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# ANDREA DI BONAIUTO, THOMAS AQUINAS, AND THE UNITY OF OPPOSITES

An epistemological experiment of axiomatic change in artistic composition.

By Pierre Beaudry, 7/23/17

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## INTRODUCTION

The difference between Raphael de Sanzio and Andrea di Bonaiuto in their artistic treatments of the fundamental differences between Plato and Aristotle is a matter of great importance for the epistemology of axiomatics, because it is timeless. Raphael explicitly represented the two philosophers in his painting, *The School of Athens*, as two opposite figures, one pointing upward to the domain of ideas and the other pointing downward to the domain of the senses. Almost a hundred and fifty years before, Andrea di Bonaiuto painted three frescos representing the same difference through a process of axiomatic transformation from one to the other in his masterful composition in the Spanish Chapel, in Florence.

Imagine yourself entering the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence with one idea in mind: experiment the axiomatic change that Andrea di Bonaiuto has set the stage for you in three immense frescos. As you enter, your head will tend to start spinning slowly in a spiral motion around the room, from the floor level upward to the pinnacle of the four gothic arches, which meet into a single point at the summit of the room; and then, your mind will spiral back down,

by inversion, only to start a similar motion, again, through the experiment of examining in detail each of the three frescos.

Start from the bottom left corner of *The Passion of Christ* and go up to the *Crucifixion*, then down to the right in the *Descent of Christ in Limbo*; next, move to your left and patiently study the *Triumph of Thomas Aquinas*; and finally, turn a half circle back around to your right and examine closely, the *Pathway to the Truth*, also apocryphally called *The Triumphal and Militant Church*.

What Andrea accomplished in that room is a masterful connecting of the dots between the cultural memory of his time and the creative imagination of the human mind from the future. He understood the economic principle whereby life from the future, will be free, because the future is what liberates mankind. Internalize that process as you read this report, and study closely the three frescos, with that in mind in that ordered succession, and you will be amazed by what Andrea has hidden in plain sight for you to discover.

Here, the comparison between Andrea and Raphael should be noticeable to anyone who has also studied closely Raphael's two frescos in the Vatican Room of the Signature. The beauty of this connection is that, in spite of being separated by about a hundred and fifty years of artistic composition and preceded by hundreds of years of religious warfare, the two frescos of Raphael and the three frescos of Andrea belong to the same epistemological domain of transformation; that is to say, the domain of Riemannian manifold transformation and of Nicholas of Cusa's *principle of unifying opposites*.

## **1. RAPHAEL AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLATO AND ARISTOTLE**

There has been a long standing silence from the leadership of the Catholic Church about the fight that has been going on, historically, between Plato and Aristotle, which has been the axiomatic source of all religious warfare throughout history, including the British-led war against the Muslim world today. The epistemological truth of the matter, has been clearly established in all of its

strategic aspects in the two master-frescos of Raphael de Sanzio located in the room of the Signature of the Vatican (**Figures 1 and 2**), and most effectively, in the three frescos by Andrea di Bonaiuto in the Spanish Chapel at Santa Maria Novella in Florence (**Figures 3, 4, and 5**).

