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I, Ellen W. Boswell Schiefer , hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

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Miracle at Monte Oliveto
Renaissance Benedictine Ideals and Humanist Pictorial Ideals in Perspective

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2606

Miracle at Monte Oliveto
Renaissance Benedictine Ideals and Humanist Pictorial Ideals in Perspective

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Abstract

The *Chiostro Grande* or Great Cloister of the Abbey of Monte Oliveto, a Benedictine abbey, is decorated with a fresco cycle depicting the life of Saint Benedict who lived approximately between 480 and 547 C.E. This fresco cycle was painted by two Italian Renaissance artists, Luca Signorelli (c.1444-1523) and Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, called Il Sodoma (1477-1549). It is the most comprehensive fresco cycle of the life of St. Benedict painted in Italy during the Renaissance period and it can be considered an artistic masterpiece and treasure of the Renaissance. In this thesis, I examine the distinct characteristics of the fresco cycle. I demonstrate that the painters of this fresco cycle, Luca Signorelli and Il Sodoma, were influenced by humanists of the period, and in particular, by Leon Battista Alberti's treatise, *On Painting*. In this writing, Alberti identifies the ideal painting and its composition. I show that Signorelli and Il Sodoma incorporate rhetorical theory as a model for painting. The fresco cycle was constructed using Albertian ideals of painting, and it was meant to perpetuate the Benedictine Rule as originally composed by St. Benedict. The fresco cycle is an expression of idealism: an ideal spiritual way of life composed on ideal principles of painting communicated by Alberti in the mid-fifteenth century and painted by Signorelli and Il Sodoma in the late fifteenth century. A discussion of monasticism and the Benedictine observant reform movement is included.

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Introduction

Sitting high atop a mountain, southeast of Siena, in the Asciano region of Italy, which is the dry and desolate wilderness of the Sienese "crete,"[1] is the Abbey of Monte Oliveto, a Benedictine abbey (see Figures 1 and 2). This abbey is home to an order of Olivetan monks. Olivetans are a distinct branch of the Benedictine order and the Olivetan branch was founded by a Sienese nobleman, Giovanni Tolomei (1272-1348); later he became known as St. Bernard Ptolomei. He vowed to commit himself to religion because his eyesight was restored through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. Coupled with his ascetic fervor, he expressed his appreciation and gratitude for the recovery of his vision by leaving home in 1313 and going into the wilderness, forsaking the world and giving his life to God. Two of his friends accompanied him, Ambrogio Piccolomini and Patricio Patrici. Tolomei and his friends retreated to some land that belonged to the Tolomei family, and the site lent itself perfectly to the eremitical life. It is on top of a mountain, much like a promontory that juts out over a sea, and it is here they committed themselves to the austere life. They were devoted and aggressive ascetics, and as a result, in 1319, they were accused of heresy and were summoned to Avignon to explain their practices to Pope John XXII (1316-1334). Piccolomini and Patrici made the journey to Avignon and were able to win the approval of the Holy Father in spite of opposition of other friars. Pope John XXII mandated that they would need to

[1] "Crete" refers to the geologic attributes of the area, referring to the Sienese clays in the Val d'Orcia. The characteristic clay comes from the sediments of the Pilocene sea, and erosion of this soil has played a major role in the formation of this striking landscape.

go to Guido di Petromala, the Bishop of Arezzo, who would confer the Rule upon them with the official approval of the Church. On March 26, 1319, the Bishop of Arezzo conferred the Benedictine Rule upon them together with the habit[2] and the *Charta Fundationis*.[3] It is atop this mount, thirty-six kilometers southeast of Siena between the towns of Buonconvento and Chiusure, that the mother house of the Olivetans, Monte Oliveto Maggiore, was built and formed.

The Abbey of Monte Oliveto was constructed over a period of more than a century, beginning in 1320, shortly after the order was recognized by the Holy See and was completed approximately in 1498 (see Figure 3). Within the walls of the abbey lies the "*Chiostro Grande*" (Great Cloister) (see Figure 4) that was constructed between 1426 and 1443, and is decorated with a fresco cycle depicting the Life of Saint Benedict (c.480-547). The fresco cycle is comprised of thirty-six scenes,[4] which portray events of the saint's life, including his youth, his withdrawal from society, his calling to teach Christianity, the formation of his monastery, and the miracles surrounding his life.[5] These works of art were painted by Luca Signorelli (c. 1444-1523) and Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, more commonly known as Il Sodoma (c.1477-1549).

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[2] Olivetan monks wear white habits, as do Cistercians. Other Benedictine monks wear black and/or grey habits.

[3] Kurt Sundstrom, *The Chiostro Grande of Monte Oliveto Maggiore and The Olivetan Reform Movement* (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2000), 23.

[4] Originally, there were thirty-seven frescoes, but the scene of an *Episcopal Consecration of a Monk* painted by Signorelli is now fragmentary.

[5] The history of the life of Saint Benedict is passed to us through two sources, Book II of Gregory's *Dialogues,* and *The Rule of Saint Benedict;* see: Myra L. Uhlfelder, trans., *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great. Book Two: Saint Benedict*, translated, with an introduction and notes, by Myra L. Uhlfelder (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); and Benedict, Saint, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, translated with an introduction by Cardinal Gasquet (London: Chatto & Windus, 1909).

Later, one of the frescoes in the cycle was painted by Bartolomeo Neroni, more commonly known as Il Riccio (c.1505-1571) in 1534.[6] It is generally accepted that Signorelli began painting the fresco cycle in 1497, abandoned the project by 1499, and Il Sodoma assumed the completion of the commission in 1505 and finished it in 1508.

The *Life of Saint Benedict* fresco cycle at Monte Oliveto is truly a marvel to behold. The work of art adorns an extremely beautiful cloister in a very isolated and wild landscape, which lends even more impact to the narrative. It is the most comprehensive fresco cycle depicting the life of Saint Benedict created during the Quattrocento of the Italian Renaissance. The literature specific to the cycle is sparse. Enzo Carli, a former Superintendent of the region, has written a book entitled *L'Abbazia di Monte Oliveto.*[7] In the opening of his book, Carli states that as Baldassar Castiglione called the Ducal Palace of Urbino a city in the form of palace, Monte Oliveto Maggiore could be called a city in the form of a monastery.[8] He gives a general description of the Abbey and discusses the formation of the Olivetans, the construction of the abbey, the art in the chapel, the surrounding grounds, forest and topography, and the fresco cycle. He has interpreted the fresco cycle as a literal account of the life and miracles of Saint Benedict presented in a chronological format. Other scholars have referred to the cycle in writings relating to monasticism, Christianity, the Catholic Church, cloister decoration, art history and the Italian Renaissance. Kurt J. Sundstrom, in his doctoral dissertation, *The Chiostro Grande of Monte Oliveto Maggiore and The Olivetan Reform Movement* (2000), closely

[6] The fresco, *The Mission of Maurus and Placidus in France and Sicily*, located in the southwest corner of the cloister, was decorated by Il Ricchio when a doorway to the refectory formerly in that bay was closed. See Laurence Kantner, *The Late Works of Luca Signorelli and his Followers* (Ph.D. diss. Columbia University 1998), 72.
[7] Enzo Carli. *L'Abbazia di Monte Oliveto*. (Milan: Electa Editrice, 1961).
[8] *Ibid*. 5.

examines the fresco cycle and then establishes a relationship between the site and the spiritual role the frescoes were intended to play in the lives of the resident monks. He goes further to argue that the fresco cycle was an important doctrinal document to the Olivetan order and its reform movement.[9]

It is my intention in this study to present the fresco cycle as an expression of idealism. The *Life of St. Benedict* fresco cycle is a comprehensive, lucid, narrative structure meant to imbue the ideals and moral philosophy of St. Benedict to the Olivetans. It is also an ideal to which the Olivetans are bound to remain, a vow if you will, and in this sense, the fresco cycle acts as a tool of corporate identity. Finally, the means by which this ideal is communicated was uniquely conceived in the latter part of the fifteenth century using the ideals of painting defined by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), the humanist, in his seminal work, *De Pictura* (1435). The scenes from the *Life of St. Benedict*, as portrayed at Monte Oliveto by Il Sodoma and Signorelli, are visually arresting and create a moral paradigm that is palpable to those who view it. The concept of Italian Renaissance humanism and the ideals associated with humanism are not novel concepts for scholars. Nor is the ideal monastic way of life. But, heretofore, these concepts of idealism in combination with the humanism of the period have not been placed in context with this fresco cycle. This thesis sets forth that the paintings depicting the Life of Saint Benedict at Monte Oliveto Maggiore are modeled and composed using the ideals on painting proposed by the humanist, Alberti, in his book, *De Pictura*, and were used to communicate, express and perpetuate Benedictine monastic ideals to the Olivetans.

[9] Reform movements within religious orders during the Renaissance occurred due to the fact many monasteries and nunneries had deviated, and in many cases, completely abandoned the rules upon which they were founded.

In the first chapter of the paper, the origins of monasticism will be presented along with an overview and history of the Benedictine Order. A brief history of the life of Saint Benedict will be given. A discussion of Pope Gregory the Great and his writing, *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, will follow. St. Benedict wrote and completed *The Rule of St. Benedict* around 540. This writing, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, upon which all Benedictine monks and nuns model their lives, will be examined. An overview of the history of the Benedictine order will be presented. The problems of the Benedictines during the fifteenth century and the observant reform movements will be addressed.

These frescoes depict a gamut of themes: familial scenes, scenes of sorrow, social corruption, images of miracles, scenes of prayers, devotional themes, notions of "*Fuga Mundi"* (Flight from the World), portrayals of transformation, the presence of evil, the triumph of Christ, scenes of teaching, scenes of building, scenes of evangelization, concepts of humility, scenes of temptation, themes of obedience, scenes of forgiveness, scenes of redemption and divine intervention, among others. The life that Saint Benedict lived exemplifies an ideal monastic way of life and it is portrayed as so in the fresco cycle at Monte Oliveto Maggiore. Despite the fact that the fresco cycle was a product for a monastic milieu, Timothy Verdon has argued that Renaissance monastic art had a greater audience as he proposes, "the evidence suggests rather that monastic imagery had a message for society at large, which saw in it the reflection of its own deepest aspirations."[10] Although the fresco cycle at Monte Oliveto would have had a limited audience due to its physical setting, primarily the monks and abbot that lived there, other monastic imagery would have been viewed by those living in urban areas in which there

[10] Timothy Gregory Verdon, O.S.B., *Monastic Themes in Renaissance Art: a Walking Tour of Italian Painting and Sculpture in the National Gallery of Art . . .* (Exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art: Washington, D.C. 1980), 1.

were monasteries and convents, like the Badia and San Miniato al Monte in Florence, which were open to the civic community.

The second chapter of the thesis will present a description of the frescoes. In this chapter, I will also include a discussion of Leon Battista Alberti and his book, *De Pictura*, also known as *On Painting*. The elements of an ideal painting will be discussed, based upon Alberti's ideas in his treatise. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that the reform movements[11] among the religious orders of the day were an attempt to revitalize those orders that had gone astray and return them to the original precepts of the founders, specifically in this case, St. Benedict's Rule. Benedictine priorities entailed restoring the ideal monastic way of life, a return to St. Benedict's Rule, and the images painted in the fresco cycle depicted this ideal. In the fifteenth century, the shoring up of crumbling moral standards and dying institutions was required. It is in this context that the fresco cycle of the Life of Saint Benedict at Monte Oliveto can be seen as an expression of Renaissance Benedictine monastic idealism. The fresco cycle was painted to resuscitate The Rule of Saint Benedict and to revitalize the ascetic ideal that Benedict taught. Two other fresco cycles of the Life of Saint Benedict painted in during the Renaissance will be taken into consideration: (1) the murals in the sacristy of San Miniato al Monte painted by Spinello Aretino in 1388; and (2) the murals in the Chiostro degli Arancia the Badia painted by Consalvo in 1436, both located in Florence.

To conclude, I will demonstrate that the paintings themselves are constructed upon Albertian ideals of painting, and they were created to express, reinforce and perpetuate Benedictine monastic ideals as set forth in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. The

[11] Benedictine monasticism had virtually collapsed according to Barry Collett; see his *Italian Benedictine Scholars and The Reformation,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

second, and perhaps more important expression of idealism in the frescoes, pertains to the sacred and monastic life depicted and embraced by the Benedictines and the value system it confers. The fresco cycle is a spiritual statement, and the ideals it confers are timeless. The combination of the pursuit of these two ideals; ideal pictorial representation combined with ideal spiritual goals, concomitantly, at a specific moment in time, during a remarkable period in the history of art, culminated in the most significant and comprehensive depiction of the Life of Saint Benedict during the Italian Renaissance. The life of Saint Benedict at Monte Oliveto is a major artistic program of the late Italian Renaissance and it is a masterpiece.

Chapter I:

The Origins of Monasticism

The ascetic ideal, or asceticism, describes a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from various worldly pleasures predominately with the aim of pursuing religious and spiritual goals. Monastic life is a form of asceticism. Early founders and practitioners of this way of life include Buddhists, Jainists, and the Christian Desert Fathers. It is in the desert in Egypt where Christian monasticism has its roots.

Early monastic beginnings can be traced back to St. Paul the Anchorite (c.228-c.341) and Anthony of Egypt (c.251-c.356). St. Anthony Abbot withdrew from society to lead an ascetic life in the desert.[12] Similar to St. Benedict, his fame grew and as a result, he had followers appear who sought his way, that instead of living alone as a hermit, he ended up living among others. (Living a solitary life as a hermit as a monastic way of life, also known as an eremitical life or an anchorite life is in contrast to a community life known a cenobitic monasticism.[13]) The coming together of men in this example is the origin of cenobitical monasticism. (The word, cenobite, itself derives from the Greek "*koinas bios,*" meaning common life.) A cenobite community practices an ascetic life based upon prayer. This way of life first spread in the fourth century around the shores of the eastern Mediterranean.

Pachomius (c.292-c.346) is generally recognized as the founder of Christian cenobitical monasticism, that is communities in which male or female monastics live

[12] Helen Waddell, trans., *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1957).
[13] Verdon, O.S.B., *Monastic Themes in Renaissance Art*, 5.

together and have their possessions in common under the leadership of an abbot or abbess. The first cenobitical monastery was established by Pachomius in Tabenna, Egypt, between 318 and 323 C.E. Pachomius founded nine houses for men, and two for women, and he wrote a rule for his monks and nuns. Later, Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379) wrote two important and influential rules for cenobitical life. By the year 400, a body of sets of rule on Christian monastic life existed.

The beginnings of monasticism in Italy and the western half of the Roman Empire were a conflation of eastern influence and autonomous development. Historically, ascetic communities in Italy and Gaul (now southern France) cropped up by the late fourth century. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote the first monastic rule in Latin. Following St. Augustine, John Cassian (360-435) was the author of two major spiritual writings late in his life. One was *The Institutes*, which deals with the external organization of monastic communities, and the other was *The Conferences*, which address the spiritual nature of man and the perfection of the heart. Both were significant to the cenobite monastic movement.[14] In these mystical writings, Cassian codified and communicated the wisdom of the Desert Fathers of Egypt. Cassian, who lived as a child in the Holy Land (Scythia Minor) moved around 420 to Marseille where he founded a monastery and a convent. These writings crystallized a growing consensus that cenobitic life versus solitary religious life was the best way for followers of Bishop Basil of

[14] Claude J. Peifer, O.S.B. *Monastic Spirituality* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 46.

Caesarea.[15] Bruce Venarde states that Cassian's writings also deeply influenced St. Benedict and his Rule.[16]

During the fifth and sixth centuries, the Latin writings of Augustine and Cassian were widely disseminated and many Greek texts had been translated to Latin, thereby introducing the oldest Egyptian traditions to the people of the western Mediterranean and Europe. There was a growing amalgamation of writings and thoughts on monastic life written by Basil, Augustine and Cassian that were followed by the establishment of numerous monasteries within Italy by the sixth century. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, written by Benedict about 540, was a distillation of his readings and experience. It was concise and a highly practical rule based upon his years as an abbot.

