

# SURVEY THE WONDROUS CROSS:

A L E N T E N A R T E X H I B I T I O N

*When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died;  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

— ISAAC WATTS

## GUIDE TO YOUR LENTEN MEDITATION

**T**HE CROSS IS THE MOST READILY RECOGNIZED SYMBOL ON THE PLANET. We see it so often, depicted in works of art, used in books and advertising, decorating buildings, worn as a fashion accessory, it is in danger of losing its meaning for us.

### **A1. Survey the Wondrous Cross** (mixed media)

Consider the Cross as an abstract form. In its simplest reading, the Cross can be viewed as a “plus” sign, adding to life, not subtracting. Its shape recalls a human figure with arms outstretched, giving, embracing. The vertical line, reaching from earth to heaven, represents a link between God and humanity; the horizontal line, suggests a bond, connecting one person with another. What do you see in the sign of the Cross?

*Go into Room A1 and start on your far left.*

### **A2. Jerusalem Cross Triptych** (graphite and colored pencil on paper). How would you have made your mark?

This piece copies a cross of Coptic design, etched into a dome on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. To create these white and rose cross collages, I glued crumpled brown wrapping paper to wooden panels, using heavy layers of granular paint to suggest a background of unpolished stone. Feel free to touch them. Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulcher is absolutely full of talking stones, bearing witness to the faith of countless pilgrims who visited the shrine and left their mark. All down the walls of a stairwell from the main sanctuary to the Armenian Chapel one level below you can see hundreds of tiny crosses, carved row upon row into the rough, discolored stonework. There are Coptic crosses, Armenian crosses, Crusader crosses, and Maltese crosses. Some are mere scratches. Others are lop-sided. There are large ones and small ones. A few show a touch of artistic talent. No two are alike. And not a single name can be seen scrawled among them. Pilgrims in times past saw no need to proclaim they had been there in the big,

bold letters of modern graffiti. A simple sign of the cross was enough.

**A3. The Road to Golgotha** (mixed media). This abstract collage of color-pencil drawings, pebbles, and corrugated cardboard was inspired by a visit to Jerusalem and a walk along the Via Dolorosa, the route Christ is supposed to have followed on the way to his Crucifixion. The drawings show graffiti left by pilgrims to the Holy City. The stones recall the rugged terrain of Golgotha. The cardboard suggests the wood of the Cross. If you like, feel the surface of the panel, the smooth, irregularly-placed pebbles and the grooves in the heavy paper. Reflect on the Crucifixion as an event taking place in real time, when as Theologian Francis Schaeffer once put it, “you could have reached out to touch the cross and picked up a splinter in your finger.”

**A4. In His Image** (mixed media) – explores the mysterious way believers share in Christ’s Crucifixion, “as all of us...seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image...” (2 Corinthians 2: 18, NRSV) The crosses, here, have arms of equal length and width, but this uniform shape comes in 25 variations. Some are cut-out crosses. Others are cross-shaped holes in cardboard squares. All are of different colors, set on a variegated, multi-textured background. This diversity in unity reflects our personal experience of spiritual transformation, as we conform to Christ’s image, each in our own way.

### **A5. Old Rugged Cross** (mixed media)

For Christians, the Cross is more than just an identifying logo. It refers to a specific historical event in 1st Century

Palestine: the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, nailed hands and feet to wooden crossbars. As the familiar hymn goes, “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross/The emblem of suffering and shame.” We tend to forget how shocking images of the Crucifixion would have been for early Christians, who, probably, had the same feelings about the Cross we now have for the electric chair. I conceived of this piece as an abstract study, showing a red cross against a chaotically-patterned background (an old vinyl table cloth, I used in my work area!) The color proved too dark, so, I began experimenting with lighter shades, impatiently repainting the cross until the surface began to warp and shred apart, revealing the original red layer underneath. The effect was visually unsettling, recalling torn human flesh. I was tempted to start again but decided to leave the shape just as is. Images of the Cross ought to disturb us.

The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 2:19-20 (NRSV):  
*“I have been crucified with Christ: and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”*

**A6. Signs & Symbols** (acrylic on panel) – shows the Anchor Cross, the Cross and Orb, and the Armenian “Tree of Life” Cross, alongside other traditional early Christian emblems: the sign of the fish (“fish” in Greek is an acronym of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior), ICXC, the Greek abbreviation for Jesus Christ, and Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet (see Revelations 1:8.) These signs and symbols have been painted as a stylized mosaic wall, a form of Early Christian art, brought to perfection in the Byzantine era. When the Pharisees told Jesus during his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem to tell his cheering followers to quiet down, he replied: “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” (Luke 19:40 RSV) I had a sense of what it means for stones to speak, while looking at the decorations on Early Christian sarcophagi in the Basilica of St. Apollinaire, near Ravenna, Italy. These were moving reminders in marble of Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Christ and the life to come. St. Apollinaire tomb engravings of a cross with Alpha and Omega signs and a dove, hovering over a baptismal fount, were the inspiration for these pieces.

