

**DOMINA PAUPERTAS. THE PRAISE OF VOLUNTARY
POVERTY BY SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI
AND ITS REFLECTION IN LATE MEDIEVAL SPANISH
PAINTING***

**DOMINA PAUPERTAS. LA EXALTACIÓN DE
LA POBREZA VOLUNTARIA POR SAN FRANCISCO DE
ASÍS Y SU REFLEJO EN LA PINTURA ESPAÑOLA
BAJOMEDIEVAL**

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Resumen: Como es bien sabido, San Francisco de Asís abrazó heroicamente la pobreza evangélica, renunciando a los bienes materiales y viviendo en la indigencia más absoluta, a imitación de Jesucristo. Además mediante sus escritos y sus testimonios orales, recogidos por sus discípulos, el santo instó con fervor a los cristianos a vivir en algún grado la pobreza voluntaria, de la que Cristo fue el modelo perfecto. Basándonos en algunas citas textuales del *Poverello*, pretendemos en este artículo mostrar la posible incidencia que esas exhortaciones de San Francisco a la pobreza pudieran haber tenido en la pintura española bajomedieval, en temas iconográficos tan significativamente franciscanos como la Natividad y la Pasión del Redentor. Mediante el análisis de un amplio conjunto de pinturas representativas de ambos temas, intentaremos poner en luz si las enseñanzas de San Francisco sobre la pobreza evangélica se reflejan de algún modo en la pintura española de la Baja Edad Media.

Palabras clave: Pobreza, pintura española bajo-medieval, iconografía.

Abstract: As is well known, St. Francis of Assisi heroically embraced evangelical poverty, renouncing material goods and living in abject poverty, in imitation of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, through his writings and oral testimonies collected by his disciples, the saint fervently urged Christians to live to some degree voluntary poverty, of which Christ was the perfect model. By basing this reading on some *Poverello's* quotations, this paper intends to show the potential impact that these exhortations from San Francisco to poverty may have had in the late medieval Spanish painting, in some iconographic themes so significantly Franciscan as the Nativity and the Passion of the Redeemer. Through the analysis of a large set of paintings representing both issues, we will attempt to put into light if the teachings of St. Francis on evangelical poverty are reflected somehow in Spanish painting of the late Middle Ages.

Keywords: Poverty, late medieval Spanish painting, iconography.

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Practice and preaching of voluntary poverty by St. Francis of Assisi

The ascetic of Saint Francis of Assisi, *il Poverello* of Umbria, is based on four pillars: poverty, humility (with its essential counterpart, obedience), chastity and charity. Among these virtues, our saint loved poverty with special predilection,² considering it as the fastest and most efficient way to obtain the favour of God and reach heaven. In fact, by encouraging humility and spiritual perfection, poverty becomes a spiritual treasure, for whose conquest it is worth the trouble of sacrificing all other material wealth.³ To our saint, it is clear that "Poverty is the true investiture of the kingdom of heaven, the security of its possession and as a foretaste of the future beatitude."⁴

Therefore, the ascetic of Assisi proclaims fervorously: "Lady Holy Poverty, the Lord would save your sister, the holy humility! (...) The holy poverty confuses cupidity, and greed, and concerns of this material world."⁵ And later he added: "Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice."⁶ The main reason for which St. Francis loves so fervently voluntary poverty is that it was adopted with humility by the infinitely rich incarnate Son of God, not only at his birth in Bethlehem, but also throughout his life of total gift and in his death on the cross. Therefore, Thomas of Celano, official biographer of the saint, points out that he, "speaking of poverty, often used to repeat to the brothers that sentence of the Gospel: 'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of God has not where to lay his head'."⁷

² Thomas of Celano, a biographer of St. Francis, stated the saint's opinion in these terms: "the friars –gathered in chapter – who asked his views on the virtue that makes one more friend of Christ, he answered –as committing a secret heart–: 'Know, children, poverty is a special way of salvation, of fruits very varied, well known by few.'" (TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, CLI, 200. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). *San Francisco de Asís. Escritos. Biografías. Documentos de la época* (Edición preparada por J. A. GUERRA). Madrid: Editorial Católica, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 399, 1980, p. 345).

³ In this regard, St. Bonaventure, General of the Order of Friars Minor and devout apologist of St. Francis, expresses in this way the thought of the saint: "when the friars asked him at a meeting which was the virtue that best garners the friendship of Christ, he responded as if one discovered a secret of his heart: 'Know ye, brethren, that poverty is the special way of salvation, as it promotes humility and is the root of perfection, and its fruits –though hidden– are many and varied. This virtue is *the hidden treasure of the gospel field*, for whose acquisition it's worth selling all things, and those that cannot be sold have to be estimated for nothing compared to the treasure.'" (SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda mayor*, VII, 1. En: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, p. 421).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS. *Saludo a las virtudes*. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, pp. 47-48.

⁶ SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS. *Admoniciones*. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, p. 82.

⁷ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, XXVI, 56. Op. cit., pp. 263-264.

That absolute poverty –St. Francis points out– was also accepted by the Virgin Mary when giving birth to Jesus, fleeing with him to Egypt, following him in his public life and accompanying him in his Passion and death. In the words of his apologist, St. Bonaventure,

He [*il Poverello*] frequently evoked –not without tears– the poverty of Jesus Christ and his mother; and as a result of his reflections, he asserted that poverty is the queen of virtues, for it had shone with such excellence in the King of kings and in the Queen, his mother.⁸

Or, as indicated by Celano, "That's why he sentenced that this virtue [poverty] is a royal virtue, as it has shone with such brilliance in the King and Queen."⁹ In more explicit terms, the same biographer explains:

The supreme aspiration of Francis, his strongest desire and highest purpose, was to observe in all and always the Holy Gospel and to follow the doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ and his steps with extreme attention, very carefully, with all the desire of his mind, with all the fervor of his heart. In assiduous meditation he recalled his words, and with very acute consideration he remembered his works. He had so presently in his memory the humility of the incarnation and the charity of passion, that he hardly wanted to think about anything.¹⁰

Aware that the two existential milestones in which Christ gave the greatest witness of poverty were his birth in the misery of the Bethlehemite manger and his passion and death on the nudity and the abandonment of the cross at Golgotha, the Umbrian ascetic always wanted that their monks and the faithful in general would continually remind that heroic example of the Redeemer's voluntary utter indigence. Thus he promoted enthusiastically the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus, a celebration that even he himself proposed to make visible, reliving it in reality. For this purpose, three years prior to his death he established the tradition of the Christmas "manger" or "crib", staging live at Greccio the episode of the Christ's Birth in Bethlehem, including every detail of the miserable environment (stable, manger, straw, mule, ox) in which, according to the Gospel and the Apocrypha, the miraculous event happened.

Later in this paper will be seen how that Franciscan "reconstruction" of the asceticism of the Son of God coming into the world will exert significant influence on late medieval Spanish society, to the point of stimulating the development and

⁸ SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda mayor*, VII, 1-2, *op. cit.*, p. 420. See also TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, CLI, 200. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). *Op. cit*, pp. 344-345.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

¹⁰ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida primera*, XXX, 84-86. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). *Op. cit*, p. 192.

the many forms of traditional iconographic themes, such as *The Nativity of Christ* and *The Epiphany to the Magi*, and the emergence and consolidation of other subjects relatively "new", as *The Adoration of the Shepherds* and *The Adoration of Baby Jesus by the Virgin*.

