

Via Crucis
at Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church



*Fourteen Bas-Relief Sculptures by
Federico Severino*

Via Crucis



About the Artist

Italian sculptor Federico Severino is well-known in Italy where his artwork is on display at many churches and basilicas, including the Pantheon in Rome and the Cathedral of his native Brescia. Severino's work inspired by sacred themes has garnered acclaim by critics and the press in Italy, and he has participated in a number of exhibitions held at important public spaces and

private galleries in Milan, Venice, Bergamo, Monza, Firenze, Brescia, Pietrasanta, Turin, Positano, and Capri. His works are also permanently displayed in various public spaces and private art collections, and included in the permanent collection of Pisa's Centro Arte Moderna.

Symbolic Elements

This “Way of the Cross” is a *“unicum”* in its genre, both in its formal and theological aspects, and is the final product of an intense and free confrontation between art and theology.

The symbolism, with its medieval flavor shapes the multiple elements which make it up, conferring on the whole journey a sense of poetry, of mysticism.

The last events of the life on this earth of Jesus of Nazareth: *“which was a prophet mighty in deed and word, before God and all people”* (Luke 24:19), are represented here in a crescendo of *pathos*, redolent with arcane memories and vivid images.

Before viewing each individual bas-relief, some of the elements, which make up the delicately balanced interpretative pivot of this complex work, are presented.

THE CROSS

The Cross is the focal element of this journey, appropriately called: *“The Way of the Cross.”*

The tender wood of the cross, naked and pure, becomes a symbol of the stripped and tortured body of Christ.

Surrounding the wood of the cross, and therefore Christ on his way toward Golgotha, the “Mystery of Salvation” manifests itself in a crescendo of figurative dialogues between the characters, symbols and continual biblical references.

THE CROWN OF THORNS

It is impossible to separate the disgrace of the Cross from the outrage of the Crown of Thorns.

In order to render perceptible the increasing suffering caused by Crown of Thorns to Christ’s head, the artist creates, in a dramatic climax, a more sculpted image of pain in each scene, adding to each

station new and more painful and stinging thorns, to to the point that in the last bas-relief it appears as a sort of “Helmet” of pain.

THE FACE OF CHRIST

The figurative presence of Christ in this “Way of the Cross,” has been synthesized, almost exclusively, in the image of his tortured, suffering face, rendering it more fundamental and more incisive. Thus, the Cross and the Man of the Cross become one in this journey, the *Way of the Cross*; the result is the indivisible bond between Jesus and his Cross.

THE OCTAGON

In all the bas-reliefs which depict the horrible gallows of the Cross, there is an octagon which surrounds and engraves the face of Christ. This octagon recalls the “eighth day,” the “day with no sunset,” the day of reckoning, to which Christ, with his sacrifice definitively opens the doors.

THE LAMB

We read in the book of the Prophet Isaiah: *“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.”* (Isaiah 53:7)

The Gospel according to John tells us of how John the Baptist, seeing Jesus pass by, exclaimed: *“And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God.”* (John 1:36) Inspired by these suggestive images, with pregnant symbolic parallelism, the figure of Christ – the Lamb of God, is juxtaposed with that lamb who, step after step, follows the real Lamb who takes away the sin of the world along the *Way of the Cross*.

Jesus is condemned to death

In this first bas-relief, with its simple, reduced-to-the-bone structure, all our attention is captured by the figure of a man, betrayed, humiliated and fully aware of the fact that his earthly existence is about to be brought to certain end at the hand of another human being.

At the center of the scene, as if from a balcony, with rigorous stylistic-theological coherence, the figure of Jesus of Nazareth appears in the exact instant in which the iniquitous false trial, which will end with his death on the cross at Golgotha begins.

“Then Jesus came forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, ‘Behold the man!’” (John 19:5) His emaciated, serene face, which shows no desire for revenge, is the face of a man who has been through the “night of the nights,” where the darkness has imprisoned and enveloped not only the body but mind and soul as well.

The night which has just concluded has been a “night of vigilance,” of betrayal, spitting, insults and torture, just as he had preannounced to his scandalized disciples: *“And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him”* (Matt. 20:19); now those predictions have come to pass: *“And the soldiers, braided a crown of thorns, and put on his head, and put on him a purple cloak. Then they approached him and said, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ striking him on the face.”* (John 19:2-3)

At Jesus’ back, almost halo-like, as a rising sun, is the hint of a crown of thorns. This image will become ever more present during the course of the Stations of the Cross; deeper, more painful, more evident as an instrument of suffering and of death, of redemption and salvation.

Surrounding Jesus there is an empty space which could be called a “Non-Place” or rather “the Place of the Prince of

Darkness,” the “Lord of Nothing” who in this moment makes the atrocious arrogance of his presence known with three expressions of flattery.

“Power,” here exercised arrogantly prevaricating justice, through the image of an elegantly dressed outstretched arm, hand rich with rings, and a finger pointed in a false accusation.

“Earthly Glory,” here represented by powerful lances, heralding trumpets, and the monogram of the Roman Empire S. P. Q. R., which brings to mind the glory of the most important empire of all times.

