



# St Nicholas News

A paper sent free to the St Nicholas' friends  
all around the world

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## THE CHAPEL OF ST NICHOLAS RESTORED TO ITS FORMER BEAUTY

# 43

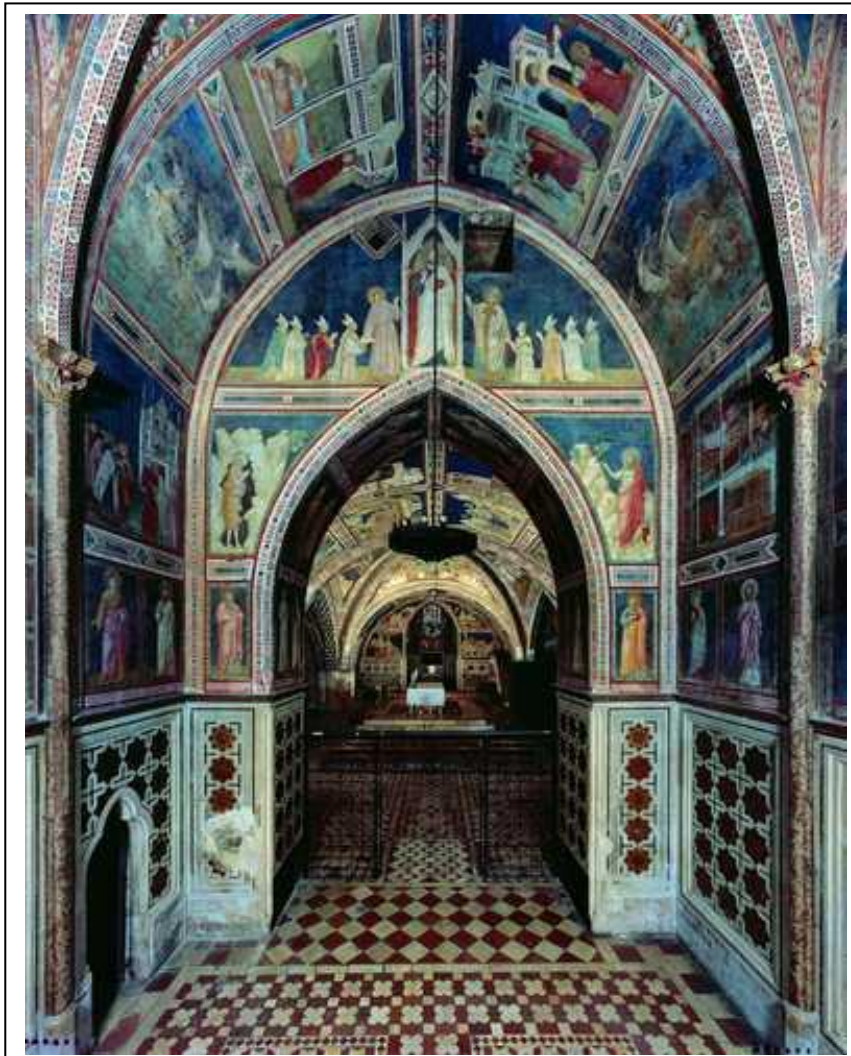
**IN THE LOWER BASILICA OF  
ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI.  
ARE THE FRESCOS BY GIOTTO ?**

**St Nicholas Chapel**  
in the lower Basilica  
of St. Francis in Assisi  
(1296-1307).

After almost three years of  
restoration works (following  
the earthquake of 1997)  
the Chapel has recovered  
its former beauty.

Experts have attributed to  
Giotto some frescos.  
A theory that changes the  
chronology of Giotto's early  
artistic experience

Next December the 6th,  
preceded by some history  
and art conferences,  
at 12,30 am. shall take place  
the blessing and the  
unveiling ceremony of the  
Chapel by mons. Gualtiero  
Bassetti, President of the  
Umbrian Episcopal  
Conference



**DECEMBER 6th 2012**

***St Nicholas day***

**ASSISI**

**SACRED CONVENT OF ST. FRANCIS  
LOWER BASILICA**

**UNVEILING CEREMONY OF THE  
ST NICHOLAS CHAPEL**

**Program:** h. 11,00: Elvio Lunghi, prof. of Art History in the Foreign University of Perugia; 11.40 Press Conference of fr. Giuseppe Piemontese, Keeper of the Sacred Convent.