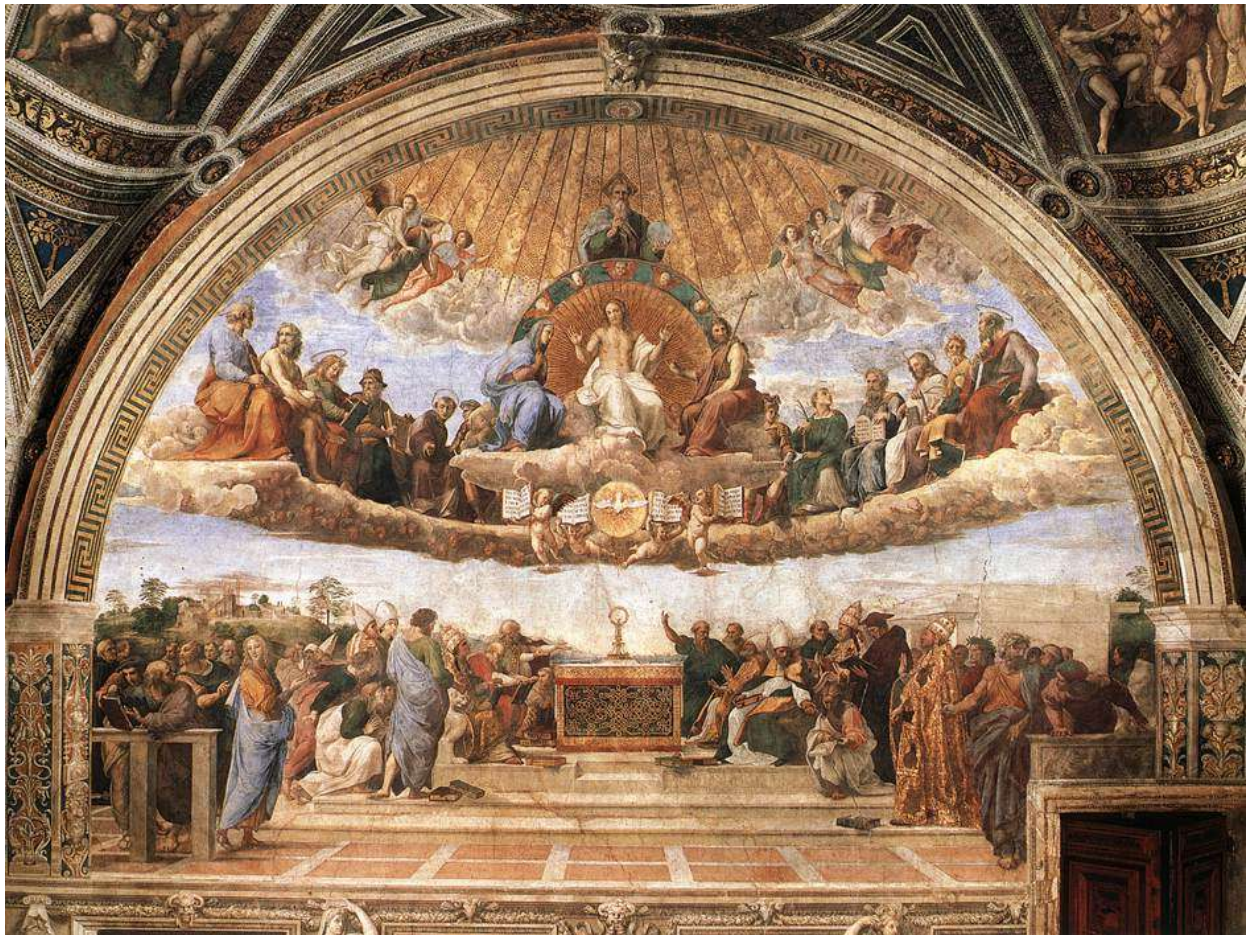


**Figure 1** Raphael, *The School of Athens*. 1509-1511.

However, the difference between Plato and Aristotle is not simply the difference between mind and sense perception; it is fundamentally a matter of discovering, as Nicholas of Cusa did, the crucial strategic solution to the *unity of opposites*, through a process of transformation of the human mind, and of applying it for the purpose of establishing a permanent peace for all of mankind, a world-



wide Peace of Westphalia. This is the difficult principle of pacification that Raphael most emphatically introduced in *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*, by means of the *Filioque*, and which he resolved in *The School of Athens*.



**Figure 2** Raphael, *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*. 1509-1511.

See my reports on [Raphael](#) in the Book I Plastic Art section of Classical Artistic Composition on my Galactic Parking Lot. These two frescos must be viewed together, in the spirit of the methods of Nicholas of Cusa and of Leonardo da Vinci, if one wishes to resolve the *paradox of the unity of opposites*. It is in that sense that these two frescos represent the highest point of the Italian Renaissance.