“Wealth,” here the fruit of a miserable exchange, is represented in a sack overflowing with coins, thrown to the ground: *“Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests. And said unto them, ‘What will you give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver.”* (Matt 26:14-16)

Finally, in the upper left corner, enclosed in a solid panel, solemn and imperious, the first word which begins the walk toward salvation that is revealed by the Stations of the Cross, “*Ecce.*” At the foot of the balcony, from which a slim and unimposing figure of Christ appears in spectral solitude we find the second word pronounced by Pilate after crowning Jesus with thorns: “*Homo.*” (John 19:5)

Yes, Christ is really the “*man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*” (Is. 53:3a); he is the Man who incarnates all the pain in the world, the Man who gives new sense to suffering and death, the Man through whom history may free itself from Power, Glory and Wealth, forms of flattery which suffocate interior freedom and transform a man free in a slave.



Jesus bears the cross

The terrible gallows of the cross appear in this scene, almost like a tree, uprooted from rocky soil and leaning to the right, initiating the slow, painful, knowing walk toward salvation.

In the middle of the cross and inscribed in the octagon, the sweet and compassionate face of Christ expresses the deep and profound sentiments of one who is determined to carry out, without reserve, the will of the Father. *“O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”* (Matt 26:39)

A hand decisively and firmly grasps the crown of thorns and with it the cross, which thus begins to inflict its terrible pain: only Christ’s willing acceptance of this pain will bring about the Will of the Father – Salvation. *“And he, bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of the skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha.”* (John 19:17)

Under the sun, shining high in the sky, the phrase *“Ave Crux”* is placed on the right side of the horizontal arm of the cross, incised into a disjointed cube emerging from a square space carved into the wood. This salutation illustrates how the Mystery of the Cross was accepted willingly and freely by Christ: *“Who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame.”* (Hebrews 12:2)

Opposite, on the horizontal arm of the cross, the holocaust of the son of Abraham is depicted, with the sacrifice of the son of God.

In fact, in the book of Genesis we read, “And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said: *“My father.”* And he said, *“Here am*

I, my son” And he said, *“Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.”* (Gen 22, 7-8)

The belt wrapped around the waist of the young boy reveals his identity: “Isaac.” He is Isaac, the son of Abraham, and on his own right shoulder he carries the wood which should have served for his own death, while with his left hand it is as if he is helping Christ, sharing his burden to carry the wood to be used for a sacrifice from which, this time, Christ will not be saved.

Above Isaac’s head, carved into a square space in the horizontal arm of the cross, a young and meek lamb appears, ready to be sacrificed, in yet another parallelism.

In the lower right corner two yoked, laden marching oxen remind us at the beginning of this journey through the Stations of the Cross of the words that Jesus used to define the unconditional terms one must surrender to in order to follow him: *“Come to me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* (Matt 11:28-30)

Two palm trees and several lines in the background contribute, utilizing the staccato technique, to the creation of an atmosphere which permeates the entire scene, and renders, notwithstanding the sobriety of images, a sense of unity and harmony.



Jesus falls for the first time

On the basis of theological principal which affirms that: “*Quod assumptum non est, sanatum non est*” (Gregorio Nazianzeno, *Epist. 101 to Cleodionium*) the third, seventh and ninth bas-reliefs of the *Way of the Cross* present the ever-increasing suffering of Christ, who repeatedly falls to the ground, taking on fully the pain which has come into the world through sin, and therefore redeeming it. In a parallelism of rich spiritual implications, these falls are placed in reaction to the first Fall in the Garden of Eden, with its three salient moments and their tragic consequences.

Jesus first fall to earth is represented as a form of salvation relating to the focal moment of Eve’s disobedience, and therefore of Adam’s. It is placed in the upper left corner of the bas-relief, at the bottom of the cross which has fallen to the earth, and represents the moment of transgression, when Eve takes the forbidden fruit from the *Tree of Good and Evil*.

It is a sunny day, and while Adam rests, Eve is portrayed in the proud act which is the foundation of Original Sin: “*For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also to her husband with her; and he did eat.*” (Gen 3:5-6)

The Cross, as it falls to the ground, awakens the devil, who since the fall of Adam and Eve, has brazenly kept their souls prisoner. As he comes out, incredulous and dumbfounded, he finds before him the face of the son of God, “*Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found*

in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth and things under the earth; and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:6-11)

On the horizontal arm of the cross, at the axis with the disheveled and terrified figure of the devil and the meek face of Christ, the identity of that suffering yet serene face of a Human God set in a hexagonal space is revealed: in fact, we read “*Ego Sum.*”

In this holy and not-to-be pronounced name with which He manifested himself to Moses on Horeb: “*And God said to Moses: “I am what I am!”.* And he said: “*Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: I am hath sent me unto you .*” (Ex 3:14)

The crown of thorns continues to inflict tremendous pain on Christ and yet, at the same time seems to point toward the sun, which illuminates the deepest and most hidden regions of the earth and the underworld.

The serene face of Christ announces authoritatively to the devil that his seeming victory is about to be definitively transformed into defeat: “*Therefore as by the offense of one judgement came upon all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.*” (Rom 5:18)

In the bottom right corner there is an image of a courageous lamb, who although on the brink of collapse, has the strength and the courage to look his adversary directly in the eye.