Going beyond the praise of the model of voluntary poverty offered by Jesus at his birth, St. Francis considered every poor man as a true reflection of the divine Poor of Bethlehem. According to Thomas of Celano,

All indigence, all penury he saw, snatched him to Christ, centering completely in him. In all the poor he viewed the Son of the poor lady carrying naked in the heart the one to whom she carried naked in her arms.¹¹

The same biographer transcribes thus the words of the saint to a monk who spoke unfair of a poor: "Brother, when you see a poor, you see a mirror of the Lord and of his poor mother."¹²

As expressed by Saint Bonaventure, in reference to his founder father:

The perfect follower of Christ so sought to marry with eternal love sublime poverty, partner of the holy humility, that not only did he leave his father and mother, but also got rid of everything he could possess. No one was so greedy of gold as him of poverty, no one was so diligent in keeping a treasure like him in saving this evangelical pearl. Since the founding of his Religion –considering himself rich with the gown, the rope and the pants–, he only seemed to glory in hardship and joy in scarcity.¹³

In imitation of Christ, St. Francis fervently devoted himself to the heroic practice of evangelical poverty, without avoiding any sacrifice. He concreted his absolute penury, for example, in clothing, not only for the small number of his garments, but also for the hardness and ruggedness of their fabric. In fact, by ignoring luxury, elegance and comfort in clothing, he used to sew rough ropes in his gown if he felt it soft and comfortable.¹⁴ Hence, when a minister of the Order asked him how the banning of earthly goods on the gospel should be interpreted,

¹¹ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, LI, 83. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, p. 279.

¹² *Ibid.*, LII, 85, p. 280.

¹³ SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda menor*, III, 5. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, p. 510. See also SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda mayor*, VII, 1-2. Op. cit., p. 420; y TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*. Op. cit., p. 263.

¹⁴ According to St. Bonaventure, the saint of Assisi "hated the softness in the dress, loved its roughness, ensuring that precisely for that John the Baptist was praised from the lips of the Lord Himself. If he ever noticed some softness in the tunic that had been given him, he sewed little strings inside, because he said that, according to the word of the truth, one must not look for the softness of the dresses in the huts of the poor, but in the palaces of princes." (SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda Mayor*, V, 2. Op. cit., p. 407).

he replied that his first and last wish was that the Friars Minor held no more than the habit, the girdle and the breeches, as prescribed by the Rule.¹⁵ Thanks to such extreme indigence adopted by St. Francis in his dress and in his way of life, his biographer says:

The father of the poor, the little poor man Francis, identified with all the poor, would not be happy if he saw someone poorer than himself; it was not by desire of vainglory, but by affection of true compassion. And, if it is true that he was happy with a tunic extremely miserable and rough, yet often wished to divide it with other poor.¹⁶

A similar ascetic austerity was practiced by St. Francis to sleep. According to his biographers, any place where he would dwell, instead of sleeping on a bed covered with clothes, he preferred to sleep naked on top of his robe, spread directly on the cold ground, having a tree or a stone for a pillow, often also sleeping sat.¹⁷

He assumed an equivalent austerity in eating. According to his apologists, *il Poverello*, wanting to avoid any pleasure of taste in food, used to abstain from eating cooked food, and if by chance this was offered to him, he mixed them all with ash or made them lose the flavour by drowning them in cold water.¹⁸

The founder of the Friars Minor demanded a similar austerity in the houses and temples of his Order. For this purpose, he forbade his friars to receive houses, churches or lands whose poverty were not evident, and, anyway, he ordered to receive them not as definite property, but as transitional housing, them being strangers and pilgrims in transit through this perishable world. He sets it that way in his *Second Rule*:

The friars do not make anything for themselves, neither house nor place nor anything. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, who serve the Lord in poverty and humility, go for alms with confidence. And they need not be

¹⁵ Cf. *Leyenda de Perusa*, 102. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, p. 675.

¹⁶ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida primera*. Op. cit., p. 187.

¹⁷ "Wherever he would be hosted he did not allow that his bed was covered with clothes, but he did lay on the bare ground his coat, that received his naked limbs. When he allowed to his weak body the sleep's gift, he often slept sitting, and when he lay, he did as indicated, putting as a head-rest a log or a rock." (TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida primera*, XIX, 52. Op. cit., p. 173). St. Bonaventure makes similar assertions in *Leyenda mayor*, V, 1. Op. cit., pp. 4406-407.

¹⁸ According to Thomas of Celano, the saint "used to say it was impossible to satisfy the need without condescending with pleasure. Very rarely he consented to eat cooked meats, and, when admitted, he often mixed them with ash or turned them insipid drowning them in cold water." (TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida primera*, XIX, 51. Op. cit., p. 173).

ashamed, for the Lord became poor for us in this world.¹⁹

And, before the imminence of his death, he confirms such a norm in his *Testament*:

The friars should avoid at all to receive churches, poor lodgings, or anything that is built for them, unless they are as befits to the holy poverty we promised in the Rule, always hosting themselves there as strangers and pilgrims.²⁰

St. Francis extended this architectural poverty to houses and churches to be built by the friars themselves. In the words of Thomas of Celano, the saint "Taught his disciples to construct poor houses, on wood, not on stone, i.e. huts raised under a very basic design."²¹ In full agreement with these statements, the anonymous author of *Mirror of Perfection* asserts that

he did not want at all the friars to overstep the poverty's measure in houses, nor in churches, nor in gardens, neither in other things that they use; he did not either want them to occupy any place as owners, but to live in them 'as pilgrims and strangers'.²²

St. Francis claimed a similar poverty in the household and in utilitarian objects, of which he required to have only those strictly necessary, and always simple and modest, lest anyone forget their status as pilgrims and exiles in this world. So Thomas of Celano points out:

This man hated ostentation not only in houses, but he also deeply hated that there would be many and exquisite belongings. He did want nothing in the tables and in the vessels, which would remind the world, so that all things which were used would speak of pilgrimage, of exile.²³

¹⁹ SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS. *Segunda Regla*, IV-VI. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, pp. 112-113.

²⁰ SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS. *Testamento*. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, p. 123.

²¹ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, XXVI, 56, op. cit., pp. 263-264. The Anonymous of Porciuncula expresses this issue with identical words in *Espejo de perfección*. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, pp. 699-700.

²² The Anonymous of Porciuncula, *Espejo de perfección*. Op. cit., p. 703. St. Bonaventure confirms such testimony, by saying: "he taught his friars that the houses they would build were humble, in the style of the por; that they must not dwell them as owners, but as tenants, considering themselves *strangers* and *pilgrims*, as is standard in the pilgrims –he said– to be housed in a strange house, to long ardently homeland in peace and move from one place to another". (SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda mayor*, VII, 1-2. Op. cit., pp. 421-422).

²³ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, p. 265. In almost identical terms, see *Espejo de perfección*. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit, pp. 699-700.

The experience of the Birth of Jesus poor by St. Francis and its probable reflection in Spanish late medieval painting

If St. Francis loved with particular preference the virtue of voluntary poverty it was, doubtless, for having seen it was taken by the very Word of God throughout his earthly life, mainly in two key episodes: his birth and his passion to death on the cross. So, *il Poverello* always commemorated with special fervour and gratitude the Nativity and the Passion of the Saviour.

