

(This PowerPoint Presentation takes approximately 40 minutes. There are 65 slides and brackets [] are used to indicate the slide number.)

[1] The San Damiano

Crucifix

(This is a compilation of a variety of different sources that address the San Damiano crucifix as an icon.)



[2] In the early days after his conversion (around the year 1206), Francis was living a penitential life alone in the countryside outside the walls of Assisi. [3] One day, while passing the run down church known as San Damiano, Francis heard an internal voice from his heart tell him to go in and pray. [4] He entered and knelt before the crucifix in contemplation and ecstasy.

[5] While gazing at the image of Christ crucified, Francis saw the lips of Jesus move and heard, “Francis,” it said, *calling him by name*, “go rebuild My house; as you see, it is all being destroyed.”¹ [6] At first Francis concentrated on repairing the church buildings of San Damiano and nearby churches. Then, when the Lord sent him many followers, he understood his commission to build up the lives of God’s people. [7] His commission was confirmed by Pope Innocent III who had a dream of the Church in the form of the [8] Basilica of St. John Lateran leaning as if to fall and one little man holding it from falling. [9] When the Pope recognized Francis as the little man in his dream, he approved the Franciscan movement and its Rule of Life. [10] Throughout the centuries the San Damiano crucifix has symbolized for all Franciscans their mission to bring renewal to the Church.

[11] This icon crucifix which spoke to Francis has been in the care of the Poor Clare Sisters since the time Francis took them to San Damiano shortly after their foundation. [12] When they left San Damiano in 1257, they took the crucifix with them and have preserved it carefully ever since. It is venerated by thousands of visitors to Assisi every year. [13] It is currently housed in the Basilica of Santa Chiara. Since 1958, it has been hung in a place accessible to pilgrims, San Giorgio's chapel in Saint Clare's Basilica. [14] An exact replica now hangs over the altar of the ancient church of San Damiano.

[15] The crucifix stands 6 feet 10 inches high and 4 feet 3 inches wide. An unknown 12th century Umbrian artist painted it in the Byzantine style. This icon was painted on canvas and then applied to a walnut wooden cross. Through the artistic beauty of the painting, the artist wanted to help us penetrate the very mystery of God. Just as it spoke to Francis, this crucifix has something to tell us in the detail of its ornamentation and design. This icon can speak to us, if we let it. It will tell us how to "read" it, how to pray it, and to contemplate it. [16] It is not difficult for us to imagine the countless hours that Clare and her Sisters must have spent absorbed in prayer before this particular image of Christ crucified.

[17] The portrait of Christ: human yet triumphant

The central figure of Christ dominates the painting, not only because of his imposing size but also because of the light that emanates from his body. This light shines over all the attendant figures. The red and black colors of the actual cross accentuate his luminous body.

[18] Clearly, the painter is not representing the very moment of the death of Jesus. The body depicted is not a bloody corpse hanging on a gibbet, but rather a living body – indeed a body that radiates the fullness of God. What we see is the majestic Son of God who has triumphed over suffering and death. [19] Instead of a crown of thorns, he wears a halo of glory with a triumphal cross. With arms outstretched, he is in the act of ascending into heaven.

The light which fills the body of Christ comes from the interior of his person. His body radiates light and that light enlightens us. The words of Christ come to mind: “I am the light of the world, the one who follows me does not walk in the dark, that person has the light of life.” [20] How right Francis was to pray: “Lord, cast your light into the darkness of my heart.”

[21] Here we are looking at the Christ who inspired the Gospel of St. John. Our first impression is that of the Christ of light, who is also a glorified Christ. He shows no sign of tension whatsoever, but he stands upright and is truly on the cross. He does not hang on the cross, nor is he crowned with thorns, but rather with a crown of glory. This brings us beyond the historical reality, beyond the crown of thorns which encircled him shortly before and beyond his sufferings which merited the crown of glory we see here.

[22] In looking upon him here, no doubt we think of Christ’s death, of his sufferings: we can see the marks of the nails, the wound in his side, [23] the blood. And yet we are beyond his sufferings, beyond his death. [24] He is portrayed without pain. We are contemplating the living Christ, the risen and glorious Christ. Does this not remind us that one day all our sufferings will be transformed into glory?

In this icon, Christ also expresses abandonment, not resignation, but a confident abandonment to the Father. We see Jesus here who seems to be offering himself, ready, abandoned to the Father, to His plan of love. Does he not invite us to follow him, to abandon ourselves, to surrender our lives too?

[25] In this figure of Christ, we also see a Jesus who receives, who welcomes the world. His arms are outstretched, as if he wants to embrace the whole universe. His hands are open as if to welcome us. They are turned upward, inviting us to look up, to look beyond ourselves, to look towards heaven. And perhaps they are open too, to help us, to support us, to lift us up after we have fallen?