Jesus meets his mother

Along his painful journey, here Jesus finds consolation – his mother Mary. The cross, leaning in a counterclockwise sense, illustrates how this meeting between mother and son is a moment of tenderness and memories. The figure of Mary, just as Christ's, is carved into the wood of the cross to underscore her role as co-redeemer. There is intense dialogue, completely internal, redolent with compassion and the capacity to suffer one with the other, between the Mother and Son, Redeemer and the Co-redeemer: both are seen as the Lamb of God. Their serene faces are well aware that this is the precious and favorable time for mercy, the hour of salvation, and the dawn of new creation.

With one hand Mary embraces, pulls to herself, and welcomes her son and the cross of his extreme sacrifice in a totally and profoundly shared moment. The crown of thorns here seems to sting less, because all the thorns, all the pain, and all the suffering have been taken into the heart of the Blessed Virgin.

The prophecy made by Simeone, “*just and pious man*” (Luke 2:25) is now about to come true. “*Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts are revealed.*” (Luke 2:34-35)

The crown of thorns and the wood of the cross seem to expand, creating a crevice which allows all of the suffering and all of the love in the world flow. At the top of the vertical arm of the cross, an angel who holds the crown of thorns reminds us of the angel who announced to Mary that her time had come and that she was to be the vessel through which God's promises would be carried out: “*And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin was called Mary.*” (Luke 1:26-27)

On the horizontal arm of the cross two panels illustrate the encounter. On the left side, the word “*Mater*” carved into a circle

which seems to be the sun, made more human by the presence of a cleaning cloth, reveals who the strong woman at the foot of the cross really is.

On the right side, as a reminder of the mystery of the incarnation, what seems to be straw appears. “*And so it was that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room in the inn.*” (Luke 2:6-7a)

Above Mary's head the polar star can be seen, indicating the Virgin as “safe haven” in the hour of the trial and tribulation. At the foot of the cross are the words that Mary pronounced to the Angel at the moment of announcement of her divine maternity, and which contain the whole plan of a life lived in the name of constant humility and coherence: “*Ecce Ancilla.*” In fact, in the Gospel according to Luke we read: “*And Mary said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”*” (Luke:1:38a)

At the foot of the composition are two suggestive images which further illuminate Christ's extraordinary encounter with his mother. The first derives from prayer which Dante Alighieri makes St. Bernard recite in the XXIII Canto of his “Paradise:” “*Oh Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son! / Created beings all in lowliness / Surpassing, as in height above them all; / Term by the eternal counsel pre-ordained; / Ennobler of thy nature, so advanced / In thee, that its great Maker did not scorn, / to make Himself his own creation; / for in thy womb rekindling shone the love / Revealed, whose genial influence makes now / This flower to germin in eternal peace.*” (1-9)

Jesus is represented here as the seed which in Mary's virginal womb brought to bloom a host of saints, here represented by a flowering palm. The second image is of a lamb who is tenderly feeding her offspring.



Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene

The elements which compose the piece describing the encounter between Jesus of Nazareth as he moves toward Golgotha and Simon of Cyrene as he returns from the country describe help given unwillingly, without freedom of choice or solidarity.

Under a leaden and threatening sky, dark and lashed by wind, where hostile and spectral elements of nature remind us of the curse of Eden: *“Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of your life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread”* (Gen 3:17b-19a), a man is obliged, against his will, to help the prisoner condemned to death, Jesus of Nazareth, who is now drained of all his strength and might succumb before he arrives at the gallows which await him at the summit of Golgotha: *“And they compelled one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross.”* (Mark 15:21)

The cross, which seems to be falling to the ground given Christ’s waning strength, is solidly supported by Simon’s strong arms, who strikes the green wood with an angry hand.

Simon of Cyrene’s face shows all his anger, his rancor, and his aversion to being obliged to help this man, condemned to death, whom he met by chance on his return home.

After a long and exhausting day in the fields with his sons Alessandro and Rufus, walking home Simon was certainly expecting some well-deserved rest; instead, he earned a place in history. Although Jesus does not speak, does not explicitly communicate with the man unwilling to help him, his teachings

ring loudly and solemnly for all men: *“When you shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say: “We are unprofitable servants.” we have done that which was our duty to do.”* (Luke 17:10)

These severe words from Christ’ teachings must be tied, however, to others much more consoling: *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord”* (Matt 25:21), and without a doubt Christ will have proffered these words to his reluctant helper, once he has reached his Kingdom.

From the octagon, the face of Jesus, much more serene gives thanks for the help received, leans forward in an attempt at an impossible dialogue; his helper, prisoner of his rage over his task which he considers iniquitous and forced, has no intention of sharing anything with this man condemned to an ignominious death.

The crown of thorns is inflicting more and more pain, as is the walk toward Golgotha under the weight of a cross which with every step becomes heavier and heavier.

On the ground, arid, rocky, to be tilled, plowed, and seeded, are the tools of Simon of Cyrene’s trade; he spends his whole life in the fields of Judea in order to buy a crust of bread for himself and his poor family.