It is well known in this respect the staging with which St. Francis established in Greccio the tradition of the "crib (*presepio*)" during the celebration of Christmas. Three years before his death, in fact, he staged in Greccio, by a "*tableau vivant*" with real people and animals, the birth of Jesus in the stable of Bethlehem: in order to commemorate the Nativity of the Redeemer in a visible way, he installed a crude manger, on which he deposited a little boy, looked after by a young couple, and placed beside a donkey and an ox;²⁴ then he celebrated Mass in the makeshift crib, during which he sang the gospel and preached the sermon on "the child of Bethlehem".²⁵

This "official" celebration of the birth of Christ on Christmas Day did not prevent him to constantly remember the hardships suffered by the Son of God incarnate, born in a very poor and filthy stable, for, according to his biographer, "he did not remember without tears the hardship that surrounded that day the little poor Virgin."²⁶ The *Poverello's* predilection for Christmas –which he celebrated with exceptional joy, considering it "the feast of feasts"²⁷— was so great as to make him wish that this day the rich men should give plenty of food to the poor and the hungry, and even that they fed the oxen and asses with more hay and fodder than usual.²⁸

In accordance with that ascetic-catechetical doctrine, the practice and preaching of absolute poverty by St. Francis of Assisi will impact largely on the Spanish artistic production of the late Middle Ages, both from the point of view of the choice and treatment of religious themes by artists and designers of iconographic programs, and from the perspective of doctrinal purposes they conferred to them.

²⁴ Cf. TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida primera*, XXX. 84. Op. cit., p. 192.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

²⁶ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, CLI, 200. Op. cit., pp. 344-345.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, CLI, 199, p. 344.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, CLI, 200, pp. 344-345.

Obviously, in this short article, it is not possible to any extent to analyse all the countless iconographic motifs in Spanish painting from the 13th to 15th centuries which could draw upon the glorification of voluntary poverty by St. Francis of Assisi. Therefore this paper will be limited to the consideration of this possible inspiration in some expressions of two great christological cycles in medieval Spain, which, although at first glance seem outside the asceticism of the *Poverello*, maintain significant doctrinal links with it: the cycle of Nativity of Jesus (with specific episodes of the Nativity, the Adoration of the Shepherds,²⁹ the Epiphany to the Magi³⁰ and the Adoration of the Child by the Virgin), and the cycle of the Passion and Death of Christ (in some of its various subthemes).

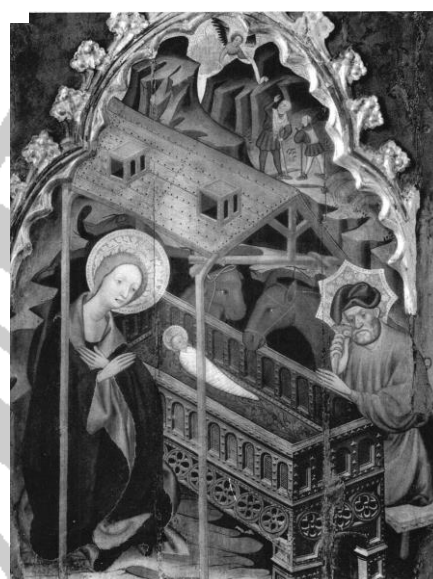


Fig.1. Ferrer Bassa, *La Natividad*,1346, fresco, St. Michael's chapel, monastery of Pedralbes, Barcelona.

Fig. 2. Ramón de Mur, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de Guimerá*, 1412. Museo Episcopal, Vic.

Among the countless representations of the Nativity of Jesus in medieval Spanish painting,³¹ a few representative examples of this iconographic motif in one or another of the subthemes will allow us to discern in them the plausible

²⁹ We have already approached the specific iconographic theme of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* on two previous works: in Chapter 6 of our book *Visiones de lo invisible. Estética e iconografía de religiosidad popular en la Italia de la Baja Edad Media*. Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Sociales / Centro de Investigaciones Postdoctorales (CIPOST) / Bid & co editor, 2010, 216 pp.; and in "Iconografía de La Adoración de los pastores en la pintura italiana bajomedieval. Una mirada bucólica a la existencia del pobre", *Eikón / Imago*, n^o 1, january-june 2012, Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2012, pp. 1-38.

³⁰ We have approached the iconography of *The Adoration of the Magi* in the Chapter 7 of the book just cited *Visiones de lo invisible*. Op. cit.

³¹ In most of the Spanish altarpieces, especially those devoted to Christ or Mary, is a constant almost obligatory that one of the panels represents the scene of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem

mark of ascetic spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. Thus, for example, in the Nativity of Ferrer Bassa in the monastery of Pedralbes,³² Ramón de Mur in Guimerà³³ altarpiece, Jaume Serra in the altarpiece of the Holy Sepulchre in Zaragoza³⁴ and Lluís Borrassà in the altarpiece of the Virgin and St. George in Vilafranca del Penedès,³⁵ the simplest interpretation of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, with a similar structure in composition and narration, can be appreciated: in the foreground the Virgin, kneeling in adoration, and Saint Joseph, almost always seated, are located on both sides of the infant lying in the oblique manger, while in the distance –usually at the top of the scene— the angel announcing the good news to the shepherds can be perceived; except for Ferrer Bassa, who, though he also includes a roof, favors the cave, the other three artists host the Holy Family under a fragile impoverished wood shed (referring to the traditional stable).



Fig. 3. Jaume Serra, *La Natividad*, panel of the altarpiece, convent of Holy Sepulchre, Zaragoza (MPBA, Zaragoza).



Fig. 4. Lluís Borrassà, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de la Virgen y San Jorge*, convent of St. Francis, Vilafranca del Penedès.

³² FERRER BASSA, *La Natividad*, 1346, fresco, chapel of St. Michael, monastery of Pedralbes, Barcelona. Illustrated in Josep GUDIOL y Santiago ALCOLEA I BLANCH. *Pintura gòtica catalana*. Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 1986, p. 294, fig. 190.

³³ RAMÓN DE MUR, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de Guimerà*, 1412. Museu Episcopal, Vic. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. *Op. cit.*, p. 102, fig. 72.

³⁴ JAUME SERRA, *La Natividad*, panel of an altarpiece from the convent of the Holy Sepulchre, Zaragoza, tempera on wood, 350 x 320 cm. Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes, Zaragoza. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. *Op. cit.*, p. 307, fig. 242.

³⁵ LLUÍS BORRASSÀ, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de la Virgen y San Jorge*, convent of St. Francis, Vilafranca del Penedès.

Without doubt, these four painters and their works embody a remarkable formal and stylistic clumsiness. But it is not this technical incompetence the ingredient which would reveal the Franciscan asceticism; rather, the implements and fixtures which configure those images are the real stuff that reveals the probable direct imprint of the St. Francis' fervent exaltation of extreme poverty with which the very rich Son of God wanted to be born. Therefore, this quartet of artists strives to capture –even with such wrong morphology– the miserable shelter (cave or stable), the fragile and rickety shack, the humble manger of plate planking (apart from the incredible Ramón de Mur's poetic license, shaping it as a pompous Gothic "cradle"), the bare rocky landscape of the environment, the patient quiet presence of the mule and the ox, the modest dress of Mary and Joseph.

Everything in these simple Hispanic Nativities breathes austerity and modesty that *il Poverello* praised so much in the birth of the Son of God incarnate. Otherwise, would it be surprising to find that the painters and designers of the iconography of these four paintings had been inspired by St. Francis' ascetic spirituality, when it is known that the monastery of Pedralbes, for whose St. Michael's chapel Ferrer Bassa painted his fresco, housed a community of Poor Clares (the Order of the Clarisses, founded by St. Clare of Assisi, St. Francis' spiritual sister), and that Lluís Borrassà painted his altarpiece of the Virgin and St. George (in which is integrated the analysed panel of the Nativity) for the Franciscan convent of Vilafranca del Penedès?



Fig. 5. García Fernández, *La Natividad*, panel of the altarpiece of Sainte Ursula, Salamanca.

Fig. 6. Master of Rubió, *La Natividad*, panel of altarpiece, church of St. Mary of Rubió.