## 2. ANDREA DI BONAIUTO'S METHOD OF ALLEGORICAL THINKING

As you enter the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella, you are overwhelmed by three immense frescos which are of the same character as the frescos of Raphael, and which may have a similar effect on your mind, depending on who you are and how you have been educated. If you are sensitive to the epistemological difference between Plato and Aristotle, Andrea's work will provoke you with a powerful irony of artistic composition, because one or more of those three frescos will completely disturb your mental comfort zone to the point that you will be forced to rethink everything you have known about the function of classical artistic composition up until now. The key to this discovery is to find the relevant succession of singularities that Andrea has incorporated in his frescoes.

The three great frescos of the Spanish Chapel were commissioned by the Dominican Order for Andrea Bonaiuto in order to portray the *Triumph of Thomas Aquinas* and his Aristotelian method of eradicating heresy as the *Pathway to the Truth*. Andrea Bonaiuto did precisely what he was paid to do, but also, a little bit more. As he painted his three main frescos, Andrea also discretely demonstrated the underlying process of the creative human mind; that is, he applied his artistic genius to the triply-connected process of *perplexity, awe, and laughter*, which are the three necessary steps for anyone to go through in order to make a discovery of principle.

**The first fresco** strikes you as a beautiful classical medieval representation of the *Passion of Christ* and an unusual representation of the *Descent of Christ in Limbo* in the lower right corner. The scenes are well known from the standpoint of religion, but they are less well known from the standpoint of epistemology. See **Figure 3**.





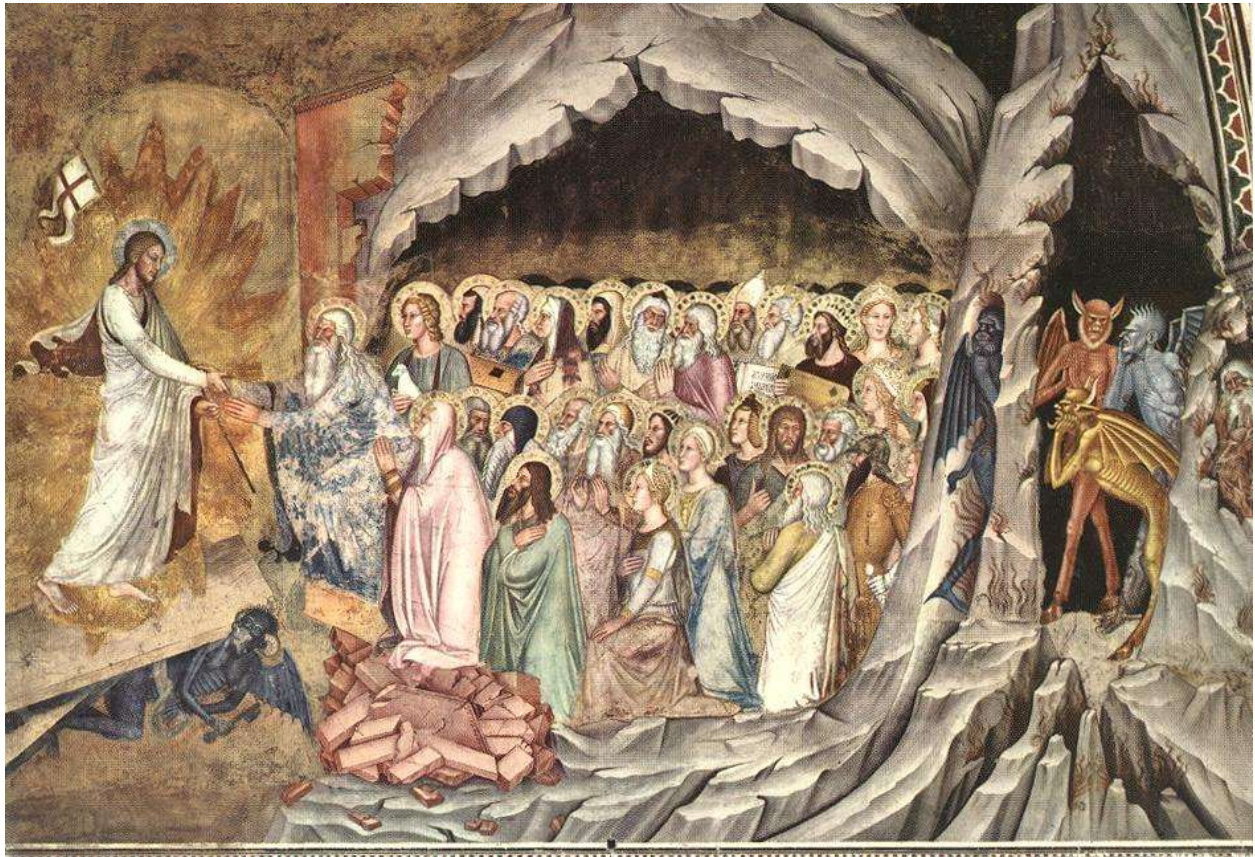
**Figure 3** Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Christ Bearing the Cross to Calvary, Crucifixion, and Descent of Christ in Limbo*, The Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria, Novella, Florence. 1365-68

