

# The San Damiano Crucifix

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### A Theological and Spiritual Interpretation

This Cross painted on wood initially hung in the Church of San Damiano, situated half way between hillside town of Assisi above and the Spoletan Valley below. It came to prominence when Jesus spoke to St. Francis as he was praying before it in the summer of 1206. The crucified and risen Jesus said to him: «Francis, don't you see that my house is falling into ruin? Go then and restore it for me.» Trembling and amazed Francis replied: "Yes Lord, I will, most willingly", thinking that Jesus was referring to San Damiano which had fallen into ruin on account of its age. Francis, literally, began by begging for the stones with which to do so and by carrying them on his own shoulders back to this church reduced to such a sorry state. Only later did he come to realize that the church Christ was referring to was the entire Church itself - his mystical body. Then, Francis, the poor friar, set off to preach the Gospel - calling people to renewed repentance and faith. Since it was the Jesus depicted on the Cross of San Damiano that enlightened Francis as to his vocation, the crucifix itself has acquired, over the subsequent centuries, a theological and spiritual significance. In what follows, I will attempt to provide such an interpretation.

Scholars, when speaking of the "style" of the crucifix, have noted that the iconographical depiction corresponds to a "Romanic" typology of painted crosses on wood already widespread in Central Italy, in which the accent was placed, through the detail of the wide open eyes, on the victory of Christ over death. The Cross of San Damiano is a Western European work that shares many aspects with Eastern religious art, but at the same time it distinguishes itself also for others. The shape of the cross itself is, for example, Latin in origin. Our concern here, though, is not the historical and artistic background, but the theology and spirituality that is depicted and contained within this iconic-crucifix. Now, the theology portrayed is so intermeshed within the entire presentation that it is difficult to isolate various aspects and scenes represented. Nonetheless, I will endeavor to provide some logical, coherent flow to my theological and spiritual analysis.

## **The Corpus**

Size is theologically significant when examining the various persons in the San Damiano Cross. Jesus is by far the largest, and thus, obviously, he is the most theologically important. So, let us first contemplate the corpus of Jesus. His body is luminous. Although Jesus is depicted as crucified, his body exudes light. The crucified Jesus is transfigured in glory. In accord with John's Gospel, the hour of Jesus' crucifixion is the hour of his glory, wherein he, as the great high priest, glorifies the Father by offering himself as the most perfect sacrifice of himself for the forgiveness of sins. What is beheld is the perfect high priest who is also the perfect sacrificial «lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world» (Jn 1:29). In glorifying his Father on the cross, the Father, in turn, glorifies his incarnate Son by raising him wondrously from the dead. Jesus begins his High Priestly prayer in John's Gospel by beseeching his Father. He lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, «Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you» (Jn 17:1). The paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection is one complete whole - the hour of Jesus' glorious death is simultaneously the hour wherein his Father gloriously takes him up into heaven. Again, Jesus earlier prayed: «Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once»" (Jn 13:31-32). This is the conjoined mystery that is displayed before the beholder of the San Damiano crucifix - Jesus, the Lamb of God, glorifying his Father and the Father glorifying him - the living Lamb who once was slain (cf. Rev 5:6).

## **Blood and Water**

This understanding is further perceived and intensified in the details. Jesus' hands and feet bear the marks of the nails, but the nails are no longer present. He is freed from the agonizing pangs of death. The black elongated rectangle background bordering his outstretched arms signifies the empty tomb from which the crucified Jesus has risen. Nevertheless, the blood of the now risen Jesus continues to flow in abundance, for this risen blood cleanses from sin and is the source of everlasting life for all who believe in him. Moreover, the blood and water continue to flow from his pierced side. This flowing of blood and water connotes the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist - the two sacraments whereby one is united to the risen Jesus. John the Baptist declares that, because the Spirit remained upon Jesus, «this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit,» for he is the incarnate Spirit-filled Son of God (Jn 1:33-34). The scallop shells that

surround the entire San Damiano crucifix traditionally denote Baptism, a baptism that makes one “a new creation” in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Similarly, the vine-like scrolls that also circumscribe the cross testify that the cross is the tree of life. In John’s Gospel, Jesus declares: «I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I am in him, he it is who bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing» (Jn 15:5). Thus, one who is baptized and who now contemplates the crucified and risen depiction of Jesus is beckoned to him so as to become a new creation in him, whereby he is able to bear the good fruit of holiness.