Finally, carved as if on a large irregular stone, placed on the bottom part of this frame, a verb illuminates and explains the whole scene: *“Angariaverunt.”* (Mark 15:21)



Veronica dries the face of Jesus

In this bas-relief a static cross, placed in a perpendicular manner, leaning slightly forward as if to welcome Veronica's gesture of pity, who in a dangerous outburst of love wants to get close enough to Christ, humiliated and suffering, in order to dry his bloody and disfigured face with a linen shroud.

The sun blazing, stands out in the sky in the right-hand corner of the scene, and confers a spiritual significance to the luminous act of charity and love carried out by this intrepid woman.

In the middle of the composition, through a thin shroud we see the lifeless features of the face of Christ; the rest of the shroud wrapped around the crown of thorns, and almost covers it, symbolizing the intention to alleviate the bitter pain caused by its stinging prickles.

Here Veronica is a courageous young woman full of life, who, suspended between heaven and earth, not only dares to capture the gaze of Christ, but proceeds with her intention to get close to him, to touch him and to give him aid: a gesture of human pity and unconditional charity.

On the left side of the horizontal arm of the cross, we find inscribed in a hexagonal geometric figure, an expression which is fundamental to the teachings of Jesus. "*Mihi fecistis.*"

Jesus in fact said to his friends: "*Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*" (Matt 25:40)

We do not know if Veronica, whose name means "vera icona" – true icon, heard these words, but certainly, in this moment when Jesus takes on the appearance of a child, she alone has the courage and the strength to serve him readily, with no ulterior motives.

On the right side of the horizontal arm, carved into the actual wood of the cross in order to underscore the profound, intimate and indissoluble ties between Christ, his teachings and his cross, we find the *incipit* of the Fifth Beatitude: "*Blessed are the merciful.*" (Matt 5:7a)

The compassionate Christ, who proclaimed in the Beatitudes, the "*Magna Carta*" of his teachings, the saving values of mercy and understanding, sees the first precious fruits of his work, in this hour of raw pain, in the unpremeditated gesture of Veronica.

At the foot of the composition, in the right corner, we see the image of an adult lamb tenderly licking its offspring. This natural gesture, simple and eloquent, which could be called "merciful," brings us back both mentally and visibly to the teachings of Jesus.

In the background of this scene there is a palm tree in full bloom, the significance of which is that compassion is not shown through eloquent words, but through concrete facts and gestures, just as Veronica's gesture was concrete and efficacious.

In the left corner, two palm trees contribute to creation of a serene perspective.

Finally, surrounding the bas-relief, all along the frame, lovely embroidery offers another point on which to reflect. This highly symbolic element reminds the observer that the spirit of Christ is present even in the "last," who awaits a concrete gesture of respect, of solidarity, and love.

The entire bas-relief appears as a shroud, to be placed on the face of Christ who lives throughout the centuries in the souls of children, of the poor and of the oppressed.



Jesus falls a second time

This bas-relief, which represents Jesus' second terrible fall to the ground, relates to salvation in that it depicts the moment in which, as the book of Genesis poetically narrates, God walks through the Garden of Eden as the day is breaking, lovingly searching for his creature, whom he does not find.

In the upper left-hand corner, sculptures and engravings of anatomical figures represent the visible manifestation of man's awareness of his guilt, his nudity, and the resulting search for an impossible place to hide from the all-seeing eyes of God: *"And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, 'Where art thou?' 'And he said, 'I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' And he said, 'Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not to eat?'" And man said: "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the woman, "What is this thou hast done?" And the woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat."* (Gen 3:9-13)

In this second fall of Christ, the cross, the gallows, thrown to the ground, forcefully wedged into the ground, tilling it, figuratively knocking vigorously for the second time at the door to the underworld, causing the devil to escape, and finally awakening the souls who lay in the shadow of death from primordial times, prisoners of the underworld, from their deep sleep.

The ancient serpent, surprised, incredulous and terrified, trying

harder and harder to escape from this terrible unexpected event, seeks in vain a new, impossible place to hide and find refuge.

On top, at the foot of the ruined vertical arm, carved into a cube, the Latin expression *"Qui tollit"* strongly reveals the sense of the mysterious repeated falls to the ground of the man who, after his previous fall, had revealed his real name, *"Ego sum."*

Yes, he is the son of God, God himself, ready to take upon himself the most terrible and cruel torment in order to save his creature who has fallen miserably into slavery.

In the empty space on the top right, a bleeding sun gives testimony to the suffering of all creation, which, alarmed yet silent, witnesses the inhuman sacrifice of its Creator, who in extreme obedience to the will of the Father, and with love without boundaries for his creature, has humiliated himself and *"... he became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."* (Phil 2:8)

In the octagon at the center of the cross, the exhausted face of Christ, although facing the ground, maintains all of its strength, energy and the internal determination in order to carry out the work which the Father sent him into the world to do.

The crown of thorns, more and more tangled and bloody, seems to slip on the ground, while in a corner an exhausted but not vanquished lamb, kneeling on his back paws, offers once again a symbolic and efficacious parallelism with the suffering of the Lamb of God.



Jesus consoles the women of Jerusalem

In this eighth bas-relief with its profoundly evangelical atmosphere, inspiration and theological rigor are combined in an exciting and poetic crescendo.

