

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT IS IT WE SEE?

THE CROSS

At the top of the San Damiano crucifix is the hand of God the Father. It is within half a semicircle—again the sign of perfection—with two of the fingers outstretched, which according to some scholars indicates the dual man and God nature of Christ, and with the other three fingers closed representing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I wonder, as Francis looked upon the cross, knowing the difficulties with his own father—how he viewed this outstretched hand of his Father in heaven.

FRANCIS' RESPONSE

One can look at the individual aspects of the San Damiano crucifix—such as the gesture of the hand of God, the number and details of the angels, or the imbedded image of the Resurrection in the risen Christ—or one can look at the arrangement as a whole, a trilogy. Surely, the unknown artist who arranged them in the original inspiration did so with a directed intent. Nothing is left to chance. All the images—singularly or in groupings—tell a story.

The hand of God, illustrated here, is symbolized in two outstretched fingers—the index and second finger of the right hand. The gesture is a symbolic statement of God's sovereign and supreme, singular position as the ultimate existence, as well as

the blessings coming forth from that gesture—blessings flowing down on all that is below it and part of its mystery of creation.

The animated angels are full of life; they seem to be a choir of talking, breathing and living creatures welcoming the risen Christ. In this icon they are the embodiment of spirituality, vibrant with the energy of life, of God and of the Son. These heavenly messengers situated beneath the hand of God, fashioned by God's creative intelligence, are abuzz with their task of witnessing to God's glory, and in that witness, are attending to the details of the fruition of his will. They were the heralds on the mountains when Christ was born in a manger, and they attended him in his tomb. Eternally vigilant, their actions are guided by the interior knowledge pressed into the ethereal nature of their beings. This nature is adoration and service. They wait in adoration; they listen and do. Theirs is the waiting without the need for time, theirs is the listening without doubt and theirs is the doing without hesitation or obstruction.

I knew a Benedictine archabbot named Leopold. He was someone I would tease in our fifteen-year relationship, first as college pastor to college student, then as archabbot to young working adult. He was the Benedictine quotient in my life, just as Francis and Clare had their Benedictine mentors. Father Leopold was my confessor and my wisest sounding board. When he became ill, I was granted permission to enter the cloister and visit him several times before he died. I sang and played my guitar for him, and he tried to sing with me the ancient hymn, the *Ultima*:

When our day of life is ending,
 Mary with your Son attending,
 Lead us home to thee we call,
 Virgin, Mother, Queen of all.

One snowy day in the forested hills around the abbey in western Pennsylvania, I broke off a piece of a blue spruce tree, to take in with me for him to smell and to handle in the sterile confines of his deathbed room. He loved it! For a long, long while he sniffed the pungent balsam odor and delighted in the sticky sap, the cold wet vanishing memory of melting snow, and the sharp blue-silver needles on the tawny limb. Life had entered his room and filled his mind and heart for a few moments with lightness and play. I told him I thought the pine branch, which was covered in snow, was the greatest gift I could bring him. He agreed. I told him that each year, at the first snow, I would know it was he shaking a branch playfully overhead, showering me from a celestial perch.

We left it at that, and when I took my last look at him in his room, his face already turned from me and from all in this world, he was sniffing and admiring the branch both in sadness and delight. At an earlier meeting he had asked me, “Where did it all go—my life?” I was stunned. I felt terrified for a moment that an archabbot wouldn’t know the worth of his whole life; and if he didn’t know at the end of his life, what possible chance would I have someday? But when I left and saw him the last time, I sensed that he had found his answers and knew he would find the rest soon.

A few days later, sitting alone in my kitchen, as large fluffy white flakes drifted past my window in Southwest Ohio—I knew he had just died, just then at that moment. I saw, in my mind’s eye four angels, beautiful handsome androgynous creatures, one at his head, one at his feet and two at his sides wrapping him, attending to him, preparing him. Their care and the solemn respect of their task sank into the sinews of my heart. When I called the archabbey, they told me that Leopold had died just a few minutes before.