Having been baptized into Christ, one is further ushered into full communion with Jesus by eating his risen Body and drinking his risen Blood, and so obtaining eternal life in him. Again, this is in accord with what Jesus declares in John’s Gospel.

«Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him» (Jn 6:52-56).

To eat and drink the luminous life-giving Body and Blood of the crucified and risen Jesus, as contemplated on the San Damiano Cross, is for one to abide in him and he in them, and so partake of his eternal life – the assurance that Jesus will raise one up when he returns gloriously on the last day.

### **The Cruciform Golden Halo of the New Creation**

Let us now contemplate the head and face of Jesus. Many of the persons and angels portrayed in the San Damiano Cross have golden halos. Not surprisingly Jesus has the largest golden halo and it, unlike the others, bears the mark of the cross. This cross-marked golden halo heralds the triumph of Jesus crucified and risen. He reigns supreme over sin and death. He is the first born of the dead (cf. Col 1:18). The golden cross-marked halo has replaced the crown of thorns. The head of Jesus is now crowned in glory. He is the King of Glory.

Moreover, as the crucified and risen Lord of heaven and earth, Jesus embodies the new creation. From all eternity the Word was with God and was God. The whole of creation came to be through him, for he is the life-giving light

that vanquished the darkness of nothingness (cf. Jn 1:1-5). As the Father created everything through him, so now the Father has re-created all things through his incarnate Word. «And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father» (Jn 1:14).

In contemplating the San Damiano Cross, we behold Jesus, the Father's Spirit-filled risen incarnate Son, filled with grace and truth. Note that Jesus' hair flows down upon his shoulders - three ringlets on each side. These signify the six days of the first creation, and now manifest the new creation that the crucified and risen Jesus himself now embodies. Moreover, as intimated above, Jesus' body radiates the new risen light that not even the darkness of sin and death could conquer. As the risen Lord and Savior, Jesus shines with the glory of the everlasting eighth day of the new creation.

While the mouth of the crucified and risen Jesus is now closed, it was open. John informs us that Jesus' last words were, «It is finished,» that is, his Father's work of redemption. Having completed his Father's work, «he bowed his head and gave up his spirit» (Jn 19:30). Jesus' head, in the San Damiano Cross, is slightly bent to his right, and he has just breathed forth his spirit unto his Father, and in breathing forth his spirit to his Father, he has simultaneously breathed forth his Spirit upon the world (cf. Jn 20:22). Jesus' last dying breath is his first breath of the new creation. That new-creation-breath is what we behold when we behold the entirety of the crucified and risen Jesus as theologically portrayed in the San Damiano Cross.

Here is where the theological significance of the "famous" rooster comes into play. He stands aside the left leg of Jesus. Yes, he crows immediately after Peter denies Jesus three times, but his crowing is announcing the everlasting dawn of the new creation. For those who contemplate the San Damiano Cross, the crowing rooster wants the beholder to wake from sleep and rejoice, for the day of salvation is at hand.

Now, since he is portrayed as crucified and risen, Jesus' eyes are wide open. He is looking into the distance, and his look is that of summoning all who are beholding him to come near. «I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself» (Jn 12:32). His outstretched and welcoming arms and his open inviting hands beckon those praying at his feet to be enfolded in his embrace -

again, a coming to abide in him that he might abide in them. By becoming one with him, they will, again, become new creations in him and so obtain life-everlasting. «And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life» (Jn 3:14). And what are those who have faith in him to believe? «When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am He» (Jn 8:28). When the incarnate Son of God is lifted up upon the cross and into his resurrected glory, then one will know and believe that he is He Who Is. By believing that the lifted-up Jesus is truly God, one will be freed from the deadly-serpent's grasp of sin with its curse of death, for one will have been subsumed into Jesus' life-giving clasp.

