

# THE SAN DAMIANO CROSS

## An Explanation



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## INTRODUCTION

*The cross pictured on the cover is a reproduction of the one St. Francis was praying before when he received the commission from the Lord to rebuild the Church. All Franciscans cherish this cross as the symbol of their mission from God. The original cross presently hangs in Santa Chiarra (St. Claire) Church in Assisi, Italy.*

Here at the Franciscan University of Steubenville we hold the San Damiano Cross in very special reverence. It represents to us both our tradition as Franciscans and our mission today to be committed, with our lives and resources, to renew and rebuild the Church in the power of God.

We have placed the cross in central places in our chapels and around campus. We are inspired to deeper faith and commitment through our reflections and prayers before these crosses.

We invite you to share with us in this rich tradition and contemporary mission.



## THE DEVOTION

This is how it came about. In the early days after his conversion, Francis was living a penitential life alone in the countryside outside of the walls of Assisi. One day, while passing the rundown church known as San Damiano (St. Damian), Francis heard an internal voice from his spirit tell him to go in and pray. He entered and knelt before the cross. There followed a time of contemplation and ecstasy. While gazing at the cross, Francis saw the lips of Jesus move and he heard the words, "Francis, go repair my house which as you see is falling completely to ruin." Francis responded, "Gladly will I do so, Lord." 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 over 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 order and its rule of life.

Throughout the centuries the cross has symbolized for Franciscans a mission to bring renewal to the Church.

## THE TYPE OF CROSS

The cross is called an icon cross because it contains images of people who have a part in the meaning of the cross. The tradition of such crosses began in the Eastern Church and was transported by Serbian monks to the Umbria district of Italy. The San Damiano Cross was one of a number of crosses painted with similar figures during the 12th century in Umbria. The name of the painter is unknown. The purpose of an icon cross was to teach the meaning of the event depicted and thereby strengthen the faith of the people. These conclusions have been reached based on a thorough study of the history of the cross and the literature concerning it. Very little of that literature is available in English. Most of it can only be read in Italian and French. The author also found it very helpful to compare the cross to similar crosses in Umbrian art. Finally, much of the English literature on the cross is faulty in its analysis since it dates back to sources prior to 1938 when the cross was restored to its original depiction.



## THE IMAGES

### Christ Crucified

Jesus Christ is represented both as wounded and as strong. He stands upright and resolute. His halo already includes the picture of the glorified cross. The bright white coloring of the Lord's body contrasts with the dark red and black around it and, therefore, accentuates the prominence of Jesus. He projects the life of the divine nature in a body pierced by nails in the hands and feet, by the crown of thorns on his head, and by the soldier's lance in his side. This representation contrasts with the triumphant, regal Christ portrayed on the cross in earlier centuries and the suffering, dying, crucified Christ depicted generally throughout the Church beginning in the 14th century. Christ is represented in full stature while all others are smaller in stature. This is done to focus our attention on Jesus as the person to be worshipped. Above the head of Jesus is the inscription in Latin: JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS.

### Major Witnesses

The next largest figures are the five witnesses of the crucifixion and witnesses of Jesus as Lord. On the left side are Mary, mother of Jesus, and St. John the Beloved, to whom Jesus gave his mother. On the right

side are Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and the centurion who in Mark's gospel proclaims, "Truly this is the Son of God." Both Mary and Mary Magdalene have their hand placed on their cheeks to reflect extreme grief and anguish. This gesture was a common expression in this art form. 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." (There is a long tradition that sees this representation of the centurion as also including the representation of the centurion who said to Jesus, "Say but the word and my servant will be healed." (Luke 7:7) On this basis, the "onlooker" who is seen over the centurion's shoulder, is then identified as the healed servant. This pious reflection may be helpful but probably was not in the mind of the artist.) The names of the five major witnesses are written beneath their pictures.

Near the cross of Jesus there stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas\* and Mary Magdalene. Seeing his mother there with the disciple whom he loved,

*\* and also mother of James cf: Mark 15:40*

Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, there is your son." In turn he said to the disciple, "There is your mother." (John 19:25-27)

### Minor Witnesses

Three smaller figures are represented as witnessing the crucifixion.