Benedict of Nursia

Although no contemporary evidence of St. Benedict's life exists, the earliest account of his life comes through the writing of Pope Gregory I (c.540-604) in Book II of his *Dialogues.* The traditional date of his birth is in the year 480. He was born into a privileged family of the Umbrian town of Nursia, a mountain town seventy miles northeast of Rome. Benedict was sent to Rome to be educated by his family. In Rome, he saw a lot of vice amongst his fellow students, and fearing his moral demise, he renounced his family, his inheritance, and the world as he knew it and retreated, isolating himself as a semi-hermit near a church in the village of Affile. Later, he completely removed himself from society and went to live in a grotto at Subiaco. He was pulled

[15] Joseph McSorley, "*St. Basil the Great*," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). Accessed online March 18, 2012, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12330b.htm.
[16] Bruce L. Venarde, *The Rule of St. Benedict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) x-xi.

from isolation to be the abbot of a local monastery at Vicovaro. In his attempt to bring order and discipline among his monks, he met insubordination by them. Then, the monks tried to poison him. He retreated to the wilderness, but his reputation for holy wisdom drew followers. He established his first monastery at Subiaco. According to Gregory, he founded twelve monasteries, each with twelve monks and a superior. Later, he set out with a few disciples to Monte Cassino, eighty miles southeast of Rome, and on top of the mountain he founded his monastery Monte Cassino where he presided as the abbot. He wrote *The Rule of St. Benedict* at Monte Cassino (see Figure 5). St. Benedict taught about the spiritual life. He wrote that spiritual knowledge was two-fold: (1) practical, which is accomplished by improvement of morals and purification from faults, and; (2) by contemplation of things divine and the knowledge of the most sacred thoughts. He died in the middle of the sixth century, approximately 547, at Monte Cassino. In 627, his remains were transferred to France to the Abbey of Fleury, which later became known as Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire.

Benedict is a heroic figure of the post-Classical period, and Book II of Gregory's *Dialogues* is the main source for the narrative of the life of St. Benedict.
The *Dialogues* were composed of four books, and Book II is entirely dedicated to the subject of Benedict. Gregory wrote his *Dialogues* between 593 and 594, and he lived just fifty years after Benedict had died.[17] Oral history may have played a role in Gregory's writings on the life of St. Benedict. Gregory's *Dialogues* are considered to be a hagiographical masterpiece. In the prologue, Gregory describes his account of Benedict based upon the witness of four monks who were disciples of the saint. Two of the events

[17] Benedict is thought to have died on March 21, 547. His life is celebrated on the first day of Spring and on July 11 as the Protector of Europe because his monks have supported European religious unity and its cultural heritage. Gregory lived and wrote just after Benedict had died.

described in the *Dialogues* coincide with historical events: (1) the visit of the King of the Goths, Totila, to Monte Cassino, and (2) the death of Bishop Germanus of Capua, which Benedict saw in a vision.

During the Middle Ages, the influence of monasticism was deep and far-reaching. In fact, it comprised the foundation of medieval spirituality. Monasteries and monks are recognized for keeping sacred texts safe, and for the copying of manuscripts.[18] Up until the twelfth century, the writing, illumination and binding of manuscripts was largely associated with monastic communities, among which those with the *Rule of St. Benedict* were prominent. In fact, the Frankish empire nurtured a close connection between monasteries and the monarchy, and as a result, kings and emperors were involved and kept abreast with the regulation and endowment of religious houses. Patronage by the royalty enhanced these communities: serving to protect the rule, the maintenance of the liturgy, and the protection of the monasteries from interference. Benedict emerges years later from this medieval monastic milieu as the father of western civilization.[19] Benedictine monasticism emphasizes work, prayer, humility, absolute obedience, silence (see Figure 6) and simple devoutness. It is perceived as moderate, practical and humane.

Pope Gregory the Great and His *Dialogues*

As noted above, Pope Gregory the Great wrote his *Dialogues* between 593 and 594. Similar to Saint Benedict, he was from a patrician family and he too, renounced the opportunities for worldly advancement, and founded monasteries in

[18] Although this was not a prescribed activity in the Rule of St. Benedict.
[19] Viollet-Le-Duc stated in the *Dictionnaire de l'Architecture*, I, 242, "Regarded merely from the philosophical point of view, the Rule of St. Benedict is perhaps the greatest historical fact of the Middle Ages." Quoted in Cuthbert Butler, *Benedictine Monachism; Studies in Benedictine Life and Rule*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1924), vii.

Sicily and Rome. He only became Pope because of his spiritual responsibility. He was forced to accept the position in 590 after Pope Pelagius succumbed to pestilence. The Lombards were invading constantly while Gregory was Pope. He was continuously trying to ward off the attacks while simultaneously attempting to keep a working relationship with the Emperor of Constantinople and the Exarch of Ravenna. It was a period of political and religious instability.[20] Aidan Kavanagh states, "It was an era of tremendous upheaval, a time when old things were not dead, when new things were conceived but not yet born, a time of perpetual emergency."[21]

Gregory was active in advancing the cause of Benedictine monasticism and in spreading the Gospel among the heathen. He can be described as very practical and completely dedicated to duty and to the leading of an exemplary life. Book II of the *Dialogues* is devoted entirely to the life of Saint Benedict, while the other books describe a number of holy persons, their miracles, and the immortality of the soul. Myra L. Uhlfelder proposes the reason Gregory wrote about Benedict as, "One possible explanation for this is that Gregory saw in Benedict his own mirror image. Benedict, though a deep lover of solitude, became an able administrator, willing to sacrifice his own peace in the faithful discharge of his duties. By the establishment and prudent administration of monastic communities, he showed that sense of social responsibility which, often combined with evangelical fervor, is a proper virtue of monasticism at its best."[22]

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[20] During the sixth century in Italy, there were several political upheavals: the fall of the Ostrogoth kingdom, the inability of Justinian to establish imperial authority from Constantinople over the West, and domination by barbarian Lombards in 568.
[21] Aidan Kavanagh, O.S.B., "Eastern Influences on the Rule of Saint Benedict," *Monasticism and The Arts*, ed. Timothy Gregory Verdon (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 54.
[22] Uhlfelder, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great Book Two: Saint Benedict*, xvii.

Gregory possessed missionary zeal, and he celebrated Benedict as a native Italian, a man of the West, a hero saint of Subiaco and Monte Cassino, exhibiting the consummate ideals that Gregory the Great embraced, and as a perfect example as a man of God.[23] The *Dialogues* convey important notions relative to the thoughts, standards, and beliefs of the period by recognizing what qualities are worthy of praise and emulation. In this vein, the biographies of the lives of the saints become important. In the *Dialogues*, as the title suggests, Gregory represents himself in dialogue with his deacon, Peter. In the opening chapter, Gregory describes Benedict as venerated, wise as an elder in his early stages of life, mature and directed, his sole desire in life was to find favor with God, and that became his goal in life.

Book II of Gregory's *Dialogues* can be divided into two parts: (1) the young Benedict departs Rome and moves to Subiaco, spends three years in a grotto and founds and builds twelve monasteries occupying the first eight chapters; and (2) the "Cassinian" period, consisting of the following thirty chapters describing the episodes from the Monte Cassino era. The Subiaco period of Benedict's life describes the spiritual tests of the soul of the Saint and demonstrate his many virtues, and the Monte Cassino episodes portray Benedict performing miracles, some of prophecy and some of power. Absent in the later chapters are the spiritual tests, and instead the concept of Benedict as the wonder-worker, comes to light.

The other primary source for the life of Saint Benedict comes down to us through Benedict's *Regulam Monachorum* or *Rule for Monks* that was written and completed around 540 (see Figure 7). Today it is commonly referred to as *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

[23] The author, Adalbert de Vogue, states Gregory wished he had espoused Benedict's example earlier in his own life. See his *Saint Benedict; the Man and His Work* translated by Gerald Malsbury (Petersham, Massachusetts: St Bede's Publications, 2006).

This is the most famous text of the Christian monastic tradition, and it has been used widely in monastic life for more than the past one thousand years. From 540 up until around 840, there were other rules in existence, but in the middle of the ninth century, St. Benedict's Rule surpassed the others due to religious standardization by the Carolingians. In his *Dialogues*, Gregory praises Benedict's Rule, "*regulam discretione praecipuam sermone luculentam*" which can be translated as "outstanding discernment and beauty of expression.

The Rule of Saint Benedict

The opening line of Benedict's Rule is "*Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri,et inclina aurem cordis tui, . . .* " which translated means "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.[24] According to Verdon, "Listening was the posture of students, or disciples, and St. Benedict thought of monasteries as schools where the monks listened not only to their abbot, but through the abbot to Christ himself 'for the abbot is believed to act in Christ's place in the monastery'"[25] Benedict's *Rule* has been the principal code and guide to life in Benedictine monasteries for more than thirteen centuries. Between its inception and the ninth century, it was one of several Latin rules used throughout Europe. It rose to eminence during a period of cultural resurgence and religious standardization associated with the Carolingians (800-888), the dynasty that ruled western Europe for most of the eighth and ninth centuries.

[24] Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980* :*The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1981),156-157.
[25] Verdon, *Monastic Themes in Renaissance Art*, 7.

The Rule can be summed up in style as brief and a highly practical guide to monastic life. It can be interpreted as a distillation of Benedict's literary study,[26] his experience as an abbot, and as an observer of human behavior in communal life. Benedict's Rule did not require the impossible as other rules of the day did. Benedict's Rule was founded upon moderation and cooperation within the community, intertwined with humility and absolute unconditional obedience to God. A careful balance for time spent on intellectual and manual work and hours of study and prayer was established.

Benedict's *Rule* is separable into two parts. The first part is comprised of a prologue and chapters one through seven. This sets forth the discussion on spiritual matters. The balance of the text takes up the practical application of spiritual principles in a monastic setting. The four chapters on spiritual advice embrace doing good works, obedience, silence and humility. Other chapters address the liturgy, the cycle of services and prayers, internal monastic discipline and penance, eating and drinking, faults and making amends for them, admission of new members to the community, along with chapters in the ideal character, sleeping arrangements, daily manual labor, monastic and private property, guests in the monastery, and the elderly and children. There are seventy-three chapters in total and each chapter is succinct with no more than one or two paragraphs.

The Benedictine Order

The Benedictine Order is a body of many hundreds of monasteries and thousands of monks, traversing multiple countries, with no unity of organization per se. Essentially,

[26] It can be surmised that Benedict read and was familiar with the writings of Augustine, Basil, and Cassian who wrote of the ascetic life.

the center of the Benedictine order is the abbey, considered as a local unit, rather than as an international body. The Benedictine family includes the Calmaldolese, the Cistercians, the Olivetans, and the Vallombrosan Orders among others. In earlier centuries, the Benedictines were involved on a daily basis with the troubling times of kingdom-making. Worldliness and worse, vices, were near impossible to keep out of monasteries. There is no denying that monks failed to live up to the monastic ideal, and at times fell short of Christian moral standards. During certain periods in the history of the Benedictine Order there was widespread and general corruption of the Order, which allowed relaxation and abuse of St. Benedict's Rule to invade the monasteries.

Pope Gregory the Great brought St. Benedict's *Rule for Monks* from Monte Cassino to Rome. It was later transported to England by St. Augustine around 597. Benedict's Rule flourished in England and France where communities of monks and nuns evolved. In the 670's, the monks of Fleury at Saint Benoit-sur-Loire claim to have acquired the relics of St. Benedict. Benedictine houses also sprouted in central Germany and in Frisia (now portions of The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark), having been introduced by English missionaries.

St. Benedict of Aniane (750-821), a former hermit and abbot, was commissioned by Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne, to reform monasteries of the Frankish Empire because monastic autonomy invited abuse of the Rule and some monasteries were following other rules. Efforts were made to standardize the order by establishing reforms based on strict observance of the St. Benedict's Rule by Benedict of Aniane. But the efforts of the Carolingian empire (800-888) to standardize Benedict's Rule among monastic houses were not entirely successful because of the death of St. Benedict of

Aniane in 821 and the collapse of imperial patronage after 843 led to a decline in monastic discipline.

Under papal patronage, Cluny of Burgundy instituted the first influential reform movement in 909 under papal patronage. Over time there was institutionalization of the Benedictine houses located all throughout Europe. During the tenth and eleventh centuries most of the Italian monasteries had come under the influence of Cluny and had adopted Cluniac customs. But by the end of the fourteenth century, almost the entire Benedictine monastic family had greatly declined so that there was practically no Cluniac observance practiced in monastic houses. The Olivetan branch of the order was, as noted above, founded in 1319, one of the last branches of the order.

"During the fourteenth century Italian Benedictine monasteries, with few exceptions, became notoriously lax in their observance of the rule of St. Benedict . . . whilst the monasteries survived as institutions their inner lives withered, and professions became few."[27] Abbots exercised sole authority over their monasteries. The majority of appointments were made "*in commendam*", that is, the papal right to nominate and appoint the abbot. Oftentimes during this period, the abbot appointed was not even a member of the order, nor even a monk. Pre-1400, "*in commendam*" appointments were utilized to reform and control monasteries. By 1400, there was gross misuse of the "*commenda*" system, and the papal officials were appointing abbatial seats to grant financial security to curial officials or members of powerful families. Once abbots were appointed to monasteries (with no term limits), they enjoyed the income from the

[27] Barry Collett, *Italian Benedictine Scholars and The Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 1.

monastery's property, and perpetuated the negligence for their own benefit, as explained below.

Benedictine tradition dictates autonomous house governance. By the turn of the fifteenth century, the need to reform the order became self-evident. Reform to stop the abuses of the monastic houses required putting an end to the "*commenda*" system. If the traditional autonomous rule associated with the Benedictine houses was overturned, and the reformers banded together and united in a congregation, with a central authority to appoint abbots, to limit the tenure of the abbots, and further Benedictine interests, such as the building of libraries, the illuminating of manuscripts, and the encouragement of art, the weak and fraudulent situation of the Benedictine Order would improve.

Benedictines, The Observant Reform Movement and the Fifteenth Century

By 1407, when Gregory XII (reigned 1406-1415), bestowed the Abbey of St. Giustina at Padua (a Cluniac house) "*in commendam*" on the Cardinal of Bologna, it was completely corrupted and ruined. The monastery at that time was vacant and uninhabited. The observance to St Benedict's Rule had weakened and failed during the Great Schism[28] (1378-1417) and the introduction of the papal system known as "*commendam.*" *"In commendam"* comes from the medieval Latin word "*commenda"* which means trust or custody. The "*commenda"* system was instituted during the Avignon papacy with the goal being to permit stronger papal control over monastic institutions, and to secure rights to ecclesiastical revenue. It resulted in the breaking down of monastic communities more often than not because persons from outside of the

[28] During the period of the Great Schism, conciliar theory had widespread support, that is the doctrine that supreme authority in the Church is vested with the General Council rather than with the Pope.

monastic community were appointed as abbots of the monasteries, and the "*commenda*" abbots did not serve as spiritual leaders. The system invited abuse. Benedictine monasteries were especially affected because of their properties and income. Even Dante wrote about it in his writing.

The Cardinal of Bologna set upon a wave of reforms and introduced the Olivetan monks to the Abbey at St. Giustina. The three remaining Cluniac monks at the abbey there were opposed to the Olivetans taking leadership at St. Giustina and they appealed to the Venetian Republic to prevent this move. In the end, the Abbey was retained by the Cluniacs and the Olivetans were dismissed. The Cardinal of Bologna resigned the Abbey to the Pope, who then placed it in the hands of Ludovico Barbo. Barbo took the Benedictine habit and received the abbatial blessing in late 1408 and he embarked upon an intense effort of restoration. He instituted a reform observance with the help of two Calmoldese monks and two canons of Alga in Venice. This monastery at St. Giustina became the birthplace of Benedictine reform in Italy. Reform observance was quickly adopted by other monasteries, and subsequently the Pope gave it his blessing and gave permission to unite and form a new congregation. The renowned abbeys of Subiaco, Monte Cassino, St. Paul's in Rome, St. George's in Venice, La Cava and Farfa joined this reform movement. In 1504, the title was changed to the Cassinese congregation.

In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a surge in interest of early monastic history. Italian Renaissance art reflects this surge in interest. The religious and social context of reform came to the forefront in the art of the period. As noted above, many, if not most religious orders had been experiencing widespread corruption, or deviations from the practices of their rules. The spiritual life of monasteries had deteriorated so badly, partly due to the *commenda* system, partly due to the political

upheaval in the Holy See during the Babylonian Captivity and Great Schism, and partly due to the decimation of the Black Plague that had ravaged through central and northern Italy in the mid-fourteenth and into the fifteenth century. Towards the year 1400, most religious orders embarked upon programs of reform, known as observances. Their primary goal was to bring order to the original observance of the order's rule.

Unity in the church following the Great Schism was restored under a single pontiff when Pope Martin V was elected in 1417. However, stability did not arrive in the "Throne of Peter" until the election of Nicholas V in 1447. The Council of Basel was initiated in 1431 as an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church in Basel, Switzerland. Later, it was transferred to Ferrara in 1438 and became known as the Council of Ferrara decreed by Pope Eugenius IV. The Council moved to Florence the next year because of the danger of the plague erupting at Ferrara, then it became known as The Council of Florence. These councils addressed a long-standing question and debate relating to ultimate authority within the Church. Reform of Benedictine monasticism occurred simultaneously with Pope Eugenius's prolonged stay in Florence from 1434 to 1443.[29] Benedictine life was being reformed throughout central Italy by the Pope Eugenius's two agents, Ambrogio Traversari, a Calmaldolese humanist, and by a Portuguese Benedictine named Gomes Eanes who was elected the abbot of the Florentine Badia in 1419. The main thrust of the Benedictine reform movement sprung near Venice. It was under the leadership of Ludovico Barbo that the monks of Santa Giustina in Padua returned to the ascetic ideal of the Benedictine Rule, and this return to the Rule, or "observance" eventually spread to other monastic houses.

