

The San Damiano Crucifix

When Francis prayed in the chapel of San Damiano in 1205, the crucifix there seemed to speak to him. That crucifix is known as the San Damiano Crucifix. It holds a special spot in our Franciscan heritage...

It is called an "icon" cross because it contains images of people who have a part in the meaning of the cross. It was painted in the 11th century by an unknown artist. It was probably transported to the Assisi region by Serbian monks. It was painted on coarse cloth that was glued to a cross made of walnut. The San Damiano Crucifix is about 6 feet 10 inches high and about 4 feet 3 inches wide. It no longer hangs in the Chapel of San Damiano. When the Poor Clares moved to their new monastery (connected to the Basilica of Santa Chiara in Assisi) in 1257, the San Damiano Crucifix went with them. In September of 1958 it was permanently placed in the San Giorgio Chapel, part of the Basilica of Santa Chiara in Assisi.

The central figure of Christ dominates the painting. Christ stands upright on the cross, eyes open, looking out on the world. He is portrayed as both wounded and strong. Jesus is represented in full stature while the other figures are much smaller. Jesus is the person to be worshiped.

The next largest figures are the five witnesses of the crucifixion. Mary, the mother of Jesus, St John, the beloved disciple, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and the Centurion who expressed his belief in Christ. These figures stand beneath the arms of Jesus. In the shadow of these larger figures are three smaller figures. On the lower left is Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus. On the lower right is Stephaton, who is identified with the soldier who offered Jesus a sponge dipped in wine. Peering over the shoulder of the centurion seems to be an observer, one of the crowd around the cross.

On the crossbar are six angels. They are marvelling at the crucifixion seemingly discussing the event of the death of the Son of God. At the foot of the cross is a damaged picture of six figures. It would seem these six (two of whom are easily seen) are the patron saints of Umbria: St John, St Michael, St Rufino, St John the Baptist, St Peter and St Paul. On the right side of the picture there is a small rooster. It is a reminder of Peter's denial, as well as a reminder not to put too much reliance on our own strength.

On the top of the cross we see Jesus, fully clothed, being welcomed into heaven. He is climbing out of the tomb and carries the cross as a sceptre of triumph. Angels crowd around him. At the very top of the cross is the right hand of the Father. God blesses all that Jesus has done. The crucifix is like a painted theology

of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Little wonder that it was precious to Francis.

The San Damiano Crucifix is special for Franciscans. It connects us to our “roots” and calls us to conversion. Replicas of this crucifix are often worn by Franciscans as a sign of their commitment to the Franciscan way of life.

Great God, full of glory, and thou, my Lord Jesus Christ, I beseech thee to illuminate me and dissipate the darkness of my spirit. Give me a pure faith, firm hope and perfect charity. Grant me to know thee well and to do all things according to thy light and in conformity with thy will. Amen.

Prayer of St. Francis.

Excerpt from Fr Lester Bach, *Catch Me A Rainbow* (1990) p. 41-42, published by the National Formation Commission of Secular Franciscans, USA. Used with permission.