### **Pilate's Declaration**

Given the above interpretation, we can now perceive the full significance of Pilate's declaration. Immediately above Jesus' head is painted IHS Nazare Rex Iudeoru (the final "m" is missing). What is fascinating is that the "IHS" is the Greek of the first three letters of Jesus' name. The remainder of Pilate's declaration is in Latin. Thus, we have "Jesus (Greek IHS) of Nazareth, King of the Jews (Latin)." However, if the "IHS" is taken as Latin letters, in conformity with the remainder of the Latin, with each letter being the initial letter of a word, then the declaration could be read as: "Jesus (I) Savior (S) of Men (H), of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Thus, the painter of the San Damiano Crucifix would be declaring that Jesus, as the King of the Jews, is also the Savior of all humankind. The artist, then, is providing a theological interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection. Through his saving sacrifice and glorious resurrection, Jesus establishes himself as the promised, everlasting Jewish Davidic king of God's eternal kingdom, and in so doing he becomes the Lord and Savior of the whole world, of Jews and Gentiles alike. Within this universalism, all who contemplate the Cross of San Damiano can be taken up into Jesus' salvific embrace.

### **The Loincloth**

Moving downward, we can now study the white loincloth around Jesus' waist, with its sprays of gold, and bound by a gold cincture tied with a threefold knot. The type of loincloth with white cloth gained ground in Byzantium and in Western Europe after iconoclasm, thus in the late 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century and was common in the period when the Cross of San Damiano was painted. Before that

epoch a long tunic was used in order to evoke the eschatological dimension. The loincloth is that of a priest, and that it is white signifies the sinlessness of Jesus' humanity. The spray of gold manifests that the sinless humanity of Jesus is that of the Son of God. Because Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, he is the great high priest who offers his pure and sinless humanity to his Father, and so his "divine" blood purifies from sin and gives divine life. The golden threefold knot attests to the Trinity. Each golden knot represents one of the three persons. That they are knotted to form one threefold knot confirms that they, together, possess the one divine nature.

### **Those Surrounding Jesus**

Having theologically examined the crucified and risen Jesus as portrayed in the San Damiano Cross, we can now study those who stand astride him. Again, size is important. Aside Jesus' body and immediately under his outstretched arms are five larger persons, two on his right side and three on his left, all of whom are named in Latin. Two lesser-sized men are lower down and off to the side, and are not named. The style of these latter is different. The lines and colors are uniform to evoke the divine dimension. This type of approach is not, however, an exclusive of Syria, but appears independently in many parts of the medieval Christian world. It is difficult to apply stylistic criteria in such a way as to be able to establish a relation of dependency from one region with respect to another. There is also the face of a man off to the upper right corner, with the curved outlines of three other heads behind him. Lastly, there are six angels - one on each side of Jesus' outstretched arms and two under each of his arms.

We begin with the persons on Jesus' right - Mary, his mother, and John, the beloved disciple. Both stand parallel to Jesus' pierced heart down to his knees, and they both have golden halos denoting their sanctity. Though they are pointing to Jesus with their right hands, they smile and gaze at one another. With her left hand, Mary, dressed in a blue dress and gold-marked mantle, is touching her cheek, and John, with his left hand, is holding his reddish-white and gold-creased cloak. Together, they are joyfully pondering the salvific work of Jesus. Jesus, with whom they suffered beneath the cross, is now gloriously risen. They are also rejoicing in the fact that Jesus has given them to one another. «When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved, he said to his mother, 'Woman behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home» (Jn 19:26-27). That is

exactly what Mary and John are doing – they are lovingly and caringly beholding one another as mother and son.