To underscore the extraordinary dialogue between the sorrowful women of Jerusalem and Jesus, who is in need of a moment of rest before his last passionate exhortation along the Way of Sorrows which leads to Golgotha, the horizontal arm of the cross appears tightly tied with a strap to the frame.

This anchorage, creating an optical effect of stability, impedes the right side from weighing on the composition below. From the octagon at the center of the cross, the exhausted yet authoritative face of the Christ leans out, and with a severe hand raised and a warning finger pointed, turns to the women of Jerusalem who are following him, lamenting, and says to them *“Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck. For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done to the dry?”* (Luke 23:28-31)

The crown of thorns continues to twist and the prickles, dense and stinging more and more, bear witness the growing pain being inflicted on Jesus’ head and body.

The right side of the crown is here, intentionally thinner and lighter, so that it figuratively exalts the dialogue and the admonishments that Jesus passionately addresses to the women of Jerusalem who have come to console him.

Below the horizontal arm, on the right side, framed by individual arches, standing on what seems to be a surrounding wall with an entrance in the middle, twelve slender female figures – reminiscent of the twelve tribes of Israel – figuratively form the holy city whose name, engraved in the sun which rests on the edge of the horizontal arm, is: *“Jerusalem.”*

At the base of the vertical arm of the cross, carved into the tender green wood from which a young and fertile sprig sprouts – a sign that life is stronger than death – the unequivocal and disturbing words which Christ speaks to women of Jerusalem appear: *“For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?”* (Luke 23:31)

To give additional weight to Jesus’ words, the second part of the question has been clearly carved into the lower edge of the bas-relief, and made sculpturally visible in a row of twelve pieces of dried wood tied together and fixed with a large nail to the right edge of the composition.

In the three empty corners of the frame, three squares with twelve holes each are carved, in memory of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The symbolic value of the number twelve in this bas-relief is repeated and strongly underscored because Jesus’ prophetic words are in particular addressed to his people, to Israel, which in its twelve tribes finds the highest and most eloquent expression of its proper identity as a “People of Alliance.”



Jesus falls for the third time

In his last and most piercing fall to earth, Jesus, his strength waning, redeems the consequences of the divine curse: the terrible expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The “map” of the bas-relief follows the model of the previous “Falls.”

In the middle of the left border a fertile sprout synthesizes and symbolizes not only the abundance of Eden but also the sense of harmony, peace and beauty of the place where the creatures had a perfect and serene rapport with their Creator.

In the corner which dominates the bas-relief, the strength of the sculptures of the figurative incarnation exalts the dramatic moment of the expulsion of Adam and Eve into an unknown and hostile world.

Alone, deprived of the loving familiarity with God, and threatened by the Cherub’s flaming sword, they must experiment the limits of their humanity. *“Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.”* (Gen 3:23-24)

In the space which separates the Cherub with the blazing sword from Adam and Eve’s exodus, a cube-shaped element, grave and oppressive as a boulder, with *“Peccata mundi”* inscribed, renders the motivation for such severity.

By uniting the words inscribed in the three bas-reliefs which illustrate Christ’s painful falls: *“Ego sum qui tollit peccata mundi,”* we fully understand the significance of these repeated falls to the ground, and the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ toward his creature who, although he has sinned and rebelled, will never cease to be loved, and therefore redeemed.

On the right, the sun seems to fade away, frightened and dismayed, in the face of the drama which is taking place on earth but also in the heart of God. With extreme exertion, although on the ground, Christ raises his face, and he, with one hand, indicates the reason for his cruel sacrifice: he has accepted freely, fully and consciously, the will of the Father who sent him to live in the earthly dominion *“pro peccata mundi,”* to take away definitively and abundantly the sin of the world and thus give back freedom, dignity, and hope to his creatures who have become children of his child.

The prickles of the crown of thorns, with all their bitter pain, frame the suffering and overwrought face of Christ, and entangle a lamb, overcome by fatigue.

In a crevice, as if in a useless hiding place, in the lower left corner frame we see what is left of the *“old serpent, called the Devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world.”* (Rev 12:9a)

On the lower frame to the left of the cross there is the suggested scene of the liberation of souls kept prisoners in the underworld, and who, thanks to Christ’s sacrifice, have reacquired their freedom.

This image precedes, in time but not substance, what the Apostle and Evangelist Saint Matthew entrusts unto us in his Gospel: *“the earth did quake, the rocks rent; And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose. And came out of the graves, after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.”* (Matt 27:51-53)



Jesus is stripped of his clothes

This bas-relief brings us to the heart of the tragedy of the cross. Every detail draws its dramatic and terrifying force from the word of God, here rigorously translated into images which evoke feelings of sincere compunction and profound compassion.

The Evangelist Saint John, who accompanied his Master to the foot of the cross, narrates in his Gospel: *“Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, ‘Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it,’ whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, ‘They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots.’ These things therefore the soldiers did so.”* (John 19:23-24)

The cross is laid carefully on the ground and through it we see the gaunt body of Christ in the moment of his deepest humiliation – when he is violently and shamelessly stripped of his clothes and delivered nude, to the mocking and hostile gazes of the eager onlookers.

From the octagon the meek, broken face of Jesus expresses sentiments of raw humiliation, voluntary impotence, and complete trust in the will of the Father.

