

The Devil as a Franciscan? – A curious detail in the Sistine Chapel

ISTVÁN F. MÉSZÁROS
University of Szeged



We all know that the devil is *in* the details. The details concerning us today, however, are *on* the devil. Hidden in three smaller scenes in the upper zone background of Botticelli's fresco – the second in the right-side Christ cycle of the Cappella Magna of the Vatican Palace (better known today as the Sistine Chapel) illustrating the *Temptation of Christ* – is the tempter described in Matthew 4:1-12. In the description of Leopold Ettlinger: "Satan appears in a curious disguise, for he is shown as a bearded man in a dark hooded cloak, *not unlike the Franciscan habit*, carrying a pilgrim's staff and a rosary. His diabolic nature is betrayed by his small batwings and the fact that he has claws instead of feet."¹



¹ L. D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo – Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*. Oxford 1963, 77. The Italicism is my own.

His appearance is ultimately derived from Petrus Comestor: 'It must be assumed that the Devil took on human form in order to seduce the Lord'.² The *Historia Scholastica* is a very natural source for consultation on this, because, as John Shearman reaffirmed,³ it was already one of the major sources used for the Sistine Chapel's fresco-cycle.⁴ Apart from that, it was a common motif in the fifteenth century to illustrate the devil not just as a human, but also as a monk. Ghiberti already mastered it in Florence, disguising the devil in the same manner in the north door of the *Battistero*, and I agree with Ettlenger's suggestion that Botticelli's devil seems to be a direct descendant of Ghiberti's – at least it was a very familiar model for the Florentine painter.



We have a humanized devil turned into a monk, and we have good reason to believe that this depiction was already standard in the fifteenth century. Have we any other reasons to scrutinize the devil's outfit? We have more than enough, at least according to Rona Goffen's belief: "It is unlikely that the resemblance between the Devil garb and the Franciscan habit is fortuitous. Presumably, Sixtus meant to indict corrupting Franciscan leadership – that is, leadership in opposition to his own."⁵

2 *Historia Scholastica, Evangelia, Patrologia Latina*, 198, col. 1556: "Credendus est autem diabolus hominis assumpsisse formam, in qua Dominum circumducere et colloqui posset ei".

3 J. Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel*. London, 1972, p. 47, n. 8, p. 55 n. 61, p. 56, p.59, p. 63 n. 102, p. 69, p. 87 n. 243.

4 First demonstrated by A. Groner, „Zur Entstehung der sixtinischen Wandfresken – Erklärung des Wand-Historienzyklus“, *Zeitschrift für christliche Kunst* 7 (1906), cols. 193. ff.

5 R. Goffen, "Friar Sixtus IV and the Sistine Chapel", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 39:2 (Summer 1986), 246.

As far as I know, the Franciscan past of Sixtus IV plays a more or less important role in every interpretation.⁶ In Rona Goffen's, however, it plays a leading, if not an exclusive, role. In a conspicuous analysis she recounts all the calamities between the two rival Franciscan factions, the Observants and the Conventuals, not to mention the Pope, who tries in vain to mediate between them, and was constantly humiliated (at least in Goffen's interpretation) by the Observants. She reveals that for both St. Francis and St. Bonaventura the figure of Moses was a constant paragon of leadership and loyalty. All of this is a convenient explication why Moses, who never before played so eminent a role in monumental art, is the leading hero of the frescoes of the left side wall, as the symmetrical counterpart of Christ. Goffen re-collects a wealth of material and gives a new explanation for the well-known *dictum* of Sixtus IV: *Moses Christus noster*. Throwing a new light on the main theme of the frescoes, she re-establishes a strong link with the Franciscan past of the pope.

Goffen's explanation is lacking, however. She takes it for granted that Sixtus IV was the mastermind of the whole program, even though only a highly dubious adulatory poem around 1477 considered him the creator of the program. We all know that, in the past just as in the present, specialized people was charged with these duties – and in the case of Sistine Chapel these people happened to be Dominicans, not Franciscans. I have no doubts that Sixtus IV had the last word concerning the overall program, but I am also convinced – as I will try to prove at the end – that he only modified it with personal additions, so it is more likely that a previous program already existed.