Moreover, the blood and water that is flowing from the side of Christ are falling upon John and Mary. This blood and water, as we saw, signify the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments that give life to the Church, and through which the faithful come into communion with the risen Jesus. Likewise, Mary becomes the living icon of the church, the new Eve who gives birth to those born anew through Baptism and the Eucharist. She is now the ecclesial mother of the living – those who are created anew in Christ through the life-giving waters of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn.3:5-6). John, the apostle, then represents those who, throughout the ages, will care for mother-church, of which Mary is the icon. Thus, the smiling John and Mary, in pointing to Jesus, are inviting all who behold him to rejoice with them, for the crucified and risen Jesus is enfolding all who come to him into his one, universal and apostolic Church, and so made holy through the sacraments.

On the left side of Jesus are Mary Magdalene, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and the centurion. Both Marys are adorned with halos. The centurion does have a halo. Both Marys had stood beneath the cross of Jesus, along with Mary, his mother and John (cf. Jn 19:25). The two Marys, both of whom are smiling, are presently conversing with one another. Mary Magdalene, like Mary, the mother of Jesus, has her right hand to her cheek, while Mary, the wife of Clopas, has her open right hand facing out. Mary Magdalene, as the great sinner from whom seven demons had been cast out, reflects with joy over her salvation (Mk 8:9 and Lk 8:2). Moreover, in John's Gospel, she is the first person, and so privileged, to whom the risen Jesus appears, and thus, she is the first to proclaim to the disciples: «I have seen the Lord» (Jn 20:18). She is the apostle to the apostles. Mary, the wife of Clopas, is exulting at all she had witnessed – the death and resurrection of Jesus. Together, along with Mary and John, they are urging those who gaze upon Jesus crucified and risen to rejoice with them, for their sins have also been forgiven – all can draw near to Jesus.

The un-haloed Roman centurion, who does not possess a proper name, looks intently at Jesus. He wears a red cloak streaked in gold with a white Roman tunic and boots with gold clasps. In his left hand is a book, probably signifying his governing authority. His right hand is bent at the elbow with his thumb, index and middle finger raised up, and his other two fingers bent down together. This

centurion would then be the centurion who, “filled with awe,” exclaimed at Jesus’ death, «Truly this was the Son of God!» (Matt 27:54, see also Mk 15:39. In Luke’s Gospel, he declares: «Certainly this man was innocent!» (Lk 23:47). Jesus, as the Son of God, is a member of the Trinity (the three fingers), and, having come to exist as man, he exists in two natures (the two bent fingers). This is what the centurion in the Synoptic Gospels professes. In John’s Gospel the centurion makes no such declaration. Moreover, the Synoptics do not give an account of Jesus’ side being pierced, as is the case in John’s Gospel. To ensure that Jesus and the two criminals were dead prior to the Sabbath, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken. Soldiers came and broke the legs of the two criminals, but they found Jesus already dead. Nonetheless, «one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water» (Jn 31-34). What is depicted in the San Damiano cross is the Johannine account. The problem is that the centurion, who is intently looking at Jesus, is not holding a spear, but instead a book. The solution to this artistic conundrum is found within the Latin tradition. The centurion who proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of God is the same centurion who pierced his side, and traditionally he has been given the name, Longinus. So, within the San Damiano Cross, we find portrayed the Latin tradition, conjoining the Synoptic and Johannine accounts. Spiritually, then, the centurion, Longinus, wants the beholder to look intently with him at Jesus, and to profess with him that the one crucified and pierced is truly the Son of God. Such a holy profession of faith will lead, as seen in John and the three Marys, to the centurion and the beholder eventually, but assuredly, obtaining a saintly halo.

There are also two smaller men. One stands to the left at Mary’s side and the other to the right at the centurion’s (Longinus’) side. Neither has a name nor a halo. They are looking intently at Jesus. Debate surrounds their identity. Because I have argued that the centurion is Longinus, I would suggest that the man, since he holds a lance or staff, is the Roman soldier who offers the crucified Jesus the vinegar. Again, John’s Gospel informs the reader that when Jesus declared that he was thirsty, «they put a sponge full of vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth» (Jn 19:28-29). The man on the right, who has a beard and wears a short Jewish-like short tunic, is traditionally named Stephaton, and is the servant of Longinus. Since they are gazing upward at Jesus, they encourage, as do others surrounding the cross, to behold the risen, glorious Jesus.