[26] The black behind his extended arms and his feet represents the empty tomb.

[27] The figures gazing into the tomb, at [28] either end of Jesus' outstretched arms, may be angels or perhaps two of the women who came to the tomb early in the morning to anoint the body of Jesus.

[29] The face of Christ: serene, calm

According to the tradition in iconography, the eyes are large, the mouth is small and the ears are almost invisible. Why? Because in the contemplation of the Father in glory, words are no longer necessary, there is nothing more to listen to; it is enough to see, to look, to love. [30] And so the eyes of Christ contemplating his Father are wide-open, he looks out to the multitude of peoples. He sees and he receives, he welcomes those who are close to him, those who contemplate him, but with this same look, he takes in all people. "Behold my blood shed for you and for the multitude." He sees all generations, those who are today and those who will be tomorrow, he wants to save them all.

And so we see before us a Christ who is living, a Christ filled with serenity and glory, abandoned to the Father and turned towards people. This is the Christ contemplated by Francis and by Clare and her sisters.

[31] Thus, while the Passion is acknowledged, what is portrayed on this crucifix is the triumphant Redeemer whose divinity is clearly emphasized. But the humanity of Christ also emerges in this icon. [32] For instance, the head of Christ, emphasized by the raised halo, radiates much tenderness in the almond-shaped eyes and the half smile. Also, Christ's head is slightly tilted, a very human gesture, creating a sense that Jesus is leaning down to listen or to speak. [33] Another interesting point is that the arm of the cross on Jesus' left dips slightly, signifying that while the Good Thief on Jesus' right went to heaven, the unrepentant thief on his left may not have.

[34] When our Holy Father Pope Francis visited Assisi on October 4, 2013, [35] he prayed before the crucifix of San Damiano. [36] He observed that “the journey of St. Francis to Christ began with the gaze of the crucified Jesus whose cross speaks to us of love, the love of God incarnate, a love which does not die, but triumphs over evil and death. When we let the crucified Jesus gaze upon us, we are re-created, we become ‘a new creation.’”

[37] Again, though presented as a triumphant Christ, he is clearly not portrayed as a king. [38] Rather he wears the loincloth of a poor man, of a humble servant. [39] His arms are not rigid, but bent in a prayerful posture of supplication.

This crucifix is unique in that it reveals the whole Paschal Mystery of Christ – suffering, death, resurrection and glorious ascension.

The attendant figures: Christ's companions in life and art

The Christ of the Gospel of John is portrayed in this crucifix. This Christ is the light of the world and is in control throughout his Passion. He announces from the cross the salvation of the world with the words "It is finished" (John 19:30). In this icon, we find the words [40] "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" inscribed in Latin above the head of Christ. Only in John's Gospel is the word [41] "Nazareth" included in the inscription on the cross (John 19:19). That may be a detail which meant something to Francis. [42] Nazareth, for Francis, recalls to him a life of poverty, a hidden life, a life of work. Jesus worked with his hands. He who is in glory, he who is all light, experienced the poverty of Nazareth, he experienced human work.

[43] Two angels are painted beneath [44] each of the outstretched arms of Christ. They are in animated conversation, perhaps marveling at the wonderful events depicted in the painting. Saving blood from the wounds of Christ's hands flows over them also. By his Paschal Mystery, Christ is the savior of all creation, visible and invisible.

[45] The Christ-in-Ascension scene depicted at the top of the crucifix further emphasizes this. In this scene, the triumphant Christ is being welcomed into heaven by ten [46] joyful angels. Jesus is fully clothed in his [47] regal garments and carrying the cross as a triumphant scepter. [48] He is climbing out of the tomb, symbolized by the black which surrounds him, and into the heavenly courts. His right hand is raised in greeting, perhaps reaching out to the Father, and five of the angels have their own hands extended in a gesture of welcome. The head of Christ, at this point, is outside the circle. Usually in iconography, the circle is the symbol of perfection and of fullness. But perfection and human fullness cannot contain Christ, he is beyond all fullness. That is why his face is outside the circle.

[49] Now let us look at another detail at the very top of the cross: it is a half circle and we see only the lower half. This circle symbolizes God the Father. We know God the Father because Christ revealed Him to us. Yet He remains, as Francis says, the One who is beyond all else. That is why there is only a semi-circle here. That is the mystery which we cannot penetrate.

At the very top of the crucifix, Jesus is being raised from the dead by the right hand of God the Father. In that semi-circle the raised index fingers on the Father's right hand speak to us of the Holy Spirit, "finger of God's right hand," as we sing in the *Veni Creator Spiritus*. The fingers can have other meanings: they represent the two natures of Christ, the human and the divine, or this can be understood as the blessing of God the Father on all that Jesus has done. This icon presents to us the Mystery of the Trinity. Francis and Clare could not contemplate Christ without, at the same time, contemplating also the Father and the Spirit.

