

A Brief Explanation of the San Damiano Crucifix



San Damiano Cross is the one before which St. Francis was praying when he received the commission from the Lord to rebuild the Church. The original cross presently hangs in the Basilica of St. Clare Church in Assisi, Italy. All Franciscans cherish this cross as the symbol of their mission from God. The cross is called an icon cross.

The tradition of such crosses began in the eastern Church and was transported by Serbian monks to the Umbria district of Italy.

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. Most of the literature on the subject is available only in Italian or French.

The History of the San Damiano Crucifix



An unknown Umbrian artist painted the Crucifix Icon in the 12th Century. There is strong Syrian influence, and history tells us that there had been some Syrian monks in the area.

It is painted on wood (walnut) to which cloth had been glued. It is about 190 cm high, 120 cm wide and 12 cm thick. It is more than likely that it was painted for San Damiano church in order to hang it over the Altar as the Blessed Sacrament was not preserved in non Parish Churches of those times. It was the case especially of those churches that had been abandoned and neglected as we know San Damiano had been. In 1257 the Poor Clares left San Damiano for San Giorgio and took the Crucifix with them. They have preserved the Cross carefully for 700 years.

In the Holy Week of 1957, it was placed on public view for the first time over the new Altar in San George's Chapel in the Basilica of St. Clare of Assisi.

The Icon of the Transfigured Christ

For Eastern Christians the Icon is a representation of the living God. By coming into its presence, for them, it becomes a personal encounter with the sacred, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly the San Damiano Icon is then an opportunity for personal encounter with the transfigured Christ – God made man.

The present Crucifix contains the story of the death, resurrection and ascension into glory. It expresses the total and universal Paschal Mystery of Christ.

This Crucifix in its serene majesty portrays the presentation of St. John's Gospel where Christ's death is presented in its salvific dimensions. It is not surprising that Saint Francis was attracted to this Icon and that the inspiration for his life came from this Christ who spoke to him "Go repair my Church ...".

The central Figure of Christ

The central figure of the icon is Christ, not only because of the relative size, but because Christ is a figure of light dominating the scene and giving light to the other figures. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Christ stands upright, not nailed. The eyes of Jesus are open. He looks out to the world, which He has saved. He is alive; the one who is eternal. Jesus' vestment is a simple loin cloth – a symbol of both High Priest and Victim. The chest, throat and neck are pictured as very strong. It symbolizes Jesus who gives the power of re-creation to His Disciples (John 22:23). He breathed on His Disciples (John 20:22). The Greek word used recalls the moment of Creation (Gen 2:7).

The shadow over the face of Jesus is increased by the fact that the halo and face are tilted forward on the original Icon. It shows that the humanity of Christ veils the true glory of the Word. Behind the outstretched arms of Christ is His empty tomb, shown as a black rectangle.

The Medallion and Inscription

The Ascension is portrayed within the circle of red in the Medallion. There Christ is breaking out of the circle, holding a golden cross which is now His Royal Scepter. His garments are of gold – a symbol of royalty and victory. His red scarf is a sign of His Dominion and Kingship; exercised in love.

Angels welcome Him into Heaven. IHS are the first three letters of the name of Jesus. The little bracket above indicates that it is shorthand. NAZARE is the Nazarene; REX is 'king' and IUDEORUM is 'of the Jews', as is reported in St. John's Gospel "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews".

The Hand of the Father

From within the semi-circle at the very top of the Icon, "He whom no eye has seen" reveals Himself in a benediction. This blessing is given by the right hand of God with the finger extended – the Holy Spirit. The Father gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to all because of the merits of the Christ's Passion.

The Mystical Vine

Around the Cross are various calligraphic scrolls which may signify the mystical vine “I am the vine, you are the branches...” (John 15), which also contain the words “Greater love has no one than this, that one lays down one’s life for one friends”. At the base of the cross there seems to be a section that looks like a rock – the symbol of the Church. The seashells are symbols of eternity – a mystery hidden in the vast and timeless sea of eternity is revealed.

Mary and John

As in John’s Gospel, Mary and John are placed side by side. Mary’s mantle is white meaning victory (Rev 3:5), purification (Rev 7:14); and good deeds (Rev 19:8). The gems on the mantle refer to the graces of the Holy Spirit.

The dark red worn under the mantle indicate intense love, while the inner dress is purple – the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 26: 1-4).

Mary’s left hand is raised to her cheek. It shows her acceptance and love of John. Her right hand points to John while her eyes proclaim acceptance of Christ’s words “Woman, behold your son...” (John 19:26). The blood drips on to John at this moment. John’s mantle is of rose colour indicating eternal wisdom, while his tunic is white denoting purity. His position is between Jesus and Mary as is fitting for the disciple loved by both of them. He looks at Mary “Son, behold your Mother”, but points to Christ.

The Other Major Figures

Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is next to Christ indicating her as very special. Her hand is on her chin indicates a confided secret – “He is risen”. She wears scarlet, which is a symbol of love; her mantle of blue deepens this aspect.

Mary Clopas. Some authorities argue her to be the mother of James. She wears garments of an earthen colour, a symbol of humility, and her light green mantle that of hope. Her admiration of Jesus is indicated by the gesture of her hand.

The Centurion of Capernaum. He holds a piece of wood in his left hand, indicating his building of the Synagogue (Luke 7: 1-10). The little boy beyond his shoulder is his son healed by Jesus. The three heads behind the boy show “he and his whole household believed” (John 4: 45-54). He has his thumb and two fingers extended, a symbol of the Trinity; his two closed fingers symbolize the hidden mystery of the two natures of Jesus the Christ. “Truly He is the Son of God”(Mark 15:39).

The Lesser Figures

Longinus. According to tradition he is the Roman soldier who pierced Jesus’ side with a lance.

Stephen. Tradition also gives the name Stephen to the soldier who offered Jesus a sponge soaked in vinegar made of wine, after Jesus cried out "I thirst" (John 19: 28 -30).

The Unknown Saints

At the bottom of the Icon are six unknown saints whom Scholars postulate are Saints Damian, Ruffin, Michael, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul. They were all patrons of Churches in and around Assisi. St. Damian was the Patron of the Church that housed the Cross and St. Ruffin was the Patron Saint of Assisi. The area of the cross has undergone too much damage to make a proper identification.

The Astonished Angels

There sat two groups of angels – animatedly discussing the scene unfolded before them (Cf. Jn 20:12). "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not die but have life everlasting" (John 3:16).

The Tomb

Behind Christ is the open tomb; Christ is alive and standing over the tomb. The red of love overcomes the black of death. The gestures of the unknown saints at His hands indicate faith. These could be Peter and John at the empty tomb (John 20: 3-9).

The Rooster

The inclusion of the rooster recalls the denial of Peter who wept bitterly. The rooster also proclaims the new dawn of the Risen Christ, the true light (1 John 2:8).

The Shape of the Cross

The shape of the Cross has been changed to enable the artist to include those who participated in the drama of the Passion. Note that the arms of the cross lift to Christ's right indicating that the Good Thief (traditionally called Dismas) went to Heaven; while the left hand dips – the other thief did not.

Numbers

There are 33 figures in the Icon – Two Christ figures, 1 Hand of the Father, 5 major figures, 2 smaller figures, 14 angels, 2 unknown at His hands, 1 small boy, 6 unknown at the bottom of the Cross and one rooster. There are 33 nail heads along the frame just inside the shells and seven around the halo.