<http://www.travelingintuscany.com/art/andreadibuonaiuto/spanishchapel.htm>.

Andrea's allegoric scenes are all clearly recognizable to anyone who is familiar with the life and death of Christ; however, when the spectator stops before the *Descent of Christ in Limbo*, he experiences a serious moment of *perplexity*. After the death of Christ on Holy Friday, one generally expects the next step to be the Resurrection on Easter Sunday; that is, in reality, the most fundamental transformation of man into divinity. However, what happens to Christ on Holy Saturday? The Orthodox faith had given great attention to Holy Saturday. To my knowledge, no western artist before Andrea has ever focused the attention of the



spectator so clearly on what Christ had been doing during that day. So, what is the epistemological significance of the *Descent of Christ in Limbo*?



**Detail 1** *Descent of Christ in Limbo.*

As Cyril of Alexandria put it: “When the gatekeepers of hell saw him, they fled; the bronze gates were broken open, and the iron chains were undone” (*Ancient Commentary on Scripture* 11.107<sup>1</sup>). It is the epistemological significance of this metaphorical process that the observer must now attempt to decipher from these series of images, as if he were projecting them onto the dimly lit wall of his mental cavity. That process governing Andrea’s allegorical method is designed to perform axiomatic changes among one’s own underlying assumptions. Take the following example.

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<sup>1</sup> [\*He Descended Into Hell.\*](#)

From the standpoint of religion, the *Descent into limbo* is also known as the *Descent to Hell* or the *Harrowing of Hell*. As the Gospel of Nicodemus tells us, Christ found there many prophets and forefathers who had been awaiting the coming of Redemption. The point is that all of the people who died before the coming of Christ could not move out of limbo until their sins had been washed away by the death of Christ. So, the first man that Christ helped out of limbo by pulling him by the wrist was Adam, because he could not come out on his own, by his own force. My question is: What is the epistemological significance of this idea of coming out of limbo and why did Andrea put it into that prominent location in front of the entrance door? What is the devil's key for? It is surly not to prevent people from coming into Hell!

*From the vantage point of epistemology, limbo may be considered as a moment of an axiomatic blind spot pertaining to the process of an axiomatic transformation of your mind; a moment of uncertainty awaiting a decision or resolution, an undetermined intermediate state of mind before a complete transformation takes place. This is the moment of decision that you arrive at when you come to a fork in the road and you have to make a political decision that involves your entire life; the moment when you have to decide, either to shed your previous axioms and jump blindly into a new and higher dimensionality of thinking, or to remain dysfunctional for the rest of your life because you have refused to break with company manners and reject your wrong underlying assumptions. That is the choice that Andrea has put before you at the very entrance of this room.*

Here, Andrea is deliberately informing the spectator that whosoever believes in the Resurrection of Christ, will be pulled out of Hell, because this Holy Saturday commemorates two victories: the victory over Death and the victory over Hell. Off stage, under the broken door and to the right, are the door-keepers of Hell lurking and waiting to see who is not going to believe in Christ. In terms of the composition as a whole, this is where the observer is also made to be uncertain as to what direction he will also take. The Orthodox faithful sing the following hymn: "Today, Hell cries out, groaning: *'My authority has been taken away! I received a mortal man as one of the dead, but I was powerless to contain Him; because of*



*Him, I have lost those whom I ruled. For ages I had dominion over the dead, but behold! He raises all!* Glory to your Cross and Resurrection, O Lord!<sup>2</sup> That's the nature of the paradigm shift! You should now be ready to jump to the second fresco!

