

“San Damiano Cross and the Gospel of John”

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Introduction

The material that I am about to present on the San Damiano is taken from several sources and my own reflection. The powerpoint presentation is from a presentation by Father Michael Ghinan, a professor of Sacred Scripture from the Franciscan School of Theology at Berkeley, CA. His whole presentation can be found in the Franciscan Intellectual Series, Vol. 4: The Gospel of St. John and the San Damiano Crucifix. This volume can be purchased through the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University and it comes with the CD. I want to make sure I give Father Guinan appropriate credit. The unique contribution that Father Michael offers from all the research I have done is his insight into interpreting the San Damiano Cross from the view of St. John's Gospel.

The crucifix is presently located at Santa Chiara Basilica, Assisi, Italy. Originally, it hung over alter in chapel of San Damiano. (slide) Remember Francis came here early in his conversion process. It was while praying under this crucifix that Francis heard the words: Go, rebuild my house that as you see is falling to ruins.

Notice that this is an Franciscan Icon but not a Franciscan crucifix. The Franciscan movement emphasized the human, suffering Christ emphasizing that Jesus, through the incarnation, puts flesh to God, so to speak. People identified with Jesus in Jesus' humanity and suffering emphasized through the preaching of the friars. This cross/crucifix was probably written about 100 years before Francis. There is another crucifix, very similar in the town of Spoleto just south of Assisi. We know the writer of the Icon in Spoleto dates to the late 1100's. This icon, known as the San Damiano Crucifix is dated about 100 before Francis.

Icons comes from the Greek Eastern religious tradition. Icons are not just art; they have dense theological symbols. An icon is considered a door into sacred space and time of God; one enters into the very mystery of God through icons. This also is what we would consider as **Cataphatic** (look up) prayer opposed to apophatic prayer. Cataphatic prayer tries to **express prayer in concrete** language; meant to look at closely and meditatively. So images, pictures, words that describe or try to describe who or what God is is cataphatic. Apophatic prayer says that there is not language or image that can describe God.

It is of the Byzantine tradition in Syro-Byzantine Style. You may be wondering how a byzantine crucifix ends up in the middle of Italy. Remember from our presentation of the history of Assisi, Justinian the

Byzantine Emperor conquerors central Italy in the mid – five fifties. With Justinian, Byzantine art was brought to Italy as well as religious work. Ravenna, Italy is known for its Byzantine art.

The San Damiano Crucifix is 6 ft. 10 inches high. It is painted on cloth and glued onto wood.

Three Steps to Understanding the San Damiano Cross

I will describe the Crucifix in three parts. First we will look at the figure of Christ himself. Then we will look at the Christian community under Jesus' arms and finally we will look at the small figures around the cross.

Figure of Jesus

First we want to look at the inscription about the head of Jesus. All four gospels mention the inscription. No two gospels use the same wording. Only in John's Gospel do we read IHSNAZARE REXIVDEORV (INRI) - Jesus of Nazareth, King of Jews. **This is an important theme in Gospel of John. identifies Jesus as King of the Jews; IN John's Gospel....**

Now let us look at Jesus' face. His eyes are open wide, he has small ears and his mouth is closed. All words have been spoken. There is nothing more to say or hear. Now we are invited to just gaze upon Christ. Notice also the crown of thorns is missing.

As we gaze on the face of Jesus we see that there is a halo, not behind the head but in front of his face. This alludes to a recurring theme in John's Gospel: the glory of God. We hear in chapter 1 of John's Gospel: "We have seen the Glory of God"; **deep roots in Old Testament; presence of God manifested in dark cloud; flashes of lightening; Dark cloud preserves one from getting full light; Exodus, Sinai; Tabernacle in Wilderness; Ezekiel; Glory of God; manifestation** of God's presence in an especially focused way; cloud means: God's presence overshadows us; glory of God, presence of Christ is shielded; halo over darkens it.

NT: We have seen the glory of God. "The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory."

Hands and Side: Blood flows: Hand, side and feet but it does something different; the blood does not drop down, but blood runs down arms to Christian community under his arms; John's Gospel is the ONLY GOSPEL to mention "piercing" of sides.

The Garment: around waist of Jesus: unlike later Jesus, not loin cloth; rather, white garment, gold trim; in the Old Testament, was understood as a "priestly" garment; the priests, for e.g., in Exodus wore gold,

blue, crimson yarn; ephod: little loin cloth-high priest was especially ornate; 2 Samuel; 1 Sam22:18; kill ephod: priest; ephod, David's dance has "priestly" character.

John 17: Francis' favorite passage; for their sake "sanctification" is priestly activity; High Priestly prayer; Jesus replaces High Priesthood of Israel as reflected in his garment.

Summary: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, Enthroned, Exalted; is reigning from Cross, priest, sanctifies, intercedes, sacrifices; these are all key themes in John's Gospel.

Demetrius Dumm: "glorify your Son so that he may glorify you." Jn.17:1. Biblical glorification of a person means the external manifestation of the person's deeper hidden nature. The ultimate role of Jesus is to make evident in our world the true, hidden nature of God... the full revelation of God's love and goodness."

Agony: Jesus is in control throughout; Jesus and Pilate? Who is really on trail here? Jesus says: "it is finished."

Question: Is John's Passion Narrative a Passion? Since Jesus is in control, John would not think of as Passion, BUT LIFTING UP OF GLORIOUS SON!

B1 Community (Christian)

Left	Right
Mary and John	Mary Magdalene; Mary, James

At Cana, other gospels name her.

