the Sancta Sanctorum.®

The Lateran played, and continued to play, a central role in the way the papacy understood itself, in the image that the popes wished to present of themselves. Constantine had chosen the Lateran as the political, religious and administrative center of Christianity in Rome. During the Middle Ages the so-called Constitutum Constantini, or Donation of Constantine, according to which Constantine had, by handing over the imperial insignia, allegedly transferred the Lateran formally to Pope Sylvester I (314-335), was used to justify, by possession of the Lateran, the independence of the Roman Church from any secular power and the papacy’s claims to secular rule over Rome and the Papal State.® When Popes Martin V (1417-1431) and Eugenius IV (1431-1447) returned to Rome after the long exile of the papal administration in Avignon and
Fig. 3. Chapel of Sancta Sanctorum at the Lateran, Rome. View looking towards the altar.

Fig. 4. Chapel of Sancta Sanctorum at the Lateran, Rome: detail of the fresco on the south wall representing St. Lawrence.
Fig. 5. View of the earliest wing of the Vatican Apostolic Palace complex with the Cappella Niccolina, seen from St. Peter’s.
during the period of the Great Schism, the Lateran was largely uninhabitable. Such was its delapidation that they transferred the seat of the Curia to the Vatican Palace (fig. 5, on page 31) adjoining St. Peter’s Basilica. By taking this decision they were pursuing a practice already initiated in the thirteenth century. Prompted by essentially practical considerations, the gradual transfer of the papal residence from the Lateran to the Vatican had been given a decisive impetus by the building measures of Popes Innocent III (1198-1216) and Nicholas III (1277-1280). The definitive choice of the Vatican as papal residence by Nicholas V and his successors was also prompted by essentially practical reasons. It did not alter or diminish the historical rank and symbolic significance of the Lateran. A visible expression of the significance of the Lateran for the legitimation of papal rule took the form of the possessio, the ceremonial procession of a newly elected pope to the Lateran and the symbolic rite of taking possession of its palace. Neither Nicholas V, nor his successors in the fifteenth century, omitted to embark on the possessio of the Lateran immediately after their sacred coronation on the steps of St. Peter’s to authenticate their claims to universal rule derived from the Donation of Constantine and possession of the Lateran.

Apart from its symbolic value as a source of legitimacy of papal rule, the Lateran also had great historical significance as representative of a tradition of papal presence in Rome extending over a millennium and more. Nicholas V sought to link his renovatio urbis with this tradition. An by no means negligible part of the renovatio urbis consisted of the restoration of the great early Christian martyrs’ and pilgrims’ basilicas in Rome. They included, according to Manetti’s report, not only the old Constantinian basilica of St. Peter’s, the Lateran basilica, Santa Maria Maggiore and San Paolo fuori le Mura, but also San Lorenzo fuori le Mura and Santo Stefano Rotondo, the most important churches consecrated to the two holy deacons Stephen and Lawrence in Rome.

The renewal of spiritual life generated by the material restoration of the most important churches of Rome by Nicholas V showed a powerful commitment to the system of cult topography in the city of Rome that had developed over the centuries. The dedication of the Cappella Niccolina was aimed in a similar direction. It appropriated the ancient tradition of saintly patronage that had hitherto distinguished the former residence of the popes, and continued it in the new papal palace at the Vatican. The deference to the model of the Lateran in the dedication of the Cappella Niccolina represents, indeed, no unique instance. For the Vatican already possessed, in its capella parva dedicated to St. Nicholas of Bari, another important chapel whose patronage followed a more ancient Lateran precedent, the chapel of San Nicola founded under Calixtus II (1119-1124). When Nicholas V began his pontificate, the capella parva had been only recently restored and was decorated with scenes from the Vita Christi in consonance with its function as the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament. But its dedication to St. Nicholas of Bari was not retained. It is clear that the taking over of Sts Nicholas and Lawrence as patron saints of chapels in the Vatican does not imply any intention to copy specific buildings or reproduce specific liturgical functions. The aim was rather to give the new papal residence at the Vatican an inner organization modelled on the Lateran, and to structure it in such a way that it could vie with the cult buildings that constituted fixed points in the Lateran’s sacred topography and that had significantly shaped the existing idea of the residence of the popes in Rome.

By this process the old residence seems to have been symbolically transferred to the new: the Vatican was placed in the succession and continuity of the Lateran and the traditions it enshrined.

The twinning of Sts Stephen and Lawrence

Just like the choice of patronage, so the combination of the cycle of St. Lawrence with that of St. Stephen in the decoration of the Cappella Niccolina can be firmly placed in a Roman tradition.

Behind this juxtaposition of the two Saints lies the long-standing tradition of pairing Stephen with Lawrence in Rome.

This tradition was based on their common burial place in San Lorenzo fuori le Mura and the particular circumstances in which their relics had been translated there.
Fig. 6. Basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, Rome: two episodes from Translation of the Body of St. Stephen to Constantinople, frescoes in the atrium of the Basilica.
As the first martyr in the history of Christianity Stephen enjoyed particular veneration from an early date. But an organized cult in his honor did not develop till the miraculous discovery of his relics in Kaphar Gamala near Jerusalem in the year 415. The cult was especially promoted by St. Augustine and by the Byzantine imperial house under Theodosius II (408-450).

The translation of the relics of St. Stephen to Rome is also associated with the period of Theodosius II by the later elaboration of the legend of the Saint in the Latin Church. After the Saint’s bones had been transferred from Jerusalem to Constantinople through an exchange, Theodosius II is said to have authorized their further translation to Rome. His aim in doing so was to procure the recovery of his mentally disturbed daughter Eudoxia, the consort of the West Roman emperor Valentinian III, by liberating her from the demon by which she was possessed. As a quid pro quo for this donation, the relics of St. Lawrence were supposed to be conveyed to Byzantium. But this never happened: for - so the legend recounts - when the procession of Greek clerics charged with the translation of the relics arrived at the basilica of San Lorenzo in Rome, the horses that were supposed to transport the body of Stephen to San Pietro in Vincoli refused to budge. Thereupon the body of Stephen was laid on a bier in front of the basilica of San Lorenzo, and Eudoxia led before it: as soon as she touched his relics she was healed. Not only that, but the Greek monks who - as agreed between Theodosius and Pope Pelagius - were supposed to accompany the relics of St. Lawrence back to Constantinople in exchange for those of St. Stephen, sank dead to the ground on attempting to move Lawrence’s bones. The Pope and his bishops saw in this a clear sign that it was the wish of both Saints to remain united together in San Lorenzo in Rome. They therefore buried Stephen at Lawrence’s side.

The legends as transmitted by the Scriptura de translatione Sancti Stephani de Jerusalem in urbem Byzantium and the Relatio translationis corporis S. Stephani protomartyris Constantinopolii Romam on the whereabouts of the relics of St. Stephen cannot historically be verified. They reflect, however, the long-standing dispute between Jerusalem, Byzantium and Rome over the rights to the relics both of Stephen and of Lawrence that is touched on by various earlier sources. Rome succeeded not only in resolving this dispute to her own advantage, but also in ensuring general recognition of her claim to possess the combined relics of both Saints in San Lorenzo fuori le Mura. The absorption of the translation reports into the recognized corpus of hagiographical legends of the Latin Church, as expressed inter alia in the Legenda Aurea of James of Varagine, written in c. 1260/77, and as embodied in innumerable murals, panel paintings and stained glass windows of the Middle Ages, that show Stephen and Lawrence buried side by side, provide eloquent proof of this.

