

Art of the Crucifixion and the Good Thief

A Study of Sacred Art

*at the
foot of the cross*

A Lenten journey from Family Rosary



Welcome to Our Family

Each year, the Church gives us the Lenten season to help us reorient our lives toward God. We encourage you and your family to enter into this season together, journeying with Jesus and Mary to the foot of the Cross and, ultimately, to the joyful celebration of Easter.

The traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (acts of love and service) help us to turn away from everything that binds and blinds us in order to make space for God in our hearts and our homes. He wishes to bring light and warmth to family life, to free us and fill us with Himself! This is the tremendous call of the entire Christian life, but the Lenten season bids us to respond to this call with even greater intentionality.

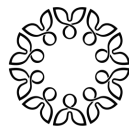
Orienting our lives toward God always requires an experience of the Paschal Mystery—the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Notably, however, this experience does not end with the Cross; it leads to the glory of Easter! As you and your family find ways to practice prayer, fasting, and almsgiving this Lent, let Mary accompany you on your journey, so that she can show you how her Son redeems and brings new life.

To facilitate your Lenten journey, we are offering prayer resources and a 40-day Lenten family activity calendar on our website, FamilyRosary.org. May God continue to bless you and your family.

A Little History

Venerable Patrick Peyton began his ministry in 1942 with the goal of building family unity through daily prayer of the Rosary. Inspired by his own father who had a deep appreciation for family prayer, praying the Rosary became the foundation for the life of Father Peyton (1909-92).

We at Family Rosary are ever so grateful Father Peyton's family instilled in him the importance of family prayer. Now it can be part of your family's tradition so you can fulfill Father Peyton's vision, "The Family That Prays Together Stays Together."



Family Rosary

HOLY CROSS
FAMILY MINISTRIES

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Introduction

“When they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left.” (Luke 23:33)

Sacred art is for our veneration, and scenes of the crucifixion are there to remind us of Christ’s sacrifice. But their true purpose is to remind the viewer that we owe Christ our gratitude for His gift to us of redemption. When we look upon such artwork it is not only to celebrate Christ but also a moment of reflection into our own lives – are we doing what God asks of us?

Here are three Italian artworks ranging from the 15th to the 18th centuries. While at their core they all have the same message, each is unique in how it presents these truths to us. We can see how artistic style changes over time, but also how Christians have grown in our faith. The first artwork dates from the Renaissance, and the tone of the artwork is far more serious. It is more of a warning -- you do not want to suffer as the Unrepentant Thief does, and so you must repent. A few hundred years later, the faithful are now seeing the Unrepentant Thief in a new light. He is still a warning, but he is also an object of pity. God gave him every chance, and he still did not follow. We, as the faithful, know what the right answer is, and it is to repent.

As we stand before the cross, we see Jesus’ choice to love us in our sin -- not so that we would remain there, but so that we would turn back to Him and repent. The thieves on either side of Christ represent our two choices; to go with Christ or remain in our sin. God will love us regardless, but it is His hope that we will repent like the Good Thief. No matter when we repent --, God will be there to embrace us. We stand before Christ, no different than the Good Thief or Mary Magdalene, as sinners who have chosen to follow His word. This will heal our relationship with God, and, at the same time, our relationships with each other.

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Art of the Crucifixion and the Good Thief

Three Centuries of Sacred Art

1. Sacred Art from the Renaissance: Calvary, Antonello da Messina, 1475, Italy
2. Sacred Art from the 16th Century: Calvary, Paolo Veronese, 1588, Italy
3. Sacred Art from the 18th century: Golgotha, Giovanni Tiepolo, 1750, Italy



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I. Sacred Art from the Renaissance: Calvary, Antonello da Messina, 1475, Italy

At a time when few were literate, artists in the Renaissance used recognizable symbols to explain the theology depicted. In this artwork by Antonello da Messina, there are many references to the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man. As a result of their disobedience, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, but God has given us a Savior, Jesus, and His Mother to cooperate in the work of Redemption; they are the New Adam and the New Eve.

As the first woman, Eve, was the one to take the fruit from the tree in Eden, so a woman—Mary—must now give her Son – “the Fruit of Life” as sacrifice. Mary sits beneath the cross, stoic in her grief, because she knows that despite her current sorrow, Jesus’ sacrifice has redeemed mankind. Her humility is a stark contrast to Eve’s original act of disobedience.