[50] The Christ in John's Gospel does not die alone, abandoned by all. Rather, he dies in communion with God, and with dear companions nearby. [51] In the crucifix of San Damiano, these companions are painted in the panels under Christ's outstretched arms.

[52] On the right side of Christ (our left as we observe the crucifix) are two figures whose names are below their images, John the Beloved and Mary, Jesus' mother. John the Beloved Disciple is close to Jesus just as he was at the Last Supper. Near the cross, he is the one who witnessed the blood and water flowing from Christ's side. Blood flows over the Beloved Disciple from the wound in Christ's side. He is a symbol of the Church redeemed by the blood of Christ. Following a Syrian tradition that dates from the 6th century, the blood is flowing from the right side of Christ. The other figure is Mary, his mother. This could be the moment when Jesus says, "Woman, behold your son" (John 19:26). Mary's gaze is not on the body of Jesus but on the Beloved Disciple. She is fulfilling her role as Mother of the Church. Mary remains serene, though in her face we see the gravity of the event. There is no exaggerated sorrow in her expression, but rather the true serenity of a woman of faith at the foot of the cross. Her left hand is placed under her chin, a gesture symbolizing sorrow, reflection, and astonishment. Her right hand points to Jesus. John makes the same gesture and he looks at Mary as if to ask the meaning of this event. We seem to capture here in this icon and in these attitudes a teaching on the role of Mary who leads us to Jesus and who helps us to understand him better. Perhaps it was in this way that Francis and Clare grasped the role of Mary in the life of the Church and in the life of their Franciscan family.

[53] Occupying a special place on the left side of Jesus (our right as we look at the crucifix) is Mary of Magdala and beside her is Mary, the wife of Clopas (John 19:25) who was also the mother of James the Lesser. These two women were the first ones to reach the tomb on Easter morning. Like Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary of Magdala has her left hand raised to her chin. This is a classic Byzantine artistic formula expressing confusion and the struggle of human reason before the mystery of faith. Through this gesture the artist is alluding to the grief and turmoil these women must have felt as they witnessed the death of Jesus.

[54] The attendant figures in this painting have, however, also witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. While the raised hands of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary of Magdala speak of distress at Jesus' death, their faces reflect joy and lively faith in Christ. Indeed, gestures of joy far outweigh expressions of grief in this icon. Mary the mother of Jesus stands as a witness to the resurrection, together with John the Beloved Disciple, Mary of Magdala, and Mary the wife of Clopas.

[55] Next to Mary Magdalen and Mary the wife of Clopas is a very interesting character, a centurion wearing a knee-length Roman tunic. Maintaining a Johannine theme, some commentators see him as the Centurion who begged Jesus to heal his son (see John 4:46 – 54). The head just visible behind the Centurion could then be that of the healed son. Or it has also been suggested that the Centurion is the one mentioned in Mark's Gospel who, having witnessed Jesus' death, declares, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:19). It is conjectured that he holds in his left hand the scroll containing the death sentence. With the three fingers raised upright he expresses his entire faith in the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this latter interpretation, the small head behind the Centurion is probably the face of the artist. This was a commonly accepted way for artists to autograph their work and, in this case, to be immortalized as a witness to Christ. Lines above the artist's head suggest a crowd of people, also witnesses to the wondrous events of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. Can we see ourselves among this great crowd of witnesses who contemplate Christ?

[56] The first four witnesses are saints who gave their lives for the Lord and are therefore represented with halos of sanctity. The Centurion is represented in the classic position of a Christian witness. The three fingers of his right hand are in the traditional sign for "I am speaking." In a Christian context this means, "I am testifying that Jesus is Lord." These next largest figures are the five major witnesses of the crucifixion and witnesses of Jesus as Lord.

Three smaller figures are represented as minor witnesses of the crucifixion. [57] On the lower left as we view the crucifix is Longinus who is beneath Mary and the Beloved Disciple. This Roman soldier who pierced Jesus' side with a lance is depicted holding the lance and looking up at Jesus (John 19:34). [58] The blood running down the arm of Jesus begins at the elbow to drip straight down. It will land on the upturned face of Longinus. In other representations, the blood is shown as landing in the eye of Longinus who, according to tradition, was healed of blindness in one eye at the time of the crucifixion.