The twinning of both Saints, as derived from their common burial, was not only reinforced, in Roman pictorial programs, by representations of this particular theme, as in the late thirteenth century depiction of the translation legends in the portico frescoes of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura (fig. 6). It was also indirectly fostered by the combination of both Saints in medieval iconography, as in the chapel of the Sancta Sanctorum at the Lateran. The chapel was given a complete renovation under Pope Nicholas III (1277-1280); the decorative program bears a close relationship to the relics preserved in the chapel. Only the presence of St. Stephen does not conform to this framework and suggests that Stephen was included in the iconographic program only as a consequence of Lawrence’s inclusion: both in the frescoes and the mosaics he is placed opposite him.

The ‘winning’ of the relics of St. Stephen was for various reasons of great significance for Rome and for the papacy: it confirmed the particular privilege acquired by the basilica of San Lorenzo as one of the seven pilgrim basilicas and its precedence over most of the other churches of Rome. At the same time the presence of Stephen in San Lorenzo significantly increased the prestige of Lawrence, since devotion to the Roman archdeacon was thus linked with a Saint who enjoyed the highest esteem through Christendom as the first martyr in the history of the Church. In the common veneration of their relics Lawrence was accorded the same status as the protomartyr of the Church; his special position in Rome,
which had always been emphasized, was thus reinforced in a prominent way. The bringing together and common burial of the relics of Stephen and Lawrence in San Lorenzo fuori le Mura meant not only that Lawrence, but also the city of Rome and its Church, were accorded a special honor.

If one takes the translation legends as a document for the ideas denoted by the possession of the relics of St. Stephen, the miraculous bringing of the Saint's body to Rome seems especially remarkable. Rome was expressly identified as the place chosen by Stephen himself. The legend implies a preference given by the Saint to Rome over Jerusalem and Constantinople: a preference that accords with the Roman claims to primacy and the supremacy of the Roman Church in the Christian world. The transference of the venerated relics of St. Stephen to Rome represents, in this interpretation, nothing short of a recognition and reinforcement of the claims to authority of the Roman Church that had been immemorially linked with Lawrence and the Princes of the Apostles.

As a pledge of papal claims to primacy the relics of the holy deacons continued to possess a high value even in the time of Nicholas V. This is confirmed by an incident from the first months of his pontificate. In July of the year 1447 the Franciscans of Santa Maria in Aracoeli made the claim that they possessed the true relics of both holy deacons in their own church. Their assertion was based on the discovery of a tomb containing the remains of two bodies, one of which revealed traces of injuries caused by fire. When the news began to spread in Rome that the two bodies in question were none other than Stephen and Lawrence, Nicholas V set up a commission that went to San Lorenzo fuori le Mura on 1 August and confirmed unequivocally that the relics preserved in that church were genuine.

The examination of the relics at San Lorenzo has been seen as a further motive for the decision to decorate the Cappella Niccolina with its combined Stephen and Lawrence program. Such an explanation misjudges, however, the real historical significance of this incident. The claim made by Santa Maria in Aracoeli threatened the position of one of the most important pilgrim churches of the city and thus placed in question the traditional structure of cult iconography in Rome. In other words, the events of 1447 signify a disagreeable incident which Nicholas V – with his customary dispatch – wished to clear up as soon as possible. But he hardly wanted to commemorate it, still less the doubts about the authenticity of the relics, in his own chapel. This is confirmed by the nature of the pictorial decoration of the Cappella Niccolina itself, which contains not the slightest allusion to the relics of the Saints or to the examination of them ordered by Nicholas V. This circumstance is all the more remarkable, since representations devoted to the posthumous whereabouts of the relics of Stephen, or to burial scenes, form a standard part of the customary iconography of Stephen and Lawrence.

**The iconography of the cycles of Sts Stephen and Lawrence**

Iconographic cycles devoted to the lives of Stephen and Lawrence are especially familiar to us from French stained glass windows and portal sculptures of the twelfth and thirteenth century, and from Italian murals and panel paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But only two examples of combined programs are known: the late thirteenth century portico frescoes at San Lorenzo fuori le Mura in Rome, and the frescoes in the choir of Castiglione Olona, presumably executed between 1432 and 1439.

Most of these hagiographical cycles are iconographically dominated by apocryphal, posthumous, thaumaturgical and martyrological elements added to the legends of both Saints in the course of time. In cycles of St. Stephen we thus find above all apocryphal scenes from the Saint's childhood and adolescence, according to the *Vita fabulosa*, as well as episodes associated with the discovery and translation of his relics.

The cycles of St. Lawrence also augment the early Christian nucleus of the legend with a wide variety of apocryphal scenes: numerous miraculous cures worked by the Saint, conversions of individuals hitherto unattested in the hagiographical tradition, and various of the tortures that preceded the Saint's martyrdom.
The events transmitted in the *Acts of the Apostles* and in the aforecited early Christian sources on Stephen and Lawrence tend to be absorbed in the later elaboration of the hagiographical tradition: apocryphal legend takes precedence over them in the pictorial representations.

The program of the Cappella Niccolina, however, differs fundamentally from this later medieval tradition. It deliberately renounces apocryphal, posthumous, thaumaturgical and martyrlogical elements, and focuses attention on the original core of the *Vita*.

Fra Angelico’s frescoes reveal an independent interpretation not in the thematic formulation of both cycles, but also in the particular adaptation of the chosen scenes. One example of this is the scene of the *Ordination of Stephen* (plate 28). It is distinguished, in contrast to other versions of the theme, by an unusual emphasis on the exclusive relationship between Stephen and Peter: of the seven deacons mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles* (6:5) only Stephen is here being ordained, and Peter alone imparts the ordination. Peter is shown standing in the choir of a three-aisled basilica, in a slightly raised position on the steps of the altar. He bends down to proffer the chalice and paten to St. Stephen, kneeling at his feet. Both are clearly demarcated from the other apostles, who are placed further in the background and lined up against the columns and intercolumniations of the nave of the basilica: passive witnesses of the event, rather than active protagonists in it. It is Peter and Stephen who are identified by size, position and interaction as the real protagonists. The ordination scene possesses, moreover, a markedly Roman and Petrine character. This is reinforced by the nature of the church in which the ordination is taking place; it is firmly defined as a Roman basilica and conceals unmistakable allusions to the old St. Peter’s in its architectural vocabulary. The scene, in its deliberately Roman and Petrine character, differs significantly from related scenes in other cycles of St. Stephen.

Significant departures from the established iconographic tradition can also be ascertained in the cycle of St. Lawrence. They are especially evident in the scene of the *Ordination of Lawrence* and in the prominent role played in the cycle by Pope Sixtus II. The scene of the *Ordination of Lawrence* (plate 69) is in fact without precedent in Italian painting: it was clearly conceived specifically for the Chapel of Nicholas V as a parallel and complement to the analogous scene of the *Ordination of Stephen*. But in formal terms, as well, it occupies a special position. Situated between the two narrow windows of the west wall, it is the only scene in the whole program to be placed separately: the other scenes are all combined in pairs. Its splendid isolation is further emphasized by the rich pictorial decoration of the window embrasures by which it is framed on either side. Indeed, it seems, both in position and setting, the most lavishly embellished and carefully staged representation of the chapel’s whole pictorial program. This impression is further reinforced by the setting in which the scene is set: its situation in the nave of a monumental column-borne basilica. It is also enhanced by the markedly ceremonial character given to the act of ordination in the presence of representatives of the different orders in the hierarchy of the Church; and not least by the unusually closed composition, which concentrates attention on the central protagonists, Sixtus and Lawrence. Apart from the *Ordination of Lawrence*, Sixtus II also appears in the scene of the *Handing over of the Treasures of the Church* (plate 79). The early Christian martyr Pope thus appears in Fra Angelico’s frescoes as the most decisive figure in the Saint’s *Vita*. He invests Lawrence with the diaconal ministry, and gives him the task of distributing the treasures of the Church to the poor and the needy, an action that would directly lead to Lawrence’s persecution and martyrdom. Additional significance is acquired by the figure of the Pope by virtue of the fact that Sixtus II is evidently portrayed with the features of Nicholas V (plate 76). This is confirmed by the coincidences between Sixtus II in the frescoes and the official portrait of Nicholas V on coins (fig. 1). Moreover, the unusual liturgical vestments of Sixtus II in the frescoes conceal a precise biographical reference to Nicholas V: the chasuble (plate 76) in the scene of ordination and the brocaded cope in the scene of the *handing over of the treasures of the Church* (plate 80) are both blue; they thus contradict the canon of liturgical colors authorized in the fifteenth century. They reflect, rather, a personal predi-
lection of Nicholas V, which Vespasiano da Bisticci reports: Nicholas, he says, preferred to wear blue. The portrayal of Sixtus II in the guise of Nicholas V is in fact one of the earliest examples of an identification portrait in the history of the Church. As the Pope who commissioned the decoration of the chapel, his presence in the frescoes may not seem at first glance particularly surprising. But a more far-reaching significance is attached to it in the context of the parallels drawn between the two cycles and the consequences that flow from this in the overall iconographic program.