[29] In early June 1434, Eugenius, disguised in the robes of a Benedictine monk, was rowed down the Tiber to a Florentine vessel at Ostia to escape to safety. *Condottiere* had invaded Rome and there was an insurrection by the Colonna family.

Chapter II:

The Life of Saint Benedict Fresco Cycles at San Miniato and *The Chiostro Degli Aranci* at The Badia

In the previous chapter, a discussion of the history of monasticism and of Saint Benedict was presented. This chapter will address the problems of narration, and how Signorelli and Il Sodoma were able to create the most encyclopedic story of the Life of Saint Benedict, and in the most imaginative way, employing the ideals of painting by Alberti, during the Renaissance. Prior to the fourteenth century, the life of Saint Benedict was not illustrated except in illuminated manuscripts and in capitals on columns. Studying the Monte Oliveto cycle, the question of precedent comes to the forefront. According to Kaftal, there are five remaining cycles of the life of Saint Benedict in Tuscany. In this thesis, two will be examined; (1) The life of Saint Benedict painted by Spinello Aretino in the sacristy of San Miniato al Monte, an Olivetan house, and (2) The *Chiostro degli Aranci* (Orange Cloister) at the Badia in Florence.

After the *Chiostro Grande* at Monte Oliveto was built, Don Domenico Airoldi needed to decorate the walls of the cloister. He set in motion the most remarkable large-scale historiated painting of the late Italian Renaissance by contracting initially with Luca Signorelli and later finalizing the project with Il Sodoma to create the masterpiece. Certainly, both artists were aware of the Benedictines and their founder, St. Benedict, as the prestige of the Benedictines was very great in Tuscany. Their task to paint the story of the life of Saint Benedict was a formidable one, and their ability to create the mural decoration in such a beautiful, inventive, and imaginative fashion was realized using the precepts of Alberti as set forth in his book, *De Pictura.*

Spinello Aretino (1350-1410) painted a cycle of The Life of Saint Benedict in the sacristy of San Miniato in Florence between 1385-1387. Ironically, it was commissioned by Benedetto degli Alberti, a relative of Leon Battista Alberti. This cycle is not as comprehensive as the one at Monte Oliveto as it contains only sixteen fresco scenes from the life of Saint Benedict, but it has elicited praise and biting criticism from art historians[30] (see Figures 8 and 9). The scenes depicted in this this cycle relate to the same text as those of Monte Oliveto with the exception of the one discussed below, and there are fewer scenes portrayed of Benedict's life at San Miniato.

Unique to this cycle is a depiction of Benedict's death that is noticeably absent in the Monte Oliveto cycle[31] (see Figure 10). According to Gregory's *Dialogues*, Benedict foretold his own death to his disciples, some who lived nearby, and others that lived far from him. He commanded those nearby to him to keep this as a secret. He told those who lived far from him that they would receive a sign when he died. Six days before he died he asked his disciples to take him to the chapel of the Blessed John the Baptist which he had built upon the place where the altar to Apollo once stood, and which he had torn down to the ground. In the chapel, he took communion, he prayed, raised his hands towards heaven and took his last breath. On that day a vision appeared to two monks, the very same one, even though one monk was far away, and the other was from Benedict's monastery, in which they saw, " a road, strewn with carpets and flashing with many lamps which led straight eastward from his cell to heaven. Above this road stood a man

[30] Cavalcaselle responded to the cycle as "being grand", and Raimond Van Marle found them "tedious … with the effect of an acrostic."

[31] It is my belief that this scene was intentionally omitted from the Monte Oliveto cycle because the Olivetans were attempting to perpetuate the Benedictine way of life for eternity, and as Alberti states," through the painting of faces the dead go on living for a time," thus an image of Benedict's death would not be congruent.

radiant in appearance and dressed in a stately robe. When he asked whose road this was, they confessed that they did not know, and he told them, 'This is the road by which Benedict, beloved by the Lord, is ascending to heaven.'"[32] The disciples nearby witnessed Benedict's death just at the same time as those far away knew it from the sign which Benedict had foretold to them. (see Figure 11)

The fresco cycle portraying the Life of Saint Benedict at The Chiostro Degli Aranci at the Badia in Florence is generally accepted to have been painted by Portuguese painter who was called Giovanni Consalvo or Gonsalvo between 1435 and 1439.[33] Gonsalvo is said to have already developed painting skills in the Hispano-Flemish tradition upon his arrival in Florence, and to have identified with Paolo Uccello, Fra Filippo Lippi, and Fra Angelico. Comprised of thirteen scenes from the Life of Saint Benedict, Gonsalvo was assisted at The Badia cycle, and his assistant was assigned to decorate the last two bays[34] (see Figures 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17). The scene of *St. Benedict Rolling in Thorns* was painted by Bronzino (1505-1574) and it must have been a replacement to a damaged fresco from the fifteenth century project. The space in the Chiostro degli Aranci is vertical, intimate and dark. The chromatic scheme is represented symbolically with scenes from his early life depicted in naturalistic color, and later as Benedict moves into the wilds of Subiaco, the colors become more earth tones, as he becomes a hermit there. Hood proposes that Gonsalvo adapted this technique used by Masaccio and Lippi at the Carmine as a means to emphasize the dignity and antiquity of

[32] Myra L. Uhlfelder, trans. *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great Book II Saint Benedict* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 47.
[33] Anne Leader in her recently published book *The Badia of Florence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012) attributes the cycle to Fra Angelico.
[34] William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993),130.

Benedictine monasticism in comparison with associations that the Thebaid tradition evoked for Carmelite claims.[35]

The fresco cycle at the Chiostro degli Aranci at the Badia is one of the earliest surviving Tuscan examples of a monumental saintly biography decorating a monastic cloister. According to Hood, the Badia murals were followed by seven other Benedictine mural programs, almost all of them were for reform congregations. At the Badia, for the first time, the life of Saint Benedict is painted outside on a cloister wall. Hood states, "the design and execution, to say nothing of the iconography, of the Chiostro degli Aranci can be integrated into the tradition of cloister decoration only by presupposing that it depended from another, earlier, cycle of the life of Saint Benedict in a cloister. The cycle in question was likely the one that Paolo Uccello painted at Santa Maria degli Angeli, which, however cannot be securely dated."[36] There does not appear to be a clear formal nexus between the fresco cycle painted by Aretino in the sacristy of San Minato al Monte and the Chiostro degli Aranci at the Badia. Indeed, if there was a precedent for the cycle at the Chiostro degli Aranci, it well could be lost. Hood states the most likely candidate for the precedent would be eight scenes of the Life of Saint Benedict painted by Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) in the cloister at Santa Maria degli Angeli that have entirely disappeared.[37]

Uccello is known to have painted another monastic cycle of the life of Saint Benedict in the cloister of the Olivetan monastery at San Miniato al Monte in Florence. Sadly, the images that remain are few and deteriorated but reveal what would be considered a magnificent fresco cycle if it survived. This cycle is believed to have been

[35] William Hood, *Fra Angelico,*134.
[36] William Hood, *Fra Angelico,* 134.
[37] Cloister decoration is subject to deterioration, decay, neglect and vandalism.

painted in the late 1440s, according to Pope-Hennessy,[38] and according to Hood it emulated the fresco cycle at the Badia. This cycle, too, could have well been a precedent for the cycle at Monte Oliveto.

According to Ursula Prinz, during the fifteenth century, cloister representations of the life of Saint Benedict reach their pinnacle, that is to say that there are more of these cycles painted at this time than in any other century[39]. However, the sheer number of Benedict cycles painted in fifteenth century cloister representation pales in comparison to the beauty and totality of the life of Saint Benedict captured at Monte Oliveto. Painted cloisters of fifteenth century Florence are programs of self-advertisement and self-representation. Mural decoration in fresco made it possible for religious orders to represent their corporate myth for the first time in public and in a monumental setting outside of the church. Hood states that this representation was freed from Christian doctrine as seen in the venue of the Church.[40] It reinforced the specific orders community claims to institutional legitimacy and demonstrated the authenticity of the order's unique mission to the Church itself. This form of representation had two purposes: (1) it reinforced the network of custom and myth that bound the community together (the religious order), and (2) it illustrated the mythic systems of group identity to an audience that was not necessarily acquainted with the group.

New buildings provided the opportunity for mural decoration (which was the new technique) for "corporate expression". Newly built cloisters that received this decoration belonged to convents and monasteries that were incorporated into reform movements of

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[38] See John Pope-Hennessy, *The Complete Work of Paolo Uccello* (London: Phaidon Press, 1950).
[39] Ursula Prinz, *Kreuzgangsdekoration Und Benediktsvita in Italien Bis Um 1500.* (PhD. Diss., Freie Universitat Berlin: 1970),28.
[40] Hood, *Fra Angelico,*131.

their respective orders. Medieval cloisters were used for lay burials, thus important sources of income. Surviving decoration of medieval cloisters appear related to burial themes rather than as a site of ritual enactments that re-emphasized the order's identity. These planned decorative ensembles were meant to articulate the essential features of the life lived by monks and friars in around the cloistered space. At Monte Oliveto Maggiore, the fresco cycle of the Life of Saint Benedict not only articulated the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, the murals acted as mirrors to the life the monks were meant to live.

De Pictura

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) was a humanist scholar, a natural scientist, a mathematician, an architect, a pioneer of the writing of the Italian vernacular,[41] and he transformed the theory and practice of the visual arts with his treatises. His book, *De Pictura*, was enormously influential on painters of the period, and it was instructional to painters in questions of light and color, expression and movement, and the laws of perspectival painting. These frescoes at Monte Oliveto clearly embrace and incorporate the Albertian ideals of painting.

In 1433, the antiquarian Cyriac of Ancona (c.1391- c.1455) visited Florence in late September and early October. He was an astute observer and recorded and sketched drawings of much of what he saw into his "commentaries" or sketchbooks. Cyriac realized that Florence in the fifteenth century was experiencing a revolution in architecture and art. He was particularly fascinated by the dome that was being erected on top of the cathedral by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446). In fact, Brunelleschi even

[41] Prior to the thirteenth century, the literary language of Italy was Latin. During the Renaissance, the native language, that of the Italian vernacular, came to life and was resurrected as a literary form.

met with Cyriac. Cyriac noted particularly the works of Lorenzo Ghiberti's bronze doors on the Baptistery and Donatello's and Ghiberti's sculpture, which he found innovative and modern. He was drawn to these new art forms inasmuch as he was drawn to antique forms.

Masaccio (1401-1428) and Masolino (1383-1447) painted frescoes in the 1420s. Masaccio's fresco of the *Trinity* (1427) in Santa Maria Novella created a powerful illusion of a three-dimensional space using techniques of perspective (see Figure 18). In contrast to this new technical approach to painting were artists like Gentile da Fabriano (1370-1427) who employed a great variety of textures and figures, using elaborate play of light and rich ornamentation to create his works of art (see Figure 19). It was in Florence at this time that art was experiencing brilliant invention and radical interpretations of classicism.

Most likely, Alberti had arrived in Florence prior to Cyriac. He returned accompanying Pope Eugenius IV (1383-1447) from his exile when he came to Florence in 1434.[42] Alberti was also a keen observer of the artistic scene in Florence. Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Ghiberti were viewed as the avant-garde not only by Cyriac, but by Alberti as well. The book Alberti wrote, *De Pictura* or *On Painting* (1435), can aid the seeing and interpreting of the art of this time through contemporary eyes.

Alberti was keenly interested in the relation between modern art and classical models. However, he deviated from Cyriac's observational model when he wrote his treatise *On Painting*. He offered a comprehensive historical and cultural

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[42] Grayson suggests Alberti may have arrived in Florence in 1428 when the ban on the exiled Alberti family was lifted. See his *Leon Battista Alberti On Painting and On Sculpture; the Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua,* ed. and trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), 8.

interpretation of the Florentine period, and he wrote the first modern manual of painting for painters. This little book had great import at a critical moment in the development of art. Scholars from distant places gathered in Florence to learn about the new discoveries of Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), the hunter of manuscripts, to hear the learned discourses of Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) and to see the new buildings, statues and paintings that Florentine artists had created. Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) came out of exile in 1433-1434 and returned to Florence. This resulted in other patrician Florentine families returning to their beloved city. The Church Council that met in Ferrara and Florence in 1438 and 1439 brought distinguished church fathers and their disciples to Florence too. The city of Florence and its intellectual circuits were "on fire" so to speak, and it is at this time that, "Alberti used the tools of the humanists to describe and to try to shape the work of artists."[43]

Humanism at this time acted as a protagonist for the revolution in the arts. Humanism was concerned with the classical age. The movement, humanism, blossomed under the re-establishment of the papacy in Rome. Humanists believed that by looking to the past, which in their minds was ideal or perfect, they could find the best models for literature, the greatest philosophy, the most specific history, and the best tenets for conduct framed by the ancient Greek and Romans.

Pliny the Elder (23-79) had written his *Natural History* (c. 77-79) that was the most elaborate ancient text on the arts in existence. Alberti stated, "I am not writing a history of painting, like Pliny, but a completely new treatment of the art. So far as I have seen, there are nowadays no extant ancient texts on this."[44] Alberti's book presented

[43] *Ibid*., 114.
[44] *Ibid*., 62-63.

systematic, coherent and detailed principles of painting. This book was the first artistic manifesto of the modern world, and it created quite a stir. Not only was Alberti observing and examining the new art, he was giving it additional form by writing about it. Alberti's goal was to develop painting from a traditional craft into a learned art. It was not the expensive pigments of the palette or the gold leaf and fine ultramarine that defined the painter's achievement, but the artist's skilled hand and cultivated intellect, argued Alberti. Alongside skill and intellectual prowess, mastery of theory was required. Alberti's ideals relative to painting became the de facto laws of painters' studio practice and formal training of the day.

On Painting can be divided into three books. In the first book, Alberti discusses mathematical relationships connected with Nature herself and how beautiful painting and art arises from Nature. The second book breaks down the art of painting for the hands of painters, and explains the different components. The third book sets forth how the artist should master the art of painting by painting compositional pieces he calls *historia.* Alberti dedicates his book to Brunelleschi in the prologue and wrote: "But after I came back here to this most beautiful of cities from the long exile in which we Albertis have grown old, I recognized in many, but above all in you, Filippo, and in our great friend the sculptor Donatello and in the others, Nencio, Luca, and Masaccio, a genius for every laudable enterprise in no way inferior to any of the ancients who gained fame in these arts."[45]

Alberti explained, "to draw with lines and paint in colors on a surface any given bodies, in such a way that at a fixed distance and with a certain determined position of the centric ray, whatever you see represented seems to stand out in relief and exactly

[45] *Ibid*., 33.

resemble the bodies in question" was the artist's technical goal.[46] He further expounded, "Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later, so that they are recognized by spectators with pleasure and deep admiration for the artist . . . Through painting the faces of the dead go on living for a very long time." [47]

In order to achieve these admirable goals, the painter must learn to create a convincing three-dimensional picture space through the use of optics and geometric techniques. Alberti states that on this three-dimensional picture space should be volumetric bodies whose skin clearly covers bones and muscles, which in turn is covered by dress and garments which move like real ones in the passing currents of air. The painter's task was further refined by requirements of body poses . . . They should be in believable postures, placing the hollow of one's throat, for example, vertically, above the ball of the foot on which the weight rests. On top of this, Alberti directs painters to create figures within spatial, emotional, and historically consistent narratives that will cause the spectator to react with the appropriate emotions, emotions that the painter had experienced previously. Alberti stipulated further that the painter must achieve "variety" and "copiousness" to lend the painting life and movement, so it would not appear crowded and confused. Alberti transformed the notion of being a painter from that of a mere craftsman to a practitioner of a learned discipline. He envisioned the ideal artist as one who shared the same qualities of erudite creative engineers (such as Brunelleschi) and literate humanist writers and critics.

[46] *Ibid*., 95.
[47] *Ibid*., 61.

He posited that the central value of painting lies in the emotions that it can provoke. As a master of rhetoric, Alberti is clearly advocating that this tradition should guide the pursuit of painting. Thus, Alberti draws a parallel between the art of painting and the art of rhetoric. Alberti, as a rhetorician, and even those before him, like Aristotle, placed most emphasis on the psychological impact of rhetoric. Good speech was defined as effective and affective. The best speech resulted in a listener's moving right into action by playing on his or her emotions. "It is significant that the only modern artist referred to by Alberti in the text of *De Pictura* is Giotto, who is praised for the physical representation of emotional states."[48] Alberti defined painting as an affective art. This has remained a central theme among writing in the arts unto this very day.

