

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.

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. 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.

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.

According to some commentators, the black behind his extended arms represents the empty tomb. The figures gazing into the tomb, at 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.

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. 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.

Two angels are painted beneath 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 flow over them also. By his paschal mystery, Christ is the savior of all creation, visible and invisible.

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 angels. Jesus is fully clothed in his regal garments and carrying the cross as a triumphant scepter. He is climbing out of the tomb and into the heavenly courts. His right hand is raised in greeting, and five of the angels have their own hands extended in a gesture of welcome. At the very top of the crucifix, Jesus is being raised from the dead by the right hand of God the Father.

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.

While depicting a triumphant Christ, the artist certainly acknowledges the passion of Christ. The marks of crucifixion are clearly seen in his bleeding wounds. But this Christ is not hanging on the cross as a man of sorrows. He is portrayed without pain. The Christ depicted here has already overcome suffering and death.

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. 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. 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.

Again, though presented as a triumphant Christ, he is clearly not portrayed as a king. Rather he wears the loincloth of a poor man. His arms are not rigid, but bent in a prayerful, supplicatory posture.

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 "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" inscribed in Latin above the head of Christ. Only in John's Gospel is the word "Nazareth" included in the inscription on the cross (John 19:19).

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. In the crucifix of San Damiano, these companions are painted in the panels under Christ's outstretched arms.

On the left are two figures, 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. There is no sign of deception in her hope. 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 that Francis and Clare grasped the role of Mary.

Occupying a special place on the left side of Jesus is Mary of Magdala and beside her is Mary, the wife of Clopas (John 19:25) and 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.

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.

Next to the two women on the right 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 is said to be that of the healed son. Or it is 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.

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. On the lower left 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). 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.

On the lower right is 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.

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).

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 betrayal 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. Along the lower right side of the shaft, there is a small animal, possibly a cat, a medieval symbol of spiritual contemplation.

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, St. Rufino, St. Michael the Archangel, St. John the Baptist, St. Peter (holding a key) and St. Paul.

All Franciscans cherish this crucifix as a symbol of their mission from God to commit their 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:

**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.**

Texts used:

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

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

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

The Crucifix of San Damiano (slide presentation booklet).