I sat a long while that morning listening to the sounds of my house in winter. I watched the snow pile up on the windowpanes and followed the tracings of a cardinal over the snow-laden branches of the mulberry tree outside. To be a listening aspect of the day is to receive the magnitude of silence in the thunderous impact and elegance of a snowflake. Leopold had entered into the silence of the needles and snow. The four angels met him there, and I continue to listen for his wisdom in the whispers of the winter wind.

Surely, the artist of this crucifix sat in silent wonder, if at no other moment, then when he had completed the masterpiece. It does snow on occasion in Assisi, and I am certain that angels attend to the hopes and dreams and prayers of all the pilgrims that travel there and kneel in front of this same image, as Francis did eight centuries ago.

Perhaps Francis sat or knelt before it in the hushed silence of snowfall. Did this insular experience heighten his prayer, his wonderment? Did he feel angels near him? Was this the Father and brother he could embrace? The timeless nature of this cross speaks to us still if we wait in silent wonder. Its message is a message for the ages, for the church. Though spiritually based, the church is of human structure, and there will always be corruption, there will always be times of low morals and times when it seems the message is falling apart and in need of reform and repair. This is the natural tendency and course of events throughout the two thousand years of the church's existence. But God always restores the message, speaks again the message of the cross of San Damiano. Its message, addressed to those who kneel and pray, is "Go and repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin." It is intended for us individually, because we are the churches in ruin. Intuitively we know this. Great writers have touched upon it and invited us into their

mystical insights to help us see it. Shakespeare calls this tragic part of us “bare ruined choirs” in Sonnet 73.

OUR RESPONSE

I don't think there is much difference between life and death. The difference is as a leaf suspended in a flowing stream. The stream has movement and force, power. The leaf, as it is carried along in the stream, like the palm of your hand, can be palm down or palm up—same leaf, same hand; only, at one moment in time the leaf has one side up and one side down. There is no difference in the up or down. The moment of turning, which we call death or birth, from one to the other is the difference, and it is only a second in time—a moment of dynamic transition—not a static state at all. And we flow in this stream of life that is the energy of God.

So how then can we correctly “see” the Resurrection? Life, death, life? The dual nature of the San Damiano crucifix is before our eyes—in its essence. It is death and life. The cross tells us Christ is dead, but the paintings of images tell us Christ is alive. The transitional moment in the stream has turned the leaf from one side to another as time carries it along, and on Easter Sunday morning the leaf turns once again. The stages are largely irrelevant; the significant aspect is to remain in the stream, to remain in the grace of God. The image of the paint on the cross is but a slender aspect of the cross, like the edge of a leaf. The nature of the cross is twofold: the surface story (like the changing of the leaf's color in the fall) and the structure of its inner, physical nature. This cross is not unlike us. We are of a multidimensional nature. We appear to one another as who we are—our faces, our voices, our temperaments and talents. Our bodies are the physical structure of our nature. Yet we, since we live, are as the leaf in the stream of life,

we are animated from a third source, the *ruah*, the breath of God, the energy of God.

Since the cross is all about dying and death and resurrection, it seems appropriate to address these mystical yet real things. When I was once asked what I thought about death, I replied that I didn't think it meant that much to God. My friend asking the question seemed shocked and wanted to know what I meant. I told her that it is my understanding that God is energy (energy that cannot be created or destroyed, only changed in form). Since God is a continuum without beginning or end, then God is an entity that continues forever. And if we are in God and God is in us, then we will never end. We are but the two sides of the leaf—one side for a moment, which is our mortal state, and the other side, death, which is only a momentary state in the continuum where the life energy is returning to its maker to be transformed into life again. The energy that is life is God and the state of death and the state of life are merely the mortal flesh animated by the life energy or not—until the next energy enlivens another state of flesh, as the continuum is forever. The energy we experience as the uniqueness of self is really the multifaceted face of God. We are the momentary mortal aspect of God in our lifetime. And at the moment of our death, God's spirit returns to its purest state—the energy of spirit. This energy with our unique expression that we feel as self is the creativity of the Creator, flowing through our mortal condition and waiting at the portal of our free will to flow freely, harmoniously with all existence—past, present and future.