**The second fresco** on the left side of the room is the first landing after this axiomatic leap: the *Triumph of Thomas Aquinas*. The same question as before also applies here: What is the epistemological significance of this imposing elevation of Thomas Aquinas? What is the fresco's underlying assumption?



**Figure 4** Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas and Allegory of the Sciences*, 1365-68. Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

<sup>2</sup> [Orthodox Holy Week](#), Great Saturday.

When you believe in sense perception, as all Aristotelians fervently do, the main underlying assumption of this form of knowledge is known as: “*RECOGNITION*.” That’s what this fresco is about: “*How do I look? How am I doing?*” The “*recognition*” of Thomas Aquinas is the empirical proof that the Dominican order was attempting to get the *GREAT APPROVAL* from the Church of Rome, that is, the supreme *acknowledgment* of the fact that Thomas Aquinas was the unquestioned leader of the Dominican Order, and that the Dominican Order was, therefore, the unquestionable leading Order of the Catholic Church.

The fresco as a whole represents the hierarchical state of human knowledge reflecting a formal and categorical form of Aristotelian compartmentalization of the mind dominated by logical categories; that is, the ultimate scientific form of power of human knowledge. As a result, each little cubicle includes the personification of different forms of particular knowledge, science, and technology, so compartmentalized that each one is prevented from being contaminated by any other. As a result, each mental product has its own unique place and each place has its unique reason for existing, in perfect hylomorphic isolation from every other. Such is the ideal picture of the superior mind.

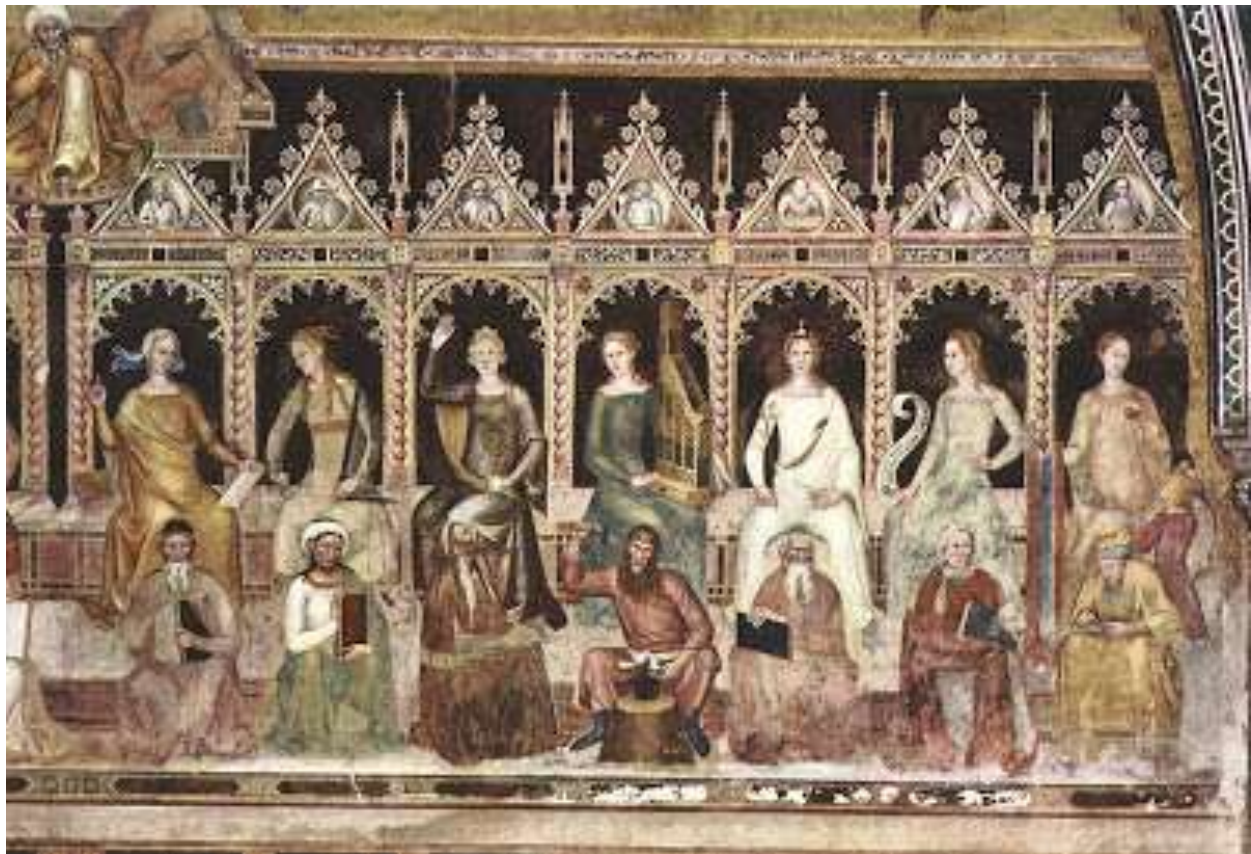
From the vantage point of epistemology, Andrea’s fresco is a reflection on what has been identified historically as the dogmatic theology of Thomism in the fixed allegoric form of a memory of the universe as a whole; a theology which represents the superior teaching of salvation by the Dominicans of the Catholic Church, over every other form of knowledge or religion. From that vantage point, any other knowledge critical of Thomism or against Thomism, is considered to be a heresy and must, therefore, be banished.