The *Cappella Magna*, as it was called in the fifteenth century, is visually displayed in two distinct parts separated by a large screen (*cancellata*) – the choir (*chorus* or *presbyterium*) and the *nave*.⁷ Our fresco is in the choir, where only very few and select clerics could enjoy it in the so-called *Cappella papalis* in the corporate sense of the word. As Nesselrath says: "Since the Sistine Chapel was the palace chapel of the papal palace in the Vatican, the iconography of its decoration was addressed at a public consisting in the first place of theologians or at least exegetes."⁸ It was not for rebellious Franciscans, one must add. A devil depicted in Franciscan disguise could be only a joke, if at all, and hardly could have any doctrinal role. Before evaluating such peculiarities, we must start with a brief survey of fifteenth-century decoration as a whole.

6 As far as I known, Ernst Steinmann was the first (and perhaps the last) who read and made use in his interpretation of the *De sanguine Christi* – one of the major theological contributions of Francesco della Rovere, after which he became the Minister General of the Franciscan Order (1564) and finally, in 1471, Pope Sixtus IV.

7 The *presbyterium* properly is the place where the altar stood, and the *chorus* the part between the *presbyterium* and the screen.

8 A. Nesselrath, „The painters of Lorenzo the Magnificent in the Chapel of Pope Sixtus IV in Rome“ in *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, Recent Restorations of the Vatican Museums*, vol. 4. Ed by F. Buranelli – A. Duston, Vatican City State 2003, 60.

The fifteenth-century frescoes – restored splendidly between 1995 and 2000 – are still outshined in the eyes of present-day visitors by Michelangelo's far most famous later contributions. At least in one part, Michelangelo's additions substantially changed the original message. Notably, this occurred with the altar wall, completely rebuilt when Michelangelo painted his huge *Last Judgement* between 1536 and '41. Formerly here were also two windows (like in the opposite entrance wall), and above the altar was painted the *Assumption of the Virgin* by Perugino, flanked on the right side by a *Nativity* and on the left side by the *Finding of Moses*.⁹ Above there were perhaps the portraits of Saint Peter and Saint Paul¹⁰ and in the two opposite corners the portraits of Linus and Cletus – starting the gallery of martyr-popes.¹¹ Like the ancient altar-wall, the north and south wall remain divided by two cornices into three zones, divided vertically by pilasters (painted pilasters in the middle and lowest zone) into a pattern resembling a facade of six bays. On the right side are the history-paintings from the life of Christ, and on the opposite side the scenes from the life of Moses. This scheme ended over the entrance wall, where the two last frescoes, *The Resurrection of Christ* and *The Archangel Michael Defending the Body of Moses*, needed complete repainting in the end of sixteenth century, after a series of structural damages.¹²

We have no written evidence for the original program, but the restorations of 1960's revealed the inscriptions in the frieze above each scene¹³ – perhaps a revival of the *tituli* of early Roman mosaics and frescoes.¹⁴ None of them is the proper title of the main subject below, so John Shearman calls them *explanatory inscriptions*, but he mentions a pamphlet published around 1513, which called them *prophecias*.¹⁵ Considering that Paris de Grassis used the same term in a liturgical context, the sense of the word here must be like the Middle English *prophesy*, that is, *expounding the Scripture*. Almost each of the so-called *tituli* (or *prophecias*) refer to Christ and to Moses as *legislator* – making clear that the context is the transmission of the Divine Law, from the Age of Law mastered by Moses and the Age

9 G. Vasari, *Le opere*. Ed. G. Milanesi, Firenze 1906, vol. 3, 579: "La nativitàdi Cristo e il nascimento di Mosè, quando dalla filiola di faraone è ripescato nella cestella".

10 Still the best reconstruction of the original form is J. Wilde, „The Decoration of the Sistine Chapel” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 44 (1958), 61–81.

11 Nesselrath („The painters of Lorenzo the Magnificent”, 48.) draws attention to the fact that in Platina's *History of the Popes* – finished in 1474 and considered the most likely iconographic source of the popes gallery – Cletus and Anacletus are deemed to be two different popes.

12 F. Stastny, “A Note on two Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel”, *The Burlington Magazine* 121/921, (Dec., 1979), 776–83.