**The significance of the combined Stephen and Lawrence program in the Cappella Niccolina**

The program of the Chapel of Nicholas V is characterized by its paralleling of the lives of Sts Stephen and Lawrence. This demands that each of the two cycles be treated not in isolation, but be ‘read’ in a comparative perspective, in such a way that one cycle integrates the other. The program of the Cappella Niccolina, however, does not just underline the factual, or episodic, parallels between the life and work of both Saints: it links Stephen and Lawrence at a level transcending the pictorial narrative itself.

This procedure is particularly apparent in the two ordination scenes (plate 28 and 69). They form two thematically identical scenes, the one directly situated over the other. Moreover, the parallels between them are strongly underlined, both through compositional similarities (arrangement and pose of the protagonists) and coincidences in pictorial motifs (the handing over of chalice and paten). So close are these coincidences that the ordination of Lawrence appears as a repetition of the liturgical action described in the ordination of Stephen, and the Roman archdeacon Lawrence, as a follower in the ministry of the first Christian deacon Stephen. The connection between them, established on the basis of their common ministry, is further developed in the following scenes describing the charitable and missionary activities of the two Saints, culminating in their common martyrdom (plate 56 and 99). The link is not accidental: it not only emphasizes the resemblances between their ministerial action, but illustrates and enforces the apostolic succession.

**Apostolic Succession and Primacy of Peter**

The ministerial tradition expressed in the frescoes through Stephen and Lawrence implies a continuous ministerial succession from the apostolic origin in the first Christian community in Jerusalem to the Roman ministerial Church: an unbroken succession from the first of the apostles, Peter, down to Sixtus II. The sacred setting and ceremonial character of the liturgy of ordination reinforce this sense of ministerial succession. Both scenes are situated in a basilica, which contains allusions to the old St. Peter’s, the Petrine church par excellence and at the same time the symbol of the Church founded by Christ on the rock of Peter.

In both scenes Stephen and Lawrence are dressed in the liturgical vestment appropriate to their ministry (plate 28 and 69), the dalmatic (the sleeved tunic of the deacon); the other personages, Peter in one scene, Sixtus in the other, and the apostles and clerics present as witnesses, are dressed in a way appropriate to the historical moment in which the events are taking place. Peter and the Apostles, in the scene of the **Ordination of Stephen** (plate 30 and 31), are thus dressed in a timeless fashion as togati, following the iconographic conventions customarily used to suggest the biblical-apostolic origins of the Church; only Peter wears a specific liturgical insignia, the pallium, the sign of the papal and metropolitan authority to ordain. Pope Sixtus II and his ecclesiastical entourage in the scene of the **Ordination of Lawrence** are, by contrast, represented in full liturgical vestments; wearing copes, dalmatics and tunicellas, depending on their respective rank in the hierarchy as priests, deacons and subdeacons or acolytes, they present the attributes of the liturgical functions they each fulfil. The first of the standing deacons behind Lawrence thus bears the Gospel in his hands; one of the subdeacons holds a censer in one hand and an incense boat in the other (plates 73 and 75). Sixtus himself is dressed in full pontifical vestments, enthroned on a purple *faldistorium*, and
furnished with the insignias of papal power and the authority to ordain, the tiara and pallium (plate 76).

In the markedly ceremonial setting of its liturgical action the ordination of Lawrence reflects the Roman Church with its various ministries and hierarchical orders. As such it is, in its paralleling with the ordination of Stephen, not only placed in the tradition of the first Christian community, but even appears as its completion and fulfilment.

The protagonists of the ordination of Lawrence, by being situated in the context of the institutional Church, are also placed in the apostolic tradition: Pope Sixtus is identified as the successor of Peter. The claim to the apostolic succession is not only referred to the liturgical function of the Bishop of Rome as dispenser of the sacrament of ordination: it also comprises – vividly so in the Pope’s appearance with pallium and tiara – the primacy attributed to Peter in his ministerial authority over the Church.

A clear allusion to the primacy of Peter is contained in the relationship between Peter and the apostles in the scene of the *Ordination of Stephen*: Peter figures in these scenes as the only bearer of the prerogative to ordain; his fellow-apostles are presented in the role of passive witnesses. The monumental representation of the figure of Peter (plate 30) also serves to focus attention on the Prince of the Apostles: powerful in form, dominating all the other figures in size and presence, his figure is associatively linked with Peter’s quality as rock of the Church and as such recalls his summons by Christ to lead the Church in the way recounted in *Matthew* 16:18-19.

This powerful representation of Peter should also be placed in relation to contemporary discussions on the relationship between pope and Council, in which the interpretation of this key biblical passage played a pivotal role. In the pointed prominence given to the Prince of the Apostles, the scene of the *Ordination of Stephen* in Fra Angelico’s fresco reflects the papalistic position, according to which Christ in *Matthew* 16:18-19 transferred the leadership of his Church to Peter alone, and not, as the conciliarists argued, to Peter merely on behalf or as a representative of all the apostles.
An important argument of the time thus lies behind the *Ordination of Stephen* and its paralleling with that of Lawrence in Fra Angelico's frescoes. The parallels between them are a way of reasserting the claims to the apostolic succession of the Bishop of Rome. Primacy of Peter and apostolic succession form together the foundation of the Roman doctrine of the pope's supremacy over the Church. The programmatic purpose behind the scene of the *Ordination of Lawrence* goes still further, however. The presentation of Sixtus II as a portrait of the reigning pope, Nicholas V, enabled him, Nicholas, to present himself as the direct successor of Peter. The claim to papal supremacy, and the pope's exclusive prerogative to exercise it, is thus directly referred to the person of the reigning pope and postulates its validity for his pontificate.

In both ordination scenes a thematic setting unusual for papal art was chosen for the enunciation of the claim to supremacy. It may be useful here to offer a brief comparison with a related scene in one of the reliefs of the bronze doors of Filarete for the central portal of the old St. Peter's, only a few years earlier in date (fig. 7). In one of the reliefs of these doors the donor, Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447), is represented kneeling before Peter and receiving from his hands the key as the sign of the primatial authority of the popes to bind and dissolve. Eugenius' purpose of placing himself in the tradition of Petrine primacy is realized in a traditional pictorial formulation that rests on the *traditio legis* with a direct and exclusive reference to *Matthew* 16:18-19.

This rather conventional interpretation of papal primacy, installed in a public position at the entrance to St. Peter's basilica, contrasts with an interpretation more powerfully focused on the ministerial Church, as depicted in the Cappella Niccolina, in the innermost sanctum of the papal palace. The linking of the papal claim to supremacy with the ordination of the holy deacons, their sacramental initiation into their ministry, is closely related to the dispute over conciliarism then agitating the Church: a dispute essentially inside the Church in which the pope's relationship to the Church and to the clergy came under heated discussion. In this situation it was towards the clergy, above all, that the papacy needed to reassert its claim to supremacy and so win their support for the leading role of the pope within the Church.