The cruelty and the shamelessness of the stripping are effectively depicted sculpturally in the figure of a strong arm which solidly grasps a sword, and by a hand which grasps a lance in the precise moment when Christ’s clothes, and his dignity, are lacerated.

On the right side of the composition, the image of a seamless tunic hanging on a nail appears, while in the lower corner we catch sight of two dice, which brings to mind those used by soldiers for the drawing of lots.

In the lower left corner a lamb, almost completely shorn, takes us back in an adept parallelism, to the prophecy of Isaiah: *“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.”* (Isaiah 53:7)

The tangled, stinging crown of thorns represents the suffering, humiliation and abandonment to the will of the Father Christ feels in this hour of bewilderment, solitude and darkness.

In order to reinforce the concept of the hour of darkness Christ is living to the end, the sun, which had accompanied him along the Way of the Cross for the salvation of the world, does not appear in any form.

Two engraved bricks express two fundamental ideas of the view of Saint Paul regarding the sacrifice of the cross. On the brick on the top left we find the word *“Absumpsit”*, which synthetically reminds us of what the *“People’s Apostle”* with unequalled lyricism, wrote in his letter to the Philippians: *“Jesus Christ humbled himself, and took the form of a servant, and he was found in fashion as a man.”* (Phil 2:7)

Adam and Eve, with their pride, wanted to achieve divinity through deceit. Now God, in Christ, takes on the human condition in order to give that divine condition, presumptuously claimed, to his creatures lovingly and freely.

Finally, incorporated into the wood of the cross in order to render more incisiveness to the humiliation of the Creator, become creature in the Son, we find the second brick with the inscription: *“Exinanivit,”* taken from the same letter of Saint Paul.



Christ is nailed to the cross

Derision and outrage now become blasphemy: *“Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest in three days, save thyself”* (Matt 27:39) And again: *“He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel; let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.”* (Matt 26:42-43)

Christ’s face is tormented with unimaginable pain provoked by the nails which keep him firmly attached to the cross, making him one with it, yet he utters no threats or words of revenge: *“... when he was reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously”* (1 Pet 2:23)

At the end of the horizontal arm of the cross, next to his pierced, bleeding, defenseless hands, is the horrible cry which is heard from Christ’s bone-dry mouth: *“Father, forgive them.”* (Luke 23:34)

The crown of thorns, a halo of pain and inhuman suffering, surrounds Christ’s face, and like a river of blood, bathes and fecundates the whole cross.

The center of the top frame holds the apex of the vertical arm of the cross, with the harsh, serene, courageous and terrible word uttered by Christ to Pontius Pilate, during his iniquitous and farcical trial: *“Rex.”*

The last conversation between Christ and Pilate was in fact about the mystery repeated by Christ without hesitation. Pilate asked him: *“Art thou the King of the Jews?”* Jesus answered: *“My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the*

Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence.” Pilate therefore said to him, *“Art thou a king then?”* Jesus answered: *“Thou sayest that I am king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.”* (John 18:36-37)

In the space between the horizontal arm of the cross and the top of the frame we note the sun and the sky which are slowly being covered by dark, dense, threatening clouds, which bring to mind the evangelical description *“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.”* (Matt 27:45)

Bearing witness to those tragic events, in the lower left corner we find, planted in arid and rocky soil, the instruments of death and human pity which marked the last instants of Christ’s earthly life: a lance and a cane with a dripping sponge.

The sponge takes us back to the Gospel of Saint Matthew: *“And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink.”* (Matt 27:48)

The lance reminds us of the last useless and cruel gesture which soon after that a soldier will make to stab Christ’s ribs: *“But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they broke not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.”* (John 19:33-34)

On the right side a cord hangs from a withered tree, lashed by the wind, with its roots uncovered in dried up soil, and reminds us of the demise of the traitor Apostle Judas Iscariot: *“And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hang himself.”* (Matt 27:5)



Jesus dies on the cross

We have now come to the final chapter of the work for which Christ was incarnated to do: the salvation of the world through his redeeming death: *“But those things, which God had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.”* (Acts 3:18)

An imposing, static, silent and suffering cross is seen in this bas-relief which presents the redeeming death of Christ.

At the top of the vertical arm, as if carved into the trunk of a young and green tree, we see displayed the motivation for the condemnation which the Roman Procurator of Judea had written above the head of this particular condemned man, whom he had decided to free: *“Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum.”*

The Evangelist and eyewitness, Saint John, writes: *“And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”* (John 19:19)

Set to the left of the horizontal arm of the cross, we find inscribed, as if in a scroll of the Jewish Laws, the holy and terrible name of God which the dying Jesus pronounced, praying with Psalm 22: *“Eli Eli.”* Then inscribed in the sun we find the “why?” exclaimed by Christ and by all men at the hour of our deaths: *“Lemà.”* (Psalm 22:2)

The Evangelist Saint Matthew bears witness: *“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lemà sabactàni?” that is to say, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”* (Matt 27:45-47)

A tangle of branches harrowing with stinging thorns sink into the tender wood of the cross like a perennial warning of the inseparable bond between Christ and his cross, *“Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.”* (Matt 27:50)

Inside the octagon the face of Christ appears serene in the composure of death, which however cannot cancel the signs of

an atrocious torture. A second, but precious miniscule octagon placed at the height of the ribs shows an eloquent sign of Christ’s complete gift: It is his slashed heart, dripping blood and water: *“But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.”* (John 19:34)

At the foot of the cross, representing evil definitively defeated, lies a skull: *“And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan”* (Rev 12:9), the father of all lies and custodian of death, here represented by the skull, jealously guarded as if it were its most precious treasure, is biting the dead body.