Art of the Crucifixion often included the symbol of a skull, as it was believed that Calvary (Golgotha) was where Adam had died. It is therefore appropriate that Christ, the New Adam, is sacrificed here as well. The artist reminds us of this truth by depicting a skull with a black snake directly beneath the crucified Christ. The contrast is clear: Adam died on earth in sin, but Christ’s death will absolve us of Adam’s disobedience.

Sitting beside the skull is an owl, which was a common symbol of Christ at the time. Medieval tradition often compared the owl to Jesus’ sacrifice, as the owl is the only bird that hunts at night. It returns to its nest in the morning, just as Christ returned to us on Easter morning. The owl’s passion for the nighttime was comparable to Christ and His love for all humanity.

The most jarring aspect of this Renaissance artwork are the two thieves who hang on either side of Christ. Instead of crosses, however, they hang from trees, their bodies contorted in pain. The artist has replaced the Roman cross with the Tree of Knowledge. Between the two, it is impossible to know which man is the Good Thief. Scripture tells us that the Good Thief hangs to the right of Christ, but in this artwork, the two thieves are identical in their suffering. Both thieves have had the opportunity to choose between repentance and unrepentance, humility, and pride.

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Beneath their almost indistinguishable outward features, are two very different dispositions of soul: one which humbly admitted his fault and abandoned himself into the merciful hands of God who was crucified beside him; the other who clung to his self-sufficiency and refused to trust in God's goodness. The two thieves, therefore, reflect the choice that each individual soul must make when confronted with the event of the Cross and the Person of Jesus Christ.

Another clue to the thief's identity is Mary, who sits to the right of the cross in the shadow of the Good Thief. St. John the Evangelist kneels in prayer, facing Christ, but his gaze is directed to the Good Thief. Again, the artist reminds us of Christ's message. Both thieves are suffering in their physical bodies, but only the Good Thief will find peace in death. Because he asked for forgiveness, he will join Christ in Heaven and his suffering will end.

Behind the three figures is a beautiful Italian landscape. Despite the sorrow of His sacrifice, Jesus desires to lead us to eternal life. He will lead us to resurrection, to a new Eden, and therefore the artist presents us with a bright, new morning. Here we should follow Mary's example and give thanks to Jesus for His sacrifice.

Notably in the background there are several buildings. The one on the far right could be interpreted as the Jerusalem Temple. When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the Temple He announced that when the Temple was destroyed, He would raise it up again in three days (cf. Jn. 2:19). It was only after the Resurrection that the apostles understood that He was speaking of the temple of His body. In other words, because of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the Jerusalem Temple became obsolete.

The Temple had previously served as God's dwelling, the place where He engaged with His children. Now, God has united human nature to Himself in Christ and has offered Himself irrevocably on the Cross. There is no longer need for the Temple because God dwells in the the Person of Jesus. He will henceforth engage with humanity by means of Jesus' body present under sacramental signs on earth: the Eucharist.

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Antonella da Messina
Sacred Art from the Renaissance:
Calvary
1475, Italy

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2. Sacred Art from the 16th Century: Calvary, Paolo Veronese ,1588, Italy

Looking at the artwork Calvary by Paolo Veronese, the viewer is presented with a vastly different interpretation of Christ's sacrifice. While sacred art from the Renaissance relied heavily on symbolism, this was now considered old-fashioned. Modern 16th century Italy was introduced to Mannerism, a new style of art that focused on drama and emotion. When it came to depictions of the Crucifixion, artists now chose to focus on the emotional impact of Christ's sacrifice.

Where Renaissance art valued symmetry and balance; in contrast, this 16th century artwork appears uneven. The main scene -- the Crucifixion -- is crowded on one side of the painting with no apparent explanation.

Upon closer inspection, however, one can see that the painting is balanced. The artist has cut the scene diagonally, and instead contrasts the drama of the Crucifixion with a stormy sky. The emotional turmoil of Christ's sacrifice is now represented by the turbulent weather. But while the storm is directly overhead, the viewer can see that the sun is rising in the horizon. A new day is beginning, and the promise that Christ has made is going to come true.