### Diaconal ministry in Rome and the Papacy

Both in terms of the historical significance of the diaconal ministry itself and in terms of the special virtues they gave proof of in their performance of it, Stephen and Lawrence lent themselves particularly well to the role of advocates and champions of papal interests.

Ever since the establishment of the diaconal ministry in the first Christian community in Jerusalem and its dissemination to all Christian churches of the East and the West, the deacon was the closest and most important confidant of the bishop in the government of the Christian community; he was directly placed under his jurisdiction and answerable only to him. The deacon's exclusive relationship of service to the bishop raised him in effect over the members of the other ranks of the clergy, especially the secular priests, to whom in degree of ordination he was clearly subordinate.

But it was in the Roman Church, in particular, that the ministry of the deacon enjoyed its greatest esteem. Particular power and influence were enjoyed by the archdeacon, who presided over the college of the 'Seven'. As plenipotentiary of the bishop in the welfare of the poor and in the running of the papal household, he possessed extensive administrative powers and enjoyed his own disciplinary and jurisdictional authority over the lower clergy. Moreover, he stood in a close personal relationship to the pope. This relationship was characterized by special devotion and loyalty, and was far from being confined to an ideal dimension. For a long time it also had a very practical meaning: the Roman bishops were almost exclusively selected from the ranks of the deacons, among whom the archdeacon was often the leading candidate to the throne of Peter.

Vigorous protest against the privileged position of the deacons was voiced as early as the second half of the fourth century, especially by the secular clergy, who felt themselves downgraded as a
result. A gradual erosion of the deacons' position of authority only came about with the growing political significance and expanding administrative apparatus of the Roman Church. The administrative and financial tasks that had at one time been concentrated in the hands of the deacons alone thus came to be distributed between various administrative agencies within the Church. But this development in no way deprived the Roman deacons of all influence on the government of the Church. On the contrary, they were even able to establish themselves, after the cardinal bishops and the cardinal priests, as the third Ordo of the College of Cardinals permanently at the apex of the curial hierarchy.

Nor did the close link of the deacons to the pope fall into abeyance as a result of these developments. In papal liturgy and curial ceremonial, the deacons, and more especially the archdeacon or prior (as he came to be more often called from the twelfth century), continued to play a leading role throughout the Middle Ages and well beyond the time of Nicholas V. In the papal liturgy he especially fulfilled, apart from the traditional services of liturgical assistance, a series of tasks in the framework of papal election, coronation and possessio, in which the cardinal deacons and their prior played a leading role. It was inter alia the task of the prior to invest the newly elected pope in his pontifical vestments, to place the mitre on his head and to proclaim the name of the new pope to the people. As part of the coronation festivities, the pope was presented with the pallium during the Coronation Mass by the two highest ranking cardinal deacons. After the Mass the pope was crowned with the tiara by the prior of the cardinal deacons on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica.

After the conclusion of this ceremony, the pope set out in festive procession to take possession of the Lateran (the so-called possessio). This procession – as previously the entry of pope and Curia into the basilica before the Coronation Mass presided over by the archdeacon – was strongly hierarchical in order; the rank of its participants proportionately rose, the closer they rode to the pope. Immediately in front of the pope rode the cardinal deacons, who assumed the high-ranking position and thus took precedence over all the other participants – including the liturgically higher-standing cardinal bishops and cardinal priests. After the completion of the coronation festivities, the pope was escorted to his apartments by two cardinal deacons, who helped him to take off his liturgical vestments.

Also in the framework of numerous other curial ceremonies, it was the practice for two cardinal deacons to provide a ceremonial escort to the pope and especially to high-ranking personalities during their visits to the Curia: if the pope received the emperor, crowned heads and other ruling princes, or their closest advisers or important envoys in private audience, in secret or public consistory, he would send two cardinal deacons to meet them and ceremonially escort them. Cardinal deacons also provided a similar ceremonial escort to newly promoted cardinals on the occasion of their summons to the Consistory and the ensuing banquet with the pope and the cardinals, and to newly appointed legates and nuncios or to those taking their leave from the Curia.

Irrespective of the deacons’ actual power in the much expanded ecclesiastical structures of the Roman Church and their subordinate liturgical rank in the spiritual hierarchy, a vivid memory of the Ordo’s former special position in the service of the bishops was still revealed in the performance of these tasks by the cardinal deacons in the time of Nicholas V. Transferred to the ceremonial level, to the symbolic and ritual forms of curial ceremony and liturgy, the deacons still acted as the closest aides of the pope. It is this bond of the deacons to the pope that made Stephen and Lawrence appear particularly well suited to represent, and to reinforce, the pope’s position in the controversy then agitating the Church about the claims of conciliarism and papal primacy. The programmatic purpose behind the frescoes in the Cappella Niccolina is not however aimed at the Ordo of the deacons in its specific historical connotation. The two Saints are presented, rather, at the center point of the pictorial narrative as exemplary representatives of the clergy altogether.
Ordination rite

The Saints' representative, or emblematic, role is shown by the particular rite described in the two scenes of ordination. According to the report in the Acts of the Apostles, the consecration of the first deacon and his fellow-deacons took the following form: the candidates elected by the whole assembly of the disciples were then presented to the apostles, "who prayed and laid their hands on them". By contrast, in the frescoes in the chapel, the ordination is represented by the handing over of the chalice and paten to Stephen and Lawrence (plates 30 and 69). The adoption of this particular rite recalls that it was the task of deacons during mass to bring and prepare the eucharistic gifts. But it does not conform to the rite of ordination actually prescribed for the diaconate. According to the canonical norms in force in the time of Nicholas V, and testified unambiguously by a manuscript of Nicholas of Cusa, the authorized rite for the ordination of deacons consisted of the handing over of a Gospel to the ordinand. The handing over of chalice and paten was not prescribed. But it was laid down for the ordination of priests: indeed it formed - cum oblatis, cum vino - the decisive rite in their ministerial investment, after the imposition of hands, the handing over of the chasuble and the anointing of hands. It also formed part in a modified form - sine oblatis, sine vino - of the ordination of subdeacons.

The representation of ordination in the frescoes of the Cappella Niccolina not only contradicts the prescribed rite for deacons, but also shows a striking ambivalence towards the precise prescriptions of the ordination liturgy. For by representing the two Saints, dressed in the deacon's dalmatic, being handed the chalice and paten, in conformity with the ordination of priests, but without bread and wine as prescribed in the ordination of subdeacons, the two ordination scenes in fact contain references to three different ordination rites. This ambiguity is not unintentional: it should be seen as a deliberate manipulation, which serves to enrich, to open up, to expand, even to universalize the content of the scenes. Ordination is enhanced by being invested with a character of universal validity. The members of various ecclesial orders could and should feel themselves addressed through the example of the two Saints and find guidance or inspiration in their action for an exemplary fulfilment of their ministry within the Church.

The ensuing scenes that show Stephen and Lawrence in the exercise of their ministry have a similar purpose. Apart from their charitable activity on behalf of the poor, the traditionally most important task of the deacons, their apostolate also includes the service of the word (preaching of Stephen) and missionary activity (Lawrence in prison). Their action possesses a clearly pastoral dimension, that elevates them above the primarily charitable and administrative sphere of the diaconate.

This interpretation also corresponds to the significance of the ordination of the first deacon in the history of the Church. For by the so-called "institution of the Seven", as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, candidates to the service of the Lord were, for the first time in the history of the Christian Church, not appointed and invested by Christ himself but by the apostles.