In their respective Nativity, García Fernández in Santa Úrsula's church at Salamanca,³⁶ the Master of Rubió in Santa Maria de Rubió,³⁷ Pere Serra in the two altarpieces of Abella de la Conca³⁸ and Sant Esperit in Manresa,³⁹ Francesc Serra in Sigena altarpiece,⁴⁰ Bernat Martorell⁴¹ in the altarpiece of the Virgin,⁴² and Jaume Cirera and Bernat Despuig in the altarpiece of St. Michael and St. Peter,⁴³ Joan Antigó⁴⁴ in the monastery of Banyoles,⁴⁵ and Pere Vall in an altarpiece predella⁴⁶ offer a quite similar narrative structure: they all represent the event of the Adoration of the Shepherds, with the nearly coincident fact of including two or three humble shepherds without sheep (except in the case of García Fernández), almost always kneeling beside Mary and Joseph.

³⁶ GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ, *La Natividad*, church of Santa Úrsula, Salamanca. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 220, fig. 188.

³⁷ MAESTRO DE RUBIÓ, *La Natividad*, panel of altarpiece of the church of Santa María de Rubió.

³⁸ PERE SERRA, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de Abella de la Conca* (ante 1387). La Seu d'Urgell. Museu Diocesano.

³⁹ PERE SERRA, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo del Sant Esperit*, cathedral of Manresa. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 228, fig. 22.

⁴⁰ FRANCESC SERRA, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de Sigena*, 2nd. mid 14th century, from the monastery of the Blessed Mary, Sigena (Huesca).

⁴¹ For a large biography of Bernat Martorell, with abundant documentation, see GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, pp. 121-125.

⁴² BERNAT MARTORELL, *La Natividad* (tempera on wood, 77 x 53 cm, Coll. Lippmann, Berlin), panel of *Retablo de la Virgen*. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 245, fig. 49

⁴³ JAUME CIRERA y BERNAT DESPUIG, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de San Miguel y San Pedro*, 1432-1433, from the church of Saint Michael, Seu d'Urgell.

⁴⁴ For a biographical synthesis of Joan Antigó, with abundant data, see GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 141.

⁴⁵ JOAN ANTIGÓ, *La Natividad*, panel of *Retablo de la Virgen*, 1437-1439, from the high altar of the monastery of St. Stephen, Banyoles (Gironès). Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 252, fig. 58.

⁴⁶ PERE VALL, *La Natividad* (Coll. Hartmann, Barcelona), predella of an altarpiece. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 361, fig. 489.

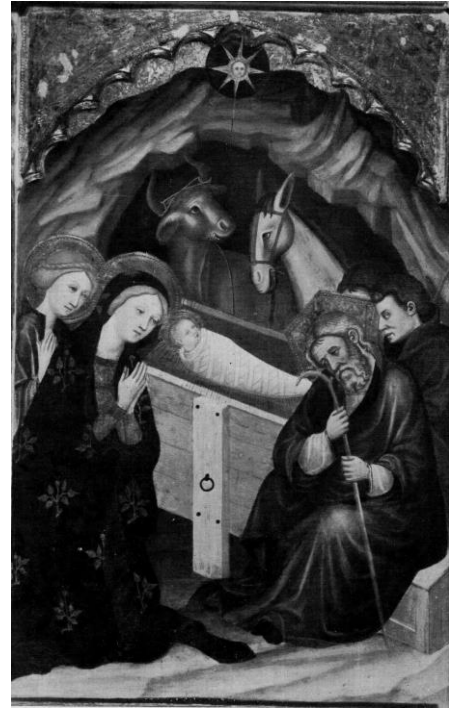


Fig. 7. Pere Serra, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de Abella de la Conca* (ante 1387). La Seu d'Urgell. Museu Diocesà.

Fig. 8. Pere Serra, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo del Sant Esperit*, cathedral of Manresa.



Fig. 9. Francesc Serra, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Altarpiece of Sigena* (s. XIV), from the monastery of Sainte Mary, Sigena.

Fig. 10. Jaume Cirera and Bernat Despuig, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Altarpiece of St. Michael and St. Peter*, 1432-1433, church of St. Michael, Seu d'Urgell.



Fig. 11. Pere Vall, *La Natividad*, predella of altarpiece.

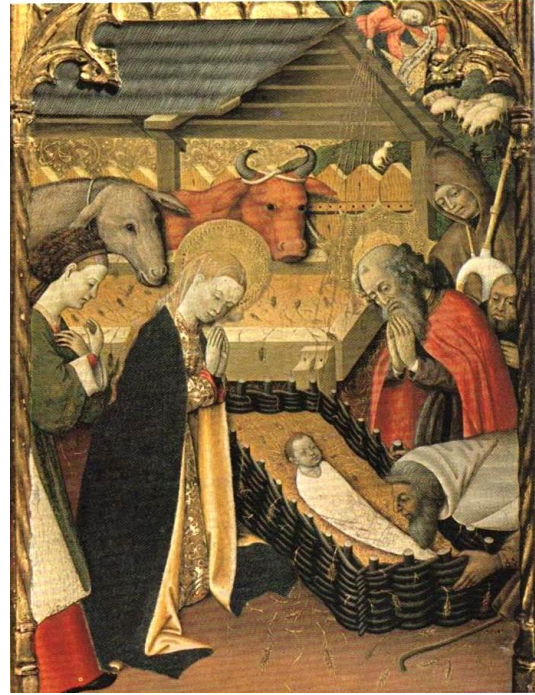


Fig. 12. Bernat Martorell, *La Natividad*, panel of the *Retablo de la Virgen*.

As Ferrer Bassa, Jaume Serra, Ramón de Mur and Lluís Borrassà did before in the first four works already seen, these eight artists also insist on emphasizing extreme poverty of physical environment and the fixtures that embody the birth of Jesus. Some, like García Fernández, the Master of Rubió, Pere Vall, Jaume Cirera and Bernat Despuig, and Pere Serra in the altarpiece of Sant Esperit, highlight the nakedness of the rugged arid cave. Others, like Pere Serra in Abella da la Conca, Francesc Serra, Bernat Martorell, and Joan Antigó, and Jaume Cirera and Bernat Despuig, underscore the most miserable configuration of the precarious shack, whom Cirera and Despuig reduce even to a simple frame of thin sticks. Most of them accentuate the humble coarseness of the crib made with rough tables, whom Martorell converts even in a crude network of twigs. They all show the modest clothing and submissive attitudes of shepherds, looking almost indigents.



Fig. 13. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Adoration of Shepherds*, 1482-1485, fresco. Capilla Sassetti, Santa Trinità, Florence.



Fig. 14. Joan Antigó, *La Natividad*, panel of the altarpiece in the monastery of Banyoles, 1437-1439.
Fig. 15. Robert Campin, *La Nativité de Dijon*, 1420-1422. Museo del Prado

Apart from its undeniable stylistic and compositional differences, all the Spanish painters studied here agree in furnishing their Nativities with obvious poverty, with a very poor shed/barn and a rustic manger: as such, the fact that these artists have had in mind the ascetic exhortations of St. Francis –who "taught his disciples to make poor houses, in wood, not in stone, i.e., huts raised under a very basic design"⁴⁷– cannot be dismissed.