The New Testament tells us that Christ was crucified beside two thieves. In this artwork, like the first piece, they too hang from nontraditional crosses. This is because Christ has died on the True Cross as He is without sin. The thieves, however, are sinners and are paying for their crimes with their lives. But Christ, who has humbled himself to die on the Cross, offers them the chance to repent – it is this moment that the artist is trying to emphasize. Like the Good Thief, when we look at Christ mounted on the Cross, we are inspired to repent and ask for God's forgiveness, and through this, we are healed.

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While it may appear subtle at first, the viewer can see the differences between the two thieves. The Good Thief is more fully clothed than the unrepentant thief; this reflects the dignity that Jesus bestows on those who turn to Him. Christian dignity comes from the fact that God has raised the thief from the misery of sin to the honor of being His follower and called to eternal life. The Good Thief faces Christ and finds comfort, while the unrepentant man looks down in shame. In fact, the artist foretells the Unrepentant Thief's destiny with the figure beneath his cross. The stranger holding the ladder, the only man who is aware of the bad thief, appears to be the Devil himself.

For Christ, at the foot of His cross is His mother Mary. Unlike the stoic Mother of Sorrows from the Renaissance, here Mary has fainted from her grief. She has trusted God's will and allowed her Son to die, but she still mourns Him. This is the height of human despair – a mother mourning her child. When we look at Mary, we grieve alongside her in recognition of Christ's sacrifice for our immortal souls.

This artwork by Veronese is most unusual because of the mysterious woman in yellow. Her face is hidden from view, but we can see that she too mourns Christ's passing. But who is she? An argument could be made for Mary Magdalene – but she herself appears at the foot of the cross, with her traditional red cloak and uncovered hair.

It is likely that this woman in yellow is intended to represent us all. When we stand at the foot of the cross, if we choose to assume the posture of this woman—a posture of adoration and humility before her God who is being crucified for her—then we make ourselves available to the graces He wishes to bestow. The grace of repentance, first of all, is that of recognizing our sin, experiencing the shame and regret that comes with that, but not stopping there. Instead of wallowing in the shame of our sins, we are called to look to Christ who, by His death, showed us that He loves us even in our sin. And this spurs us to greater love, and ultimately to want to leave sin behind out of love for Him.

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Paolo Veronese

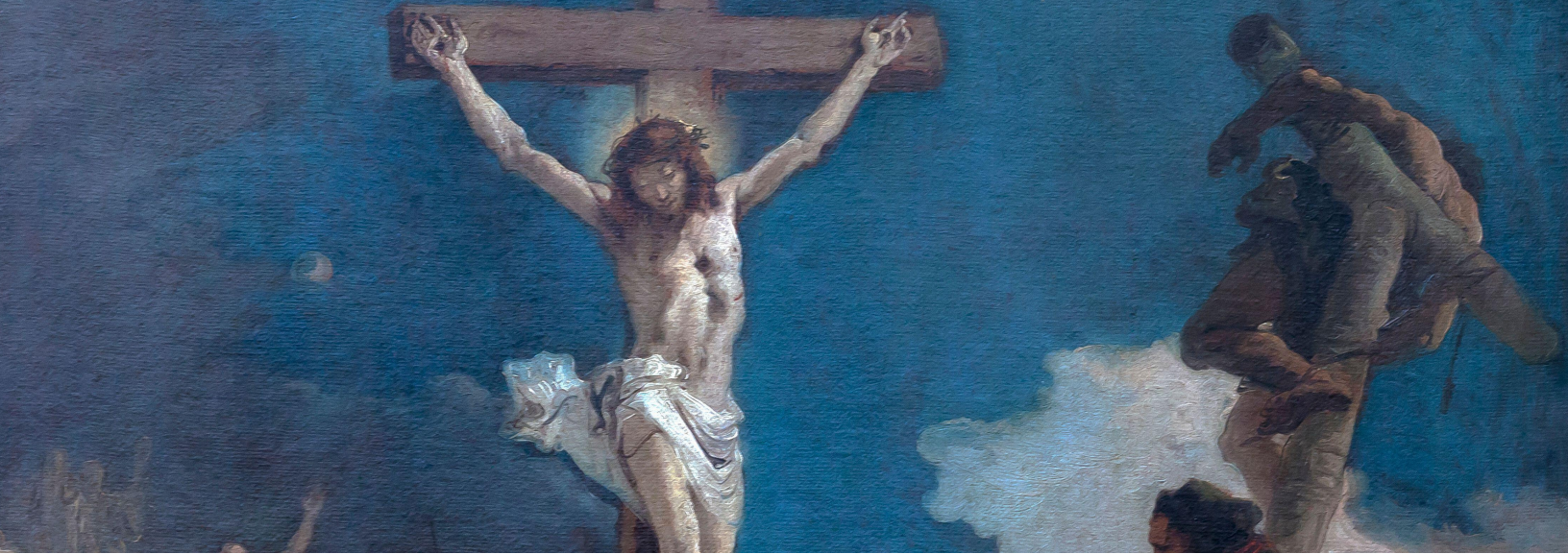
Sacred Art from the 16th Century:

Calvary

1588, Italy

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3. 18th century Artwork: Golgotha, Giovanni Tiepolo, 1750, Italy

It is the next morning, and Christ and the two thieves hang dead on the cross. Similarly to the second painting, the 18th century artist Tiepolo also used a stormy sky to express drama and turmoil. But the sky directly behind Christ is clear; He is parting the storm and revealing a blue sky. The artist is confirming the truth that we, the viewers, already know. Christ has upheld His promise and mankind has been redeemed.

His mother, Mary, has fainted, and she lies beneath the cross unaware of the turmoil around them. Her body mirrors that of her Son – death has not ended their close bond. Once again, Mary is distraught at her Son's death and we grieve alongside her with the knowledge that God has upheld His promise. The right path does not mean it is an easy path. Following in Christ does not mean an escape from suffering, but it is a promise of things to come.

Beside Christ are the two thieves, about to be taken down from their crosses. The artist identifies the two thieves in subtle yet powerful ways, much like the second artwork. Before death, these men were equal, both put to death for their crimes. But we, the viewers, now know that for the Good Thief his suffering has ended. He chose to repent and therefore has joined Christ in Heaven. The Good Thief is to the right of Christ, and we know this because of how he is treated in the artwork. His cross is actively being lowered to the ground, a sign that his suffering has ended.

The Unrepentant Thief is the only figure who is faced away from the viewer and there is a reason we cannot see his face – it is because he has died in shame. The Unrepentant Thief hangs from a cross that appears like it will soon fall to the ground. Unlike the Good Thief, none are there to help his descent.

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The Unrepentant Thief does not fall because of his sin alone —apart from Mary, everyone at the foot of the cross is a sinner. The difference between the Unrepentant Thief and the Good Thief is that the former was a sinner who remained obstinate in his sin while the latter had the humility to entrust himself to God’s mercy. Worst of all, no one seems to notice or care what has happened to his body. The Unrepentant Thief has rejected the invitation of Divine Love, and by his own choice, has been forgotten entirely.

Like the first painting, balance and symmetry have returned to the scene of the Crucifixion. Christ is again at the center, literally and figuratively. While there is still movement and chaos happening in the scene there is also a peaceful calm that surrounds the figure of Christ. The artist has very plainly shown us our two choices. It is not simply enough to carry out religious practices if we do not allow them to transform our hearts; instead, we are called to recognize our sins, mourn for them, and then turn to God with confidence in His love. Only by actively serving Him and trusting Him will we find our salvation.

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Giovanni Tiepolo
Sacred Art from the 18th century:
Golgotha
1750, Italy

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**at the
foot of the cross**
A Lenten journey from Family Rosary

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At the Foot of the Cross

Forgiveness, Redemption, Repentance.

At the foot of the Cross we receive redemption, a gift we don't deserve yet it is a gift we need to receive and give to others. This Lent reconcile with God and your family. Join us at the foot of the cross and see how Jesus forgives.

Find all of your Lenten prayer resources at FamilyRosary.org.

Keep an eye on:

Family Rosary@ familyrosary.org

Catholic Mom@ catholicmom.com

Museum of Family Prayer@ museumoffamilyprayer.com

and on our Facebook and Instagram sites too!

#AtTheFootOfTheCross #Lent2022



Bringing Families Together In Prayer

We hope the time you've spent reflecting with this material has been enriching. Continue to pray with your family every day, wherever you are.

For additional online resources for family prayer including additional e-books and the mobile Rosary App, please visit our website at FamilyRosary.org.

This e-book and all our resources represent a culmination of Father Peyton's passion for family unity through prayer. We hope our services will enhance your family's prayer life particularly remembering Father Peyton's famous words, "The family that prays together stays together."

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