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One day, while St Francis was passing the run-down church known as the San Damiano, Francis heard an internal voice from his spirit telling 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.

The San Damiano cross is the large Romanesque rood cross that hung in the abandoned chapel near Assisi. While still in his early 20’s and seeking his place in the world, Francis of Assisi was praying before this cross when he heard the voice of God commanding him to “rebuild my church.”

It is because of this event in Francis’ life that the cross takes on such importance in the Franciscan tradition. All Franciscans cherish this cross as the symbol of their mission from God to commit their lives and resources to renew and rebuild the Church through the power of Christ. 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 was to teach the meaning of the event depicted and thereby strengthen the faith of the people.

San Damiano Cross was one of number of crosses painted with similar figures during the 12th century in Umbria. The name of the painter is unknown. Most of the literature on the subject is available only in Italian or French.

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An unknown Umbrian artist painted the Crucifix Icon in the 12th Century. There is strong Syrian influence, and history tells us that there had been some Syrian monks in the area. It is painted on wood (walnut) to which cloth had been glued. It is about 190 cm high, 120 cm wide and 12 cm thick. It is more than likely that it was painted for San Damiano church in order to hang it over the Altar as the Blessed Sacrament was not preserved in non-Parish Churches of those times. It was the case especially of those churches that had been abandoned and neglected as we know San Damiano had been. In 1257 the Poor Clares left San Damiano for San Giorgio and took the Crucifix with them. They have preserved the Cross carefully for 700 years.

For Eastern Christians, the Icon is a representation of the living God. By coming into its presence, for them, it becomes a personal encounter with the sacred,

through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the San Damiano Icon is then an opportunity for personal encounter with the transfigured Christ - God made man. The present Crucifix contains the story of the death, resurrection and ascension into glory. It expresses the total and universal Paschal Mystery of Christ. This Crucifix in its serene majesty portrays the presentation of St. John's Gospel where Christ's death is presented in its salvific dimensions. It is not surprising that Saint Francis was attracted to this Icon and that the inspiration for his life came from this Christ who spoke to him "Go repair my Church ...".

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The central figure of the icon is Christ, not only because of the relative size, but because Christ is a figure of light dominating the scene and giving light to the other figures: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Christ stands upright, not nailed. The eyes of Jesus are open: He looks out to the world, which He has saved. He is alive; the one who is eternal. Jesus' vestment is a simple loin cloth - a symbol of both High Priest and Victim. The chest, throat and neck are pictured as very strong. It symbolizes Jesus who gives the power of re-creation to His Disciples (John 22:23).

The largest figure is Jesus Christ, represented both as wounded and strong, standing upright and resolute. The bright white of the Lord's body contrasts with the dark red and black around it and, therefore, accentuates the prominence of Jesus. He projects the life of 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. This representation contrasts with the regal Christ portrayed on the cross in earlier centuries and the crucified Christ depicted generally throughout the Church since the beginning of the 14th century.

He breathed on His Disciples (John 20:22). The Greek word used recalls the moment of Creation (Gen 2:7).

The shadow over the face of Jesus is increased by the fact that the halo and face are tilted forward. It shows that the humanity of Christ veils the true glory of the Word. Behind the outstretched arms of Christ is His empty tomb, shown as a black rectangle.

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The next largest figures are the five witnesses of the crucifixion and witnesses of Jesus as Lord. On the left side are the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist, to whom Jesus entrusted his mother. On the right side are Mary Magdalene; Mary Clopas, Mother of James; and the centurion who in Matthew's Gospel account asks Christ to heal his son. Both Mary and Mary Magdalene have their hands placed on their cheeks to reflect extreme grief and anguish. The first four witnesses have halos because they are saints who gave their lives for the Lord.

As in John's Gospel, Mary and John are placed side by side. Mary's mantle is white meaning victory (Rev 3:5), purification (Rev 7:14); and good deeds (Rev 19:8). The gems on the mantle refer to the graces of the Holy Spirit. The dark red worn under the mantle indicate intense love, while the inner dress is purple - the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 26: 1-4). Mary's left hand is raised to her cheek. It shows her acceptance and love of John. Her right hand points to John while her eyes proclaim acceptance of Christ's words "Woman, behold your son..." (John 19:26). The blood drips on to John at this moment. John's mantle is of rose colour indicating eternal wisdom, while his tunic is white denoting purity. His position is between Jesus and Mary as is fitting for the disciple loved by both of them. He looks at Mary "Son, behold your Mother", but points to Christ.

Mary Magdalene: Mary Magdalene is next to Christ indicating her as very special. Her hand is on her chin indicates a confided secret – "He is risen". She wears scarlet, which is a symbol of love; her mantle of blue deepens this aspect.