**Prof. Lorenzo Ornaghi.** Minister of Cultural activities; Francesco Scoppola, Head of Fine Arts regional Board in Umbria; Prof. Sergio Fusetti, head restorer of the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi; h 12.30 Blessing and inauguration by S.E. Mons. Gualtiero Bassetti, President of Episcopal Congerence of Umbria.



## SAINT FRANCIS AND SAINT NICHOLAS

**St. Francis**, the most known Saint in Italy, had the occasion to hear about St Nicholas already in his youth while playing in the Assisi place. A church of St Nicholas was exactly on the main square of the city. Even today what has remained of this church is called **S. Nicolò della Piazza**.

Romanesque and with a single nave, this church had a rectangular **crypt**. This latter is still existing with two naves and two pillars. Above the stone walls there is a tunnel vault. It stands against a wall of the Roman period. Usually it is dated to the years 1087-1093, but such dating seems to come from the erroneous prejudice that St Nicholas cult started in the west after the translation of his bones to Bari in 1087. The church of St Nicholas in Assisi could be therefore well prior to 1087, keeping into account its position in the central square (that allows the conjecture that the church started with the town).

After the earthquake of 1832 it was closed and used as Pontifical Carabinieri station. After 1929 became a Post Office and Magistrate's court.

When St Francis changed his life and had the first followers he used to gather them in St Nicholas church in order to meditate with them about the meaning of the Gospel.

After him, the Franciscan Order was sensible to the St Nicholas devotion with frequent painting representations in their churches. An interesting example is the Sacred Mountain of Orta.

This sanctuary is on the top of a hill of the peninsula where is the town of Orta S. Giulio.

The sacred itinerary is dedicated to St Francis, while the church on the top is dedicated to St Nicholas. At the time of its restoration the artists drew inspiration from the lower Basilica of Assisi. In the church it can be admired the statue of the Piety, a Nativity of Procaccini and paintings by Cantalupi and Busca.

Particularly inspired are the words of the keeper of the Sacred Convent of Assisi, fr **Giuseppe Piemontese**, commenting the restoration:

*The attention toward Art and Culture on the part of the Assisian brothers points out to the road that from sensible beauty brings us to God's beauty. The frescos of the Basilica of St Francis are the Bible of the poor that allows to read St Francis life discovering God's Paternity. To St Nicholas of Myra, very likely the most venerated and popular Saint in the history of Medieval and Modern Christianity, is dedicated a chapel in the lower Basilica of St Francis of Assisi.*

*Giotto frescoed it marvelously by illustrating the stories, the miracles and the faith of the holy bishop of Myra, patron saint of children, boys and girls, students, pharmacists, merchants, sailors, fishermen. At that time people perceived how the zeal and the charity of this Saint were close to the witness of the "Poverello" of Assisi, imagined in sanctity and renown at side with the Saint venerated in the East and in the West.*

*The reopening to the cult of St Nicholas Chapel, after the delicate work of restoration of Giotto's frescos, in this "year of faith" wants to signify a good omen of that ecumenical faith of the Church of which spoke the blessed pope John Paul II. The Church, he said, must newly and again breathe with its two lungs, the oriental and the western one.*

## ST NICHOLAS CHAPEL IN THE LOWER BASILICA OF ASSISI

We are speaking of the years 1295-1310. These were fundamental years for the Basilica of St Nicholas in Bari as well. In fact in 1304 King Charles II Anjou wrote and promulgated the Ecclesiastical Constitution for the Chapter of the 42 canons. That same year John of Taranto made the frescos (today is possible to admire only the Crucifixion in St Martin's Chapel).

**Basic years for the Italian literature** as well, with Dante Alighieri writing the *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304), the *Convivio* (1305) and beginning the *Divine Comedy* (1307).

In these years dies **St Nicholas of Tolentino** (September 10, 1305), who was born (according the contemporary writer Peter of Monterubbiano) after his parents went in pilgrimage to Bari.