On the lower left, looking up toward Jesus is *Longinus*, the Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus with a lance. He is represented here as holding the lance and looking up at Jesus. 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. (See John 19:33)



On the lower right is *Stephaton*. Umbrian paintings of the crucifixion regularly represented Longinus and Stephaton as complementary figures at the foot of the cross. Stephaton is identified with the soldier who offered Jesus the sponge soaked in vinegar wine. The name Stephaton is a faulty derivation from the Greek word for sponge. (See John 19:28-30) It is clear from the posture of this figure, as well as from other art works depicting Longinus and Stephaton, that he is holding a staff and sponge in the same manner as Longinus holds the spear. The 1938 restoration did not uncover this staff and sponge, but they undoubtedly were part of the original painting. He is portrayed as a Roman with his knee length garment.

*The Onlooker.* Peering over the left shoulder of the centurion is a small face. Some commentators have suggested that this is the servant of the centurion healed by Jesus. This does not seem likely. There is no indication that the centurion at the crucifixion is the same as the centurion whose son was healed. Furthermore, a closer look at the face of the observer reveals the tops of three other observers behind him. The observer is, therefore, the front person in the crowd of spectators. It is far more likely that the face of the observer is the face of the artist who in accordance with the practice of the day was both claiming authorship and immortalizing himself as a witness to Christ.



*The Angels.* Six angels are represented as marvelling over the event of the crucifixion. They are positioned at both ends of the crossbar. Their hand gestures indicate they are both discussing this wondrous event of the death of the Son of God and calling us to marvel and worship with them.





*The Patron Saints.* At the foot of the cross there is a damaged picture of six figures, two of whom we clearly see with halos. In accordance with the tradition of the day, these six are the patrons of Umbria: St. John, St. Michael, St. Rufino, St. John the Baptist, St. Peter and St. Paul.



*The Rooster.* On the right side of the picture next to the left calf of Jesus, there is a small rooster. This rooster represents the sign of Peter's betrayal of Jesus and 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. (See John 18:25-27)

*The Heavenly Welcome.* On the top of the cross we see Jesus now fully clothed in his regal garments and carrying the cross as a triumphant sceptre. He is climbing out of the tomb and into the heavenly courts. Ten angels are crowded around. Five of them have their hands extended in a welcoming gesture to Jesus, who himself has his hand raised in the form of a greeting.



*The Right Hand of God.* At the very top of the cross is the right hand of the Father with two fingers extended. Jesus is being raised from the dead by the right hand of God the Father. This can also be understood as the blessing of God the Father on all that Jesus has done.



*The Foot of the Cross.* Some commentators have seen the black space at the foot of the cross as representing hell (limbo) to which Jesus descended before ascending to His Father. These commentators would also find the black behind the shoulders of Jesus to be an open tomb and the figures at the foot of the cross to be those Old Testament saints released from hell (not the hell of the damned). All of this seems highly unlikely and probably comes from conclusions reached before the 1938 restoration of the cross. The black provides a dark background of the wood of the cross which accentuates the whitened body of Jesus.

## THE TEACHING

We are called first to see in the cross the paschal mystery of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The painter wants us to relate the parts of the mystery. We see the suffering connected with the wounds; we see the human and divine natures together; we see the rising from the tomb and the ascension into heaven; and we see that this is all done by the power of God.

Our second lesson teaches the supreme importance of Christ. He dominates all other figures. The angels are very small in comparison and awed by his deeds. The saints are also considerably smaller and are focused on Jesus. They are witnessing the central event of history. Some are witnessing it in person gathered at the Cross, while the patron saints continue to witness it in faith by their lives.

You and I are identified with the observer. He and those behind him look on this wondrous event and are called to be witnesses as the saints were. We are invited to adoration by the angels and cautioned not to presume on our fidelity by the sign of the rooster.

**The Prayer of St. Francis before  
the Cross at San Damiano**

Most High glorious God, bring light to the  
darkness of my heart. Give me right faith,  
certain hope and perfect charity, insight and  
wisdom, so I can always observe your holy  
and true command. Amen.