Moreover, the imprint of Franciscan asceticism we believe to have found in Spanish medieval Nativity is even more evident when compared with similar contemporaries interpretations painted by Italian and Flemish artists, for example, with those of Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Sassetti Chapel, Florence, or that of Robert Campin (*Nativity of Dijon*) in the Museo del Prado: all the stripping and humble sober austerity –bordering on pauperism—that exudes the Hispanic nativities contrasts in an outstanding way with the lush pageantry and ostentatious wealth held, with elegant coolness and without shame, by the Italian and Flemish counterparts images

The experience of the Passion of Christ poor by St. Francis and its possible reflection in Spanish late medieval painting

In a similar sense of commiseration St. Francis recalled the terrible vicissitudes of the Passion and death of Christ. He experienced that sharp and steady shudder at the Passion of the Redeemer from the moment of his conversion. When this began, the then dissolute Francis had the formidable mystical experience of seeing that Jesus himself spoke to him through the crucifix of the crumbling temple of San Damiano, asking him to repair the Church (meant more as a universal spiritual institution than as a concrete material building). Thus St. Bonaventure relates this mystical revelation:

One day when he was praying so, retired in solitude, Jesus Christ appeared to him in the figure of the crucified, passing through him so effectively those words of the Gospel: *Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me*, that his soul was burnt in a fire of love, while it was filled with the absinthe of compassion. Indeed, at such a vision his soul was melted, and the memory of the passion of Christ was recorded so dearly at the core of his heart, that he saw almost continuously with the eyes of soul the wounds of the crucified Lord and he could barely contain externally tears and groans.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, XXVI, 56. Op. cit., pp. 263-264. The Anonymous of Porciuncula expresses similar terms in *Espejo de perfección*. In: J.A. GUERRA (ed.). Op. cit., pp. 699-700.

⁴⁸ SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda menor*, 1, 4. Op. cit., p. 512.

The compunction that St. Francis experienced in front of the sufferings of Jesus Christ in his Passion is confirmed by Thomas of Celano, noting that, although on average of overflowing joy, the sudden memory of the passion and death of Jesus made him sprout bitter tears, and led him to the contemplation of the transcendent values.⁴⁹

In that vein, St. Bonaventure affirms that "Jesus Christ crucified *dwelt* continually, as a little bundle of myrrh, in the mind and heart of Francis, and he wished to be completely transformed in Him by the fire of his excessive love."⁵⁰ That is why, decided to boast only in the sufferings of Jesus in his Passion,⁵¹ the Umbrian ascetic strove in resembling in all to the suffering Christ on the cross, as indicated by St. Bonaventure:

Certainly he wanted to accord at all with Christ crucified, which was hanging on the cross: poor, suffering and naked. Therefore, at the beginning of his conversion he remained naked before the bishop, and also, at the end of his life he wanted to leave this world naked. And he commanded by charity's obedience the friars who attended him that, when they saw him already dead, they leave him lying naked on the earth as much space of time a person needs to walk slowly a mile way⁵²

Although, due to its central importance in the history of salvation, the iconographic theme of the Passion of Christ had been widely developed many centuries ago by Christian artists, it sounds logical that the insistent preaching and the constant experiential example of St. Francis for the permanent remembrance and steady sympathy to the suffering and the crucifixion of Jesus have contributed notably to modify in the subsequent Christian art –especially in the Spanish of the Middle Ages— the doctrinal and didactic approach to the different scenes of the Passion.

In the light of this, it seems reasonable to think that the exhortations and personal example of *Poverello* have produced about a twofold catechetical effect: to facilitate the development of complete iconographic cycles of the Passion of the Redeemer, and, above all, to stimulate in the

⁴⁹ After revealing that St. Francis sang in French when he was specially joyful, his official biographer says: "All these transports of joy often ended in tears; the joy was resolved into compassion for the passion of Christ. Hence this saint continually burst forth in sighs, and, as groans reiterated, forgotten what this world was up, he was rapt in heavenly things." (TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, XC, 127. Op. cit., p. 323).

⁵⁰ SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda mayor*, IX, 2. Op. cit., p. 449.

⁵¹ Cf. TOMÁS DE CELANO. *Vida segunda*, CIV, 203. Op. cit., p. 363.

⁵² SAN BUENAVENTURA. *Leyenda mayor*, XIV, 4. Op. cit., p. 481.

artists and iconographic programmers a greater emotional expressiveness, able to move the viewer of pictures with these issues to a similar compassion (in the sense of "to suffer jointly and severally") with Christ's sufferings.

When analysing pictorial production in late medieval Spain, a strong footprint of this Franciscan compassion for the various avatars of the Passion of the Savior seems evident in it. To begin with, a first manifestation of this influence of the saint of Assisi is seen in Hispanic representations of execution of Jesus on Calvary. In fact, the core of the Crucifixion episode is a scene that, with fair immutability, crowns the central crest in all Spanish Gothic altarpieces.

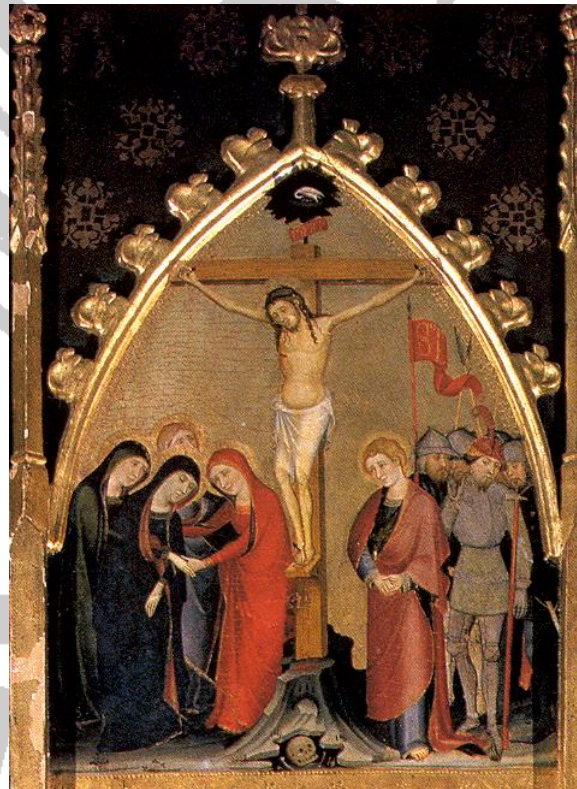
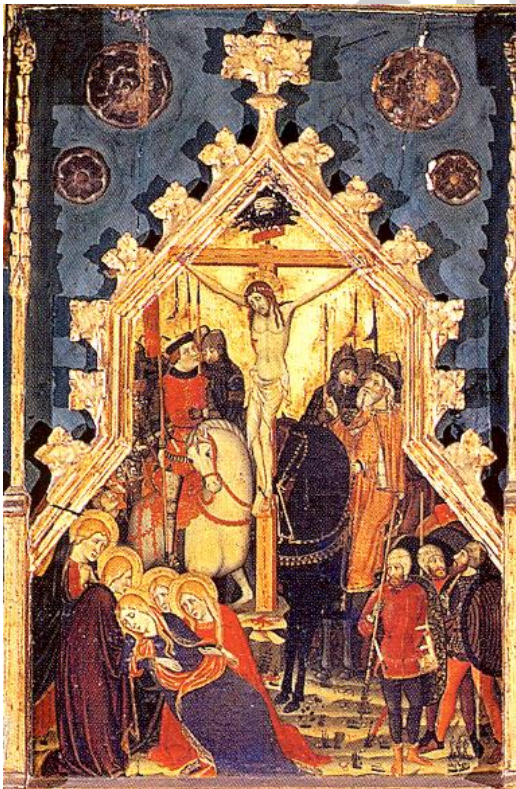


Fig. 16. Francesc Serra, *Calvario*, panel of the *Retablo de Sigena* (XIV century), from the monastery of Sigena.

Fig. 17. Pere Serra, *Calvario*, panel of the *Retablo de Abella de la Conca* (ante 1387). La Seu d'Urgell. Museu Diocesà.