Decorum, one principle of ancient rhetoric, played an important role in Alberti's treatise, *On Painting.* Alberti transferred the notion of decorum used in the art of rhetoric, that is, as he put it, "persuasion was effected by skillful manipulation of conventions, within a cultural framework, a detailed regime of propriety, that the speaker shared with his audience," to the art of painting.[49] For the painter, decorum, was expressed by Alberti, " to require that the painter make each member of a given body fit the rest, in age, texture, size and color; that each body present in a painting play a part in the story to be told; that each gesture made have the 'sweetness and grace' appropriate to the art".[50]

Alberti mandated that the artist should know the surface of the body as well as the anatomy. This would be required not only for the goal of three-dimensional reality but also for the literary canon of decorum. The goal was anatomical correctness, and if

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[48] See Cecil Grayson's introduction to *Leon Battista Alberti*, 9.
[49] Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti*, 118
[50] *Ibid.* 118.

anatomical correctness was not achieved by the artist, the work would lack cohesiveness. He went further in establishing his canons of painting, directing painters to treat the human body as a machine. He stipulated that every arm motion should be counterbalanced by a prevailing motion of the opposite foot. The idea to treat the body as a mechanism was to further elucidate to painters how to eliminate excesses in the representation of moving arms and feet.

The combination of rhetoric and painting allowed Alberti an intellectual framework and a formal vocabulary for him to propose, in a concise format, problems of representation for painters, which would have been otherwise challenging in general and abstract terms to the actual innovations of the artists he knew in his day. Alberti embraced the direct study of nature. He adopted classification of seven types of movement identified by Quintilian (35-100). To quote him: " I like to see hair make all the seven forms of movement that I mentioned. Let it move in a circle, striving to form a knot, let it flow like waves, imitating flames, and let it sometimes creep like snakes under other strands of hair, raising itself now in this direction and now in that".[51] Rhetoric gave Alberti an exact verbal format with which to describe what he saw happening in artist studios. It gave him a model to communicate his ideas and theories.

"We painters wish to express the emotions of the mind by the motions of the members".[52] On the subject of plane surfaces, Alberti sets forth that colors should remain uniform as opposed to spherical and concave surfaces where light refracts. He addresses receding human figures and states that in a correctly executed painting, the faces should remain at a single level, while their feet retract upwards towards the head, as their bodies

[51] Cecil Grayson, *Leon Battista Alberti*, 87.
[52] *Ibid*., 83

become smaller in the distance. And, he says, artists should become experts on sketching nude bodies, be able to draw the bone, muscle and sinew beneath the skin and the naked body under its clothes.

In Book Three of *On Painting*, Alberti discusses *historia*, a term not easily defined that refers to a composition of painting in which several figures appear. It is in this genre of painting that Alberti places the most importance, and he says it should be complete with every abundance. He writes, "we should take care to learn to paint well as far as our talent allows, not only the human figure but also the horse, the dog and other living creatures, and every object worthy to be seen. In this way, variety and abundance, without which no *historia* merits praise, will not be lacking in our works".[53]

In painting a *historia,* Alberti proposes that a sketch and plan should be undertaken prior to the actual painting, to develop a model whereby all the structural elements of the composition will be determined before its actualization. He further proposes to use great diligence combined with speed as to avoid tedium. The work of art should be open to comment by friends and spectators. " The painter's work is intended to please the public so he will not despise the public's criticism and judgement when he is still in a position to meet their opinion".[54]

Alberti closes his treatise by appealing to painters who read his manual to reward him for his labors by placing a portrait of him in their *historiae*. If this is done, his name and face will live in posterity, with following generations knowing that he was a student of painting. He expresses thanks to painters for giving him this favor. He further expands upon the pursuit of painting, referring to painting as the most noble art. He

[53]Grayson, *Leon Battista Alberti,* 103
[54]*Ibid*., 105.

expresses gratitude for being able to study painting and to write about it, recognizing that he is the first to write about the subject and deliver a standard of painting principles. Perfection is the aim, but Alberti ends his treatise, "Nothing, they say, was born perfect"

Description of Fresco Cycle at Monte Oliveto Maggiore and Alberti's *De Pictura*

The fresco cycle at Monte Oliveto Maggiore is comprised of a series of scenes from the Life of St. Benedict which were painted by three Renaissance artists, Luca Signorelli , Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, also known as Il Sodoma, along with one fresco by Bartolomeo Neroni, also known as Il Riccio. Events of the Saint Benedict's life, including the history of the Benedictine order and the miracles surrounding his life, are depicted in thirty-six frescoes, in a chronological format around four walls of the great cloister of the monastery at Monte Oliveto Maggiore. The story of the Life of Saint Benedict comes from his biographer Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) who wrote about Benedict in his second book, *Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great*. (593-594). As noted above, of the thirty-six scenes depicting the life of Saint Benedict, Signorelli painted and was responsible for the decoration of ten of these scenes, all of which are found on the west wall of the cloister.[55] The remainder of the frescoes were painted by Il Sodoma with the exception of the one which was painted by Il Riccio. Signorelli started the fresco

[55] There is still speculation today among scholars as to why Signorelli worked only on the west wall of the *Chiostro Grande*. Some have postulated that this wall would have received the most sunlight with the most favorable weather conditions, and others have proposed that these scenes were chosen by Signorelli to paint because the subject appealed to his imagination.

cycle in 1497 and left the project in 1499.[56] Il Sodoma assumed the commission in 1505 and completed it in 1508.[57]

An eighteenth-century manuscript of Monte Oliveto Maggiore dates the cloister decoration as beginning at the initiation of Don Domenico Airoldi da Lecco during his second term as abbot of the monastery (1497-1501).[58] Domenico Airoldi da Lecco was a favorite of Pope Innocent VIII and his initial term as the abbot of Monte Oliveto Maggiore was from 1484-1488, and again he served as abbot from 1497-1501. In 1505, Domenico Airoldi was elected to his third term as abbot of the monastery.

In the interim between Airoldi's second and third term as the abbot at Monte Oliveto, Francesco Ringhieri assumed the position of abbot. Term limits had been introduced by the Church.[59] Ringhieri served as abbot from 1501 to 1503. He was succeeded by Tommaso Pallavicini da Milano from 1503 to 1505. In 1505, Airoldi reassumed the abbacy until 1507. Following Airoldi's third term as abbot, Ringhieri returned to the position of abbot from 1507 to 1509. It was during these last two terms that the fresco cycle was completed by Il Sodoma from 1505 and 1507. It was Airoldi who commissioned Il Sodoma to finalize the fresco cycle on the south and the east walls of the cloister.

Unfortunately, there is no extant record as to exactly when during the years of 1497 to 1501 that Signorelli began working at the monastery, or why he abandoned the

[56]Laurence J. Kanter, *The Late Works of Luca Signorelli and His Followers 1498-1559* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1989).
[57]Andree Hayum, *Giovanni Antonio Bazzi – Il Sodoma* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1968).
[58] Laurence J. Kanter, *The Late Works of Luca Signorelli and His Followers 1498-1559* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1989), 73.
[59] Kanter states that the conclave of 1501 that elected Francesco Ringhieri as abbot also voted to restrict the term of office as abbot to two years hence afterwards.

project. Also unknown is why Signorelli chose to paint only a small set of scenes from the second half of the Saint's life. [60]

It is generally accepted that Signorelli was summoned to Monte Oliveto Maggiore immediately following Airoldi's election to the abbacy in 1497, and began work in the summer of 1497, and continued painting there until 1498. However, it is unclear as to when he actually left the commission. He did leave the project at Monte Oliveto to begin working in Orvieto, having signed a contract in the month of April 1499. In August 1505, Sodoma arrived at the monastery and began his finalization of the fresco cycle.[61]

There are ten frescoes that are universally accepted as those painted by Signorelli. They are to be found on the west wall of the cloister, beginning in the second bay, and they are chronological:

I. God Punishing Fiorenzo
II. St. Benedict Preaching to the Inhabitants of Monte Cassino
III. St. Benedict Moving the Demon Off A Rock
IV. St. Benedict Reviving the Monk on Whom a Wall Had Fallen
V. St. Benedict Telling Two Monks Where and When They Had Eaten Outside the Monastery
VI. Saint Benedict Reproving the Brother of Fra Valerian
VII. St. Benedict Uncovering the Fiction of Totila
VIII. St. Benedict Recognizing and Receiving Totila
IX. An Episcopal Consecration
X. St. Benedict Reviving a Youth.

The last two scenes are not in good condition and are fragmentary, as a doorway was later enlarged and ruined the central focus of the narrative of the fresco. These ten frescoes were the first in the cycle to be painted at Monte Oliveto Maggiore on the west wall of the cloister, but they do not represent the beginning of the narrative of Saint

[60] Carli has proposed that he found the content of the murals "boring", and another suggestion set forth is that Signorelli sought greater income which he would have realized by the commission of the decoration of the Chapel at San Brizio in Orvieto.
[61] Andree Hayum, *Giovanni Antonio Bazzi*, 12.

Benedict's Life. The story of the life of Saint Benedict commences with the scene, *How Benedict Leaves Home and Goes to Study in Rome,* located in the southeast corner of the Great Cloister. According to Lavin, she describes the narrative cycle at Monte Oliveto, "Essentially, the compositions are made to thrust with rhythmic variations to move the viewer from the entrance at the right transept wing of the main church to a clockwise circuit around the cloister."[62]

The narrative of St. Benedict's Life begins with the fresco, *How Benedict Leaves Home and Goes to Study in Rome,* painted by Il Sodoma (see Figures 20 and 21). In this fresco, Benedict is mounted atop a horse, leaving his family to go to study in Rome. Pictured in the scene are members of his family: his father, his mother, and his sister, Scholastica. The domestic scene is further enhanced by the pet dog tugging on his sister's dress. His nurse, Cyrilla, accompanies him atop a mule as he prepares to depart from his family. In this fresco, the emotional expression of sadness and sorrow upon leaving his family is clearly seen in Benedict's face. The emotional aspect dominates the narrative of this fresco, as Alberti suggests. There is a striking resemblance in the faces of Benedict and his mother. The steed is portrayed full of energy and strength in juxtaposition to the tenderness of the farewell. The serene landscape of his native Nursia with the flowing river, the calm skies and gentle hills in the background provide the setting. In the bottom right of the picture, a guide, competent and muscular, leads the way, cocking his head backward to make sure that the sojourn is underway.[63]

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[62] See Marilyn Aronberg Lavin's *The Place of Narrative Mural Decoration in Italian Churches, 431-1600.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 241.

[63] The narratives of each mural decoration in the "Chiostro Grande" are discussed in Enzo Carli's book, *L'Abbazia di Monte Oliveto,* 35-45, and in Kurt Sundstrom's "*Chiostro Grande,*" 173-298.

Sodoma's second fresco representing the Life of Saint Benedict is *How Benedict Leaves the School of Rome* (see Figure 22). The architectural components in this scene are striking (see Figure 23). Artists of the fifteenth century exhibited growing interest in the remains of ancient art and architecture, and this scene reflects this preoccupation. This style is generally referred to as *all' antica*. The School is pictured in a Greek fashion, within a porticoed hall with an authoritative rector on his throne, reading from his book with students on both sides of him. In the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory, it is written that in Rome, St. Benedict becomes disenchanted with society, having seen much sinning and licentiousness. Here in the School of Rome, Benedict meets a hedonistic and epicurean lifestyle. He finds the society corrupt, analogous to the pagan world, and he eschews it. The dress and hairstyle of the students demonstrate a cosmopolitan style. There appears to be a questioning and pensiveness in their faces. Benedict, depicted in a Leonardesque [64] style, is captured at the significant moment of his departure from the school. His facial expression is delicate and resolute at the same time. This is a moment of action, of decisiveness, a pivotal moment in the imminent spiritual path Benedict will choose for his life's path. Alberti directs painters to tell a story and it is here where the story of Benedict's ultimate spiritual journey begins. Il Sodoma has created a convincing three-dimensional illusion through optical manipulation.

The next fresco, *How Benedict Mends the Cribble That Was Broken,* illustrates the miraculous nature of St. Benedict. This is the first of many scenes to follow which portray his miraculous nature. Most remarkable about this fresco is the self-portrait of Il

[64] Andree Hayum, a noted scholar of Il Sodoma, has suggested that Sodoma may likely have worked with Leonardo in Milan, and was influenced by Leonardo. Other noted art historians including Berenson and Crowe and Cavascalle believe this.

Sodoma,[65] cloaked in beautiful finery, almost as the narrator of the two scenes depicted (see Figures 24, 25, and 26). Ironically, he is the narrator as the painter. Note the weasels at his feet, which are generally thought to be among his favorite animals.[66] Alberti sets forth in his book, *On Painting*, that the painter should paint a painting "with every 'abundance'." The weasels pictured at Il Sodoma's feet and the long curved neck of the white swan behind him and Benedict are a manifestation of this "abundance," Alberti has described. There are two scenes represented in this one fresco, and they are correlated. The scene to the left illustrates a woman completely forlorn because of the broken cribble. Kneeling next to her, hands clasped together in prayer is Benedict, asking God to repair the cribble. Miraculously, through divine intervention, the mended cribble appears before St. Benedict. The history of this scene derives from the time when Benedict leaves the School of Rome and commits himself to a life of prayer and penance. Before reaching Lake Subiaco, he lived for some time in a small village known as Affile. Cyrilla, as she was devoted and extremely fond of Benedict, had refused to leave his side. She had borrowed the cribble in order to clean some grain. It broke, she was disheartened, Benedict prays to God, and it is mended. To the right of the self-portrait of Il Sodoma is the other part of the story. Pictured here is a group of people looking in amazement at Benedict's power to mend the cribble. The mended cribble is now seen hanging on the church. In Gregory's *Dialogues*, it is recounted that the people in the vicinity of the town of Affile learned of the broken cribble being miraculously repaired by Benedict and then they hung the cribble on the entrance to the local church. The facial

[65] Alberti discusses immemorializing himself in his De Pittura. Here we see Sodoma incorporating Alberti's ideas, immemorializing himself.
[66] Alberti proposes in Book Three of *On Painting*, "to paint . . . not only the human figure but also the horse, the dog and other living creatures."

expression of Benedict dressed in a tunic is most refined, as is the self-portrait of Il Sodoma.[67]

The following fresco, *How the Monk Romanus Gives Benedict the Hermit's Habit*, has as its central figure the old, wise, bearded monk dressed in a white habit, placing another habit on top of Benedict who apparently is more than ready to receive it, as one can interpret from his gesture (see Figures 27, 28, and 29). Sodoma portrays Benedict kneeling, reverent, with his head bowed. Captured in this scene is the sanctity of the moment, a moment of transformation. In the background, we see an image of Benedict, making his way with a determined pace in the garb of a young Roman. Behind that in the background is a peristyle church with a monk reading a book in front of the church. Again, an architectural component is used to elucidate the story. The landscape is beautiful, with the hilltop town of Subiaco in the background. There is a Virgilian aspect to this fresco with the detail of the two shepherds, one plucking at a mandolin as their sheep graze.[68] This fresco illustrates the story in Gregory's *Dialogues* when Romanus, a monk, first inducts Benedict into the eremitical life.

In the next bay, the story, *How the Devil Breaks the Bell*, is represented (see Figures 30, 31, and 32). In Gregory's *Dialogues*, after Benedict receives the habit from Romanus, he retreats to a cave and lives in solitude for a period of three years, emerging only to receive food and water when he hears the ring of the bell. Romanus supplies him with food and drink when he rings the bell. In this fresco, we see the introduction of the devil as pictured in the upper left part of the fresco. Benedict, the central figure, is

[67] The monks at Monte Oliveto called Sodoma, affectionately probably, *Il Mataccio*, which can be translated as "the crazy one" or perhaps, "the prankster." In this self-portrait, one catches a glimpse of this personality trait in the smile upon his face.
[68] This is an example of Alberti's prescription in his treatise, "that each gesture made have the 'sweetness and grace' appropriate to the art"

portrayed in front of his cave; below him is the basket of food that is being lowered to him by Romanus. He is wearing full monastic dress with a cowl, particularly notable is the symmetry of the drapery fold in his habit which seems to echo the fissures of the rock formation. . His face appeals to God, his hands are in prayer. The soulful and emotive expression in his face is palpable. Here a new and different Benedict is represented. He no longer is wearing long flowing hair. The beginning of a beard is showing. Behind Benedict is the cave of rocks and fissures where he has retreated to an ascetic life. In the distant background is a peaceful and bucolic scene in sharp contrast to the dramatic verve of the devil hurling a rock to break the bell, ending his food supply, so Benedict will not be able to live.

