

The San Damiano Cross



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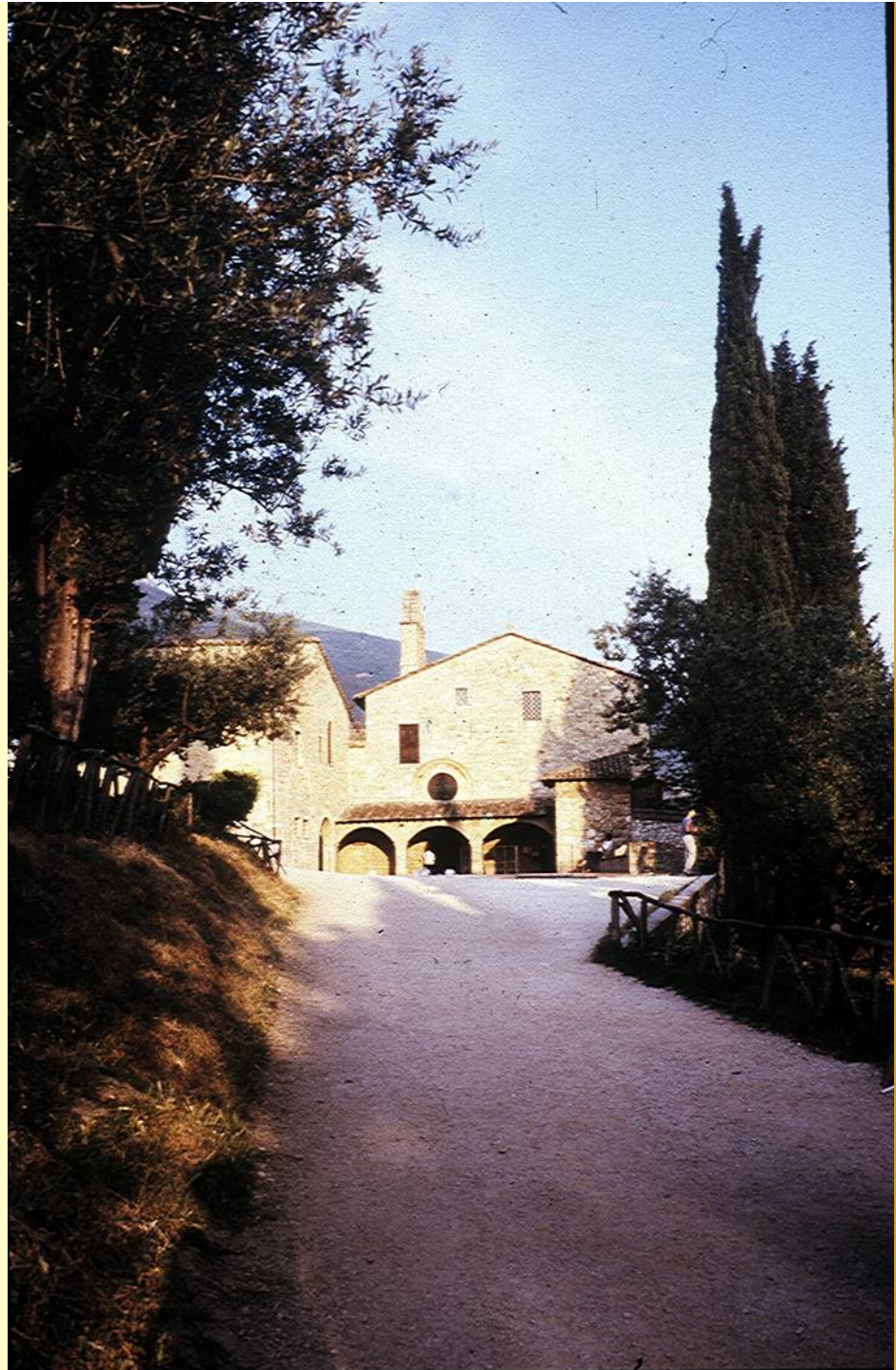
The cross pictured is a reproduction of the one St. Francis was praying before when he received the commission from the Lord to rebuild the Church. The original cross hangs in Santa Chiara (St. Clare) Basilica in Assisi, Italy.

One day, while passing the run down church known as San Damiano, Francis heard an internal voice from his spirit tell him to go in and pray. He entered and knelt before the cross in 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 into ruin." Throughout the centuries the San Damiano cross has symbolized for Franciscans a mission to bring renewal to the Church.

The cross is called an icon cross because it contains images of persons who have a part in the meaning of the cross. The purpose of an icon cross is to teach the meaning of the event depicted and thereby strengthen the faith of the people.

The San Damiano cross, meditation on the Word of God in scripture and the evangelical life of Francis and Clare are at the heart of the Franciscan vision.

The Church of San Damiano

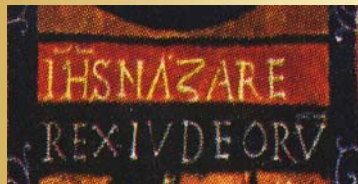




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The Images

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 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. The 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 fourteenth century. Christ is represented in full stature while all other figures are smaller in stature. This focuses 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.

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The Images

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 hands placed on their cheeks to reflect extreme grief and anguish, a common expression in this art form. The three fingers on the right hand of the centurion are in the traditional sign for "I am speaking." The first four witnesses are saints who gave their lives for the Lord and are therefore represented with halos of sanctity.



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The Images Minor Witnesses

Three smaller figures are represented as witnessing the crucifixion. On the lower left is Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierce the side of Jesus with a lance.

On the right side is Stephanos. Stephanos is identified with the soldier who offered Jesus the sponge soaked in vinegar wine. The name Stephanos is a faulty derivation from the Greek word for sponge.

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. It is far more likely to be 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.



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The Images



The Angels

Positioned at both ends of the crossbar, six angels are represented as marveling over the event of the crucifixion. Their hand gestures indicate they are discussing this wondrous event of the death of the Son of God and calling us to marvel and worship with them.

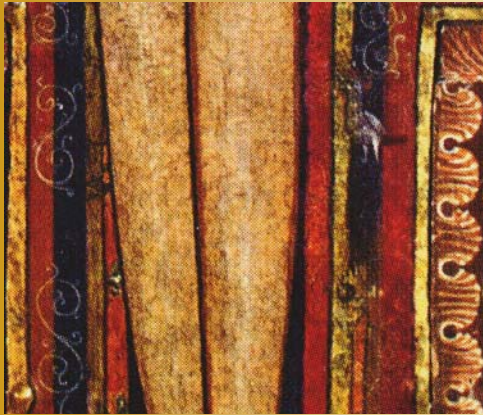


The Patron Saints

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.

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The Images



The Rooster

On the right side of the picture next to the left calf of Jesus, there is a small rooster. This rooster represents Peter's betrayal of Jesus and is placed there as a warning to all of us not 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.

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 scepter. He is climbing out of the tomb and into the heavenly courts. Ten angels crowd around him. Five of them extend their hands in welcoming gestures to Jesus, who himself raises his hand in greeting.



The San Damiano Cross

The Images



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 the Old Testament saints released from hell (not the hell of the damned.) All of this seems highly unlikely and probably comes from the 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.



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

Most High and 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.

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Bibliography

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