From the remarkable compositional simplicity that comes with Pere Serra in the altarpiece of Abella de la Conca to the relative complexity with which Francesc Serra structures the altarpiece of Sigena –and these are just two mere illustrative examples among the countless samples we could

quote—, this scene of Hispanic Gothic Calvary used to be composed with relative simplicity and with few characters and fixtures: on an often neutral background, in almost complete absence of the surrounding landscape, the three Marys and John the Evangelist console the Virgin, who faints beside crucified Christ, who usually appears as the only executed, generally obviating the presence of the two thieves who accompanied him on the deadly ordeal. Despite the undeniable clumsiness with which they are configured, all friends of the Redeemer—especially his vanished mother— foreshadow with their attitudes in these paintings this pain and pity that St. Francis would awaken the sufferings of Jesus in the various events in his inhuman Passion in the believers.



Fig. 18. Jaume Cabrera and circle, *Santo Entierro*, cathedral of Girona.



Fig. 19. Francisco Chacón, *La quinta angustia*, c. 1492. Museo de Bellas Artes, Granada.

Even more revealing of the influence of St. Francis' spirituality in Spanish medieval iconography of the Passion are the heterogeneous representations of a mixed theme that might be called –for economy of terminology– the Descent, but usually integrated with the Lamentation over the body of Christ (the Italian *Pietà*) and even with that of his or Burial in the grave. In Hispanic Gothic painting the mode of representing this complex issue of Descent / Lamentation / Entombment is quite variegated.

Beyond its obvious compositional differences, Jaume Cabrera⁵³ on the panel

⁵³ For a large biography of Jaume Cabrera, with plenty of data, see GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op.

of the Girona cathedral,⁵⁴ Jaume Huguet in the altar's front of the Louvre,⁵⁵ Lluís Borrassà in the predella of the altarpiece of Sant Esperit, and the Master of Tortosa⁵⁶ in the altar's front of the Tortosa cathedral⁵⁷ broadly agree about the essentials of narrative structure: composition's space is filled with a large group of characters, including the Virgin, the three Marys and John the Evangelist, who weep and mourn around the horizontal lifeless body of Christ, some feelings shared by the co-stars of the tragedy, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

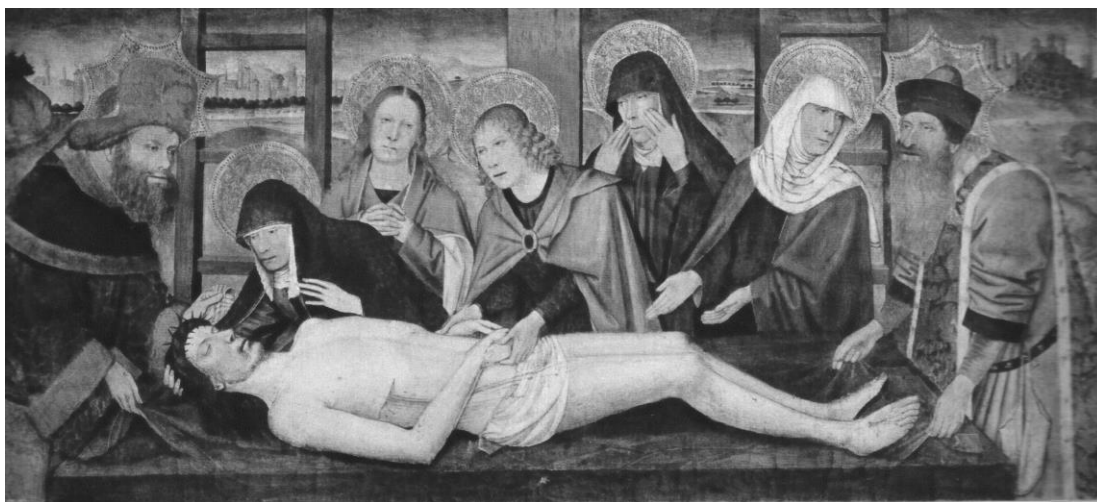


Fig. 20. Jaume Huguet, *La quinta angustia*, front of altar. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

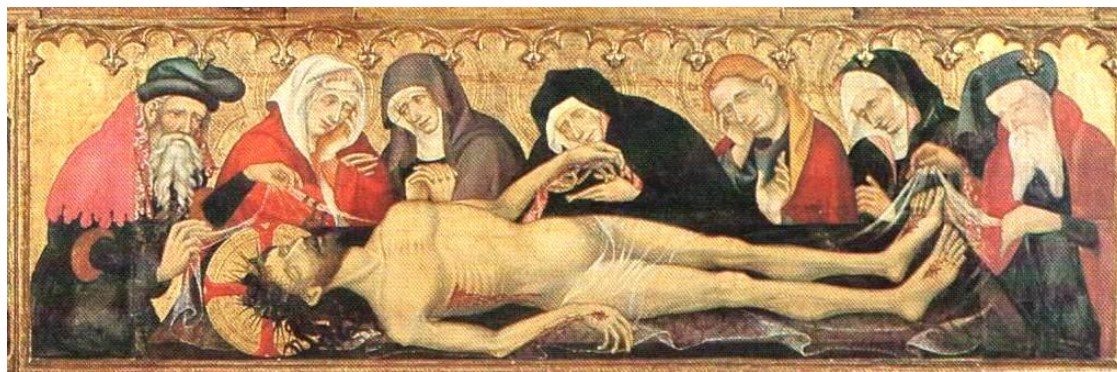


Fig. 21. Lluís Borrassà, *La Lamentación*, predella of the *Retablo del Sant Esperit*, 1394, Manresa.

cit, pp. 92-95.

⁵⁴ JAUME CABRERA and circle, *Santo entierro*, tempera on panel, 190 x 135 cm, cathedral of Girona. Illustr. en GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 356, fig. 453.

⁵⁵ JAUME HUGUET, *La Quinta Angustia*, altar front, 75 x 156, transferred on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Inv. N° 998 B). Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 415, fig. 782.

⁵⁶ For a brief biographical sketch of Master of Tortosa, see GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op, cit, pp. 63-64.

⁵⁷ MASTER OF TORTOSA, *La Lamentación* (o *Santo Entierro*), high altar front of the Tortosa cathedral 1351. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, p. 318, fig. 296.



Fig. 22. Maestro de Tortosa, *La Lamentación*, front of the main altar, cathedral of Tortosa, 1351.

Only Francisco Chacón in his panel –the most decoratively Flemish of the whole examined— disconnects somewhat from this compositional and narrative scaffolding, not so much for orienting obliquely Jesus' body, but, above all, for including only the Virgin Mary, the Magdalene and John the Evangelist (to whom he adds discreetly the donor at the right end of the table) as mourners, while giving relief to the bright colorful scenery and to the rolling phylactery surrounding the wooden cross.

In that vein, the fact that often the horizontal scenes of Lamentation / Entombment of Christ are precisely the front of the altar, as in the aforementioned works of Jaume Huguet, Lluís Borrassà and Master of Tortosa, is still revealing. By posing this sad scene of the *Pietà* as an altar's front (what the believer has before his eyes as a table of the Eucharistic sacrifice), the ecclesiastical authorities, who design the iconographic program of the whole, undoubtedly seek to make visible and intelligible the definitive redemption of mankind obtained by Christ through his death on the cross, redemption which revives and is commemorated every time the Eucharist is celebrated on this altar

A final expression of the likely influence of asceticism of St. Francis in Spanish medieval iconography of the Passion is found in the sub-theme of "Man of Sorrows". Such sub-theme exhibits Christ (often upright) with his body scourged, his head pierced by thorns and deep wounds of nails and spear, often flanked by the weeping figures of the Virgin and Saint John – or even sustained by them, as seen in the work of Diego de la Cruz at the Museo del Prado⁵⁸—, or supported by a pair of pricked angels, while often the symbols of the Passion (nails, spear, whip, bones, claws, reed, sponge ...) surround the Savior.