[59] On the other side, at the feet of the Centurion, we see another small person. His left hand is on his hip. He seems to be defying Christ on the cross. His clothing suggests that he might be a chief of the synagogue. Notice that his face is in profile. This is a surprising detail in an icon where generally all figures are turned towards the observer, with the faces full of light. This man has not yet attained the light of Christ. The other side of his face, that side which we do not see, has yet to come out of the darkness and receive the light of the Resurrection. He may be the soldier who offered Jesus the sponge soaked in wine (John 19:29). Christian tradition calls him Stephaton (faulty derivation of the Greek for *sponge*). He certainly would have been painted holding a staff and sponge to balance the spear of Longinus, but they are no longer visible. While his knee length garment indicates Roman dress, the rest of his appearance would lead to the conclusion that he is a Jewish Temple guard.

[60] Another author suggests that the blood flowing down Christ's arms and dripping at the elbows will land right on top of Longinus and Stephaton who played a role in Jesus' death. Christ's redeeming love flows even on those who "look upon him whom they have pierced" (John 19:37).

[61] On the right side of the crucifix and beside Jesus' calf is a small fowl, some say a peacock which symbolizes immortality, others say a rooster which is a reminder of the denial of Jesus by Peter. It is placed there as a warning to all of us not to be presumptuous of our strength or complacent in our faith. We need to turn to the Crucified Lord continually and seek the grace we need for our lives. It is significant that the rooster is so small. Sin is a reality of which we need to be wary, but the salvation of Christ is so much greater than the power of human sin. The rooster is also a symbol of the new dawn. With his song, he greets the first rays of the sun and invites us to come out of our spiritual slumber and enter into the light of the Risen Christ. [62] Along the lower right side of the shaft, below the peacock or the rooster, there is a small animal, possibly a cat, a medieval symbol of spiritual contemplation.

[63] The figures at the bottom of the crucifix are no longer clearly discernible. It has been suggested that these figures represent the patriarchs and holy people of the Old Testament who had to wait in the nether world for the coming of the Savior. Saving blood from the wounds in Christ's feet flows over these faithful people who preceded Jesus in time. In this reading of the scene, the black space surrounding Jesus' feet symbolizes the hell (this is not the hell of the damned) into which Jesus descended, according to the Apostles' Creed, before rising and ascending into heaven, taking the Just with him. Though this interpretation of the scene at the foot of the crucifix is appealing, some commentators consider it highly unlikely. They suggest that the figures are most likely the patron saints of the Umbrian region: St. Damian, patron of the little church where the crucifix was originally located, St. Rufino, patron of Assisi and its Cathedral Church, St. Michael the Archangel, St. John the Baptist, St. Peter (holding a key) and St. Paul.

[64] This crucifix of San Damiano which we have contemplated in detail gives us a message of amazing theological depth. It speaks to us of the mystery of the Trinity and of the fullness of Christ in his incarnation, death and resurrection. United with his own in heaven through the Ascension, he remains constantly turned towards us. His mission is to save all. This is the Paschal Mystery in its totality.

Jesus is not alone on the cross. He is in the midst of a whole people, who are symbolized by the few persons around him as witnesses to his death and resurrection. Today he is still alive in the midst of his Church. To those of us who contemplate him, he invites us to be witnesses. How attentive are we to his call?

All Franciscans cherish this crucifix as a symbol of our mission from God to commit our lives and resources to renew and rebuild the Church in the power of God! With St. Francis, we are invited to pray his prayer before this crucifix:

**[65] Most high and glorious God,
bring light to the darkness of my heart!
Give me right faith, certain hope, and perfect charity.
Lord, give me insight and wisdom so I might always discern
Your holy and true will.**

Footnote:

¹ *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, by Thomas of Celano, The First Book, Chapter VI, p. 249 in Vol. 2: Francis of Assisi: The Founder.

Texts used:

Armstrong, Regis, O.F.M. Cap., J. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., & William Short, O.F.M. (Eds.). (1999). *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents: Vol.1: The Saint*. NY: New City Press.

Bach, Lester, O.F.M. Cap. (2010). *The Franciscan Journey, Updated version*, Lindsborg, KS: Smoky Valley.

Bach, Lester, O.F.M. Cap. (1999). *Catch Me A Rainbow Too*, Lindsborg, KS: Barbo-Carlson Enterprises.

Bach, Lester, O.F.M. Cap. & Teresa V. Baker, O.F.S. (2001). *Come and See*, Lindsborg, KS: Smoky Valley.

Bunson, Matthew. (2013). *Pope in Assisi: Reject the spirit of this world*. In Our Sunday Visitor: October 20, 2013 issue.

For Up To Now (2011). National Formation Commission of the National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order – U.S.A.

Moonan, Michael, S.S.P. (2000). *The Crucifix that Spoke to St. Francis*. Staten Island, NY: Alba House.

Moriceau, Richard, O.F.M. Cap. *Evangile Aujourd'hui The Crucifix of San Damiano*. Paris: rue Marie Rose. (slide presentation booklet).

Scanlan, Michael, T.O.R. (1983). *The San Damiano Cross: An Explanation*. Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press.