Centurion; light and blood

Mary and John: Only Gospel of John is Mary and John not named: says Mother and Disciple whom he loved.

Jesus addresses her as "woman", serving symbolic function as John does;

"Beloved Disciple" Gospel itself never mentions as "John", the Apostle, but tradition did, but we know now, that it wasn't apostle;

First appears Beloved Disciple at last supper, reclining on Jesus bosom; Prologue John 1:18; Jesus described in NRSV as close to Father's heart, literally in "Bosom" of Father, source of God, makes God known, so, too, does God depict John, bosom shows us Jesus.

Crucifixion was intended to be public event.

Those observing the Cross:

Mt. 27:55-58

Mk. 15:40 Acts don't agree, begins to get mixed up.

Lk. 23:49

Jn. 19:25

Key: contrast: others make point: "at a distance", John says: "**near**" **cross**;

The two Marys: Maria Magdalene and Maria Jacobi (Mary of James)

*The Centurion written under him:

John has no centurion; the synoptic do; Gentile: Mt; Lk; healing Centurion's son; John 4: 2nd sign at Cana Galilee; Royal official; scholars say Jewish official (Mixing goes on)

Artist had in mind the Johannine Account: John 4:53, behind son's head are three (3) other foreheads; believed, plus whole household, artist brought another sheep, a Gentile.

Community of nine (9) persons:

Symbol of inclusive community of Jews and Gentiles; women and men; young and old; well-positioned and lowly. Paul in Galatians.

Behind community is a yellow, bright light; important in John's gospel is light of God; prologue; community lives in Jesus' light. "God is light."

Blood of Jesus Hands goes down arms drops into community of faith; Chapter Six of John, **Bread of Life Discourse**;

Blood hands and sides, flow onto Christian community so he can drink his blood; protected under arms; **Scholar Ray Brown; John is Reconstitution; a family of disciples**; Jesus on Cross brings about a new relationship; **inclusiveness** is key; John brings them near. John relocation: Son of Man is lifted up on Cross and draws all things to himself. **Does Francis make this connection between the lepers – the reconstituted family?** We are mothers, and brothers and sisters of Jesus when we....1LtF

C1 Small figures at the Bottom of the Cross

Bottom; what is it?

- **Rooster**; beak open; crowing; all 4 Gospels include; Jesus says at Last Supper; Peter, you will deny me three (3) times, and Peter denied Jesus.
- **2 Observers**; male; one on left and one on right; left appearance Roman 's spear, centurion Longinus, only in John; on right, no name, looks different—suggests, soldier who gave Jesus wine on sponge, by 10th century, Stephan, Father Mike says NO, no spear, sponge; look at John 19:37; Zech 12:10; Fr. Mike suggests it symbolizes “Jewish Leadership;
- **Angels**: (4 Gospels say) Mt. 28; Mk16; Lk. 24 and Jn 20
Wings open and folded; 3 pairs of 2 angles; 2 sets under arms; one on either side; pointing to the Glorified Christ.

Ascension; Golden garment is symbol of victory; purple victory; going up left hand-cross royal scepter; face has slight smile welcomed back by choir of angels (10); 5 on each side; almost all have names; feet of Jesus; This is Jesus of Nazareth; King of the Jews; think of Ascension; Acts 40 days: Acts separates out
In John; 40; same day as Easter, NOT 40 days; Acts represents Ascension as one movement, one moment of **GLORIFICATION**.

San Damiano Cross: Jesus goes to Father's right hand; John's Prologue; Jesus tells Nicodemus: goes not just to heaven, but Father's right hand; Early Christians; Old Testament; Psalm 110:1; enthronement of Christ, not cited in John's Gospel, but clearly important.

Hand (2) fingers: Medieval; Veni Spiritu; Finger of Father's right hand would fit Johannine context, not too convincing; Ascension often depicted with Jesus at Father's right hand.

*We see small figures at bottom, side and top.

Summary

Looking at slide (top); look at Cross and start at bottom and
go up; moving

Progressively through Passion of John; narrative flow; little visual symbols are clues; associate memory with what's going on;

Bottom; not what is depicted on bottom, BUT where is it likely that artist would depict passion of Jesus;
look at Structure of John. Two parts:

Part One (Ch. 1-12) Book of Signs

Part Two (Ch 13 ff) Book of Glory

Last Supper; could bottom be a Last Supper Scene?

Bottom of Cross; blood drips down; Last Supper, Cup

Rephrasing Question: We know from early sources; Francis stretched on earth; Francis ordered the Gospel of John; 6 days before Passover to be read (1 Cel.10); Chapter 13 of John, Last Supper; None of the Franciscan Sources mention where reading stops; For Francis it is a **Spiritual Inclusion:**

st represents Conversion - the end of conversion - and was to be read aloud.

Ewert Cousin aware of the coincidence of opposites resides in this cross:

Divine yet human

Crucified yet risen

In pain yet in majesty

Failure yet victorious

Sign of humanities great evil and sign of the Father's great love

Demetrius p. 75

The glorification that Jesus seeks in the presence of his Father is said to be "glory that I had in your presence before the World existed," Jn 17:5. Jesus is praying for the restoration of the glory he enjoyed as the Eternal Word prior to creation and prior to his mission in our human history... Also implied because he (Jesus) also says: "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me before the foundation of the world. Jn. 17:24 Jesus does not want to return to his previous glory and leave us behind. He has acquired friends during his mission on earth and he wants them (all of us) to return with him to the presence of his Father. We can scarcely imagine how delightful it will be to make this journey with him."