Our personality is a product of our human nature, infused with the divine, as it was with Christ. We can make choices. We cry. We love. We play. We are athletes, actresses and plumbers, because we are extensions of the limitless possibilities of God expressing God in us.

Why would God seek the infinitesimal? God didn't seek it—God is it. The collective finite particles are the whole. We are the very fabric of God. We are the fabric, which is God. To me this explains the collective unconscious Carl Jung explored—in that we seem to sometimes sense things or have a *déjà vu* moment inexplicably because we *are* part of the continuum of God and all that was and all that will be. Heaven isn't a distant place, it is within us—we carry it in us, the memory of its reality is indelibly pressed into the cells of our brain and flesh and it is the knowledge (unconscious knowledge in some, conscious in others) of being in the glory of God—the joy, the rush experienced in the pure essence of God—the center core, if you will, of the continuum of which everything else is only a part. This center is the pure essence of life. It is the moment of life and death and life again, the Power infinite. Where this energy of God is catalyzing all that is, is pure joy. Total oneness with the Maker—love separated by nothing—no flesh, no clothes, no thoughts, no worries or anxieties—just the exhilaration of oneness, acceptance, love. This is the joy of being absolutely happy without need or worry, without pain, without concern of it ever ending or leaving. This is Heaven.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SHAPE OF THE CROSS

THE CROSS

The shape of the San Damiano cross mirrors the floor plan of a Romanesque church, where the altar is located in the center—the heart. At the level of Christ’s arms there are many witnesses to the crucifixion. Moving upward, from the rock of the earth at the cross’s base, through the peopled earth, the shape narrows above Christ’s halo in the region of the heavenly hosts, as if to signify that we humans do not tread there, that it is a place reserved for ethereal beings.

FRANCIS’ RESPONSE

The San Damiano crucifix is unique, as was Francis’ response to it. In his lifetime Francis was raised as the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, became a knight, was imprisoned, gave up his inheritance, lived with lepers, started the beginnings of the Poor Clares, the Friars Minors and the secular Franciscans, met with a pope, journeyed to Egypt to speak to a sultan, claimed Lady Poverty as his bride, carried the stigmata on his body and was canonized a saint. His is a tough act to follow.

Francis began the long litany of aforementioned events at prayer before this crucifix. The Lord he met, the vision he saw, the courage he was given was enough for him to take the first steps into his journey. One of the greatest attributes of Francis

of Assisi is his recognition of that space on the cross that narrows where no humans dare enter because it is intended only for ethereal beings. His reverence for creaturehood is extraordinary. It is as if somewhere in the embrace between Christ and him, Francis saw or knew the hierarchy of the universe and accepted it.

Lowering himself to the plane of the other creatures, he called his body Brother Ass, using the same Brother or Sister salutation for many other things such as Brother Fire, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water. His was an inclusive existence because he humbled himself to be counted among the vast multitude of all that was created by the hand of God. For Francis, to have merely been part of God's thoughts enough to be the product of his creative expression was the endpoint, the culmination.

Francis counted himself blessed to be as lowly as a sparrow. We know from his writings and historical record that he identified with being among the creatures, not above them, where most humans place themselves.

OUR RESPONSE

Francis' charge was to go and repair the church; perhaps our charge will be to go and repair our family or our job, our environment or our relationship with someone, perhaps our relationship with God himself. The humility of living as a created being, equal to all others—and not above anyone or anything—gives a unique perspective to everyday existence. Anticipation is also a good thing. It keeps us striving for more—keeps us wide-eyed and seeking. If Francis had not sought again that day, that autumn in the thirteenth century, he would not have been present in the chapel with the cross to hear the command.