The next fresco is entitled *How a Priest Inspired by God Brings Benedict Food on Easter Day* (see Figure 33). The fresco is divided into two scenes by the placement of an arcade-like superimposition in the central part of the mural. This spatial element is symbolic of the Redeemer, and Christ is depicted in the ceiling of the arcade. There are two monks depicted in the tondos on either side of the arcade. Here one witnesses another transformation of Benedict, namely, that through a messenger of God he is being called into service, not as a hermit as he thought his destiny would be, but as a leader of other men in a community of brethren, for the advancement of the Christian religion in a common life. On the right side of the Redeemer as symbolized by the arcade, (see Figure 24) the priest stands, his hand held perpendicularly across his forehead to shield his eyes from the mystical brilliance of the light being emitted by the symbolic Redeemer. As Alberti suggests, “every arm motion should be counterbalanced by a prevailing motion of the opposite foot”, Sodoma has portrayed the priest in such a manner. The message from the Lord to the priest is to find Benedict and bring food to him. On the left, the

completion of the story unfolds. The priest kneels, his hand is over his heart, as if to say, come unto us, into the service of the Lord. Easter is one of the most important days and feasts in Christianity, and it is on this day Benedict has been called into the service of the Lord.

How Benedict Instructs Visiting Peasants in Sacred Doctrine is the first representation of Benedict as teacher, and there is a premonition of the Benedictine precept of *ora et labora* [69] (see Figures 35, 36, and 37). Benedict is seen in his monastic garb speaking to a group of different men clothed in various ways. During Benedict's lifetime,[70] the region he inhabited was under constant danger of skirmishes of warfare and terror by barbarians. People lived in fear, and the peasants depicted as his audience are extremely attentive to his words. As Benedict uses his fingers to make his points, as a teacher would, all eyes and ears seem to be with Benedict. It appears a following is at hand. A premonition of Benedict's future calling is portrayed. Of particular note in the artistry in this scene is the shepherd leaning on his staff as his loyal dog looks upward towards him for praise. Here we see more Albertian "abundance" at hand. In the sky, a wild ave dances through the sky[71] (see Figure 38).

Gregory tells us the story in his *Dialogues* that one day Benedict felt a temptation within him that was so vehement and violent that he had never experienced anything comparable previously in his life. In the fresco, *How Benedict is Tempted by Impurity and Overcomes Temptation,* Sodoma depicts Benedict as disturbed and anguished on the

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[69] *Ora et labora* refers to a key precept of Benedict's Rule to pray and work.
[70] Benedict lived on the cusp of the post-Antique and pre-Middle age period.
[71] Andre Chastel notes among Umbrian and Tuscan painters the open space of the sky almost always included flights of birds of prey. This is repeated throughout the fresco cycle. Andre Chastel, *A Chronicle of Italian Renaissance Painting,* trans. Linda and Peter Murray (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 101.

left (see Figures 39,40, and 41). Alberti has described in his book *On Painting* that emotions of the mind should be expressed. The psychological element is forceful. Clearly, he is waging a spiritual battle. Above him, evil hovers in the guise of a beautiful winged woman. Benedict is on the verge of succumbing to the temptation, and at the very last moment disrobes and throws himself into a thicket of thorns, as seen on the right side of the fresco, in order to resist temptation and stay on his chosen path and sacred course. This fresco imparts a Christian moral in which Christ and his path will triumph over evil. In the uppermost part of the fresco, Sodoma has imaginatively portrayed the seductress in transparent veils with demon-like feet and horns erupting from her beguiling face, while the archangel Michael is ready to vanquish her tempting by means of an outthrust sword.

Gregory recounts the story in his *Dialogues* of a group of hermits in his area that came to him and asked Benedict to be their superior. Sodoma, in the fresco, *How Benedict, at the Entreaty of Certain Hermits, Consents to be Their Superior and Abbot,* paints Benedict in front of a rocky outcropping, staff in hand, receiving a group of hermits from the vicinity (see Figure 42). They have come to appeal to him to be their leader. Benedict's hand is open, and his eyes are directed towards the group of hermits, as if to say, "Yes, follow me." His confidence, ability and strength are conveyed through this gesture. His beard is now long and full, symbolizing maturity. He is ready to assume the mantle of leader, superior and abbot. His staff is upright and strong. There is darkness in the sky, represented in the upper right, in contrast to the light and lightness surrounding Benedict and falling upon him and his followers. This scene can be viewed as the beginning of Benedict's cenobitic movement and the growth of Christianity.

How Benedict, with the Sign of a Cross, Breaks a Glass of Poisoned Wine is the subject of the next fresco (see Figures 43 and 44). In this scene, one sees the first attempt on Benedict's life. Benedict is resolutely committed to the revival and growth of Christian life and is being threatened with the loss of his own life. It is the devil who tries to stop him from carrying out Christ's wishes, and the agents for the devil are the hermits as pictured in the previous fresco, *How Benedict, at the Entreaty of Certain Hermits, Consents to be Their Superior and Abbot*. Gregory recounts in his *Dialogues* that as Benedict begins to lead the hermits on their ascetic path, they do not follow Benedict and his austere rules. Benedict admonishes the wayward hermits. The coterie of monks decide to poison Benedict with wine. Benedict makes the sign of the cross, and divine providence saves him by causing the glass to break at the sign of the cross. The facial expressions of the monks represented in the scene illustrate psychological features of the human condition: anger, chicanery, complicity and deceipt. Benedict is portrayed as indignant and forgiving simultaneously. The attempt to kill Benedict can also be interpreted as an attempt to kill the reflourishing of the Christian life.

The next fresco, *How Benedict Completes the Construction of Twelve Monasteries*, is symbolic of the future growth of the Benedictines (see Figures 45 and 46). Benedict, father of western monasticism, and architect of the first of Benedictine monasteries, is represented directing the construction of the monastery. This fresco captures exquisitely Alberti's notion of a creating of a convincing three-dimensional space. This is a scene of men at work, a scene of productivity. The bricklayer attentively listens to Benedict. Two monks look over Benedict's shoulder listening to his directives. In the mid-background, there is a painter lifting a pole brush. Men balance themselves upon the supports and scaffolding as they complete their work on the arches.

Architectural tools are seen in the foreground. The stone-cutter is busy with his hammer. The colors in this fresco are somewhat atonal, but overall the composition is balanced.

How Benedict Receives the Two Boys from Rome, Maurus and Placidus is one of the most impressive of Sodoma's frescoes (see Figures 47 and 48). A massive retinue is depicted in the foreground. Arriving from Rome and accompanied by their fathers are Maurus and Placidus. Their fathers are Equitius and Tertullus. They have brought their sons here to be in Benedict's care and tutelage. Of particular interest in this scene is all the different attire worn by the entourage from Rome. The boys kneel in grace at Benedict's feet. His hands are open and welcoming; one above the head of one of the young boys, and the other on the neck. Three other young men encircle Maurus and Placidus in their multi-colored garb. There are men from distant places pictured in this fresco. In the background steeds are charging through the arch, birds are flying through the air and the army is on its way. The faces of the fathers, Tertullus and Equitius, are portrayed in a Leonardesque fashion. Sodoma has aptly articulated Alberti's notions of "variety and copiousness" in this scene, as depicted in the costumes and the soldier's garb. There is a tenderness and sorrow seen in the expressions of the fathers. Roman monuments define the background, and there is a cavalcade of soldiers in their party, along with a rear guard in the distance.

In the next fresco, *How Benedict Delivers a Possessed Monk by Scourging Him***,** Benedict is seen flogging the back of one of his monks and blood appears (see Figures 50, 51, 52, and 53). There are three scenes depicted in this frame. On the left, a group of monks is at prayer with Benedict, and one of the monks is tempted to leave the prayer by the devil pictured here as a small dark creature with wings who tugs at a monk's tunic. On the right, the errant monk accepts his punishment as Benedict whips him with some

twigs. In the background, the monk who was punished kneels in forgiveness to Benedict. Benedict forgives him. On the terrace, above the main scene, are two monks overlooking the events below. This is an important scene in the cycle because discipline is being enforced. Discipline is required to be a monk, and an ideal monk lives a life of discipline.

How Benedict, Entreated by Monks, Produces Water from the Top of a Mountain is the next mural in the fresco cycle (see Figures 54 and 55). The scene is comprised of a group of eight monks who come before Benedict, kneeling and petitioning him. In the background, there are three monasteries. There is no water in the monasteries, and the monks must descend the mountain every day to retrieve water. In this frame, there are three scenes: (1) the petition by the monks to Benedict for water; (2) the prayer by Benedict to God for water seen in the far-background; and (3) the finding of water on the right in the mid-background. According to Gregory in his *Dialogues*, Benedict climbs the mountain and after having prayed with fervor, marks the spot with three stones and returns to the monastery. The next day, to the distressed monks on their return, he says, "Go up to the cliff. There you will find three stones atop one another. Dig a little and almighty God, if it be his Will, may give you the water you desire." The monks dig with an axe and the water appears. This fresco is evocative of Giotto's *Miracle of the Spring* (1299) and also of the story of Moses in the Bible, who with a touch of a rod made water spring from stone. Here, Sodoma has created a spatial, emotional, and historically consistent narrative as Alberti directs in his treatise.

The composition in *How Benedict Causes a Hedging Bill that Has Fallen* to *the Bottom of the Lake to Return to Its Handle* is dominated by the central figure of St. Benedict leaning over the shores of Lake Subiaco, immersing the long handle of the

hedging bill into the water, in an attempt to retrieve the hedging bill (see Figures 56 and 57). Aside him is another monk, whom we know from Gregory's *Dialogues* as Goth, who was descended from the barbarians that sacked Italy for a number of years. Goth is visibly upset, his face is distraught and his hand lies over his heart. In Gregory's *Dialogues*, it is recounted that miraculously the hedging bill attaches back to the handle, and Benedict tells Goth, "Here, work, and be sad no longer." On the immediate left of the lake, Goth realizes he has lost the hedging bill, his hand held up in the air, a gesture of surprise. Further behind him is a scene in which Goth relates the loss of the hedging bill to Benedict. In the right background, Sodoma has inserted a scene of bathers and boxers amusing themselves another perfect example of Albertian abundance (see Figure 58).

The next fresco, "*How Maurus, Sent to Save Placidus, Walks on Water,*" again illustrates the miraculous and savior-like nature of Benedict (see Figures 59 and 60). Gregory recounts in his *Dialogues* that Placidus had gone to the lake to collect water, had fallen into the lake, and was drowning. Benedict had a vision of this calamity as he was clairvoyant, and he called to Maurus and directed him to go and save Placidus. This is shown on the left side of the fresco. In the main scene, Maurus, through divine providence, is able to walk on water and save Placidus. He pulls Placidus gently out of the lake to save him from drowning. The representation is extremely realistic. Maurus grabs Placidus by the back of his habit at the neck as he drags him to the shore. Placidus appears limp-like. The landscape is extraordinary in this scene; the vegetal representation emphasizes the quattrocento pre-occupation with the natural world. Looking closely at the tree on the right on the edge of the riverbank, one can almost feel the limpid air.

In the eighteenth chapter of Gregory's *Dialogues*, it is told that Benedict is to be delivered two flasks of wine by an errand boy. The courier boy is overcome with greed and decides to keep one flask for himself and hide it in the hedge. He presents Benedict with one flask of wine. Benedict accepts the gift and thanks him. Again, Benedict's clairvoyance comes front and center as he tells the young man, "Be careful not to drink from the flask you have hidden, but first make sure what it contains." The boy leaves ashamed, and goes to the flask. To his surprise and horror, when the boy grasps for the flask, a snake emerges from it. The fresco entitled, *How Benedict Turns a Flask of Wine into a Serpent When Being Deceived by an Errand Boy* tells this story (see Figure 61). There are the two scenes depicted in the one bay, and they are fractured due to the fact an entrance has been cut through the foreground of the scene. The architectural elements are employed to create the three-dimensional space Alberti seeks in painting.

In the fresco, *How Florentius Tries to Poison Benedict,* a second attempt on Benedict's life takes place (see Figure 62, 63, and 64). Florentius is an evil protagonist. He is a priest who is jealous and envious of Benedict, as Benedict has the untainted and great reputation of being a man of God.[72] He attempts to kill Benedict by offering him a poisoned loaf of bread. In this picture, there are two scenes depicted; (1) Florentius offers the poisoned bread to Benedict and three monks surround him as he takes the loaf of bread, and (2) miraculously and through divine providence, Benedict is forewarned that the loaf of bread is poisoned and he throws it to a crow instructing the crow to carry it far away so no one would eat it. The architectural framework and detail here is significant in this scene with the multitude of multi-colored marble columns, *all'antica*.

[72] Benedict possesses and practices ideal human characteristics.

Also remarkable is the elegant representation of the peacock in silhouette atop the column and lintel.

In the next fresco, entitled *How Florentius Sends Evil Women,* Sodoma has represented two groups of characters that appear quite opposite to one another (see Figures 65 and 66). On the right side, there are eight women in a graceful, lyrical pose, evocative of Botticelli's *Primavera* (see Figure 67). On the left of the arcade, positioned in the middle of the fresco, is a group of devoted, faithful monks with a mule. St. Benedict and the monks are about to set out on a journey. From the *Dialogues*, it is known that the evil man Florentius is at work again. He is the jealous priest trying for a second time to thwart Benedict and his followers by tempting them with the seduction by beautiful women, hoping to untether their moral fiber. This painting is among one of the best in the entire fresco cycle, especially in terms of its composition. The women are represented with great detail and movement, and in *contrapposto* [73] (see Figures 68 and 69). Again, Sodoma has used elegant, powerful, and ancient architecture to frame the narrative, and is successful at making (as Alberti directs) "each member of a given body fit the rest, in age, texture, size and color; that each body present play a part in the story to be told; that each gesture made have the 'sweetness and grace' appropriate to the art." Note the diminutive, precious white dog in the center forefront prancing towards the mule.

The first fresco on the west wall of the Great Cloister has been painted by Bartolomeo Neroni, also known as Il Riccio. It is entitled, *How Benedict Sends Maurus to France and Placidus to Sicily* (see Figures 70 and 71). In his *Dialogues*, Gregory

[73] In *De Pictura*, Alberti is very explicit about composing human figures in movement, so that there is counter-movement to each part of the body in movement. This is precisely how Sodoma achieves this.

recounts how Placidus and Maurus are sent on missions of evangelization. Benedict directs Maurus to go to France, and Placidus to go to Sicily. Pictured here are both men kneeling before Benedict as he gives each of them a copy of his Rule before they set off on their respective missions. Needless to say, the continuity of the previous frescoes is simply lost in this fresco because it from the hand of Il Riccio. Also, this event actually is misplaced within the chronology of the fresco cycle.[74] The King of France is depicted to the left of Maurus, overlooking him, which is symbolic because that is where he is going to do his work by introducing the people of France to the Benedictine way of life. . The artistic rendering of the horses is most expressive. In the background, there is a marvelous large Roman style building.

The next eight frescoes are by the hand of Luca Signorelli and his assistants, the first of which is *How God Punishes Florentius* (see Figures 72 and 73). Signorelli paints a group of monks about to depart for Monte Cassino. To the left is pictured the remains of the destroyed house of Florentius, who has been punished by God. A monk has run from Subiaco to recount the fall of Florentius under his collapsed house. He is gloating in Florentius's downfall. Benedict is presented as strict and stern, and admonishes the messenger for his inappropriate expression of pleasure at the downfall of Florentius. Most remarkable about this fresco are the evil and fantastic creatures flying and swerving through the sky. Four of the winged creatures continue to demolish the house of Florentius, while two others carry off the soul of Florentius, while one strikes at him. Signorelli's imaginative genius is at work here, and the blood and thunder of the devil is unmistakeably present.

[74] Placidus went on his evangelization journey in 537 and Maurus left for his mission approximately 546.

Again, from his *Dialogues*, Gregory recounts that Benedict leaves Subiaco and goes to Monte Cassino to build a monastery there. In the second fresco by Signorelli, *How Benedict Evangelizes the Inhabitants of Monte Cassino,* Benedict is portrayed teaching the Christian life to the people of Monte Cassino, who only know the life of the pagan world (see Figure 74). Evidence of that is seen in the right background, where a group of monks are tearing down and destroying the statue of Apollo located where a Temple of Apollo once stood[75] (see Figure 75). This idol was worshipped locally in late antiquity. Signorelli's depiction of Benedict is more severe and religious in spirit than that of Sodoma's. In this scene, the iconography of victory of Christianity over paganism is clear and central. In the skies, there is an eeriness conveyed in the clouds.

