

THE SAN DAMIANO CROSS EXPLAINED

Toward the top of the cross, Jesus is fully clothed in 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 have their hands extended in a welcoming gesture to Jesus, who himself has his hand raised in the form of a greeting.

The largest figure is Jesus Christ, represented both as wounded and strong. 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.

The next largest figures are the five witnesses of the crucifixion. The first four have halos because they are saints who gave their lives for the Lord. On the left side of Jesus are the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist. At their feet is a smaller figure, Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus with a lance.

At the foot of the cross there are six faded 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. John, St. Michael, St. Rufino, St. John the Baptist, St. Peter and St. Paul.

At the very top of the cross is the Hand of God with two fingers extended. This is to be understood as the blessing of God the Father on the sacrifice of his Son.

At both ends of the crossbar are six angels, marveling over the crucifixion.

On the right side of Jesus, the three larger figures are Mary Magdalene; Mary, Mother of James; and the centurion who, in Matthew's Gospel account, asks Christ to heal his son. At their feet is a smaller figure, Stephaton, the soldier who offered Jesus the sponge soaked in vinegar wine. Peering over the left shoulder of the centurion is a small face with 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.

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. Along the lower right side of the shaft, there is a small animal, possibly a cat.

