The San Damiano Crucifix

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

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. 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. He entered and knelt before the crucifix in contemplation and ecstasy. 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” [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]. 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. His commission was confirmed by Pope Innocent III who had a dream of the Church in the form of the Basilica of St. John Lateran leaning as if to fall and one little man holding it from falling. When the Pope recognized Francis as the little man in his dream, he approved the Franciscan movement and its Rule of Life. Throughout the centuries the San Damiano crucifix has symbolized for all Franciscans their mission to bring renewal to the Church.

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. 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. 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. An exact replica now hangs over the altar of the ancient church of San Damiano.

[Compiled by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017]