Signorelli paints *How Benedict Drives the Enemy from the Stone* by incorporating three different scenes (see Figures 76, 77 and 78). In this fresco and in others in the cycle, the problem of inventing the life of Saint Benedict within the confines of the architectural parameters of the lunettes have been cleverly solved and manipulated by placing three different stories in one bay and simultaneously, successfully communicating the story. St. Gregory tells the story of how Benedict was perpetually harassed and interrupted by evil and diabolical forces in his attempts to grow the faith and lead monks on their spiritual quest. In the center foreground, a group of monks is represented trying to pry loose and move a large and heavy stone that seems immoveable. Benedict makes the sign of the cross over the stone, and miraculously, the stone becomes moveable. In the middle right ground of the picture is a depiction of a group of monks

[75] It is exactly on this site where the Temple of Apollo once stood that Benedict built his monastery at Monte Cassino.

scurrying, carrying pails of water to douse a fire that is destroying the monastery.[76] And, in the back left, there are a group of monks digging up a statue of an idol. The background is composed of distant mountains in pyramidal shapes. The theme of this fresco could be interpreted as a triumph over evil. Signorelli has painted a believable narrative in which all the members play a role, where the movement is felt, and the anatomical correctness achieved.

The next fresco, *How Benedict Revives a Young Monk on Whom a Wall Had Fallen,* is a thematic continuation of the diabolical interference Benedict continues to face (see Figures 79,80, and 81). In the back left, a young monk is engaged in laying brick and he is being pushed off the scaffolding by the devil. The devil causes the wall to collapse and the monk loses his life as a result. Three different scenes are depicted. The next scene shows the fellow monks carrying down the monk, who has lost his life, to Benedict. Benedict, upon seeing the monk, miraculously revives him back to life. The psychological impact is acutely and keenly represented in this fresco: tragedy and confusion, grief and sorrow, revival and joy.

In the fresco, *How Benedict Tells the Monks Where and When They Had Eaten Outside the Monastery,* Signorelli has incorporated a very successful tool of perspective, still evident in spite of its largely deteriorated condition (see Figures 82, 83, and 84). It is considered one of the best of the frescoes in the cycle, despite its condition. In a lyrical presentation, two monks are dining outside of the monastery. They appear to be dining at a table within a home. One woman is serving them with wine, while the other woman serves them food, and a young boy brings them bread. In the distant background, a male

[76] We know from Gregory's *Dialogues*' that Benedict restored sound sight to the monks (freed from illusions caused by the devil) who saw an imaginary fire.

figure in silhouette stands in an open doorway that lends a most successful aspect to the work. Seen descending the staircase in the background are more women. Quite unusual about this scene is that it is the one and only interior scene in the fresco cycle. Gregory relates in his *Dialogues* that Benedict was able to recount exactly where and what they had eaten outside the monastery while in violation of the Rule. In the upper right, Signorelli has painted the monks repenting for their sins. This fresco reinforces the clairvoyant nature of Benedict. In this scene and in other scenes, St. Benedict's ability to foresee the future come to light. His power of clairvoyance is portrayed when he saves Placidus from drowning when he foresees the event, when he knows the errand boy has not delivered all the flasks of wine he is meant to deliver, when he foresees the destruction of Monte Cassino, the monastery which he has built, and most arresting is when he foresees his own death. Note the little white dog to the right of the woman's foot. In this scene, we have all the Albertian elements of an ideal painting, many figures, abundance, three-dimensional pictorial space, and a *historia*.

How Benedict Reproves the Brother of the Monk Valentinian for Having Violated His Fast, tells the story of the brother of the monk Valentinian, who was in the practice of going to Monte Cassino once a year and fasting (see Figures 85 and 86). Here again are three different scenes depicted in one fresco by Signorelli, and they are correlated. On the right appear two travellers. The man on the left is painted with an energy and anatomical robustness and verve for which Signorelli is famous. His backside of his body protrudes, emphasized by the chap on his right leg having fallen to his ankle. Reminiscent of Alberti's directives of counter-balancing the movement of the human body, there is *contrapposto* in this scene. He appears to be a vagabond with a white sack hanging over his left shoulder attached to the stick that he carries. He gestures to the

fellow traveller to come to him while the man who is dressed in a more genteel manner, the brother of Valentinian, points directly in front of him. On closer examination, the vagabond is seen to have horns, symbolizing his diabolical nature, and he is diverting the brother of Valentinian from his pure course of action. The movement and energy in the depiction of these men is refreshingly real. On the left side, Benedict is pictured encircled by three monks while his hand is placed upon the head of the brother of Valentinian as he kneels and asks for forgiveness. Benedict gently scolds him and forgives him for having broken his fast. In the upper left background are two other travellers refreshing themselves by a spring. This fresco can be interpreted thematically to demonstrate the forgiving nature of Benedict.

Most impressive and dramatic in the entire cycle is the fresco, *How Benedict Exposes Totila's Sham* (see Figures 87 and 88). This fresco and the one in the following bay make a two-part fresco to communicate the prowess of clairvoyance that Benedict possesses. Totila is King of the Goths. During his incursions into Campania he has heard of Benedict and his remarkable reputation as being a man of God. Totila decides to test his reputation. He commands his shield bearer, Rigo, to dress Rigo as himself, and present himself to Benedict as Totila, believing if Benedict truly is a man of God, he will be able to detect the imposter. Rigo advances to Benedict along with the royal entourage. Benedict immediately recognizes him as an imposter and says " Put off, o son, put off that garb that you wearing; it is not your own." The composition, the realism and the drama of this fresco are most remarkable. The group of soldiers in their brightly-colored dress, the boldness of their stances, the emotion in their faces, and the awe depicted in Totila's face, present a challenge to the man of God, but Benedict appears unshaken, resolute and fatherly in appearance; all these elements come together with great force.

The contrast between the groups of men further emphasizes the theatrics of the scene. Benedict and his brothers are in their plain white habits while those in the royal entourage wear brightly colored and striped pantaloons along with various forms of headdress. In the distant background, Rigo is depicted returning to Totila's camp to relay the story of Benedict's ability to immediately discern that he was not Totila, but an imposter. The camp is marvelously realized with multiple domed tents, flags and banners, all fluttering in the wind.[77]

The next fresco, *How Benedict Recognizes and Receives Totila*, completes the second part of the story (see Figures 89, 90, 91, and 92). Again, Signorelli has captured the essence of the moment as he presents Totila kneeling in front of Benedict as if to pay homage. He comes to Benedict along with his entourage to meet and pay his respect to him. This composition is equally beautiful. The facial expressions of the soldiers are varied and numerous. Anatomical realism is utilized along with movement and dynamism in the group of the entourage. The soldier upon the steed looks behind, and even his horse expresses emotion. The horse, his nostrils flared, looks at the soldiers in front of him with their lances upright. The soldiers are in the service of a barbarian king and their violent nature is represented in their faces. These two frescoes are visually the most powerful in the entire cycle, both are complex and bold compositions.

Moving clockwise around the Great Cloister, the next scene on the west wall begins a new set of frescoes by Sodoma. As prophesized by Benedict before his death, the composition *How Benedict Foretells the Destruction of Monte Cassino***,** captures the confusion and the calamity at hand (see Figures 93, 94, and 95). There is terror in the

[77] Alberti discusses seven forms of movement he desires in painting. The banners in the camp capture the fluttering of the wind.

faces of the men on the ground. The commanders of the destruction are atop their mounts, clearly barbarian as seen by their headdress. This picture alludes to the destruction of the monastery at Monte Cassino by the Longobards in 581 A.D. Benedict had built this monastery and it is his life's work, his masterpiece. Devastation is at hand and Benedict is seen in the right top predicting the destruction to a nobleman, Theoprobus. Sodoma has meticulously painted the tragedy of the destruction of the monastery by using the dynamic group of barbarians, armored, attacking on their horses. The horses appear angry, and agitated and even their ears are horned. There is some evocation here of *The Battle of San Romano* by Uccello[78] (see Figure 96). The men are surely from distant lands, as attested not only by their headdress but also by their clothes and the color of their skin. The clairvoyant nature of Benedict is expressed once again.

The fresco, *How Benedict Obtains Flour in Abundance and with it Restores the Monks,* continues the narrative of the life of Benedict and reaffirms his trust and faith in divine power (see Figures 97 and 98). Bread was becoming scarce and the monks were exhibiting anxiety about the lack of food. Benedict scolds the monks for having so little faith, and to allay their fears promised them the next day that they would have bread in abundance. And, it happened the very next day that two hundred *modii* of flour were found at the door of the monastery. On the table are five small loaves of bread and some fish. On the left side of the fresco is a hall room where Benedict shows off the abundance of flour to the surprised monks. This narrative is reminiscent of the story in the Bible in which Jesus multiplies the five loaves and fish in order to feed the multitude. There is a pulpit in the refectory above the dining table and in it is a reader and,

[78] Paolo Uccello had painted a cycle of the Life of St. Benedict at San Minato al Monte and at Santa Maria degli Angeli. These may have served as precedents for Signorelli and Il Sodoma.

according to the *Rule,* he is meant to accompany the monk's meal while reading. At the far end of the room in the wall is painted a beautiful crucifix with the Virgin Mary and St. John. This fresco is in sharp contrast to the preceding fresco. In this composition, peace and serenity abound, heightened by monastic faith and divine providence. Sodoma has used perspective to achieve the optical effect so desired. Seemingly, the first monk on the right is taking the bread of his fellow monk seated beside him. He lifts up his hand to recover his loaf, an emotive aspect to the painting. Note the two animals grimacing at one another in front of the dining table (see Figure 99).

In the scene, *How Benedict Appears to Two Far-Off Monks and Shows them the Design for the Construction of the Monastery***,** Benedict is shown holding a design for the future construction of a monastery over the heads of two monks who are fast asleep and dreaming (see Figures 100 and 101). Gregory recounts in his *Dialogues* that Benedict, at the request of a man from Terracina, sent some monks to the area for the construction of a monastery. On the right side of the fresco is the actual construction depicted underway. Seen there are the mortar-mixers, the bricklayer and assistant and a monk. Upon the dormitory wall there is an inscription "*Sit nox cum somno et sine lite dies*" which can be translated as "let the night be with sleep and the day without contention." The monk holding the plumb weight is thought to be a portrait of the Olivetan architect, wood inlayer and sculptor, Fra Giovanni di Verona (c. 1457-1525), who had inlaid the choir in the monastery at Monte Oliveto.

In the next fresco, *How Benedict Excommunicates Two Religious Women and Absolves Them After They Were Dead***,** tells the story of two women who were consecrated (recognized as sacred) and living in their own house and had received a warning and rebuke from Benedict to change their ways, especially for the habit of using

contemptuous language to a man whom they employed (see Figure 102). The women continued their aberrant behavior in spite of Benedict's warning to stop. Upon their death, a nurse, who had also worked for them, is said to have seen the women leave their grave upon the chanting of a deacon, "If there be anyone excommunicated, let him leave," in church. She knew of Benedict and of his involvement with the women, and she ran to him to tell him what she saw. Benedict gives the nurse alms to offer for the peace of the deceased souls, and the women immediately find peace in the grave. In the picture, framed by an architectural setting, on the far left there are the two women leaving their grave. The central component of the fresco is inside the church where a solemn high mass is underway. Particularly interesting to the scene is the group of choristers on the right. In the front and center part of the composition are the people attending the mass. Two young children are playing behind their parents, one with a dog and another tugging on the lady's dress. The columns appear to be of very fine marble, probably from different areas of the world, since the columns are all colored differently.

*How Benedict Has the Body of Christ Placed on the Body of the Monk Whom the Earth Would Not Receive***,** relates the story of an errant monk who had gone to visit his parents without Benedict's blessing (see Figures 103 and 104). Later, the monk died and was buried, but for two successive days afterwards his corpse was found above ground. His relatives advise Benedict of this, and he subsequently orders that the Blessed Sacrament be placed on the dead man's chest. After this, his body finds peace in the grave. In this fresco, the churchyard is where the narrative unfolds. On the right we see Benedict presenting another man in sacred vestments receiving a receptacle that contains the Sacred Host that will be placed upon the body of the dead monk. Pictured on the left side is a group of men taking part in the ceremony; the expressions on their faces are full

of energy. The alter boys' facial expressions are very delicate. The priest is depicted as composed and austere. The background landscape is bucolic with deer leaping and dancing towards safety.

The following fresco, *How Benedict Pardons the Monk Wishing to Flee from the Monastery, Encounters a Serpent Along the Way*, illustrates a young monk who wanted to renounce the eremetic life, and return to the life of the world (see Figures 105 and 106). Benedict encouraged him to persevere and keep his word to God and remain a monk. After repeated requests by the monk who wanted to leave, Benedict relented and allowed the young monk to leave the monastery. No sooner had the monk departed the monastery than he came upon a dreaded serpent. Seeing this as a sign from Heaven, he asks for Benedict's pardon, and returns zealously to the religious life to which he had committed himself previously. Unfortunately, this fresco is not in very good condition. Pictured on the right is the monk who upon his exit from the monastery meets a monster-like serpent. He is terrified and runs the other way. His habit illustrates flight, as it appears to be in movement, bending and flowing. Alberti directs painters that the three-dimensional picture space should include, "volumetric bodies whose skin clearly covers bones and muscles which is covered by dress and garments which move, like real ones passing in the air" as seen here. On the left side of the picture, Benedict receives the monk back into the monastic fold. The monk appeals to Benedict, kneeling, his face full of sorrow, and he repents.

The next fresco is the last fresco on the south wall of the Great Cloister. It is entitled, *How Benedict Releases a Peasant Who Was Bound, by Only Looking at Him* (see Figures 107 and 108). This fresco tells the story of how a cruel Goth named Zalla captures a poor peasant and demands all of his money and threatens to kill him if he does

not hand it over. To save himself, the peasant tells the cruel Zalla that he has turned his money over to Benedict. Zalla forces the peasant to take him to Benedict, which he does. Benedict, seated, placid, and reading, looks up, looks to the peasant, looks to the Goth, and miraculously unbinds the rope that binds the peasant, merely by looking at him. Sodoma's picture is most expressive and original, despite its poor condition. In the composition on the left, Zalla is captured in disbelief and amazement, armored, his right hand held up in the air with an open palm, his partner in crime, the fierce Goth, appears to be beating the peasant with extreme force trying to rein him in. Benedict is poised, one hand on his book, the other hand lifted up, and the peasant exhibits terror in his facial expression. There is great dynamism in the central part of the fresco. It is further enhanced by the depiction of the white horse attended by the groom who appears to be agile and patient in the wake of all the action to the left of him. In the middle background, the scene of Zalla upon his steed overtaking the peasant is shown. Zalla, with commanding force, pulls his sword to the sky, threatening the peasant. In the distance we see a body of water surrounded by mountains, and boats plying the waters.

Finally, we move to the first fresco on the east wall, also painted by Il Sodoma. It is entitled *St. Benedict Confers The Rule on The Olivetan Monks* (see Figure 109). This fresco symbolizes the inclusion of the congregation of the Olivetans into the Benedictine monastic family. Benedict is pictured atop his abbatial seat, handing copies of the Rule to the monks on the right and on the left. They are each dressed in a white cowl, and their habits are full and flowing. The cloth folds in the habits worn by the monks are depicted most successfully, in perfect symmetry, by Sodoma. Benedict's arms possess a broad, enveloping gesture as if to say welcome to the order. The monochromatic use of color emphasizes the profound nature of the event. The physiognomies of the group of monks,

his disciples, appear to be expressions of devotion and love. There is tenderness in their faces. From a rhetorical standpoint, here we see the culmination of painting as an affective art. Benedict has succeeded in passing on his legacy, and growing the Christian faith. Below the picture frame is an inscription in Latin that gives the founding date of the order, March 26, 1319, during the reign of the Supreme Pontiff, being John XXII.

Conclusion

As Alberti communicated to painters of the Renaissance, "Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later, so that they are recognized by spectators with pleasure and deep admiration for the artist . . . through painting the faces of the dead go on living for a very long time." This concept and idea seems to have been bespoken for Signorelli and Sodoma at Monte Oliveto. The "divine power" of these artists has brought St. Benedict alive and present to the monks that have lived there, the ones that live there now, and for all viewers like myself who see them now five hundred years after they were created.

As humanists had aspirations of ideal cities and utopias, ascetics had idealized their spiritual life as 'flight from the world', or "Fugi Mondi". A nexus can be construed between humanist and conventual ideologies in their quest for the ideal life. In the monastic communal life, relationships, especially with God, are transformed from within the cloister. The paintings at Monte Oliveto certainly served as an integral part of transforming the monk's lives.