**A7. Agnus Dei** (mixed media)

This piece may startle you, perhaps, seem a bit irreverent. I want you to do a “double take” and really look at the figure on the Cross. This image is a far cry from “prettified” presentations of the Crucified Christ, which became the norm in European sacred art, after

Renaissance artists rediscovered the human body and perfection of form came to be associated with holiness. In fact, it is a composite collage, made from artistic representations of the Crucifixion from the medieval to modern period. The head is by French Artist Georges Rouault (to my mind, the master of contemporary sacred art!), the hands are by German Expressionists Otto Dix and Emil Nolde, the upper torso by Michelangelo, the lower torso by 20th century British Artist Graham Sutherland, the loins by Italian Renaissance Painter Giovanni Bellini, the knees from the magnificent 16th Century Isenheim altarpiece by the German artist, Matthias Grunewald, the feet from a medieval Spanish polychrome sculpture (artist unknown), and the halo from an Ethiopian processional cross.

**A Lamb of God for all ages!**

O Sacred Head, now wounded,  
With grief and shame weighed down,  
Now scornfully surrounded  
With thorns Thine only crown.  
O Sacred Head, what glory,  
What bliss, till now was Thine!  
Yet, though despised and gory,  
I joy to call Thee mine.

– PAUL GERHARDT

**A8. Alpha and Omega Cross** (mixed media)

**A9. Descent of the Dove** (mixed media).

**A10. Coptic Cross** (mixed media)

This series of images explores how the sign of the Cross has served as a Christian witness down the ages. The earliest depictions of the Cross can be found in the Catacombs of Rome, where it was often depicted as an anchor or suggested by the Chi-Ro monogram, combining X (Chi) and P (Ro), the first two Greek letters in “Christ.” After Constantine defeated rivals for the imperial throne in 312 CE, inspired by a vision of the Cross, he legalized Christianity the following year, and cross imagery spread throughout the Roman Empire, although actual depictions of the Crucifixion do not appear until the 5th Century.

*Please move to Room A3*

## *Starting in Room A3*

Let's shift our focus in the next three pictures away from images of the Cross to portraits of Christ, the "Sacred Head, now wounded." Since the Gospel narratives provide no physical description of Jesus, artists down the centuries have puzzled over the problem of how to portray a Christ both human and divine. Stories developed about miraculous images, unmade by human hands. In the Latin West, believers revered a holy portrait, appearing on a towel, which a woman named Veronica ("true icon") had used to wipe the face of Christ on his way to Golgotha (an event recalled in the sixth Station of the Cross.)

**B11. Veronica's Veil** (mixed media) – offers a version of this image with strong black outlines in the style of Georges Rouault, painted on a course dish cloth.

**B12. The Wounded Shepherd** (acrylic on paper) presents a modern variation on over-sentimentalized images of the Good Shepherd. This is no gentle Jesus, meek and mild, but a rugged Christ whose hands bear the marks of nails, a shepherd, who "lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11, NRSV)

**B13. Made Without Hands** (acrylic on canvas) – follows the pattern of traditional Eastern Orthodox icons of another divine image, which Jesus is said to have imprinted, himself, on a linen face cloth, sent to heal the ailing King of Edessa.

**B14. Spanish Passion** (watercolor, ink, graphite, color pencil on paper) places you above and behind the Cross, giving an overview of faces in the crowd: indignant, indifferent, mocking, mournful, distraught. This unusual point of view was inspired by a small sketch in ink by 16th Century Spanish Mystic, St. John of the Cross, in which you look on the Crucified Christ, as if floating above the Cross. Imagine what emotions you might have experienced had you been a bystander at the Crucifixion.