In the lower left corner, a corpulent bearded masculine figure with a cane in his right hand covers his eyes with his left hand; his attitude manifests dismay, contempt and horror. This figure is reminiscent of Isaiah’s prophecy: *“He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”* (Isaiah 53:2b-5)

At the far right of the horizontal arm, as if at the feet of an altar, we find in an efficacious parallelism, a sacrificial lamb. Finally, from the ends of the horizontal arm two stems of a vine are sprouting which remind us of the words pronounced by Jesus at the Last Supper with his disciples: *“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit, for without me ye can do nothing.”* (John 15:5)

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Jesus is taken down from the cross

In the Gospel according to Saint John we read. *“And after this, Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.”* (John 19:38-40)

The Evangelist Saint Mark, illustrating the sorrowful events which lead Jesus to die on the Cross, writes: *“When they had fulfilled all things that were written about him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb.”* (Acts 13:29)

A bare, but not empty cross appears for the last time in this journey with all the signs of the inhuman and unparalleled suffering which took place on it.

A dynamic angelic figure descends rapidly from the top of the cross, interpreting the tragic events which took place on the cross.

The pure pain of this angelic being embodies the loss and the anguish of all creation in the face of the sacrifice made by the Son of God for the salvation of his creation.

While the left hand in its flowing manifests an innately human gesture of suffering, the pointed finger of the right hand, an invitation to lower one's gaze, brings the observer to read and meditate upon the words engraved on the lower edge of the frame which reveal the true, profound sense of the sacrifice of the man of the cross *“Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree.”* (1 Pet 2:24)

The octagon which surrounded Christ's head is broken, meaning that the Savior of the world, *“the first fruits of them that*

slept” (1 Cor 15:20) has definitely entered into the eighth day, the day with no sunset, of the resurrection and of eternity, forever.

On the wood of the cross, as if on melted wax, it is as if a shroud of Christ's tortured body remained – a perennial testimony to the terrible torment he underwent and of the love without boundaries he gave.

Three hollows, dark as the night and deep as the underworld, remain in place of the nails which, with inhuman suffering, they tightly held the dying Christ's body prisoner.

The cord which served to bring down Christ's dead body remains on the cross, testimony of the gesture of human pity made by two just men: Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus.

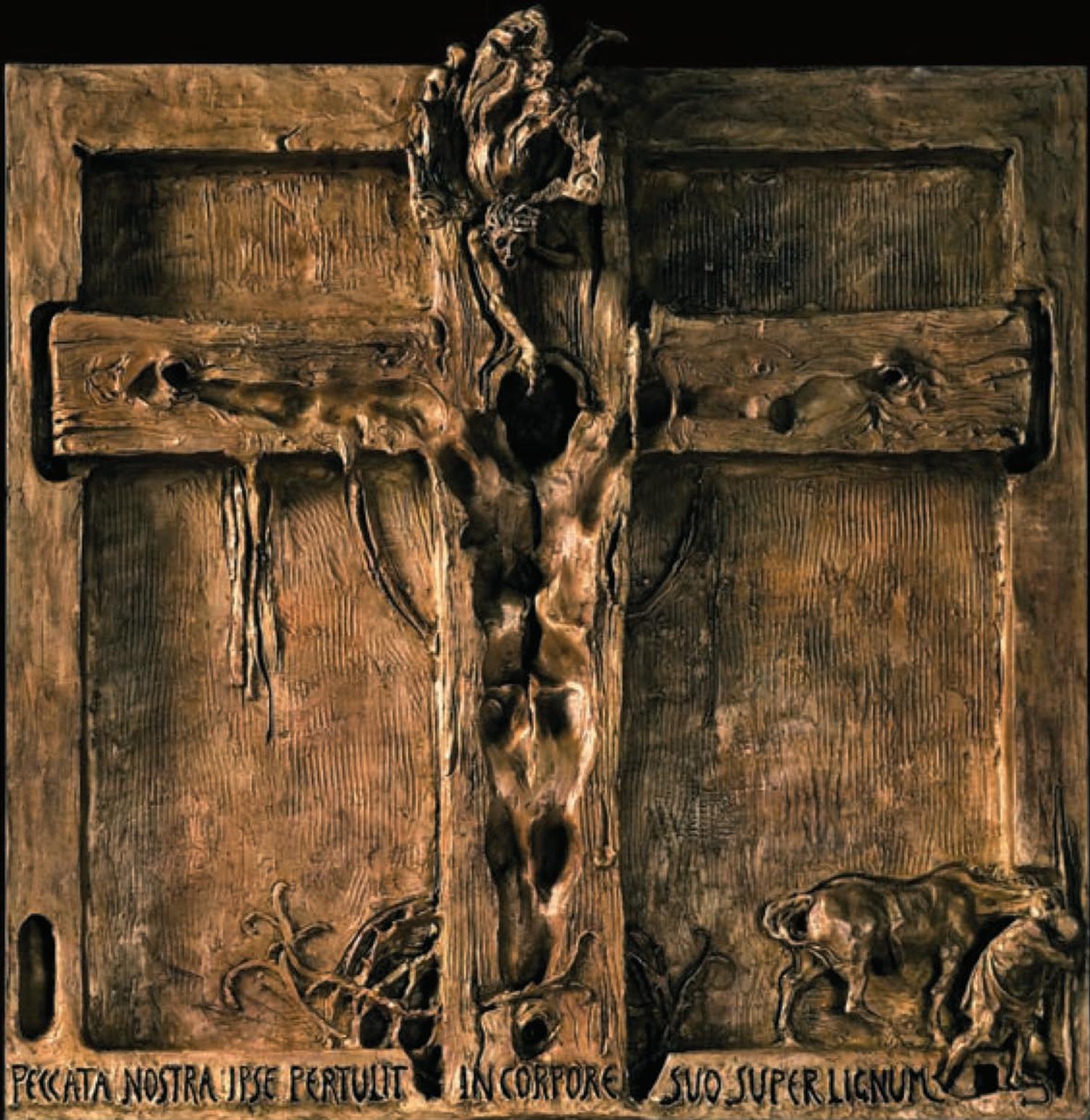
On the ground, protected by the cross, lies the crown of thorns, which, soaked with the blood of Christ, seems to sprout to new life. The lower right corner is occupied by the figure of a man, pensive, head lowered, holding his horse by its bridle, who turns his back on the mysterious works of God.