**Previous to this restoration** the common opinion was that these frescos were a work by Palmerino di Guido, or Giotto or even the "St Nicholas master".



After the restoration work it has strengthened the thesis that at the frescos of St Nicholas Chapel worked Giotto himself.



**Sergio Fusetti**, chief restorer, declared: *«For many years this chapel was closed. It was used sometimes as a place to hear personal problems of people. Now the restoration will allow tasting the beauty and the richness of the frescos (that were found in very bad conditions), in which can be noticed the presence of pure gold. It was in fact the painted decoration of the funerary chapel of Gian Gaetano Orsini, the young deacon died before his time, commissioned by his brother the cardinal Napoleon Orsini».*

**Father Enzo Fortunato**, director of the review *Saint Francis Patron Saint of Italy* and speaker of the Sacred Convent underscored that has been given back to the pilgrims and to the Art-lovers Giotto's last piece lacking from the year 1997. We are sure that this last restoration will equally permit to enjoy the beauty and let the pilgrims to rise their heart and their mind toward God".

**This chapel, often closed** and neglected, has been the last to be restored after the earthquake of 1997. This was possible thanks to the financial help (360.000 euro) by the Cassa di Risparmio of Perugia and Generals.

**The St Nicholas' Chapel was commissioned by Napoleone Orsini**, son of Rinaldo Orsini (brother of pope Nicholas III). Only three years after he had become a priest (1285), he was created cardinal of St Adrian at the Forum by the pope Nicholas IV (1288).

**He was papal Legate at Spoleto and Ancona** when (1296/97) he commissioned the St Nicholas chapel in the lower church of St Francis in Assisi. It had to be built in order to host the tomb of his brother John Caietan Orsini, died in 1292. The funerary monument was realized by a local artist following Arnolfo di Cambio's style (he drew inspiration from the funerary monument of pope Benedict XI in St Benedict's church in Perugia).

**Up to this moment** the frescos illustrating St Nicholas' life have been attributed to Palmerino di Guido, mentioned together with Giotto in a document of the year 1309.

With regard to Napoleon, in 1306 he had been charged with the title of archpriest of the Vatican Basilica. He succeeded, thanks to his intelligent diplomacy, to remain in the high spheres of the ecclesiastical power. He died in the year 1342.

**In the history of Italian Art**, because of the artistic richness of the entire Basilica, St Nicholas Chapel was always in the shadow. In the restoration project following the earthquake it had equally the last place. But after the restoration work it came out to the international attention.



**St Nicholas Chapel inner façade.** Christ the Redeemer (at the center) is blessing. The procession (at left) is guided by **St Francis** who presents the cardinal Napoleon (commissioner of the entire Chapel) to Christ. The right procession is guided by **St Nicholas** who leads the young John Caietan Orsini, died before his time in 1292. The Chapel in fact was destined to host the funerary monument of the young Cardinal's brother.

**The restoration was carried out by** Sergio Fusetti, while Director was Vittoria Garibaldi, superintendent of Fine Arts and cultural goods of Umbria. Someone has noticed the absence of the Central Institute of Restoration, main actor since 1941.

Fusetti pointed out to the fact that the restoration went along with the exhibition **Giotto's colours**, held from April to September 2010. More than 30.000 visitors enjoyed the opportunity of admiring at few centimeters of distance (together with the restorers) the frescos during the works of recovering them.

Fusetti worked on 300 square meters of fresco and 80 of stone materials. He is convinced that this is *one of the first works in Giotto's artistic life*, and that has a great importance in order to establish the chronology of his activity and of his workshop. In the context of the unending critical debate on the attribution of the frescos in the monumental complex of Assisi to Giotto and his workshop (in this case there should be no doubts) or on the contrary to other painters of his time, like Peter Cavallini, has to be taken into account the presence on a piece of stone material of St Nicholas chapel of a kind of abbreviation GB, where the B is very readable. It could be taken as an hypothesis that it deals with the signature of Giotto di Bondone.