It was the task of the "Seven" to relieve the apostles in the running of the community and so enable them (the apostles) to devote themselves exclusively to prayer and to the service of the word. The distribution of food or service to the poor was later performed by the so-called "helpers" (diakonoi), whose existence and role are testified by the Letters of Paul to the Philippians and Timothy. The diakonoi, as suggested by the connotation of the word itself, were "those who served at mealtimes". This narrow definition of their service in Paul's Letters does not coincide, however, with the account transmitted by the Acts of the Apostles. Both the election by the whole of the community, and the consecration by the prayer and imposition of hands by the apostles, point to a higher vocation. The missionary activity of preaching and conversion performed by Stephen (Acts 6:7-8), which corresponds to the proclamation of the word reserved to the apostles, is especially difficult to reconcile with the service of the deacon in the Pauline sense. This has led to the "institution of the Seven" being repeatedly regarded in exegetical and
historical commentaries on the *Acts of the Apostles* as the institution of the priestly ministry itself, and Stephen and his fellow-deacons as precursors of the ministers in the Church described as “evangelists” in a later passage of the *Acts of the Apostles* (21:8).  

The attribution to Stephen of what is tantamount to the order of priesthood implies ideas about Stephen’s ministry and apostolate that opens up an important perspective on how the chapel program should be understood. Irrespective of the later elaboration of the hagiographical tradition and the veneration of the Saint as the first deacon, his calling to the service of the Lord was emblematic of the origin and dissemination of the institution of the Church as a whole. A decisive impulse to the development of the ministerial Church was given by the “institution of the Seven”. This had a great effect on the growth of the community in Jerusalem, as is made clear by the summarium of the seventh verse in *Acts* on the spreading of the faith worked by the “Seven”, and led significantly to the propagation of the faith throughout the whole world.  

The calling of Stephen, his ordination as deacon, thus denotes the historical origin of the Roman Church. That similar ideas enjoyed support in the time of Nicholas V is shown by the *Chronicon* of the Archbishop of Florence, Antoninus (1389-1459). In the course of his paraphrase of the legend of St. Stephen based on the *Acts of the Apostles*, he comments on the “institution of the Seven” in a short gloss in which he points to further ministries (i.e. those of subdeacons and acolytes) created by the Church in subsequent periods.  

The holy deacons thus represented ideally not only the order of the pope’s closest and most loyal servants. By Stephen’s contribution to the origin of the institutional Church, which turned him into the progenitor of all office-holders in the Church, they also possessed a general applicability to the priesthood as a whole.

**St. Lawrence in the Ambrosian doctrine of duty**

The representation of Stephen and Lawrence in the frescoes as representatives of the clergy in general reflects a view of the holy deacons that was expressed in the early Christian period by the Milanese Church Father Ambrose in his *De officiis ministerum*, a moral and ascetical treatise on the duties of priests, addressed in the first instance to the clergy of Milan. In this text Ambrose praises at length the deep devotion and loyalty that Lawrence had displayed in his relations with his master, Pope Sixtus II, and the exemplary way he had distributed the treasures of the Church, inspired by his love and concern for the poor entrusted to his care.

Lawrence’s loyalty to Sixtus is dramatically described by Ambrose in a scene of leavetakings, in the course of which Lawrence pleads with the imprisoned Pope not to abandon him, but to put him to the test, to see whether he has chosen a worthy servant, and to allow him to accompany Sixtus on his last journey. But this plea is rejected by Sixtus with the prophecy of even greater and harsher trials to come. In the course of his conversation with Sixtus Lawrence identifies himself with Stephen and Isaac: he begs the Pope to sacrifice him, just as Abraham had sacrificed his son and just as Peter had sent out Stephen.

In a wide-ranging consideration of the worldly goods of the Church, in the course of which Ambrose denounces the Church’s accumulation of gold and silver for no other purpose than the empty display of splendor, the Milanese Archbishop refers a second time to Lawrence. The example of the Saint, who had recognized the poor as the “real treasure of the Church” and who had shared among them the worldly goods of the Church entrusted to him, served Ambrose to lend force to his exhortation to the Church not to hoard treasures, nor hesitate to dispose even of liturgical vessels, if it were a question of providing for the welfare of the poor or of relieving the lot of the persecuted.

The relationship between Lawrence and Stephen that Ambrose points out in the leavetakings episode deserves special attention: in this passage, not only is the first Christian deacon linked with the archdeacon of the Roman Church, but a parallel is drawn between their common ministry and, more importantly, between their exemplary conduct as ordained ministers in the Church.

A central moment of the leavetakings episode is Lawrence’s own self-comparison with Stephen and Isaac: he asks Sixtus to put him to the
test, to see if he proved to be as loyal and obedient as Stephen had been to Peter and Isaac to Abraham. This plea corresponds strikingly to the situation produced in the Chapel of Nicholas V by the paralleling of the two hagiographical cycles. The paralleling aims at a 'reading' of the two cycles in which the lives of the two Saints are confronted and analogies drawn between them. It suggests that the program be contemplated in the light of Lawrence's plea and interpreted in a similarly comparative spirit.

The implications of this comparative reading were already mentioned in our discussion of the two ordination scenes and the theme of papal primacy contained in them. The concept of a typological series that stretches back from Stephen and Peter to Isaac and Abraham is used by Ambrose to illustrate Lawrence's loyalty and his readiness to sacrifice his own life in his fulfillment of it. Both concerns, the defence of supremacy and the exhortation to the clergy to show loyalty and obedience to the bishop, cannot be separated. The one is dependent on the other: obedience is a precondition for the achievement of supremacy.

A leavetaking scene, specific to the Ambrosian plea for loyalty, is not represented in the Chapel of Nicholas V. For it is contained in the ordination scenes themselves. The purely dialogic conception of the act of ordination - between Peter and Stephen on the one hand, Sixtus and Lawrence on the other - serves not only to further the papal claims to primacy, but also reflects the bond of special fidelity between deacon and bishop, as the early Christian liturgy of ordination sought to express it. Hippolytus, the great Roman liturgist of the early third century, had demanded in his Traditio Apostolica of c. 215 that the special bond of the deacon to the bishop be expressed in the ordination rite, and the rites for the ordination of priests and deacons be correspondingly differentiated. Hippolytus affirmed that in the ordination of priests both bishop and priests should lay their hands on the candidate together, whereas in the ordination of deacons the imposition of hands should be performed by the bishop alone. Hippolytus' instructions remained valid even in the time of Nicholas V, as may be inferred from the prescriptions of the Liber Caeremoniarum compiled by Petrus Burgensis, papal master of ceremonies (who held office from 1445 to 1469). He prescribes the exclusive imposition of hands by the pope for the ordination of a cardinal deacon; this is stressed by the formulation "solus Papa" in the text to differentiate the rite from that of various other ordination rites. The ordination scenes of the Capella Niccolina follow this tradition in their focusing on Peter and Sixtus as the exclusive dispensers of ordination. But analogously to the Ambrosian doctrine of duty, the demand for the ordinand's loyalty and obedience contained in this doctrine is addressed to the clergy as a whole in the more inclusive form of the ordination through chalice and paten (plates 28 and 69).

Significant in this connection is the inclusion of Abraham and Isaac in the chapel's pictorial program (plate 118). They are represented in the uppermost roundel of the embrasure of the window to the right: Abraham with the sacrificial knife in his right hand, and with his left hand resting on Isaac's head. Considered in isolation, the inclusion of Abraham and Isaac among the various Old Testament prophets and patriarchs that decorate the window embrasures may seem a matter of no particular moment. The window embrasures, after all, play only a minimal part in the chapel's overall decorative program. But their representation acquires a clearly programmatic dimension when placed in the system of the arrangement of the frescoes as a whole. Situated as they are in the upper part of the chapel's right-hand window, they are placed not only in immediate proximity to the two ordination scenes, respectively to the left and upper left, but also to the full-length figure of Ambrose, who is represented in the narrow field of the barrel-vaulted arch above the window to the right (plate 11). In this specific position in the decorative program, the appearance of Abraham and Isaac seems like an extension of the tradition stretching back to the Old Testament that is alluded to in the ordination scenes and completed by the self-comparison put into Lawrence's mouth by Ambrose.

