

Anna Myers

Increased Dominican Anti-Semitism Following the 1350 Plague as Illustrated in the *Via Veritatus*

In 1350, the wealthy Florentine merchant Buonamico di Lapo Guidalotti decided to leave an extravagant 325 gold florins to have the inside of the Spanish Chapel of the Dominican Santa Maria Novella decorated with frescoes ². Just a few years previous, the bubonic plague had swept through Florence, taking with it a third of the city's inhabitants, Guidalotti's wife among them and now he lay bedridden, dying of gout. The horrors of the plague had caused Guidalotti, among many Florentines, to become more pious in his final years; he became very close with the Dominican Friar Jacopo Passavanti and together they began to plan out the imagery and themes of the chapel's frescoes ².

Andrea da Firenze painted one of the more famous of these frescoes, titled the *Via Veritatus (The Way of Salvation)* or the *Church Militant and Triumphant*, completing it in 1365. The *Church Triumphant* is the Catholic name for the assembly of Christians already in heaven. They are depicted amidst a horde of angels in the top half of Firenze's fresco, surrounding Christ, who sits encircled in a golden orb. Yet is the lower half of the fresco – the *Church Militant* or those Christians still remaining on Earth – that illustrates Guidalotti and Passavanti's beliefs. On the left side of the upper portion (or what might be the background were there not an utter lack of perspective) a group of haloed Christians, those who have been saved, are ushered through gates decorated with a fleur de lis pattern and gaze upward to the heavens which await them. Prominent among them are multiple Dominican Friars, identifiable by their black and white robes ⁴. To the far right, a group of

young revelers play music, pick fruit from the trees, and generally enjoy earthly pleasures. They are bluntly contrasted with an old man to their immediate right, who seeks penance from two austere but benevolent Dominicans. One of them gestures with one hand toward the gates and the other toward the old man, suggesting that his piety has saved him from purgatory ². On the bottom left side, the most important secular and non-secular figures, including the pope and emperor, are seated on a short platform and surrounded by the clergy, which consists overwhelmingly of Dominicans, on one side and ordinary people on the other.

Guidalotti and Passavanti did not simply have Firenze depict the Dominican order as very important to the Church; they also seem to have used the *Church Militant* to promote Dominican ideas. The Dominican order of the Roman Catholic Church, also called the Order of Preachers, was founded in 1216 by St. Dominic de Guzman ⁵. From the beginning, the order focused on preaching and on converting Jews, and to a lesser extent Muslims, to Christianity ⁶.

Reacting to the commonly held belief that the plague was a punishment from God, the various orders of the Church in Florence – including the Dominicans – reacted by emphasizing the importance of upholding Christian morals and by cracking down on any person or act deemed immoral ⁴. I believe that, advising Firenze on the ideology illustrated in the *Via Veritatus*, Guidalotti and Passavanti were influenced by the increasingly anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Dominican order in Florence that followed the post-plague crackdown on supposed sinners.

This influence is most apparent in the final area of the fresco – the bottom right side. Here, St. Peter Martyr tries to convert one group of heretics through discussion, enumerating their errors on his fingers, while St. Thomas uses his Christian writings, specifically the *Summa contra gentiles* to try to convert the another group of heretics⁴. The crowds of heretics include both Muslims and Jews, but the Jews can be identified by their yellow garb³, pointed, wide-brimmed hats⁴, exaggerated brows, and overemphasized hook noses, which are often shown in profile for still further emphasis². While the grossly stereotyped faces are obviously derogatory even to a modern viewer, Florentines would have seen the yellow clothes as equally pejorative³. To the late medieval viewer, the color could represent sickness and death, as bitter, yellow dandelions were common symbols of the Crucifixion, or cowardice and sin, as Judas Iscariot was thought by some to have been robed in yellow when he betrayed Christ⁶. Yellow cloth had been required attire for known prostitutes in many Italian cities for decades at the time the *Via Veritatus* was commissioned and more recently, mostly following the plague, some Italian cities such as Venice had begun to force Jews to wear yellow robes or yellow circles on their clothes³. Yellow would have reminded the viewer of the connection between the Crucifixion and Jews, who some Dominican theologians even called the “Christ-killers”⁴. That Guidalotti and Passavanti may have held this view, is hinted at by another of Firenze’s frescoes in the Spanish Chapel , in which Christ bears the cross through the streets past crowds of good Christians, who visibly mourn, and heretics, a good portion of them garbed in yellow, who leer and shout⁴. The idea that the Jews were not just ignorant in not accepting the way of salvation but hatefully, intentionally ignorant, is also exemplified by one of the heretics of the group whom St.

Thomas is shown attempting to convert. Though not garbed in yellow, he wears the characteristic pointed hat and his only distinguishable facial feature is his grotesquely stereotyped, overlarge curved nose⁴. Standing at the edge of the crowd, he does not look at the saint, but down at his hands, which are tearing pages out of one of St. Thomas's theological books; he is actively avoiding conversion through purposeful ignorance.

The Dominicans did not just believe the Jews to be willfully ignorant heretics; increasingly in the decades following the 1348 plague, their sermons also called them a danger to Christian society, one that must be converted or expelled¹. While the depictions of the actions of St. Thomas and St. Peter Martyr could be said to symbolize the mostly unsuccessful attempts of the order at conversion, the depiction of St. Dominic shows a harsher solution to God's anger at the allowance of heretics in Christian society. To the left of the two proselytizing saints, St. Dominic uses a stick to encourage black and white dogs (*Domini canes*, a symbol of the Dominican order) to kill wolves before they can eat a group of sheep². This could be seen as symbolizing the risk to the whole of Christian society, as represented by the sheep (the Lord often being referred to as the Good Shepherd), posed by allowing outsiders and non-believers who do not follow the guidance of the Lord to live among them, here represented by the wolves. The dogs, directed by St. Dominic and obviously representing the Dominican order, must kill these wolves to keep them from descending upon the flock; this scene as a whole has been interpreted as symbolizing the importance of the Dominican role in the inquisitorial aspects of the Church² or of the need to expel the city's heretics to save the good Christians of Florence⁴.

That these ideas of willful ignorance and the need for expulsion to save Christian society expressed through the *Via Veritatus* fresco were not limited to Guidalotti and Passavanti but part of the general trend of increasingly anti-Semitic sentiment in Dominican thought following the plague is evidenced by the records of many Dominican sermons at the time⁴. Some of the most popular were penned by the Florentine Dominican Giovanni Dominici¹. Dominici tweaked the popular teachings of another Dominican, Regimio de' Girolami, to fit his own views on what had to be done to save Christian society in a time of crisis. Girolami had, years earlier, called for a more unified Florence using the metaphor of the republic as a whole person whose limbs must all work together in their specific roles¹. Dominici added to this that, like the plague, the Jews were a disease which must be expelled lest it kill the whole body of good Christian society in Florence¹.

In the *Via Veritatus*, good Christian society - the Church Militant - is protected from the heretics almost solely by Dominicans and their watch dogs. This illustrates the order's particular fervor about removing heretics, especially Jews, from Christian society, a fervor which seems to have predated the plague⁵. While it seems that the plague, in its role as a supposed punishment from God, did influence Dominicans to be more anti-Semitic, perhaps they were also astute in exploiting the fear that followed it to promote and preach more publicly the extreme views they had long held. As Diana Norman writes on the Florentine branch, "among the newly founded orders, the Dominicans... were particularly astute in their exploitation of art for the promotion of their collective identities and ideologies."⁷ Perhaps, in advising on the themes of the *Via Veritatus*, Passavanti was one such Dominican.

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