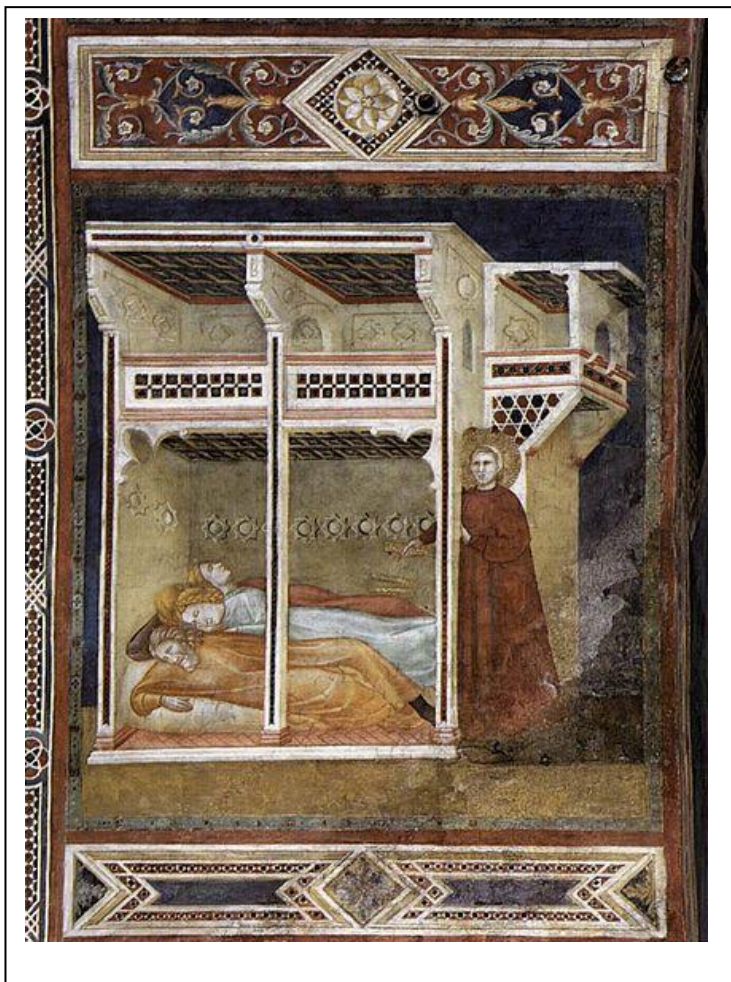
### THREE DAUGHTERS

#### *Praxis de tribus filiabus*

Source: Michael the Archimandrite (VIII-IX s.)

**Story:** A noble and rich man of Patara (native city of St Nicholas in Asia Minor, today Turkey) or of Myra (episcopal city of the Saint) has fallen on hard times. To help his daughters to get married he wants to give them to prostitution and so gain the necessary money. When Nicholas comes to know his intentions, puts sufficient money in a bag and during the night throws it through the window. Repeating his act three times he makes possible one after the other their marriage.

Very famous in the West (more than in the East) this episode is mentioned by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* and by Dante Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy*.



In the *Giornale dell'Arte* the Art critic **Bruno Zanardi** does not agree on the interpretation of the abbreviation GB (according to him, a pure “media folklore”) This kind of abbreviations is very rare in the Middle Age and Giotto never signs this way.

In spite of this and other aspects, he agrees with the revolutionary thesis according to which it is more likely that Giotto worked in St Nicholas Chapel than in the upper Basilica.

In St Nicholas Chapel have been frescoed some Saints, Apostles, the Virgin with the Child, St Francis, St John the Baptist and St Mary Magdalene. Obviously a large space is reserved to St Nicholas' stories.