Andrea painted this fresco as a sort of warning against those who might consider taking a different route than Thomism, as was the case, for instance, with the Franciscans and other tendencies inside and outside of the Church. This might have been the reason why the French commentator of the video of “[Andrea di Bonaiuto, sale capitulaire de Santa Maria Novella](#),” stated that the Dominicans considered as “heretics” both the “Cathars and Franciscans.”



However, Andrea is not denouncing the Dominicans as being evil; he is telling the spectator not to be fooled by mere sense perception, because what you see is not what you get; the truth comes out of discovering the key that unlocks the door to underlying assumptions behind what is visible, because there is always more than meets the eye when you have to deal with the process of development of the human mind.

And so Andrea painted this fresco dominated by the most famous of all Dominicans advocating Thomism as the only valid dogmatic power of knowledge in the universe. The triumphant Thomas Aquinas is sitting as the God of Deductive Logic, twice the size of every other figure in the fresco, including other Saints. This claim to glory must also have trophies, which are to be found at the feet of the “Angelic Doctor,” the three well-known heretics: Nestorius, Averroes, and Arius.



**Detail 2** Seven of the fourteen stalls with female representations of the liberal arts and their male biblical references at their feet.

What Andrea identifies, therefore, is the awesome power of the Aristotelian-Euclidean universe of deductive reasoning which had recruited a great part of the Catholic Church throughout history to the idea that salvation was located in the hierarchy of obedience to logical deductive reasoning based on universal recognition of Thomas Aquinas as the highest authority in matters of salvation. This is also what gave the Dominicans the power to impose the Inquisition, whose function in the Church was to kill the heretics, as the Dominican Order saw fit, during the beginning of the thirteenth century during the Crusades against the Cathars and Albigensians. Next, jump to the third fresco.

**The third fresco**, titled "*Pathway to the Truth*" is a different form of axiom busting experiment. The "*Pathway to the Truth*" reflects the natural process of the human mind entirely oriented toward the future as opposed to deductive logic based on the past. It is the actual inversion of the preceding fresco. See **Figure 5**.

The great effect of this fresco is no longer under the doctrinal authority of Thomas Aquinas. The great shock, here, is the discovery of the future Duomo of Santa Maria del Fiore. This was explicitly done in defiance to all Aristotelian sense conception and following the poetic principle of Dante and Petrarch who are portrayed in the lower central portion of the fresco. This change was meant to demonstrate the impossible.