13 Called “a feature unexpected in Quattrocento frescoes” by Shearman, (*Raphael's Cartoons*, 7.).

14 E. Steinmann, *Die Tituli und die kirchliche Wandmalerei*. Leipzig 1891.

15 Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons*, 48: “a list of inscriptions of both side-walls was published in 1513, as it happens in a pamphlet setting out the distribution of the cardinals' cells for the Conclave of Leo X”. *Electio Pape Leonis Decimi, Anno MC. Tredecimo. Ordo Mansionum Reverendorum minorum Cardinalium in Conclavii exiamentium: assignatarum secundum Prophecias in Cappella pontificia figuratas* (without date).

of Grace performed by Christ.¹⁶ They clearly established the proper typological connections between the two walls, and – at least to me – it seems to be also clear that the frescoes must properly be read in pairs.¹⁷ What is less clear is how much theology we can infer to the whole cycle, or whether we can look at them simply as plain biblical illustrations actualized for a concrete legal message – as pointed out recently by Avraham Ronen.¹⁸

Ronen declared that we have in fact to do with a rationalist biblical account: six sequences to the right side of the life of Jesus put in chronological order, which determine each opposite typological counterpart of the Moses cycle. So the first scene of the *Nativity* (originally in the altar-wall) must followed by the *Baptism*,¹⁹ then the *Temptation*,²⁰ the *Calling of the first Apostles*,²¹ the *Sermon on the Mount*,²² *Christ's Charge to St. Peter*,²³ *The Last Supper*²⁴ and finally the *Resurrection*.²⁵

That the historical cycle could not enjoyed as simply narratives is proved already by the first fresco, where the main theme of the *Baptism* includes a figure of Christ preaching – despite the fact that his first sermon took place after the *Temptation* that is represented in the next fresco. After all the frescoes illustrate doctrine, and we must bear in mind the dictum of Edgar Wind: “the doctrinal point must be learned and understood if the visual phrase is to be spelled out correctly”. How could we spell out the *Temptation*-fresco correctly?

We have already stated that in the upper zone of the background we have three scenes of temptation according to Matthew.²⁶ In the foreground is a huge scene of sacrifice: a youth and a high priest hold a basin filled with blood, and directly behind them is an altar with burning flames. Both the figure of the High Priest and the form of the altar faithfully follows the illustrations of *Postilla litteralis* of Nicolaus de Lyra,²⁷ in which he carefully reconstructed after Hebrew and Latin sources the forms of the altar in biblical antiquity – so the uncommon reference to a scene from the Old Testament in the Evangelical series is highly deliberate.

16 Many of the previous exegetes could discern already without the help of the inscriptions that the historical cycle vindicated the papal power like *princeps*, *legislator* and *pontifex maximus*.

17 A reading performed consequently only by Groner, as mentioned in n. 4.

18 A. Ronen, “Gli affreschi quattrocenteschi della Cappella Sistina: una nuova lettura”, in: *Atti e memorie della Accademia Petrarca di lettere, arti e scienze, Nuova serie* 61 (1999), 57 – 97.

19 With the inscription above it: INSTIIVTIO NOVAE REGENERATIONIS A CHRISTO IN BAPTISMO.

20 With the inscription above it: TEMPTATIO IESV CHRISTI LATORIS EVANGELICAE LEGIS.

21 With the inscription above it: CONGREGATIO POPVLI LEGEM EVANGELICAM RECEPVRRI

22 With the inscription above it: PROMVLGATIO EVANGELICAE LEGIS PER CHRISTVM

23 With the inscription above it: CONTVRBATIO IESV CHRISTI LEGISLATORIS

24 With the inscription above it: REPLICATIO LEGIS EVANGELICAE A CHRISTO

25 RESURRECTIO ET ASCENSIO CHRISTI EVANGELICAE LEGIS LATOR[IS]

26 Mark has only a general reference to temptations; and John none; in Luke the temptation occurring on the pinnacle of the Temple is the third.

27 *Postilla litteralis et moralis super Epistolas et Evangelia...* (Nuremberg, Koberger, 1481).

Ernst Steinmann, followed by many, including myself, calls the main scene the *Healing of Leper*.²⁸ Long after his epochal *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo*, Leopold Ettlinger remained hostile to this interpretation throughout his life: “The explanation given in most guidebooks that the scene represents the *Cleansing of the Leper* is not correct”. According to him, the main scene represents an Old Testament blood sacrifice, probably illustrating a passage from the *Epistle to the Hebrews*: “The inclusion of such a scene within an imagery which is not only narrative but also didactic makes perfect sense. Literal sacrifices, as enacted before our eyes on this fresco, belong to the Age of Law, but Christ self-sacrifice and the symbolic sacrifice of the Eucharist, as depicted by Rosselli on the last fresco of the same wall, mark the Age of Grace. It is precisely this difference between the nature of Jewish and Christian sacrifice which the *Epistle to the Hebrews* discusses at length”²⁹.