To this image, which takes its inspiration from Psalm 33, a more noble and hidden meaning has been attributed.

The Psalm says: *“A horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy; to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.”*

(Psalm 33:17-19)

From now on every man is invited to put his life only in the hands of the man of the cross, in Jesus, son of God, only true savior of the world.



PECCATA NOSTRA IPSE PERTULIT IN CORPORE SUO SUPER LIGNUM

Jesus is laid in the sepulchre

In this last bas-relief, the idea of a great silence, a long wait, a great hope in a scenario rich with symbolism, which can be traced back to the Garden of Eden where the original sin was committed, is linked, in a poetic and theological parallelism, to this garden where humanity is redeemed.

At the center of the composition, between two columns which support a transom, the entrance to a sepulchre carved into the rocks and sealed by a heavy stone appears.

The gospel gives us a detailed and precise description: *“Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.”* (John 19:41-42)

The book of Genesis, contextualizing the fault of Adam and Eve says: *“And the Lord God said, ‘Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.’”* (Gen 3:22) The tree on the right represents and commemorates the tree of good and evil. If we look closely, we notice an anomaly in its flowering: half of its foliage is arid and dry, and represents Evil, while the other half is rich with vegetation and represents Good. In the middle of this green and thriving vegetation a ripe fruit stands out, which calls to mind the fruit picked by Eve in disobedience to her Creator.

This sin of pride, signals the beginning of the progressive banishment of the unfaithful creature, and of the pursuit of the faithful God, all in order to reach this garden where the obedience of Christ brings about total and perennial redemption.

Looking to the left of the sepulchre, we see the image of another tree: the tree of life. Similar in structure and in foliage to the tree

of good and evil, the tree of life is fertile, all of its branches are covered with thriving vegetation, symbol of perennial flowering and of incorruptible life.

In the upper left corner leaping out the frame, the Latin phrase *“orto iam sole”* clearly appears. These words, dense with prophecy, are from Mark’s Gospel: when: *“And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun”* (Mark 16:2) and should be read in symbiosis with the luminous, blinding sun rising on the bottom left – a symbolic allusion to the resurrection of Christ alluded to in the 16th Psalm: *“Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”* (Psalm 16:9-10)

At the foot of the composition, on the left, we see a young peacock, solemn, proud, the classic image of immortality, move toward the tomb. On the edge of the top right corner the moon, framed by the stars, seems to disappear in order to permit the new light that Christ had already prophetically announced with words carved into the bottom of the frame to blaze: *“Post tres dies.”* (Matt 20:19) To these three words pronounced by Jesus before the Way of the Cross, the extraordinary event already prophetically pre-announced, is tied: *“Resurgit,”* to which every man is called either to accept or to deny.

Finally, in the lower right corner, crouched on a stone on which the names of those who helped in the creation of this work are engraved, an angel places a finger on the hand left on its mouth to invite all to silence, while the arm and the right hand extended toward the sepulchre, forcibly and decisively point toward whom all of our attention must be paid.

ORTO IAM SOLE



POST TRES DIES

ANNO DOMINI MCM
DONTIFICATUS VI BRUNO DICHO PPE
EVDI AD HONORIS TROPUS DEHICATIA
SANTIAU PLACIA AD DEACTYUS
DANIEL MICHELETTI ARCHIDIECESANUS
VIA CUIUS CAPITULI STATUIT
HANC ISSUE VIAM FIDES
TUIS MIRIFICAT QUID IN ANIMO
FRATRES HABANT
ANNO MCM PAVLE SACRIS
FREDERICUS SEVERINO SOLITE
TUA COMMUNIT AC DONAVIT



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