Here, the modern reader must make a special effort of imagining himself to be a contemporary of Andrea, looking at that painting 70 years before the Brunelleschi's Duomo was built. In fact, Brunelleschi was born nine years after Andrea's fresco was finished. So, imagine the state of surprise of all of those observers during that 70 year period, when they were looking at the future Cathedral of Santa Maria de Fiore, an engineering and architectural task known to be impossible by any Aristotelian standard. These observers were looking at the future; they were thinking from the future, by time reversal. It is essential that you internalize that state of mind if you wish to understand the intention of Andrea di Bonaiuto.



The beauty of this fresco is that it has the function of having the observer looking back from the future in order to experiment an extreme state of perplexity (limbo) as long as it is necessary until the moment comes when his mind suddenly breaks totally with deductive logic and discovers what the truth of the *Via Veritatis* is about.



**Figure 5** Andrea Bonaiuto, *Via Veritatis* or *Triumphant and Militant Church*, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1365-68. See French Video presentation: <https://youtu.be/ikfJuMYS6Jo>.

Follow the pictorial narrative of this fresco by using an allegorical boustrophedon process of ascension, like the ancient Greek method of ploughing the field, from left to right and right to left, alternatively. Start from the bottom left section of the fresco and move to your right, then, come back from right to left, one step up, etc., toward heaven. This serpentine process of moving the pictorial narrative was explicitly construed to be counterposed to the fixed and immutable process of the *Triumph of Thomas Aquinas* fresco in front of it.

Here, contrary to the previous case, the state of mind represents a process where the intellect of the observer progresses by making axiomatic jumps and by discovering the principle that makes him jump at the same time. As opposed to contemplating the past, this third step introduces mankind to think from the future, by time reversal.

At the time that Andrea di Bonaiuto was commissioned to paint the frescos of the Spanish Chapel, in Santa Maria Novella, he was also appointed to a committee for the construction of the dome of the Cathedral of Florence. This explains the presence of the “completed” Cathedral in the main fresco of the *Via Veritatis*, nearly 70 years before its actual completion by Brunelleschi in 1436. In this way *Via Veritatis* shows the creative way of thinking from the future.

In this order just presented, (from **Figures 3 to 5**) Andrea's purpose was to provoke the observer into discovering how his own mind progresses by bursts of new discoveries through *perplexity, amazement, and joyful ironic transformations*. By taking the corset off of his characters, Andrea freed them from their shackles as if they had been prisoners of their sense perception in the darkness of Plato's Cave. For centuries, individuals of all nations have witnessed the power of such a necessary liberation, but no one had yet dared to tell the truth about it, in such an elaborate form of artistic composition, and from the inside of the fox's own den, so to speak. The difference between the severities of the *Triumph of St Thomas* in opposition to the playfulness of the *Via Veritas* is the final clue to understand the revolutionary state of mind of Andrea di Bonaiuto. This is the process of the *catenary principle* that Brunelleschi adopted for the self-elevation of the Duomo



construction. See my report: [BRUNELLESCHI'S MIND AND THE CATENARY PRINCIPLE.](#)



**Detail 3** The “completed” cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.



The lesson to be learned with Andrea's method is that he is helping the spectator to become creative in his own right, by making him go through the discovery of how to *unify opposites*. He is demonstrating the way to solve conflicts that oppose two persons or two camps in warfare by showing that the *unity of opposites* is not a simple mental exercise; it is the only way to save mankind from its genocidal tendency, which was then reflected in the bubonic plague and is today reflected in the strategy of geopolitics. In that sense, Andrea was able to express a means of action which is capable of solving the tragic dimensionality of humanity by uplifting his spectator to the level of the sublime.

The process involved, here, is no longer deductive logic, but the *Filioque* process of discovery; that is, the triply-connected process of experiencing *perplexity, awe, and joy*, as one's mind is made to go through the underlying process of creativity for the benefit of his fellowman. In other words, the process is not visible, *per se*, but only perceived through your mind's eye. Even without noticing it, the spectator is able to enter into the completely new universe of the Renaissance; that is, where fixed categorical compartmentalization of medieval times has been substituted by the creative process of the human imagination. Just follow the boustrophedon process of change in the narrative of the allegory, starting at the bottom left of the fresco of *Via Veritatis*. But, be careful not to trip over the jumps.