In this 'extension' of the typology of Stephen and Lawrence the frescoes of the Cappella Niccolina contain an unmistakable reference to the leavetaking episode of the Ambrosian doctrine of duty, which is reinforced by the immediate presence of Ambrose himself as if by an author's signature. This reference confirms the allusion to the loyalty and obedience of deacons, implied by the dialogic formulation of the ordina-
tion scenes, and the call for a similar conduct on the part of the clergy that derives from it. Above all, however, the appearance of Abraham and Isaac justifies the assumption that Ambrose’s doctrine of duty formed a model for the conception of the fresco program. It does so both in terms of the typological pairing of the two hagiographical cycles that developed from Lawrence’s self-comparison with Stephen in the levatetaking episode, and in terms of the image of both Saints and of their exemplary obedience that Ambrose’s book helped to shape.

Caritas and institutional Church

In his De officiis ministrorum Ambrose strove to lay down a fundamental canon of duties, personal qualities and virtues that were required of those who held office in the Church. This concern, as also the moral norms developed by Ambrose on the basis of the principle of the four cardinal virtues enunciated by Cicero in his De officiis, remained more than ever alive in the late- and post-conciliar period. The debate about the renewal of spiritual life, that developed in the Curia at this time, prompted by the need to reform the Church and repudiate conciliar thought, was decisively influenced by the formulation and enunciation of such norms for the exercise of ministerial and governmental authority within the Church.

At the center of this debate stood the demand for a fundamental realignment of spiritual life, its subservience to the central Christian commandment of caritas; a re-dedication to the pastoral tasks of the Church; and calls for the government of the Church to be founded on the four cardinal virtues which — in contrast to the scholastic syntheses of the high middle ages — were placed in the foreground once again, in the tradition of Roman antiquity, stemming in particular from Cicero.

This concern, which is transmitted in numerous, thematically very different sources as a constant theme, is also made manifest in the frescoes of the Chapel of Nicholas V.

An exhortation to the cardinal virtues is in fact contained in the scene of the Martyrdom of St. Lawrence (plate 99). The representation of the Saint on the gridiron is set against the backdrop of a palace wall adorned with five symmetrically placed niches (plates 99 and 108). Small statues are placed in these niches; they personify the four cardinal virtues Fortitudo, Prudentia, Temperantia and Justitia, plus the figure of Hercules as summa virtus. As elements of the architectural backdrop of the scene, and placed in the specific narrative context of martyrdom, the personified virtues are hardly intended to have any explicit reference to the Saint’s ecclesial ministry. Rather, they contain general allusions to the virtues which were attested in general by Lawrence and which found their most consummate expression in martyrdom.

The action of the deacons Stephen and Lawrence comprised the welfare of the poor, missionary activity and pastoral ministry. As such their service corresponded to contemporary calls for the clergy’s reinforced dedication to the Church’s original pastoral tasks. These included the administration of the sacraments instituted by Christ. It was the duty of the clergy to prepare the faithful for the reception of the sacraments by instructing them in the word of God and by “improvement of life”, as the curial Cardinal Domenico Capranica had affirmed in the preface to his Quedam avisamenta, an exhortation calling for the reform of the Church written prior to 1449.

The scene of Stephen preaching in public and the representation of Lawrence in prison (plates 41 and 99), presumably shown in the process of converting Lucillus to the faith, are both referable to such exhortations to the clergy to prepare the faithful.

It is noticeable, however, that in both cycles greater emphasis is placed on the Church’s charitable work than on her pastoral and sacramental tasks. Two scenes are devoted to them: Stephen’s distribution of alms (plate 36), and Lawrence’s distribution of the treasures of the Church to the poor and the crippled (plate 84). Both scenes bear eloquent witness to active love for our fellowmen: they represent a form of directly enacted Christian caritas.

Caritas is the law of Christ, the supreme commandment of Christian doctrine: all the other commandments and rules of Christian conduct flow from it and are subservient to it. The be-all
and end-all of the Gospel of Christ, _caritas_ possesses an all-encompassing meaning in the spiritual as well as in the practical life of the Church, one that far transcends the welfare of the poor and that has turned it ever since the early days of the Church into a central issue of questions of theology, ecclesiology and canon law.194

In the discussions about how to end the Schism _caritas_ even came to represent a key value in terms of canon law. The obstinate refusal of the rival popes to renounce their claims to the papacy was regarded as a serious violation of the law of Christ, even a heresy. And it was this recognition of heresy which provided the Council with the juridical foundations on which to end the Schism, even against the will of the contending popes, by their forcible ejection from office.195 So _caritas_ formed not only the central commandment of Christian teaching, it also represented a crucial condition for the Church’s exercise of her ministerial power. Its disregard or violation posed serious risks for ministers in the Church, even the suspicion of heresy and eventual loss of office. The great attention paid to _caritas_ in the curial debate about how to reform the Church in the time of Nicholas V was a way of countering the more recent threats to papal rule and a conscious strategy to dispel the suspicion of heresy. The response to the standard accusations of abuses in the exercise of the papal right to grant dispensations and benefices and of simony, denounced as heresy even by the partisans of the pope himself, first and foremost by Cardinal Juan de Torquemada,196 did not however take a direct, theologically systematic form as did the papalistic treatises of the time devoted to the question of primacy. It took in the main an indirect form: it was expressed in a fundamental enunciation of the moral norms of church government connoted by _caritas_. This enunciation was accompanied and reinforced by a constant exhortation to support the needy, to care for the sick, to console the distressed and to forgive one’s enemies.197

The commandment of _caritas_, to which the renewal of spiritual life was subordinated, was thus reaffirmed in a concrete form and recommended to the government of a Church. _Caritas_ is aimed at the active love of our fellowmen: a form of apostolate that has, ever since the days of the apostles, been specifically organized and practised in the Church in the form of the diaconate. Against this background, the action of the holy deacons in the frescoes of the Cappella Niccolina takes on added significance: it exemplifies the _caritas_ being called for on all sides. Stephen and Lawrence make a contribution to _caritas_ both fundamentally as martyrs in the imitation of Christ and in the more specific sense of the active love for our neighbor institutionalized in the charitable activities of the Church, and more particularly in the diaconate.

In this regard it is of decisive significance that the assistance of the poor performed by Stephen and Lawrence is attributed not to the Saints’ individual virtues nor to their personally motivated commitment to charitable activity, but is inseparably bound up with the particular ministry they exercised in the Church. This assumption is supported by the way that the scenes are composed, and more especially by the way their architectural settings are characterized and by the situational context deducible from their narrative mode.

In both cycles welfare for the poor is set in a framework of the institutional Church. Both Stephen and Lawrence perform works of charity and distribute their gifts in front of a large Christian basilica (plates 28 and 80). Lawrence, in the scene in which he hands out the treasures of the Church to the poor, stands in front of a magnificent pilaster-framed portal, that opens up a view into the central nave of a monumental basilica.