Ettlinger could be right in general, but he misses some details. All the details performed in the *Healing of the Leper* according to Leviticus 14:4 appear in Botticelli’s fresco: “Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two birds alive *and* clean, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop.” – even if in our scene the cedar wood was replaced with the heraldic oaks of the della Rovere family.



28 E. Steinmann, „Sandro Botticellis Temple-scene zu Jerusalem in der Sixtinischen Kapelle“ *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 18 (1895) [= *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, i. München, 1901, 245].

29 L. D. Ettlinger – H. S. Ettlinger, *Botticelli*. New York 1977, 59.

If Ettliger over-interprets the historical cycle, Ronen, for his part, over-simplifies it.³⁰ When confronted with the delicate question *Why is the main scene in the background?* – he answers that two of the three temptation scenes happened to be at a great height, so Botticelli was forced by technical reasons to paint them in the background.

To understand the role of the main scene in the foreground, we need to relate it to the doctrinal message: *the gradual revelation of the Divine Law according to the Scripture*. It was Johannes Wilde who first mentioned that the second and the fifth fresco on the right side are “marked by an emphatic central feature” underscored by the differentiation of the fictive brocades in the lower register.³¹ Both of them bear negative statements in the *tituli* above them (*Temptatio* and *Conturbatio*), and both of these *tituli* refer to a scene hidden in the background, and not to the main scene in the foreground. John Shearman can be credited with finding an interpretative clue for this. I cite him extensively: “The Temple of Jerusalem in the centre background [that is, the pinnacle of the Temple, where the third temptation is performed] is represented metaphorically as Sixtus IV’ Hospital of Santo Spirito. It has been observed, however, and rightly, that Santo Spirito was not a leper-colony. The solution to this apparent difficulty is to be found in Saint Jerome’s commentary on the text (Matthew 16:18-20) of the fifth fresco, the *Donation of the Keys*. Saint Jerome enlarges on the power of the priesthood that is symbolized by the Keys, and when dealing with that which is later defined as *Potestas ordinis*, that is the capacity to distinguish between sinners and innocent, he specifically compares it with the power of the priesthood in the Old Covenant in distinguishing between the clean and the unclean: ‘*Legimus in Levitico de leprosis*’. In the same way, says Saint Jerome, the priest of the New Covenant is given, in Matthew 16, the knowledge of who should be loosed and who bound. The reasoning depends upon the interpretation of leprosy as a metaphor of sin, which is one of the constants of Christian exegesis.”³²

We have a fourth scene hidden between the foreground and the background – Christ with an explicative gesture points in the direction of the sacrifice-scene, apparently saying something to the four angels behind.³³ There seem to be no direct references to the gospels here, and I am convinced that it is inserted here as a clue for the entire interpretation. In my mind, the only appropriate biblical quotation could be the words of Christ from Matthew 5:17 “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill”. We should never forget that the “correct spelling” of each fresco *must refer in each case to the role of legislator* – both Christ and both Moses are depicted

30 His conclusion: „Questi nostri studi ci hanno portato perciò alla conclusione opposta [with those of Ettliger’s], e i tentativi di adempire alle sue varie esigenze sono ispirati a un pensiero razionale, piuttosto che teologico, esegetico o mistico.” Ronen, 96.

31 Wilde, „The Decoration of the Sistine Chapel”, 68–9; Shearman, *Raphael’s Cartoons*, 48; Goffen, “Friar Sixtus IV”, 234.

32 Shearman, *Raphael’s Cartoons*, 49.

33 Inexplicably for me, Ernst Steinmann thought that here Christ is departing from the angels, before he leaves to the desert.

consequently in this role.³⁴ In the terms of a mediaeval legalist on the doctrinal point expressed here: *Christ wished to be under the Law, in order to redeem those under the Law*—that is his only chance to destroy the devil’s work, and that is why he refuses all the temptations of the devil, in each case quoting the words of Deuteronomy.³⁵