Mary Clopas: Some authorities argue her to be the mother of James. She wears garments of an earthen colour, a symbol of humility, and her light green mantle that of hope. Her admiration of Jesus is indicated by the gesture of her hand.

The Centurion of Capernaum: He holds a piece of wood in his left hand, indicating his building of the Synagogue (Luke 7: 1-10).

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The little boy beyond his shoulder is his son healed by Jesus. The three heads behind the boy show "he and his whole household believed" (John 4: 45-54). He has his thumb and two fingers extended, a symbol of the Trinity; his two closed fingers symbolize the hidden mystery of the two natures of Jesus the Christ. "Truly He is the Son of God"(Mark 15:39). Peering over the left shoulder of the centurion is a small face of a boy. A close look reveals the tops of the heads of three others

beside him. This represents the centurion's son who was healed by Jesus and the rest of his family to show that "he and his whole household believed." (John 4:45-54)

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The three smaller figures are represented as witnessing the crucifixion. On the lower left is **Longinus**, the traditional name of the Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus with a lance. In the lower right is **Stephaton (Stephen)**, the traditional name for the soldier who offered Jesus the sponge soaked in vinegar wine after Jesus cried out "I thirst" (John 19: 28 -30).

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From within the semi-circle at the very top of the Icon, "He whom no eye has seen" reveals Himself in a benediction. This blessing is given by the right hand of God with the finger extended - the Holy Spirit. The Father gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to all because of the merits of the Christ's Passion.

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On the top of the cross, one sees 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 are crowded around, five of whom have their hands extended in a welcoming gesture to Jesus, who himself has his hand raised in the form of a greeting.

The Ascension is portrayed within the circle of red in the Medallion. There Christ is breaking out of the circle, holding a golden cross which is now His Royal Scepter. His garments are of gold - a symbol of royalty and victory. His red scarf is a sign of His Dominion and Kingship; exercised in love. Angels welcome Him into Heaven.

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IHS are the first three letters of the name of Jesus. The little bracket above indicates that it is shorthand. NAZARE is the Nazarene; REX is 'king' and IUDEORUM is 'of the Jews', as is reported in St. John's Gospel "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews".

Behind Christ is the **open tomb**; Christ is alive and standing over the tomb. The red of love overcomes the black of death. The gestures of the unknown saints at

His hands indicate faith. These could be **Peter and John at the empty tomb (John 20: 3-9)**.

There sat two groups of angels - animatedly discussing the scene unfolded before them (Cf. Jn 20:12). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not die but have life everlasting” (John 3:16).

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The Shape of the Cross

The shape of the Cross has been changed to enable the artist to include those who participated in the drama of the Passion. Note that the arms of the cross lift to Christ’s right indicating that the Good Thief (traditionally called Dismas) went to Heaven; while the left hand dips - the other thief did not.

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On the right side of the picture next to the left calf of Jesus, there is a small figure **of a fowl**. Some art historians have interpreted it to be a **rooster**, (Jesus’ denial by Peter); other commentators see it as a peacock, a frequent symbol of immortality in Early Christian art. The inclusion of the rooster recalls the denial of Peter who wept bitterly. The rooster also proclaims the new dawn of the Risen Christ, the true light (1 John 2:8).

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At the foot of the cross there is a damaged picture of six figures, two of whom have halos. In accordance with the traditions of the day, these six are the patrons of Umbria, the region surrounding Assisi: St. Damian, St. Ruffin, St. Michael, St. John the Baptist, St. Peter, and St. Paul. St. Damian was the Patron of the Church that housed the Cross and St. Ruffin was the Patron Saint of Assisi.

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The Mystical Vine

Around the Cross are various calligraphic scrolls which may signify the mystical vine “I am the vine, you are the branches...” (John 15), which also contain the words “Greater love has no one than this, that one lays down one’s life for one friends”. At the base of the cross there seems to be a section that looks like a rock –

the symbol of the Church. The seashells are symbols of eternity – a mystery hidden in the vast and timeless sea of eternity is revealed.

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Numbers

There are 33 figures in the Icon - Two Christ figures, 1 Hand of the Father, 5 major figures, 2 smaller figures, 14 angels, 2 unknown at His hands, 1 small boy, 6 unknown at the bottom of the Cross and one rooster. There are 33 nail heads along the frame just inside the shells and 7 nail heads around the halo.

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When the Poor Clares moved from San Damiano to the Basilica of Santa Chiara in 1257, they took the original San Damiano Cross with them and still guard it with great solicitude. It now hangs in the Basilica over the altar of the Chapel of the Crucifix – a reconstruction of the Church of Saint George, which was torn down to build the Basilica.