The late fifteenth century Italy was a period of angst and hope. As Jonathan Riess sets forth in his book, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, there was an air of apocalypticism

during the late Quattrocento, " The 1490's was indeed, as we know, a time of apocalyptic agitation."[79] But hope in the period of the imminent papal Jubilee served to extinguish this malaise. Observant reform in the Benedictine order and the return to the original precept of St. Benedict reinforced the 'deepest aspirations' of the Olivetans and as Verdon proposes, the society at large.

In Alberti's treatise, *On Painting*, he describes the ideal painting, "…So in painting variety of bodies and colours is pleasing. I would say a picture was richly varied if it contained a properly arranged mixture of old men, youths, boys, matrons, maidens, children, domestic animals, dogs, birds, horses sheep, buildings and provinces; and I would praise any variety provided it is appropriate to what is going on in the picture."[80]

In the fresco cycle depicting the Life of St. Benedict at Monte Oliveto, the ideal elements of a painting; variety, composition and *historia*, as communicated by Alberti have been used by Signorelli and Il Sodoma to communicate the ideal way of life for the monks. This "double-loaded shotgun", if you will, acts as a mirror and plays on the emotions of the monks on a daily basis. Here we see painting, it is affective, it is ideal, it expresses an ideal, and it is a call to arms for living the ideal.

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[79] Jonathan Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995), 8.
[80] Alberti, *On Painting*, 79.

Illustrations

Figure 1
Entrance to Monte Oliveto Maggiore
Unless otherwise noted, all images were photographed by Ellen Boswell Schiefer

Figure 2
Panoramic photo of Monte Oliveto Maggiore
Source: Enzo Carli, L'Abbazia di Monte Oliveto

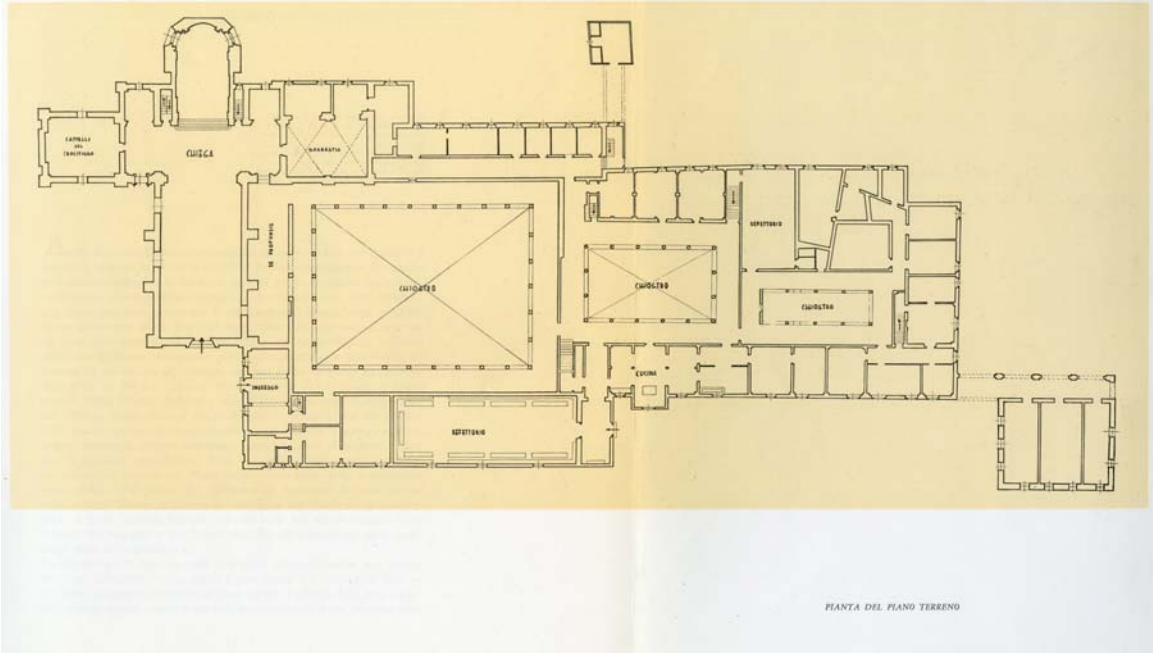
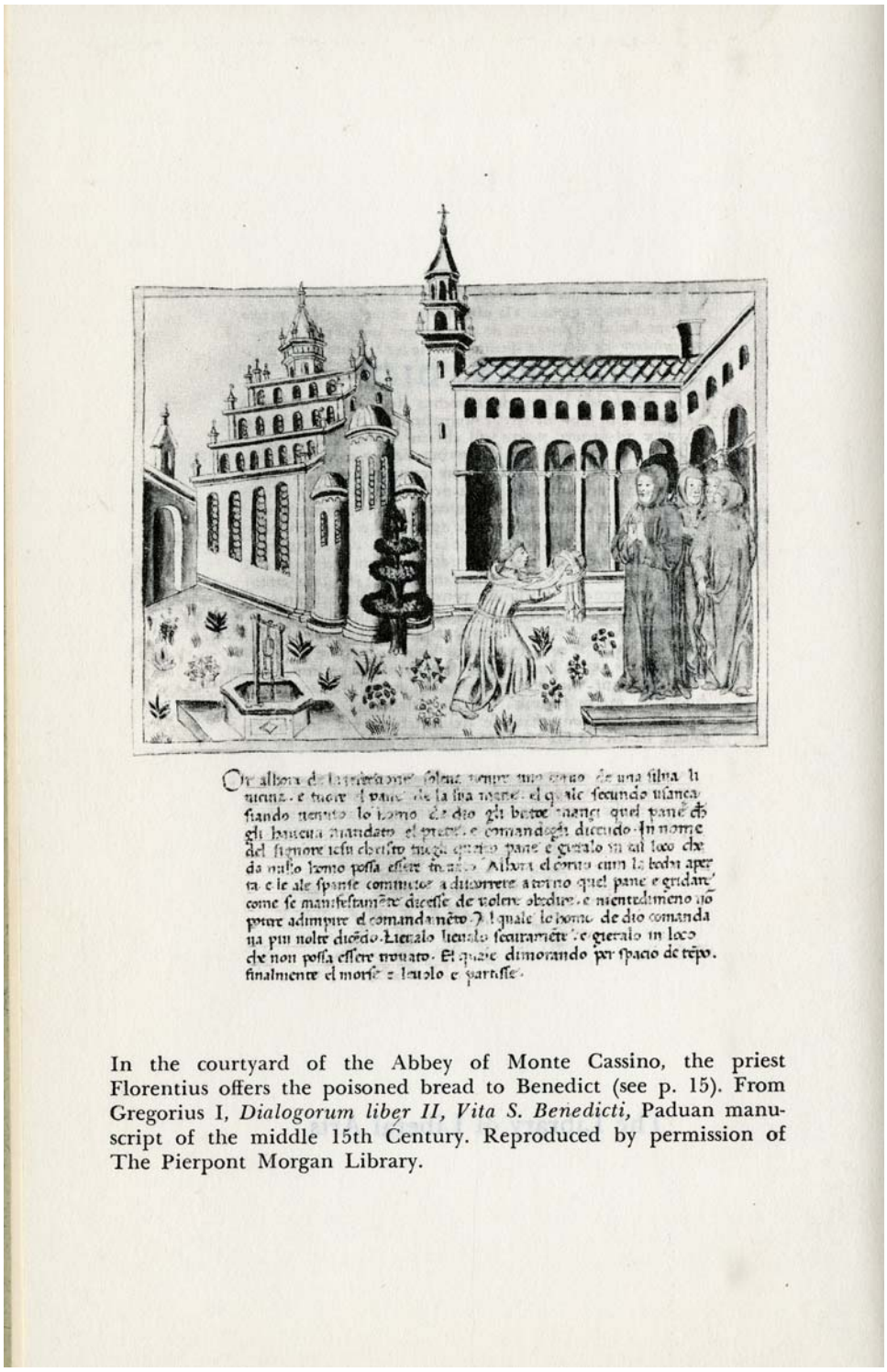


Figure 3
Plan of the Abbey of Monte Oliveto
Source: Enzo Carli, L'Abbazia di Monteoliveto

Figure 4
Chiostro Grande of Monte Oliveto



In the courtyard of the Abbey of Monte Cassino, the priest Florentius offers the poisoned bread to Benedict (see p. 15). From Gregorius I, *Dialogorum liber II, Vita S. Benedicti,* Paduan manuscript of the middle 15th Century. Reproduced by permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library.

Figure 5
Source: Book II of Gregory's Dialogues

Figure 6
Saint Benedict, Silence
Attributed to Mariano di Matteo, c. 1473-1474
Source: Artstor

Figure 7
Text: Rule of St. Benedict. Decorated initial 'A(sculta)' with foliated tendrils. Bar border with interlace and feathering.
Monastic rules.
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
Source: Artstor

Figure 8
Saint Benedict Brings a Monk Crushed by a Wall Back to Life and Founds Monte Cassino
Spinello Aretino 1386-1388
San Miniato al Monte
Source: Artstor

Figure 9
Saint Benedict Drives Away the Devil
Spinello Aretino 1387
San Miniato al Monte
Source:Artstor

Figure 10
The Funeral of Saint Benedict
Spinello Aretino 1387
San Miniato al Monte
Source: Artstor

Figure 11
The Death of Saint Benedict
Source: Artstor

Figure 12
Saint Benedict Leaving his Father's House
Attributed to Giovanni di Consalvo 1437-1439
Badia Fiorentina
Source:Artstor

Figure 13
Saint Benedict Receiving the Habit
Attributed to Giovanni di Consalvo 1437-1439
Badia Fiorentina
Source: Artstor

Figure 14
Maurus Saving Placid
Attributed to Giovanni di Consalvo 1437-1439
Badia Fiorentina
Souce: Artstor

Figure 15
Saint Benedict Brings a Monk Back to Life After a Wall Falls Upon Him
Attributed to Giovani di Consalvo 1437-1439
Badia Fiorentina
Source: Artstor

Figure 16
Miracle of the Poisoned Glass of Wine
Attributed to Giovanni di Consalvo 1437-1439
Badia Fiorentina
Source: Artstor

Figure 17
Miracle of the Raven
Attributed to Giovanni di Consalvo 1437-1439
Badia Fiorentina
Source: Artstor

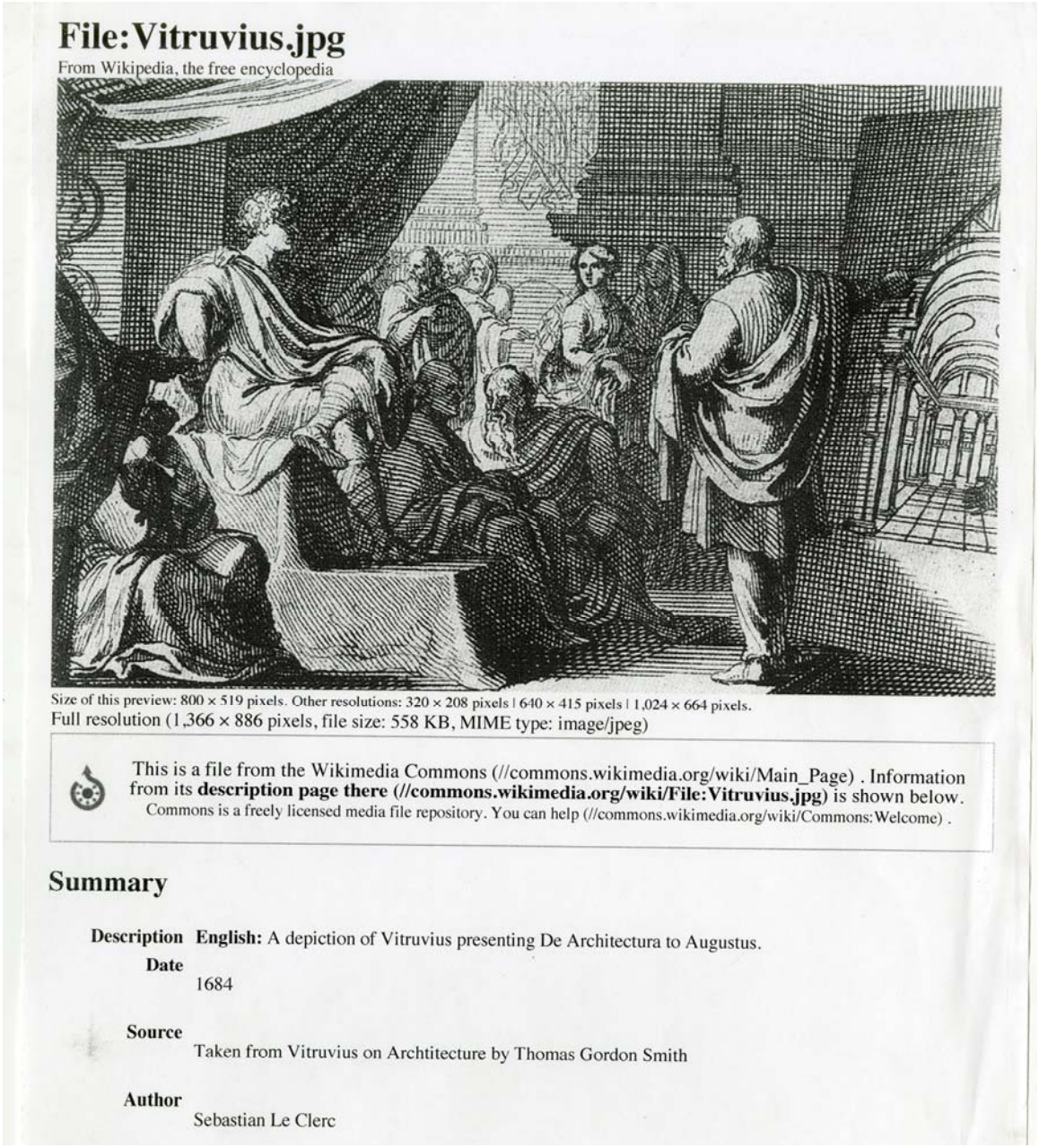
Figure 18
The Holy Trinity by Masaccio, 1427, S. Maria Novella
Source: Artstor

Figure 19
Adoration of the Magi by Gentile da Fabriano, 1423
Source: Artstor

Figure 20
How Benedict Leaves Home and Goes to Study in Rome
Il Sodoma

Figure 21
Detail, How Benedict Leaves Home and Goes to Study in Rome
Il Sodoma

Figure 22
How Benedict Leaves the School of Rome
Il Sodoma



File:Vitruvius.jpg

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Size of this preview: 800 × 519 pixels. Other resolutions: 320 × 208 pixels | 640 × 415 pixels | 1,024 × 664 pixels.
Full resolution (1,366 × 886 pixels, file size: 558 KB, MIME type: image/jpeg)

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Summary

Description	**English:** A depiction of Vitruvius presenting De Architectura to Augustus.
Date	1684
Source	Taken from Vitruvius on Archtitecture by Thomas Gordon Smith
Author	Sebastian Le Clerc

Figure 23
A Depiction of Vitruvius presenting *De Architectura* to Augustus

Figure 24
How Benedict Mends the Cribble That Was Broken
Il Sodoma

Figure 25
Detail, How Benedict Mends the Cribble That Was Broken
Il Sodoma

Figure 26
Detail, How Benedict Mends the Cribble That Was Broken
Il Sodoma

Figure 27
How the Monk Romanus Gives Benedict the Hermit's Habit
Il Sodoma

Figure 28
Detail, How the Monk Romanus Gives Benedict the Hermit's Habit
Il Sodoma

Figure 29
Detail, How the Monk Romanus Gives Benedict the Hermit's Habit
Il Sodoma

Figure 30
How the Devil Breaks the Bell
Il Sodoma

Figure 31
Detail, How the Devil Breaks the Bell
Il Sodoma

Figure 32
Detail, How the Devil Breaks the Bell
Il Sodoma

Figure 33
How a Priest Inspired by God Brings Benedict Food on Easter Day
Il Sodoma

Figure 34
Detail, How a Priest Inspired by God Brings Benedict Food on Easter Day
Il Sodoma

Figure 35
How Benedict Instructs Visiting Peasants in Sacred Doctrine
Il Sodoma

Figure 36
Detail, How Benedict Instructs Visiting Peasants in Sacred Doctrine
Il Sodoma