**B15. Stations of the Cross** (graphite, ink, colored pencil on poster board).

Pilgrimage to the Holy Land was a dangerous and costly enterprise in the Middle Ages, so, Christians in Europe did the next best thing – they began acting out Christ's walk to his Crucifixion in their home churches, a meditative exercise, remembered in Worshippers would process up and down the side aisles of the nave, pausing at selected spots, usually marked by plaques or artwork, to

remember the events of Good Friday with hymns and prayers. The number of these "stations" was, eventually, set at fourteen. This series of drawings, intended for private devotion, follows the traditional sequence, beginning with Christ's condemnation by Pilate and his acceptance of the Cross and ending with his deposition from the Cross and entombment. Along the way to Golgotha, Christ stumbles once; encounters his mother, Mary; gets help to bear the Cross from Simon of Cyrene; leaves Veronica an image of his holy face on a cloth; stumbles a second time; speaks to the women of Jerusalem; and stumbles a third time, before he is stripped of his clothes and nailed to the Cross. I have added a fifteenth image, recalling the Resurrection. Starting at the last panel at the bottom left, make a pilgrimage with your eyes, now, along the twisting Via Dolorosa, turning left down the central row, proceeding right along the top tier until you reach the golden cross.

Just shifting your point of view can reveal something new in the old and familiar. The next set of images present the traditional Crucifixion scene from three different perspectives.

**B16. Still Life** (acrylic on panel). As the title implies, this is a study of real objects: a brightly painted wooden crucifix from Honduras, placed among stones, gathered from beaches on the island of Cyprus. We don't view this painted panel as we would an ordinary still-life, say, of artfully arranged fruit in a china bowl. Such is the power of cross imagery and its many associations that seeing these objects, we recall the Passion story: the hill of Golgotha and the Crucifixion; Christ, rising from the tomb, carved from rock.

**B17. Beneath the Cross** (acrylic on canvas) – is modeled on medieval European paintings of Christ's death, where wealthy patrons paid artists to portray them, kneeling at the foot of the Cross in positions usually reserved for the Virgin Mary and St. John. It was, no doubt, a form of self-advertisement but also reflected a new type of piety, in which believers were drawn to the humanity of Christ and sought to identify in some personal way with his physical sufferings.

**B18. Ethiopian Crucifixion** (acrylic on panel) reminds us of the universality of the Crucifixion story, depicted, here, with the bright color palette and symbolism of Ethiopian Orthodox iconography.

*Please move to the hallway leading to the main entrance.*

**19. The Vision of St. Francis** (mixed media) This collage, commemorating a moment, when the contemplation of an image of the Cross actually turned the Christian world upside down! In 1205, Francis of Assisi was praying before a 12th century icon of the Crucifixion in the derelict Chapel of San Damiano, just outside his hometown of Assisi, when he heard the voice of the Crucified Christ, telling him to “go, Francis, and repair my church, which you see, is falling into ruins.” Francis took the message literally, at first, and set about fixing the San Damiano Chapel, but his zeal to live an authentic Christian life would eventually “repair” the entire medieval Roman Catholic Church through the founding of the Franciscan order. This collage incorporates an image of the miraculous San Damiano crucifix in the very center. The kneeling St. Francis, to the left, comes from a fresco of The Miracle of the Crucifix, traditionally attributed to Giotto, in the upper church of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. You might like to take a moment, now, to read the following

**Prayer Before the Crucifix by St. Francis**

Most High Glorious God,  
Enlighten the darkness of my heart.  
Give me right faith,  
Sure hope,  
And perfect charity.  
Fill me with understanding  
And knowledge  
That I may fulfill  
Your Commands.

*Our Lenten meditation ends with this final piece.*

**20. Take Up Your Cross** (mixed media)

This collage pays tribute to a modern “sacred art installation,” affirming the enduring power of the Christian faith: the Hill of Crosses in Siauliai, Lithuania. I first learned about this remarkable pilgrimage site from a BBC documentary, showing a hillside, bristling with thousands of crosses of different sizes, shapes, colors and materials, gathered together in a jumbled heap. Although the tradition of leaving crosses at Siauliai may date back to the Middle Ages, this unique form of Christian witness found special expression during the Soviet era, when the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church suffered persecution.

Three times the former Communist regime bulldozed the site, even covering it with sewage and trash, only to find crosses appearing again, as if sprouting from the earth. I imagined Lithuanian believers in the thousands carrying their crosses to Siauliai and thought of the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:24 (NRSV): “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Like the crosses in this collage and at Siauliai, our crosses must surely be as unique as we are as people – each one just fitting the hollows of our shoulders, as heavy as we have the strength to bear. You have seen images of the Cross in multiple forms throughout this show. As you leave this place, are you willing to take up your cross?

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I hope these meditations on the Cross have brought new meaning to the Lenten season for you. Please come again and repeat the cycle of reflections. If you would be interested in viewing more religious art with commentaries, I invite you to visit my website: [www.sacredartpilgrim.com](http://www.sacredartpilgrim.com).

May God’s peace be with you!

— *John Alan Kohan*