Now, the head of the fellow who looks over the left shoulder of the



centurion is a mystery. While he is looking at Jesus, he is frowning. That there are three curved outlines of heads behind him adds to the ambiguity. If we knew the reason for his unhappiness, we might be able to discern his importance. He may signify those who do not believe in Jesus, and so is distraught by those surrounding Jesus who do believe that he is the crucified Savior and risen Lord. In the end, his presence remains an enigma.

Lastly, there are the six angels beside and under Jesus' arms. They, like the others, are pointing to Jesus, as well as animatedly conversing with one another. Thus, again, they are encouraging those who behold the cross to contemplate Jesus and enter into his presence.

### **The Roundel**

Above the crucified and risen Jesus, in the top shorter beam, there is a roundel that depicts Jesus' ascension. Behind the ascending Jesus is a red circle enclosed in a black loop. This is Jesus' empty tomb from which he is just coming forth, for his feet are lifting him up and out as if he were ascending into heaven. The risen Jesus wears a light blue tunic with a white robe. Over his left shoulder is a red stole. The stole informs the beholder that Jesus is a priest, and thus the reason for his risen-ascending is due to his offering the most perfect sacrifice of himself for the forgiveness of sins, and so merited eternal life. Thus, Jesus is holding a golden cross-shaped crosier in his left hand - the trophy-cross-of-triumph over death.

Moreover, a golden cross-marked halo adorns his head - radiating his risen majesty. This victory is confirmed by the Father's blessing-hand appearing down from heaven in the half-circle above his risen-ascending Son. The Father's paternal blessing welcomes his risen, incarnate Son into his presence, where he will sit at his Father's right hand to reign supreme over heaven and earth. The Father's index and middle fingers are straight, while his thumb and other two fingers are closed together, thus indicating that Jesus is one of the persons of the Trinity who exists in two natures - as God and as man. That the Father is blessing his risen-ascending Son incarnate also manifests that Jesus is the long-expected Messiah - the one filled with the Holy Spirit. Ten smiling, golden-haloed heavenly angels rejoice at his appearance, with the front four beckoning the beholder to join in their heavenly chorus of praise. Again, we find the central theme of the San Damiano Cross - that of Jesus drawing all men and women to himself so that

they might abide in his risen, everlasting life.

### **St. Cosmas and St. Damian**

Although the steeped square beneath the corpus of the crucified and risen Jesus is almost entirely obliterated, yet in the right-hand corner one sees the golden-haloed Cosmas and Damian. It was in the church dedicated to them, that this icon-cross was first placed, and it was in this church that Jesus spoke to St. Francis. Cosmas and Damian were both doctors. It is providential that they were such, for the San Damiano Cross portrays he who is the medicine of immortality – the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus. All who die with him will rise with him, and all who rise with him will ascend with him, and so attain everlasting life.

### **Conclusion**

Whoever the artist was who painted on wood this Crucifix, he was very familiar with the Gospels. He was particularly steeped in the Gospel of St. John. One could imagine that John's passion and resurrection narrative was opened at his side as he painted each detail – from the gloriously transfigured body of Jesus to all those who surrounded him, the Saints and the angels alike. Thus, when pilgrims come to Assisi and go to the Chapel of the Crucifix in the Basilica of St. Clare, it would be beneficial if they brought with them a Bible and prayerfully read John's account of Jesus' death and resurrection. By contemplating the Cross of San Damiano in unison with meditating on John's account, one may hear the luminous crucified Jesus speak as he spoke to St. Thomas – «Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.» In response, one can then echo with Thomas: «My Lord and my God!» (Jn 20:27-28). Having done so, one can then leave, with a new awareness of the personal call received from Jesus to go and help restore his house for Him as a committed disciple.

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