## ST NICHOLAS SAVES THREE INNOCENT MEN FROM BEHEADING

*Praxis de stratelatis (IV sec.)*

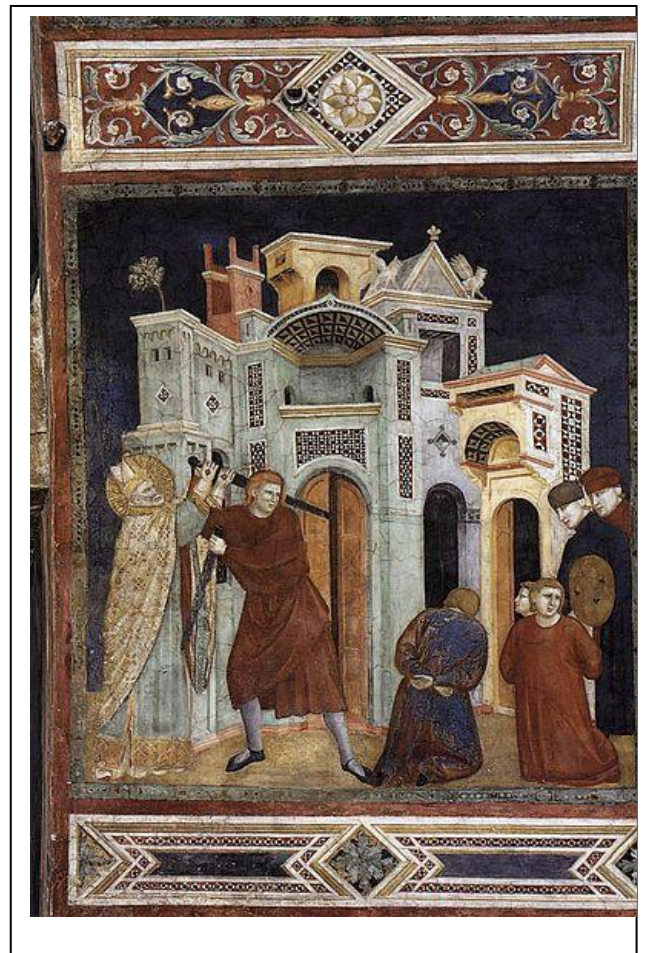
Source: Greek anonymous

**Story:** Nicholas is speaking in the port of Myra with three generals sent by Constantine in order to calm down a revolt of Taiphales in the nearby Phrygia. To him some citizens rush telling him about an imminent beheading of some innocent men. He runs through the streets of Myra and stops the sword of the headsman.

Very famous in the East (a little less in the West). In the West the story, because of the mixture of the term “innocent” with *Feast of the Innocents* (the children killed by Herod), gave birth to the legend of the three *children* killed by the innkeeper and resurrected by St Nicholas.

Entering the Chapel in the counterfaçade are well visible the processions toward Christ Redeemer at center. The procession at left is guided by St Francis, leading Card. Napoleon to Christ. The one at right is guided by St Nicholas leading the young John Caietan Orsini to Christ. The chapel was built to host the tomb of this latter.

The stories of St Nicholas life are based on the canonical lives (not on the apocriphal *Vita Nicolai Sionitae*). Therefore no Birth and no Three Children resurrected. The stories are: 1) Dowry to the three daughters; 2) Nicholas stops the headsman who is about to kill three innocent men; 3) Nicholas forgives Eustathios governor of Myra; 4) He appears to the emperor Constantine; 5) He saves Adeodatus and brings him back to the parents.



# THE HAND OF GIOTTO ?

**Giotto di Bondone, in the history of the Italian Art** is considered the inventor of a new figurative language, that, detaching itself from the Byzantine style, opens the road to Western Renaissance.

According to traditional history of Art he is the author of the beautiful stories of St Francis in the upper Basilica, while only his disciples and other masters have worked in the lower Basilica.

This thesis is based on a passage of Vasari who wrote in 1568 that the general minister of the Franciscan Order Giovanni da Murro (elected in May 1296) called him to fresco St Francis stories.

Although in the past there was a general agreement on this, recently the famous Art critic Federico Zeri aligned himself with anglosaxon and German Art critics who denied that the frescos in the upper church are Giotto's work.

One of the most important research on this subject was made by **Irene Hueck** in her *Der Lettner der Unterkirche von San Francesco in Assisi*, apparso nelle "Mitteilungen des Kunst-historischen Institutes in Florenz", a. XXVIII (1984), f. II, p. 173-202.

I give a synthesis, taking it from an article by Bruno Zanardi, a major expert of Giotto's art.



## ST NICHOLAS FORGIVES THE GOVERNOR EUSTATHIOS

Source: *Praxis de stratelatis* (IV sec.)