Further, we have a fourth, strongly symbolic element: the little boy in the foreground holding a bunch of grapes, looking fearsomely at a snake under his right foot. The bunch of grapes symbolizes Salvation, the snake the devil. The redeeming work of Christ ended only with his death and resurrection – as illustrated in the last fresco. Until then everything is only in the course of preparation: three angels prepare the Eucharistic host behind the third temptation, and the whole scene of the *Healing the Leper* is like a *preparation* for a blood-sacrifice.³⁶ Christ resisted the temptation of the devil with his allegiance to (Mosaic) Divine Law. Without this, he could not start his expiatory work as depicted in the consecutive *Congregatio* and *Promulgatio* scenes. Until his death and resurrection—illustrated on the entrance wall, but already anticipated here with the Eucharistic-scene far in the right background – we are waiting for our salvation and complete remission of our sins. In this sense the little boy is holding both the symbol of our Salvation and the symbol of our fall.

34 As for my part I am convinced that Michelangelo’s frescoes also refer to the Divine Law – as *prophesy* in Genesis. That is what Condivi says about the so-called “Creation of Adam”, that in this scene the Lord gave the law to the first man.

35 Three times the devil tempted Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew: “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. ... And when the tempter came to him, he said. If thou be the Son of God, *command that these stones be made bread*. But he answered and said. It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God {Deut 8:3}” (Matt. 4:1–5). Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him *on a pinnacle of the temple*. And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in *their* hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. {Deut 6:16}” (Matt. 4:5–8). The third temptation: ‘the devil taketh him up *into an exceeding high mountain*, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the word, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve {Deut 6:13}. Then the devil leaveth him and, behold, *angels came and ministered unto him*.” (Matt. 4: 8–11).

36 For the idea that everything in this fresco is in a stage of preparation, I am in debt to Jorge Maria Cardinal Mejia, “Biblical reading of the frescoes on the walls of the Sistine Chapel”, in *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel*, 24.



On the opposite side of our fresco was the papal throne,³⁷ so practically every time Sixtus IV sat there, he had faced the *Temptation*-scene directly. It is highly improbable and against human nature that every time he wanted to see a devil disguised as a Franciscan or anything else that reminded him the long list of calamities caused by the Observants carefully recollected by Rona Goffen. It is more understandable that sitting as the actual Vicar of Christ below the large oak-tree at the center of the fresco of the *Temptation of Moses*,³⁸ Sixtus IV wanted to see on the opposite side something to bring love to his heart, such as his nephew, Giuliano della Rovere, or his dearest project realized not long before, the *Ospedale di Santo Spirito*. As proved by Arnold Nesselrath, the representation of the latter “was only decided in the last moment”.³⁹ In other words, the architectural portrait of the façade of *Santo Spirito* was included in an already finished fresco. That is the detail in which the devil lies.

Whatever interpretations we are choosing for the main scene, it *must* include the theme of healing – that is, the proper function of the *Ospedale di Santo Spirito*.⁴⁰

37 As illustrated in a codex-page now in the Musée Condé at Chantilly, illustrated in Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons*, 5.

38 As Leopold Ettlinger put it: “Yet this charming scene [the idyll shown in the centre: *Moses giving water to the sheep of Jethro daughters*] was hardly given such prominence only because it delighted the eye; theologians argued that this little incident prefigure Christ’s care for His Church, and that is why it was given so conspicuous a place here.” Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 53. Beda Venerabilis, *In Pentateuchum Commentarii – Exodus*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, Lutetia Parisiorum 1862, 91, col. 292A: “et per oves: populos sub iugo ecclesiarum; has autem ecclesias Christus defendit”.

39 Nesselrath, „The painters of Lorenzo the Magnificent”, 53: “The odd banana-shaped *giornata* surrounding the triangular pediment now makes no sense, but may suggest that the artist had originally planned a building of the type of Alberti’s San Francesco in Rimini or even a centrally-planned building, of the kind that Perugino included in his *Christ’s charge to St. Peter*.”

40 Below under the pontificate of Leo X stood the tapestry after the cartoon of Raphael, *Saint Peter healing the Lame Man*. Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons*, 50.

As the Redeemer has beaten the Tempter in order to take away the sins of the words, so his actual vicar must maintain his legacy. All the material recollecting by Rona Goffen is still valid as the cultural heritage of Sixtus IV but not as explanatory texts for the program of the Sistine Chapel. For we are here in the first chapel of the Christendom, and all that is on the walls represents the Triumph of the Church – “without which there is neither salvation nor remissions of sins”.⁴¹

41 As dogmatized already in 1302 in the bull *Unam sanctam* of Pope Boniface VIII.