In **Detail 3**, on the bottom left of the *Via Veritatis*, one can observe that if Pope Innocent III<sup>3</sup>, the Emperor and King, the Dominican Prior, and the Bishop are all frozen like statues, the rest of the clergy in front of them is animated in different manners of dialogue, prayer, meditation, and book-study. The difference between the clergy and the leadership of the Church clearly reflects the process of the composition as a whole. The flock of sheep, representing the general population, is kept quiet by two guard-dogs wearing black and white coats who represent the Dominicans; that is, portraying the Latin pun on the name "Dominican," or "*Domini Canis*," dogs of the Lord.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Innocent III and Thomas Aquinas are also found "staring" at each other in the Raphael *Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*.





**Detail 4** Dominicans preaching to pagans and heretics.

On the right side of this fresco, Andrea portrays Dominicans preaching to pagans and heretics. Some of the people are debating what is being said while others don't want to hear the "barking" or are even ripping apart the books of Thomas Aquinas. Meanwhile, in case nobody had noticed, Andrea added a footnote on the truth of the matter by showing, at the bottom of the fresco that, if you did not convert to the Dominican rule of conduct, be aware that the Dogs of the Lord have also been trained to kill. No need to mention, here, that it was the Dominicans who had committed the most atrocious genocide in religious history. Let me simply add that the Cathar and Albigensian Genocide<sup>4</sup> committed by Pope Innocent III helped greatly the Dominicans to consolidate their Order as the Vatican's number one choice for inquisitor and executioner against non-Catholics up to the Renaissance. Raphael Lemkin identified in no uncertain terms that the

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<sup>4</sup> See [Albigensian crusade](#).

Albigensian Crusade was “one of the most conclusive cases of genocide in religious history<sup>5</sup>.” As one of the Crusaders stated in 1209: “Kill them all, God will sort them out.” See my report on [THE ULTRAMONTANE PAPACY PART I](#).



**Detail 5** The pleasures of life and the sins to confess.

After such a moment of total perplexity, the spectator is suddenly shocked by a major interruption in the allegorical process, by having to move upward and toward the left of the fresco where Andrea depicts dancing young girls celebrating the spring of life with music and where young boys climb fruit trees against a panoramic view of the beautiful countryside of Tuscany. Then, the process is interrupted again by the necessity of confessing one's sins, before being introduced by Saint Dominic, himself, to Saint Peter at the gate of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Lemkin, [Lemkin on Genocide](#), Lexington Book, New York, 2012, p. 71



## CONCLUSION

Now you know there was an order in this entire process; but it is not the order you thought it was. Such a complexity of interacting and interweaving themes represents the process of change in the human mind. Thus, the order is change. The ceiling scenes of the *Navicella*, the *Resurrection*, the *Ascension*, and the *Pentecost* (not shown here) are all there, on the ceiling, to reinforce the process of what the human mind has to go through in order to discover the pathway to the truth

The focus is not on the truth, itself, but on the changes in the pathway to it. What is the pathway? The pathway is to know how to get there. This is the key to the difference between the Militant Church and the Triumphant Church. See [JOAN OF ARC AND EPISTEMOLOGY](#).

Of course, the major singularity to account for, here, is death; that is, the ultimate jump of how one goes from the lower domain to the higher domain; from



the Militant Church to the Triumphant Church. However, meanwhile, one may opt, as Andrea showed the way, for a preparatory exercise by changing from Aristotelianism to Platonism; a challenge one might not want to miss by experimenting the *unity of opposites*.

As Lyn has demonstrated, the process of a truthful transformation, as expressed by the self-development spiral action of axiomatic changes, is a true metaphorical reflection of how the human mind works by generating higher energy flux density in the universe as a whole.

**Detail 6** Saint Peter and the key to the Triumphant Church.

**FIN**