Greek Anonymous (the story is part of the previous one)

**Story.** After having saved the innocent men from beheading Nicholas rushes to the governor's palace and reproaches him for his corruption (because of money he had condemned the previous three innocent men). Thanks to the intercession of the three generals, Nicholas doesn't take measures against him and forgives him by urging him to honesty.

The story was well known in the Middle Age because touched the question of the corruption of the official authorities. A question that never seems outdated.



According to the above mentioned scholar the frescos of St Nicholas chapel have been carried out in two different periods. Reasons of historical nature put the first period in the years 1296-1297 (the first linked to the election of Giovanni da Murro who called Giotto, the second one connected to the stealing of the papal treasure by Stephen Colonna in May the third 1297, with the consequent persecution of the Colonnas by pope Boniface VIII).

It is true that was Giovanni da Murro to call Giotto, however not to fresco the upper Basilica, but the lower one. Here in the first period were painted the Colonna cardinals, cancelled in the second period because a papal Basilica could not permit to have images of relatives of the thieves of papal treasure. They were replaced by the Orsini.



**ST NICHOLAS APPEARS  
IN A DREAM TO THE  
EMPEROR CONSTANTINE**

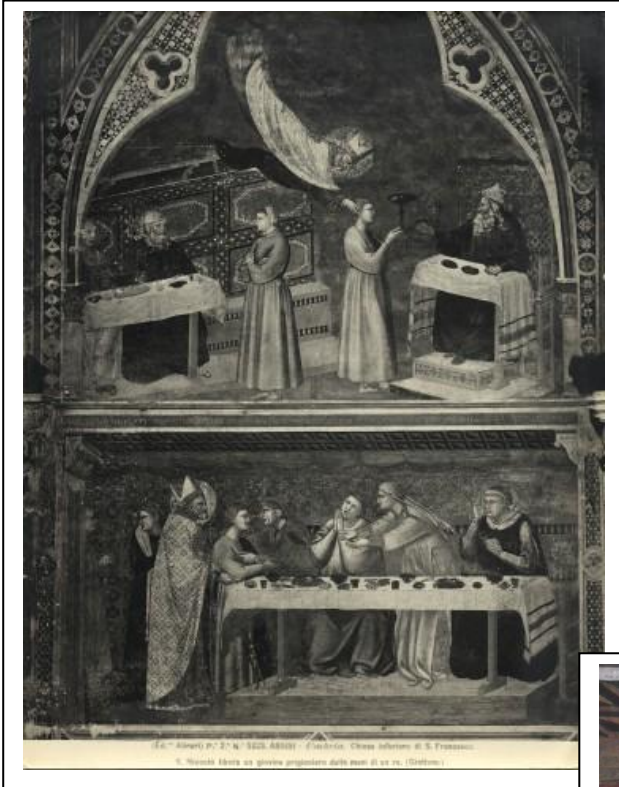
The generals who in Myra assisted to the liberation of the innocent men, back to Constantinople are received triumphantly. But the corrupted prefect Ablabios persuades Constantine to condemn them to death on the ground they were plotting against him. They pray God and St Nicholas, who appears to Constantine and compels him to let them free.

If therefore Giotto worked in the lower church between May 14 1296 and May the 3d 1297 it is to be inferred that this Giotto's activity is chronologically the first documented in his life.

His way of painting is very different from the one of the three headmasters who were painting the upper church.

NB. Unless I have missed some passage of the question, I would make this objection. Who tells us that Giovanni da Murro (+ 1312) called Giotto already in the first period and not uniquely in the second phase of the works ?