This lavish architectural backdrop not only lends the action a heightened ceremonial character, but is also so arranged that the apse of the basilica surrounds the figure of the Saint like a niche. The close relationship between Lawrence and the basilica enforced by the fresco contains a clear reference to the deacon’s incorporation in the institutional Church of which the basilica is a metaphor; it enables us to grasp that this institution is the real place of his action and the source of _caritas_. The relation of Stephen to the Church is less obvious. The scene of almsgiving is set against the profane backdrop of a city view, in which at first sight no specifically ecclesial reference can be perceived. This only becomes apparent when we shift our gaze to the left and look at the scene in combination with the scene to which it is annexed and of which it forms the continuation: that of the ordination of Stephen, which is situated in a Christian
basilica. In the scene of almsgiving Stephen stands to the far left with his back to a pillar, which forms part of the basilica’s end-wall. It is this pillar that separates the two adjoining scenes in the lunette. By this device Stephen seems as if placed with his back to the basilica that stretches behind him. In this way he assumes a position to the visible Church that is not dissimilar from Lawrence’s. This impression is strengthened by the direct link of Stephen to the church in the form of the podium on which he is standing as he distributes alms. It forms an external continuation of the floor of the basilica and thus connects Stephen with the church interior portrayed behind his back. By this device a continuation is suggested between the action going on inside and outside the basilica: it seems as if on the conclusion of his ordination the Saint has just emerged from the basilica, in order to fulfill the duties incumbent on him as part of the ministry with which he has just been invested. The link of almsgiving to the ministry and institution of the Church is further reinforced by the sub-deacon or acolyte who assists Stephen in the distribution of alms (plate 36). He holds a long list in his hands, on which are presumably written the names of the needy and the amount of the alms each should receive. He thus contributes to an orderly process in the distribution of alms and unmistakably implies that almsgiving is taking place according to a plan drawn up by the Church, that it forms an inseparable part of her mission and is enacted in her name. This ecclesial mission is not enacted anonymously. Both deacons perform their service to the poor on the express instructions of the pope. Stephen assumes the same position and pose in the distribution of alms as that of Peter in the preceding scene of ordination. Moreover he is – in contrast to the ordination scene – now dressed in the yellow mantle of the first of the Apostles. Both circumstances suggest that Stephen is acting as Peter’s representative. That Stephen should repeat the position and pose of Peter clearly has compositional reasons and can be explained by the sequential narrative mode that distinguishes the cycle of St. Stephen. Yet it also underlines Stephen’s role in substitution of Peter, as also does his appearance with Peter’s yellow mantle. That the Saint should be represented wearing the yellow mantle of the Prince of the Apostles is unprecedented in the known iconography of the Saint. But it does have a significant Old Testament precedent. It recalls the episode of Elijah throwing his cloak over Elisha. By this gesture of girding him with his mantle, Elijah, before his ascent into heaven, called his disciple Elisha to follow him in his ministry as prophet.  

The Old Testament calling of Elisha to follow in the footsteps of Elijah is analogous to the situation described in the frescoes in which Stephen appears for the first time after his ordination as deacon in the mantle of Peter. It enables us to relate a motif unique to the frescoes of the Cappella Niccolina to a biblical analogy and to interpret the dressing of Stephen in the yellow mantle of Peter as a metaphor of the mission entrusted to him by the first of the apostles.  

Just like Stephen, Lawrence too acts on papal instructions in distributing the treasures of the Church (plate 81). The distribution of the treasures of the Church to the poor and the crippled is preceded by a scene in which the Pope hands over the treasures of the Church to him: the pose and interaction of both protagonists in this scene leave no doubt that Sixtus, in handing over the treasures, pledges Lawrence to the performance of a particular mission. The Pope raises his right hand in a gesture enforcing attention, while Lawrence kneels as a sign of his obedience in receiving the money-bag.  

That the welfare of the poor should be related to the institutional framework of the Church is also enforced by the seemingly arrested moment in the scene of the distribution of the treasures of the Church in the St. Lawrence cycle. This scene is characterized, in its markedly symmetrical figural composition, in which all movements seem arrested and transfigured into a timeless dimension, by a consciously staged interpretation of the scene. The recipients of alms (plate 82) are represented as widows and orphans, the sick and the elderly, the crippled, the blind and the beggars: they represent all the spheres of social deprivation. The scene of the distribution thus assumes an universal character, which enables us to grasp it as a timeless image of caritas in the Church.
Papal supremacy and ecclesial reform in the private chapel of the papal palace

The frescoes of the Cappella Niccolina contain a clear statement of principle by Nicholas V about the goals of church reform in his time. The two Saints chosen as protagonists of the chapel’s narrative program, Stephen and Lawrence, were both early Christian martyrs who had borne witness with their blood to the ideal embodied in the Fathers and Martyrs of the apostolic Church. As members of the clergy, moreover, they were particularly well-suited to exemplify, by their deeds, the vocation of the clergy to the pastoral tasks of the Church being called for on all sides.

The chapel’s pictorial program reinforces this appeal by an appropriately targeted narrative treatment of the diaconate of the two Saints. But Nicholas V does not only adopt the goal of reform in his private chapel, namely the renewal of spiritual life. By stressing its implementation through Peter and Sixtus he claims that reform was the task of the papacy, and presents himself in the guise of Sixtus II as the guarantor for its realization in the present. The adoption of the reform idea implied incorporation in the institutional framework of the Roman Church, in which the success of the reform was dependent on certain conditions: the loyalty and obedience of the clergy, and the recognition of papal primacy.

The two hagiographical cycles reflect, in their linking of claims to primacy and striving for reform, central papal positions in response to the challenges of conciliarism and contemporary criticism of the government of the Church by pope and Curia. They also contribute significantly to an ecclesiological discourse by providing a pictorial commentary on the great contemporary discussions about the life and action of the Church. No purely spiritual or mystical concept of the Church thus lies behind the fresco program, as it does in the ecclesiology of the Hussites, with its demand for a poor and invisible spiritual church. The program of the Cappella Niccolina embodies and expresses instead the concept of the Church as corpus politicum, as sacramental ministerial Church and monar-
chically and hierarchically structured institution. This ecclesiologi-
cal understanding, testified above all by the ordination of Stephen
and Lawrence, and by their action in the service of caritas, finds an
important complement in the figurative program by which the narrative
scenes of the chapel are framed.

The Doctors of the Church

Eight Doctors of the Church - Ambrose, Athanasius, Augustine,
Gregory the Great, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Leo the
Great and Thomas Aquinas - are gathered together around the
action of the holy deacons. Their appearance may not at first sight
appear very remarkable. Their choice needs no particular justification:
their theological authority is sufficient in itself to justify their
inclusion, and other external circumstances could from case to case
reinforce this. Thus Thomas Aquinas, the great scholastic theologian
of the Middle Ages, while he did not belong to the ranks of the early
Fathers, did enjoy the high esteem of Nicholas V, who celebrated him
in Rome with a special feastday in his honor. However, if we con
sider the eight Doctors of the Church as a whole, their choice and
combination does suggest something unorthodox. The program com
prises four Latin Church Fathers, two Greek Fathers, Thomas Aquinas,
and Leo the Great, the great early Christian Pope and defender of Rome
against the barbarian invasions of the fifth century.

The four Latin Church Fathers Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory
and Jerome form a canonical group. Given that eight Doctors of the
Church are included in the program, and seen against the back-
ground of the Union with the Greek Church achieved a few years
earlier and energetically championed by Nicholas V, a symmetrical
combination of four Latin with four Greek Church Fathers might
have suggested itself: such an equation between two groups of four
might have underlined the unity of both Churches. But the program
of the Cappella Niccolina is limited to two representatives of the
Eastern Church, Athanasius and John Chrysostom. The two Greek
Fathers chosen were precisely those who were repeatedly invoked by
papal partisans as witnesses to Roman primacy both during the negoti-
ations with the Greek Church at the Council of Florence and in the
repudiation of conciliar and conciliarist theories within the Latin
Church. It was no doubt as a particular champion of Roman pri-


In short, shared characteristics can be found in some of the
Doctors of the Church represented in the frescoes that link them
together and that presumably influenced their choice and combina-
tion. But no overriding raison d'être can be recognized in these char-
acteristics or is applicable to them all and programmatically links
them together.