Although not originally from Spain,⁵⁹ that variable representation of

⁵⁸ Diego de la Cruz, *Christ Man of Sorrows between the Virgin Mary and St John*, c. 1495, wood, 136 x 117 cm. Museo del Prado.

⁵⁹ In the Italy of Quattrocento certain images similar to the representation of the *Man of Sorrows* are

Christ as Man of Sorrows reaches widely circulated in Spain. However, with this pitiful picture of the Man of Sorrows (often designed as predella of an altarpiece or altar front) the ecclesiastical authorities that schedule this iconography seek undoubtedly to put in sight of believers the torn effigy of the suffering Redeemer, with the purpose of arousing in them a sincere affliction before the inhuman suffering of the Messiah. That way, these pathetic images –so markedly Spanish– of the Man of Sorrows seem to be inspired by all accounts in the exhortations of St. Francis in favour of being compassionated with Lord's suffering and Passion.

In this regard, the fact that the predella of the altarpiece of the Virgin and St. George in Vilafranca del Penedès, designed by Lluís Borrassà, concludes in its right end precisely with the miracle of the Stigmata of St. Francis, an event in which *il Poverello* achieved his maximum compassion/identification with the sufferings of Christ crucified, is highly symptomatic.

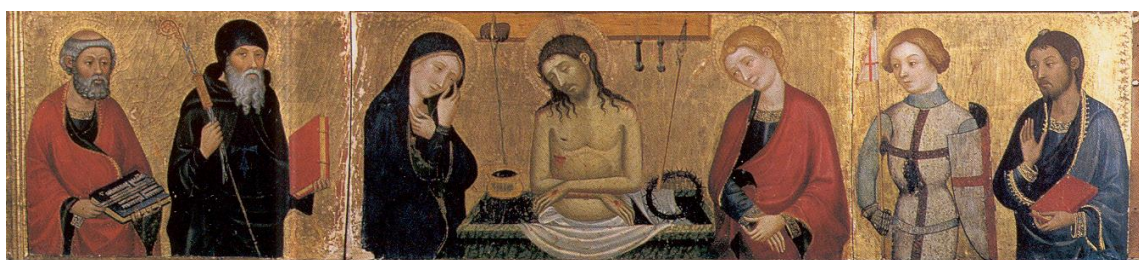


Fig. 23. Pere Serra, *Cristo Varón de Dolores*, predella of the *Retablo de Abella de la Conca* (ante 1387). La Seu d'Urgell. Museu Diocesà.

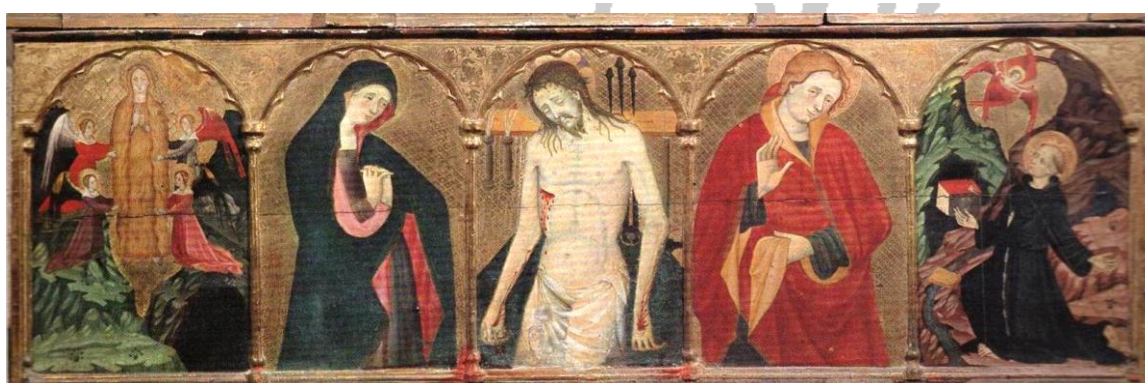


Fig. 24. Lluís Borrassà, *Cristo Varón de Dolores*, predella of the *Retablo de la Virgen y San Jorge*, convent of St Francis, Vilafranca del Penedès.

As a revealing finding, these Spanish Gothic interpretations of the

frequent. However, these Italian representations are closer in form and substance to the iconography of the *Pietà*, whose they are a specific subtopic, as revealed by the very titles of these Italian works. Numerous variants painted by Giovanni Bellini and Antonello da Messina -only as examples- clearly illustrate this subtopic.

Passion of Christ manifest a more emotional spirituality and a greater austerity in composition and narration – a likely symptom of a more direct and deep Franciscan inspiration— than that of their Italian and Flemish contemporary colleagues. Three comparisons could be proposed here, as simple examples, to show this assertion. So, the *Man of Sorrows* (in the Museo del Prado) shaped by Diego de la Cruz around 1495 looks much more sober and natural than the lush and theatrical *Compianto su Cristo morto* (Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan) painted by Botticelli by the same year.

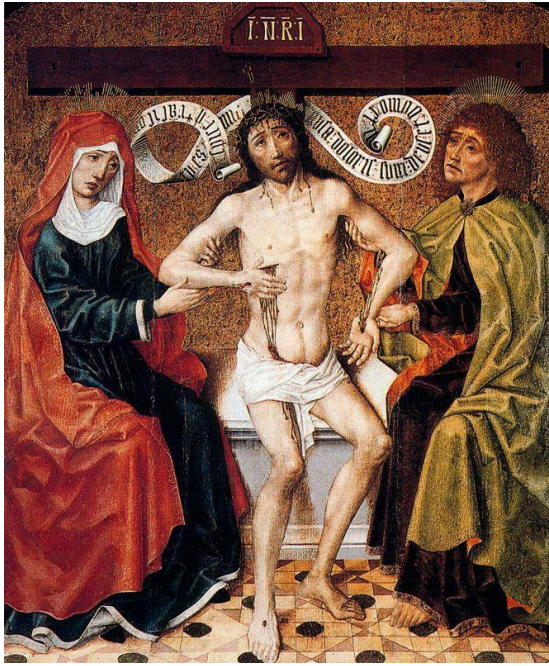


Fig. 25. Diego de la Cruz, *Christ Man of Sorrows between the Virgin and St John*, c. 1495, Prado. Picture from Wikimedia Commons. <http://pintura.aut.org/SearchProducto?Prodnunum=15384>
Fig. 26. Sandro Botticelli, *Compianto sul Cristo morto*, c. 1495. Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan.