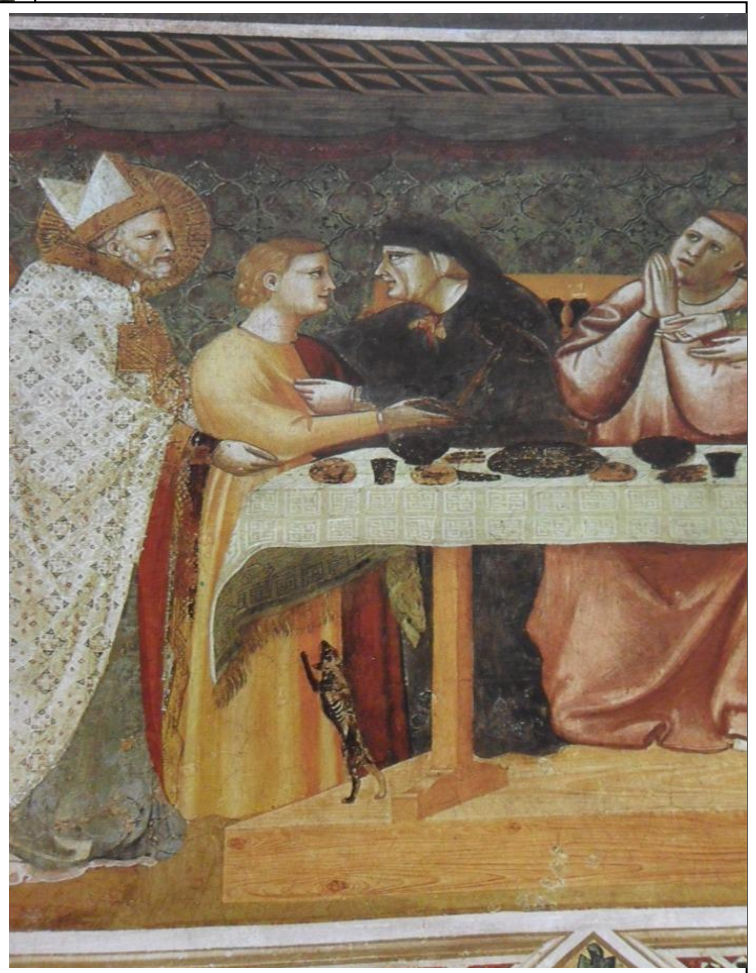
According to me, Hueck's thesis shakes the current certitudes, but is not sufficient to prove that Giotto worked already in 1296/7 and not in 1305/9 only. And it doesn't prove that Giotto was not one of the three headmasters of the upper Basilica.



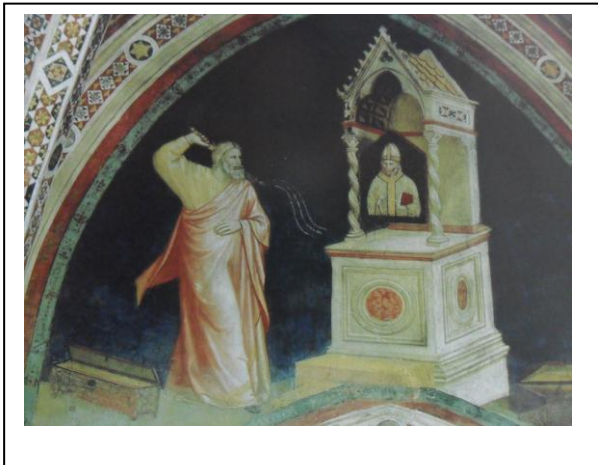
## NICHOLAS BRINGS ADEODATUS BACK TO HIS PARENTS

Source: *Thauma de Basilio* (IX secolo)

Story: In a surprise attack by the Saracens the young Basile (in western dramas is called Adeodatus) is captured and brought as a present to the emir of Crete, who makes him cupbearer. After a year he bursts into tears thinking to his sad parents. The emir tells him to resign himself to his own fate, because no help can come to get him free. Nichols descends abruptly on them, seizes Basil (upper scene) and brings him back to the parents (lower scene, and below in colours).



1195 circa by Jean Bodel, that became one of the most performed drama-comedy by the students December 6th and one of the most known after the Passion dramas.



### *Iconia S. Nicolai in Africa*

**NOT in St Nicholas chapel , BUT in the one of Blessed Sacrament** is frescoed the story of the merchant whipping the Saint's icon, guilty of not having kept a good watch over his goods. During his absence thieves have stolen everything. Nicholas swoops on the thieves while in a tavern they are dividing the haul and compels them to bring it back to the merchant's shop. Upon this episode is based the famous theater drama *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* written in