Common to them all, however, is their belonging as priests,
bishops, patriarchs and popes to the hierarchy of the Church. The
ecclesiastical rank of the individual Doctors of the Church, in the
sense of their specific liturgical degree of ordination, generally plays
no particular recommendation for their inclusion in pictorial pro-
grams of this sort. This aspect is generally overlaid by their theo-

cal and historical significance.

In the Chapel of Nicholas V, on the other hand, the particu-
ar ministry exercised, or order represented, by the eight Doctors of
the Church in question seems to have played a significant role in their
choice. This is shown by their arrangement according to rigorously
hierarchical principles. The individual Doctors of the Church are
distributed over the narrow elongated panels of the chapel's two bar-
rel-vaulted arches in such a way that two representatives of the same
degree of ordination stand opposite each other to the right and left of
the entrance and altar-wall (plates 1, 2, 3 and 4). Moreover, their
hierarchical rank increases progressively upwards, from bottom to
top, from the entrance to the altar-wall, beginning with the priests
Jerome (plate 21), and Thomas Aquinas (plate 19), followed by the
bishops Augustine (plate 12) and Ambrose (plate 11), the patriarchs of

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Constantinople and Alexandria, John Chrysostom (plate 22) and Athanasius (plate 18), and ending up with the Popes Gregory the Great (plate 13) and Leo the Great (plate 10). In this hierarchical sequence the occurrence of the eight Doctors of the Church possesses a transpersonal aspect. Their choice is related to the Church as institution; they are to be seen as exponents and mainstays of its hierarchical structure. As representatives of the ministerial Church they complement the two hagiographical cycles and further reinforce the program’s ecclesiological message.

Mystical body of Christ

The interpretation of the Church as corpus politicum testified in the frescoes of the Chapel of Nicholas V does not exclude the spiritual concept of the Church as corpus Christi mysticum. The essentially patristic concept of the Church as mystical body of the Lord describes the community of love founded and sustained by Christ and the Holy Spirit, and that was filled with life by his death on the Cross. This concept was placed in forced opposition to the Roman Church by the critics and opponents of the papacy. The papal ecclesiology, as represented first and foremost by Cardinal Juan de Torquemada, who exhaustively tackled the question of the Church as corpus Christi mysticum in his Summa de Ecclesia, completed during the pontificate of Nicholas V in 1453, aimed at overcoming this antagonism and at reconciling the corpus politicum with the mystical body of the Lord, which had originally been equated, especially in the theology of the eleventh century, with the eucharistic body of Christ. The central question about the position of the Curia, and in particular of the Pope, and the demonstration of their “membership” of the Ecclesia universalis, was answered by differentiating between Christ and his representative as respectively the invisible (Christ) and the visible (Pope) head of the corpus Christi mysticum. The same striving for a reconciliation between the social and spiritual sides of the Church is also reflected in the pictorial program of the Chapel of Nicholas V.

The culminating moment of this reconciliation occurred over the chapel’s altar itself, where a representation of the Deposition from the Cross was originally placed. By the choice of this specific iconographic theme, which held up the eucharistic body of the Lord to meditation, the corpus Christi mysticum in its essential connotation was made present over the altar and the ecclesiological discourse of the fresco program raised to a higher dimension: that of the spiritual and redemptive side of the Church.

Function of the chapel

Fra Angelico’s frescoes contain pointed references to fundamental ecclesiological questions about the nature, constitution and tasks of the Church and of the papacy. In their wide-ranging claims, these ecclesiological implications of the frescoes are surprising in so small a space and so private a chapel as the Cappella Niccolina. Yet they have a close relationship to the chapel’s function in the time of Nicholas V, in so far as we are able to reconstruct it from a series of fifteenth and sixteenth century reports.

The situation of the chapel inside the papal private apartment of the Vatican and its limited size have always led scholars to assume that its access was limited, its character intimate. Occasionally it has even been suggested that the chapel was intended exclusively for the personal devotions of the pope.

In the literature on the history of the Vatican Palace and the function of its various rooms, reports on the role of the Cappella Niccolina are limited to the statement that the pope celebrated daily Mass there. This information is provided by Paris de Grassis and refers to a later pontificate, that of Julius II (1502-1513), but its particular significance remains unexplained. However, the reports of the papal masters of ceremonies of the early sixteenth century, Paris de Grassis (in office: 1504-1521) and Biagio da Cesena (in office: 1518-1544), contain repeated references to the chapel, which enable us to define more closely its role in curial ceremonial.
Regular reports refer, in particular, to the creation of knights as *miles auratus Sancti Petri*. This honorary rank was mainly bestowed on secular dignitaries from the Italian political world, whose alliance and loyalty the popes sought to secure. The rite of installing these knights in the Order was personally conducted by the pope in his chapel: he consecrated one or more candidates as knights in the presence of a few cardinals, bishops and other high-ranking curial officials.

Even more noteworthy than the honors bestowed on secular personalities are reports on the bestowal of a pallium, and the ordination and installation of newly appointed cardinals, over which Julius II presided in the Cappella Niccolina.

The ceremonies described by Paris de Grassis date sixty years and more after the decoration of the chapel by Fra Angelico. These years were distinguished not so much by continuity as by an inner re-organization of the papal private apartments from pontificate to pontificate. So a continuous use of the chapel for the aforesaid ceremonies since Nicholas V cannot be automatically assumed. Still less is it possible to postulate the papal private chapel as their only possible venue inside the palace. Both Julius II and Leo X (1513-1521) usually made use of other rooms in their private apartments for this purpose.

On the other hand, however, it cannot be assumed that the chapel only began to be involved in the courtly liturgical ceremonies of the Curia from the beginning of the sixteenth century. The ordination of a bishop in the papal private chapel is reported as early as the early fifteenth century. According to the report of the papal master of ceremonies at the time, Guido de Busco (in office: 1404-1431), Gregory XII (1406-1415) consecrated his nephew Antonio Correr as bishop of Methone in his *capella secreta* on 24 February. The case seems not to have been anything unusual – i.e. a particular privilege bestowed on a member of the Pope’s family –, but to have been a customary procedure in curial ceremonial; for Guido de Busco in his *Responsiones*, the recommendations drawn up for his successors about the liturgy in the various chapels of the papal palace, expressly comments on the receipts due to the ceremonial clerics from episcopal consecrations in the *capella secreta*.

The use made of the Cappella Niccolina for purposes of curial ceremonial in the time of Julius II and Leo X thus had a tradition stretching back at least to the early fifteenth century, and may be assumed to have been the standard practice also in the time of Nicholas V.

We may therefore conclude that the Cappella Niccolina served the pope who commissioned its decoration and his successors not only for the celebration of daily Mass, but also as a setting for intimate but very important papal ceremonies. In the exclusive circle of selected witnesses from the highest ranks of the curial hierarchy these ceremonies consisted in the conferment of high spiritual honors, through which the pope personally took into his service leading exponents of the ministerial Church and pledged them to loyalty and obedience. This situation is reflected in the themes of loyalty and obedience represented in the frescoes: a direct parallel exists between the contents of the pictorial scenes represented in the chapel and the aims of the ceremonial rites conducted in it.

The chapel’s decoration reflects its use as a place of ecclesial investitures. It confronted the candidates with visual corollaries of the ideals and values expected of them by virtue of the ordination conferred on them by the pope. The pictorial program was thus a means of expressing the papal conception of *ecclesia* to an audience of high-ranking Church officials and dignitaries. The aim was to provide a model for their action in the service of Christ and of his Vicar by an identification with Stephen and Lawrence. So the Chapel of Nicholas V should no longer be seen merely as testifying to the personal devotion and piety of the pope who commissioned Fra Angelico to decorate it. It played within the papal court a role consonant with the iconography of its pictorial program and the aesthetic quality of its decoration. Its decoration was an important step in the development of the Vatican as the official residence of the pope and testifies eloquently to the way the papacy understood itself in the late-conciliar period.