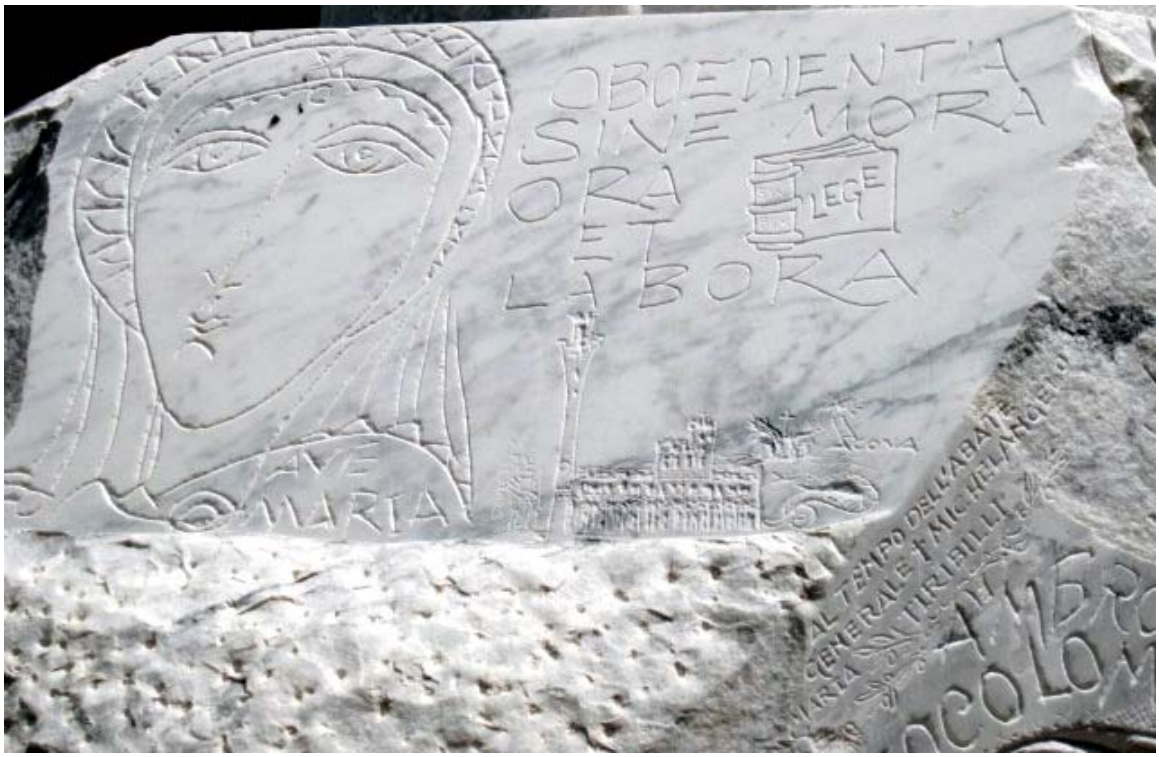

Figure 37
"Ora et Labora"

Figure 38
Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Leper
Cosimo Rosselli and Piero di Cosimo 1482
fresco painting
Sistine Chapel, Vatican
Source: Artstor

Figure 39
How Benedict is Tempted by Impurity and Overcomes Temptation
Il Sodoma

Figure 40
Detail, How Benedict is Tempted by Impurity and Overcomes Temptation
Il Sodoma

Figure 41
Detail, How Benedict is Tempted by Impurity and Overcomes Temptation
Il Sodoma

Figure 42
How Benedict, at the Entreaty of Certain Hermits, Consents to be Their Superior and Abbot
Il Sodoma

Figure 43
How Benedict, with a Sign of a Cross, Breaks a Glass of Poisoned Wine
Il Sodoma

Figure 44
Detail, How Benedict, with a Sign of a Cross, Breaks a Glass of Poisoned Wine
Il Sodoma

Figure 45
How Benedict Completes the Construction of Twelve Monasteries
Il Sodoma

Figure 46
Detail, How Benedict Completes the Construction of Twelve Monasteries
Il Sodoma

Figure 47
How Benedict Receives the Two Boys from Rome, Maurus and Placidus
Il Sodoma

Figure 48
Detail, How Benedict Receives the Two Boys from Rome, Maurus and Placidus
Il Sodoma

Figure 49
How Benedict Delivers a Possessed Monk by Scourging Him
Il Sodoma

Figure 50
Detail, How Benedict Delivers a Possessed Monk by Scourging Him
Il Sodoma

Figure 51
Detail, How Benedict Delivers a Possessed Monk by Scourging Him
Il Sodoma

Figure 52
Detail, How Benedict Delivers a Possessed Monk by Scourging Him
Il Sodoma

Figure 53
Detail, How Benedict Delivers a Possessed Monk by Scourging Him
Il Sodoma

Figure 54
How Benedict, Entreated by Monks, Produces Water from the Top of a Mountain
Il Sodoma

Figure 55
Detail, How Benedict, Entreated by Monks, Produces Water from the Top of a Mountain
Il Sodoma

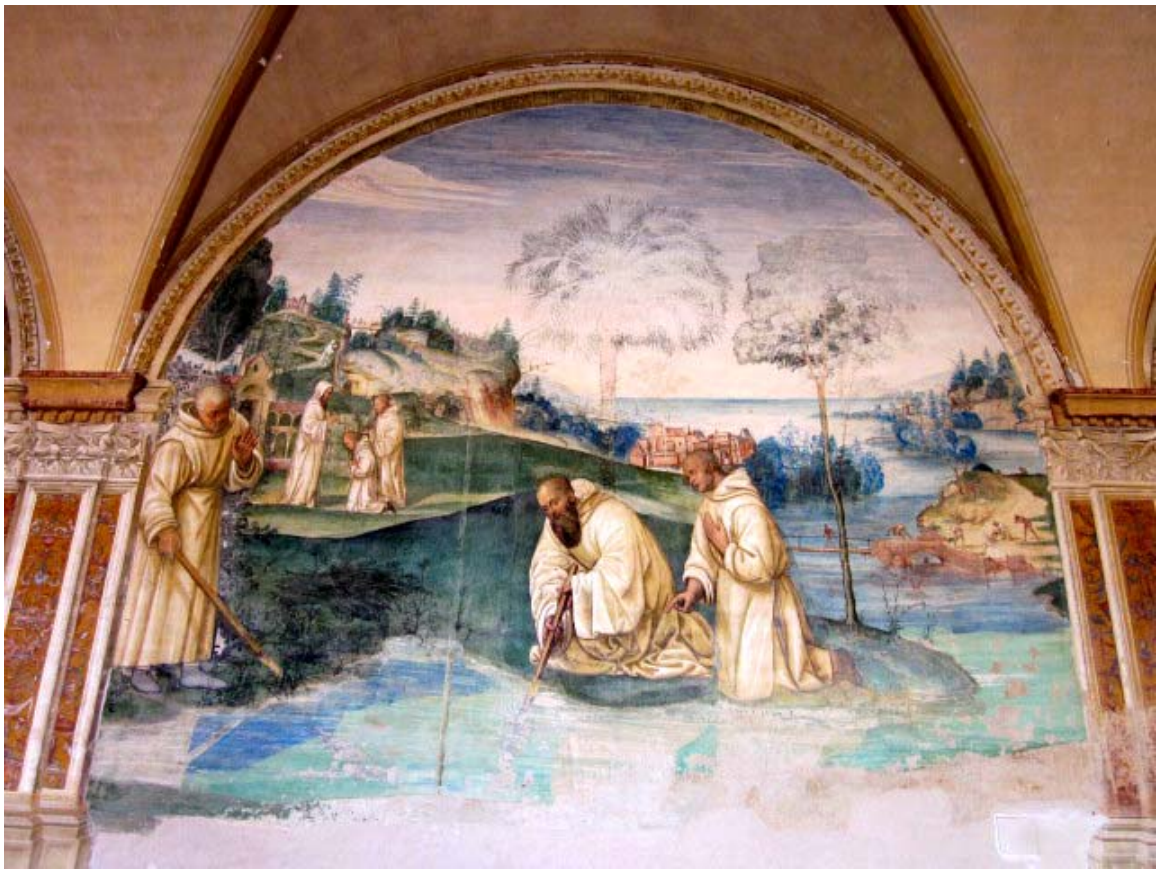

Figure 56
How Benedict Causes a Hedging Bill that Has Fallen to the Bottom of the Lake to Return to its Handle
Il Sodoma

Figure 57
Detail, How Benedict Causes a Hedging Bill that Has Fallen to the Bottom of the Lake to Return to its Handle
Il Sodoma

Figure 58
Detail, How Benedict Causes a Hedging Bill that Has Fallen to the Bottom of the Lake to Return to its Handle
Il Sodoma

Figure 59
How Maurus, Sent to Save Placidus, Walks on Water
Il Sodoma

Figure 60
Detail, How Maurus, Sent to Save Placidus, Walks on Water
Il Sodoma

Figure 61
How Benedict Turns a Flask of Wine into a Serpent When Being Deceived by an Errand Boy
Il Sodoma

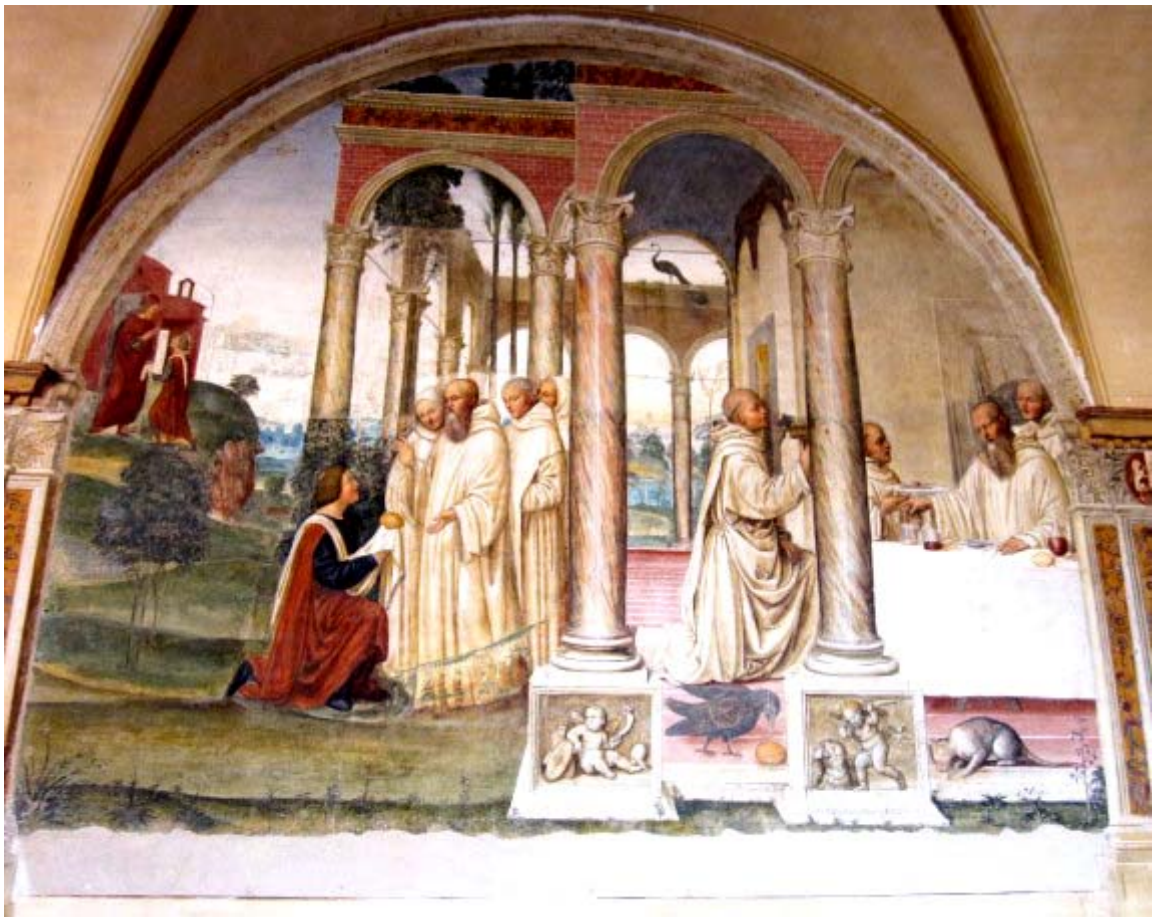

Figure 62
How Florentius Tries to Poison Benedict
Il Sodoma

Figure 63
Detail, How Florentius Tries to Poison Benedict
Il Sodoma

Figure 64
Detail, How Florentius Tries to Poison Benedict
Il Sodoma

Figure 65
How Florentius Sends Evil Women
Il Sodoma

Figure 66
Detail, How Florentius Sends Evil Women
Il Sodoma

Figure 67
Primavera by Sandro Botticelli, 1478
Source: Artstor

Figure 68
Detail, How Florentius Sends Evil Women
Il Sodoma

Figure 69
Detail, How Florentius Sends Evil Women

Figure 70
How Benedict Sends Maurus to France and Placidus to Sicily
Il Ricchio

Figure 71
Detail, How Benedict Sends Maurus to France and Placidus to Sicily
Il Ricchio

Figure 72
How God Punishes Florentius
Luca Signorelli

Figure 73
How God Punishes Florentius
Luca Signorelli

Figure 74
How Benedict Evangelizes the Inhabitants of Monte Cassino
Luca Signorelli

Figure 75
Detail, How Benedict Evangelizes the Inhabitants of Monte Cassino
Luca Signorelli

Figure 76
How Benedict Drives the Enemy from the Stone
Luca Signorelli

Figure 77
Detail, How Benedict Drives the Enemy from the Stone
Luca Signorelli

Figure 78
Detail, How Benedict Drives the Enemy from the Stone
Luca Signorelli

Figure 79
How Benedict Revives a Young Monk on Whom a Wall Had Fallen
Luca Signorelli

Figure 80
Detail, How Benedict Revives a Young Monk on Whom a Wall Had Fallen
Luca Signorelli

Figure 81
Detail, How Benedict Revives a Young Monk on Whom a Wall Had Fallen
Luca Signorelli

Figure 82
How Benedict Tells the Monks Where and When They Had Eaten Outside the Monastery
Luca Signorelli

Figure 83
How Benedict Tells the Monks Where and When They Had Eaten Outside the Monastery
Luca Signorelli

Figure 84
Detail, How Benedict Tells the Monks Where and When They Had Eaten Outside the Monastery
Luca Signorelli

Figure 85
How Benedict Reproves the Brother of the Monk Valentinian for Having Violated His Fast
Luca Signorelli

Figure 86
Detail, How Benedict Reproves the Brother of the Monk Valentinian for Having Violated His Fast
Luca Signorelli

Figure 87
How Benedict Exposes Totila's Sham
Luca Signorelli

Figure 88
Detail, How Benedict Exposes Totila's Sham
Luca Signorelli

Figure 89
How Benedict Recognizes and Receives Totila
Luca Signorelli

Figure 90
Detail, How Benedict Recognizes and Receives Totila
Luca Signorelli

Figure 91
Detail, How Benedict Recognizes and Receives Totila
Luca Signorelli

Figure 92
Detail, How Benedict Recognizes and Receives Totila
Luca Signorelli

Figure 93
How Benedict Foretells the Destruction of Monte Cassino
Il Sodoma

Figure 94
Detail, How Benedict Foretells the Destruction of Monte Cassino
Il Sodoma

Figure 95
Detail, How Benedict Foretells the Destruction of Monte Cassino
Il Sodoma

Figure 96
The Battle of San Romano by Paolo Uccello, 1472
Source: Artstor

Figure 97
How Benedict Obtains Flour in Abundance and with it Restores the Monks
Il Sodoma

Figure 98
Detail, How Benedict Obtains Flour in Abundance and with it Restores the Monks
Il Sodoma

Figure 99
Detail, How Benedict Obtains Flour in Abundance and with it Restores the Monks
Il Sodoma

Figure 100
How Benedict Appears to Two Far-Off Monks and Shows them the Design for the Construction of the Monastery
Il Sodoma

Figure 101
Detail, How Benedict Appears to Two Far-Off Monks and Shows Them the Design for the Construction of the Monastery
Il Sodoma

Figure 102
How Benedict Excommunicates Two Religious Women and Absolves Them After They Were Dead
Il Sodoma

Figure 103
How Benedict Has the Body of Christ Placed on the Body of the Monk Whom the Earth Would Not Receive
Il Sodoma

Figure 104
Detail, How Benedict Has the Body of Christ Placed on the Body of the Monk Whom the Earth Would Not Receive
Il Sodoma

Figure 105
How Benedict Pardons the Monk Wishing to Flee from the Monastery, Encounters a Serpent Along the Way
Il Sodoma

Figure 106
Detail, How Benedict Pardons the Monk Wishing to Flee from the Monastery, Encounters a Serpent Along the Way
Il Sodoma

Figure 107
How Benedict Releases a Peasant Who Was Bound, By Only Looking at Him
Il Sodoma

Figure 108
Detail, How Benedict Releases a Peasant Who Was Bound, By Only Looking at Him
Il Sodoma

Figure 109
St. Benedict Confers the Rule on the Olivetan Monks
Il Sodoma

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