

The Cross as the Tree of Life in Franciscan Spirituality

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The picture of the Crucified, with the body contorted and disfigured by pain, is firmly imprinted in the Western imagination, and the physical suffering of Christ is a key theme in Franciscan spirituality. To illustrate this, one might look, for instance, at the large painted cross in the Church of San Francesco at Arezzo, in which the habited figure of Francis kneels before the Crucified, his head inclined towards the cross as he caresses the bloodied right foot of the Lord with his hands. Here is an image of true compassion, in this case, of Francis literally 'suffering with' his Crucified Lord. But there is more to be seen when we look back to some of the more iconic Franciscan images and to the written sources of Franciscan spirituality.

In this, the 800th anniversary year of the granting of the Rule of the Friars Minor, Franciscan brothers and sisters throughout the world have been encouraged to reflect on the cross of San Damiano in order to recall the origins of the Franciscan vocation. According to the earliest biographical record of Francis' life, Francis was praying alone in the dilapidated little rural church of San Damiano, outside the city of Assisi on the lower slope of Mount Subasio. From the cross, probably suspended above the altar, Christ addressed Francis directly saying: "My house is in ruins. Go, then, and rebuild it for me". This is only one of the two incidents where the calling of a Christian saint is mediated through a piece of liturgical art, but in Francis' case, what exactly was this image? The cross from the church of San Damiano, though now heavily restored, hangs in the Church of Santa Chiara in Assisi, and is probably one of the most reproduced and familiar images of the cross in the western Christian world. The painted cross is Byzantine in style and is more akin to the Eastern icon than to the naturalistic renderings of later renaissance paintings of the crucifixion. The painted figure of Christ is depicted with arms outstretched, as in a gesture of welcome, and although blood visibly trickles down from his pierced hands and feet and side, the figure faces the viewer without any signs of pain, with large open, almond shaped eyes, and with slightly smiling lips. In this way, the viewer is not so much invited to look into the painting, and there to contemplate a scene of physical suffering, but to return the attention, the gaze of the crucified One who is depicted in a full frontal way. The question which occurs when one stands before this image is, who exactly is looking at whom? The figure of the crucified in this cross of San Damiano, works in other words like a typical

Eastern icon, with its inverse perspective, and its prominent face and exaggerated eyes.

This feature, common in all early icons of the Christian East, recalls the Hebrew word 'panim', usually translated as 'face', carrying the deeper sense of 'presence', and which frequently occurs in the poetry of the Psalms. And so, if we return to the scene of Francis at prayer before the cross at San Damiano, as depicted by the fresco panel attributed to Giotto in the lower band of decoration on the north side of the nave of the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, what is shown is not simply Francis contemplating a crucified figure, but Francis being engaged by the crucified and risen Christ himself. So what this cross represents is not a historical single scene as such, but a painted medium which pictorially displays, one might almost say, 'unveils' the Christ who suffered and died before the face of the Father, and was raised by the power and glory of the Spirit. In other words, what we see in the cross of San Damiano is an icon of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection which meets the gaze of the viewer as he or she attentively focuses in prayer upon the image.

In art historical terms, there was a shift in style and emphasis in Italian paintings of the cross in the thirteenth century, which in all likelihood was in part influenced by the Byzantine icons of the 'Man of Sorrows'. A large crucifix from Giunta Pisano (c.1180-1250), commissioned by Brother Elias to hang in the newly constructed Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, reflected this shift in sensibility and artistic style. This crucifix, painted around 1228 to hang above the high altar in the Upper Church, depicted Brother Elias, the Minister General, embracing the foot of the cross. Although this crucifix is now lost, an imposing cross of this type, painted around 1236, is to be seen in the little Friary Museum of the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, in Assisi. In this depiction, the focus is on the 's' shaped figure of the Crucified, stripped naked, his head hanging forward, and with closed eyes. The figure, though not tortured, is now depicted as being dead on the cross. It is a realistic portrayal of the physical suffering of Jesus, but there is one particular feature in this image which invites comment, and that is the near diaphanous loincloth around the body. It reveals to the viewer the vulnerability of Jesus, and thereby exposes the incarnate Christ, as being flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. In this sense, the cross of Pisano is as much an icon of the incarnation as it is of the Passion.

The incarnation, celebrated on the feast of the Nativity of Christ, was undoubtedly at the heart of Francis' spirituality, and the story of how Francis, just three years before he died, arranged a Christmas night mass at the manger in Greccio is well documented and illustrated. Further, one may also draw attention to how as much space is given to the Christmas cycle of events as to the Passion in the decorative fresco scheme in the Lower Church Basilica of St Francis in Assisi.

The focus of Franciscan devotion, therefore, is on the whole Christ, and the whole saving mystery rather than exclusively on any single aspect or episode in the drama of salvation. Entirely consistent with this view is how the later

Bonaventure refers to both the cross and to Christ himself as 'the tree of life', and thereby coins the dominant Franciscan metaphor for depicting the saving work of God in Christ.

Pictorially, the image of the cross as the tree of life was developed and became a particular feature of art work commissioned by the Franciscans. A tree of life and Last Supper painted by Taddeo Gaddi in the second quarter of the fourteenth century is found in the Refectory (now the museum) of Santa Croce in Florence, and other stunning examples, commissioned by the Poor Clares include one in Monticello now in the Academia in Florence and in Milan. The close association between the cross and the Last Supper in Gaddi's Tree of Life suggests that we see the gifts of the Eucharist as the fruit of Christ's passion, and come to regard the crucifixion as a kind of planting. This imagery echoes the words in John's Gospel that it is only the seed which falls into the ground and dies which comes to bear much fruit. And in the fuller frame of the whole mystery of Christ, the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ comes to be seen as the divine work of renewing creation. In conclusion, then, we are led to say that in the Franciscan scheme of pictorial theology the cross is so related to creation that salvation itself can be seen as the 'greening' of the natural world! In a world increasingly conscious of the ecological crisis, such a view will have considerable resonance for us, and should strengthen our resolve to care for the environment in this fragile planet earth, so that all its creatures may, as Francis intimated, voice their praise to our Creator God. *f*

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