Fig. 27. Petrus Christus, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, 1455-1460. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

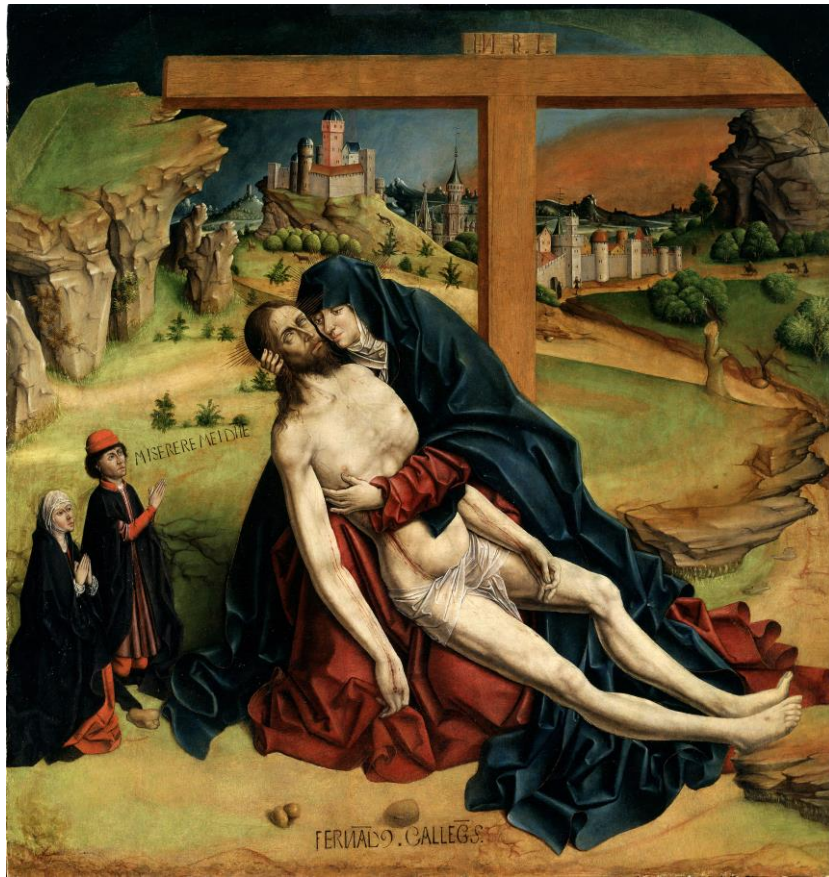


Fig. 28. Fernando Gallego, *La Pietà*, c. 1470. Museo del Prado

A similar result can be obtained by comparing the harrowing *Pietà* by Fernando Gallego (c. 1470) in the Museo del Prado with *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* by Petrus Christus (1455-1460) in Royaux Musées des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. On Gallego's canvas all is pathos and curbed drama, with a tragic Virgin which tenderly embraces her inert Son, while the pair of donors, in a fervent bereaved attitude, proclaim by the inscription "*Miserere mei, Domine*" their repentance before the crucified. In *The Lamentation* by Petrus Christus, however, everything is expressionless and cold absorption in characters (including the two strange individuals faced on the right flank, perhaps, the pair of donors), which, in the beautiful elegance of their gestures and clothing, exhibit a dull coldness and an emotional lack very little consistent with the tragic event represented here.



Fig. 29. Bartolomé Bermejo, *La Pietà* (altarpiece of the Lluís Desplà's Chapel), 1490, Museo de la Catedral, Barcelona.

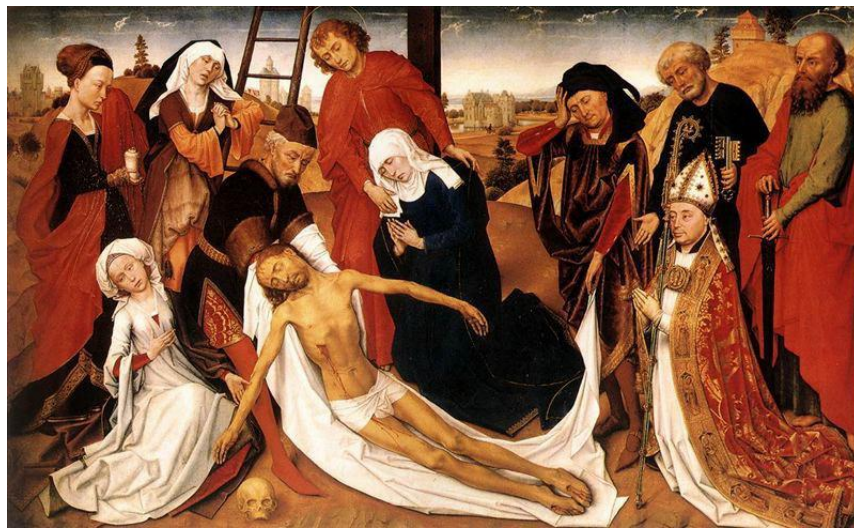


Fig. 30. Rogier van der Weyden, *The Lamentation from The Hage*, c. 1460-1480.

Similarly, the very Flemish *Piedad* by Bartolomé Bermejo⁶⁰ in the Lluís Desplà's Chapel (1490)⁶¹ –with the donor Archdeacon flanking devoutly with St.

⁶⁰ For a large biography, with some documented data, of Bartolomé Bermejo, see GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op. cit, pp. 205-206; and chiefly VV.AA. *La pintura gòtica hispanoflamenca: Bartolomé Bermejo y su época*. Op. cit.

⁶¹ BARTOLOMÉ BERMEJO, *La Piedad*, altarpiece of the palace's chapel of the archdeacon Lluís Desplà at Barcelona, 1490, oil on wood, 175 x 189 cm. Museo de la Catedral, Barcelona. Illustr. in GUDIOL, ALCOLEA I BLANCH. Op, cit., p. 276, fig. 92; and in VV.AA. *La pintura gòtica hispanoflamenca: Bartolomé Bermejo y su época* [catalogue of exhibition]. Museo Nacional d'Art de Catalunya,

Jerome a rueful Virgin Mary, which holds the body of Christ on her lap on a thorough background landscape⁶²— looks much more emotional and spiritual than *The Lamentation from The Hague*, painted about 1560-80 by Rogier van der Weyden.⁶³ In this Flemish table, full of a precious formal elegance, even if somewhat chilly, van der Weyden invests all the co-stars of the tragedy –the Virgin, the three Marys, Saint John, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, to whom he adds the apostles Peter and Paul—, with a a little cold and distant solemnity, bordering on the inexpressiveness, that grows to the limit in the phlegmatic prelate, who, with glacial elegance, exhibits himself in the foreground as self-satisfied donor, far from feeling a Franciscan compassion to the bloodless crucified Redeemer.

Conclusion

A brief corollary can be drawn from what has been said here. Undoubtedly, because of their marrowy relevance in the history of salvation, the iconographic cycles of the Nativity and the Passion of Christ were disseminated and developed at great length for many centuries in Christian art of East and West, before St. Francis of Assisi. However, the persistent preaching and exemplary life practice of *il Poverello* in favour of remembering and praising for the extreme poverty with which Jesus chose to be born in Bethlehem, as well as towards constantly remember and sympathize with the suffering and crucifixion of the Son of God seems to have contributed significantly to modify the doctrinal and didactic approach of the different Spanish pictorial images of those two Christological cycles.

In this regard, it looks reasonable to conjecture that the exhortations and the particular example of the Umbrian ascetic might have produced in Gothic art of Spain a double catechetical fruit: promoting the creation of complete cycles of the Passion iconography in certain important churches;

Barcelona, 26 february-11 mai 2003, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 9 june-31 august 2003, 587 p.

⁶² For an analysis of this table of Bartolomé Bermejo, see Frederic-Pau VERRIÉ. "13. Bartolomé Bermejo, Piedad (1490)". In: VV.AA. *La pintura gótica hispanoﬂamenca: Bartolomé Bermejo y su época*. Op. cit., pp. 190-195.

⁶³ Rogier VAN DER WEYDEN, *The Lamentation from The Hague*, c. 1460-1480, oil on wood, 80,7 x 130,3 cm. Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen, The Hague.

and, very especially, stimulating in the Spanish artists a more expressive and devout emotionality in this respect, conceived as rhetorical strategy to persuade believers to internalize experientially a double Franciscan feeling: first of all, that of sharing in some measure the poverty voluntarily chosen by the Son of God in his very miserable Birth in Bethlehem' stable; and then that of showing compassion (suffering in solidarity) to the inhuman martyrdom of the Crucified and the unspeakable sufferings of the Man of Sorrows.

