

THE SAN DAMIANO CROSS

So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. ~ Numbers 21:9

Devotion to the Cross

IN THE EARLY DAYS after his conversion, St. Francis of Assisi was living a penitential life alone in the countryside outside of the walls of Assisi. One day, while passing a rundown church known as San Damiano (St. Damian), Francis heard an internal voice 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 into ruin." Francis responded, "Gladly I will do so, Lord."

At first, Francis concentrated on repairing the church buildings of San Damiano and nearby churches. Then when the Lord sent him followers, he understood his commission to build up the lives of God's people, the Church. His commission was confirmed by Pope Innocent III, who had had a dream of the Church. In it, he saw the Basilica of St. John Lateran leaning over as if to fall and one little man keeping it from doing so. When he recognized Francis as the man in his dream, the Pope approved the Franciscan order and its rule of life.

Throughout the centuries, the cross has symbolized the continuation of St. Francis' mission to bring renewal to the Church.

Features of the Cross

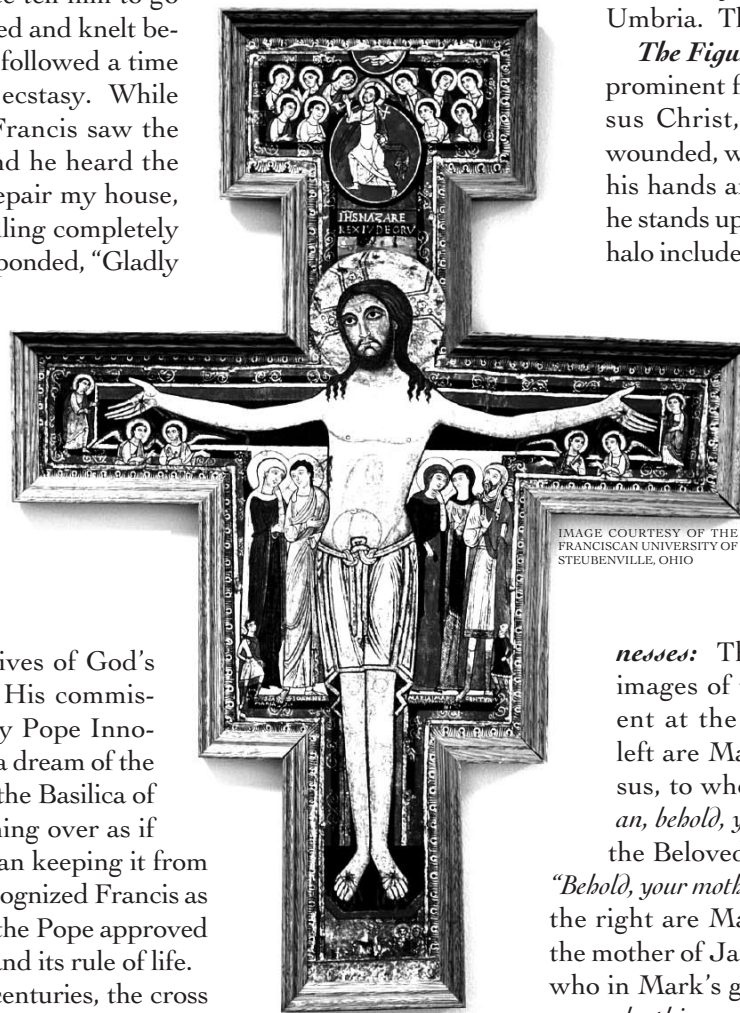
The cross, called an icon (literally, "image"), is a traditional

form of artwork arising in the Eastern Church that had been transported by Serbian monks to the Umbria district of Italy. An icon is intended to teach the meaning of the event depicted and thereby strengthen the faith of those who view it. The San Damiano cross was one of a number of crosses painted in the icon style in the 12th century in Umbria. The artist is unknown.

The Figure of Christ: The most prominent figure in the icon is Jesus Christ, represented as both wounded, with blood flowing from his hands and feet, and strong, as he stands upright and resolute. His halo includes a depiction of the glorified cross. This image of Christ focuses our attention on Jesus as the One to be worshipped. Above his head is the Latin inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

The Major Witnesses: This icon also contains images of those who were present at the crucifixion. On the left are Mary, the mother of Jesus, to whom Jesus said, "Woman, behold, your son," and St. John the Beloved, to whom Jesus said: "Behold, your mother" (Jn 19:26-27). On the right are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and the centurion who in Mark's gospel proclaims, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk 15:39). Both Mary, Jesus' mother, and Mary Magdalene have their hands on their cheeks to reflect extreme grief and anguish.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE FRANCISCAN UNIVERSITY OF STEUBENVILLE, OHIO



"While gazing at the cross, Francis saw the lips of Jesus move."

The Minor Witnesses: On the

lower left side is Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierced Jesus' side with a lance. On the lower right side is Stephaton, identified with the soldier who offered Jesus the sponge soaked in vinegar wine.

The Angels: The hand gestures of the six angels positioned at both ends of the crossbar indicate that they are both discussing this wondrous event and calling us to worship with them. At the top of the icon, ten angels crowd around Jesus as he climbs out of the tomb and into the Heavenly courts. He is fully clothed in his regal garments and carrying the cross as a triumphant scepter.

The Right Hand of God: At the very top of the icon is depicted the right hand of God. This image expresses the fact that Jesus is being raised from the dead by God's power and can be understood as the blessing of the Father on Jesus' entire ministry.

St. Francis' Prayer Before the San Damiano Cross

"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."
(CCC 1159-1162)



*"Give me right faith, certain hope and perfect charity,
insight and wisdom, so I can always observe your holy
and true command. Amen."*