

Jesus and the Cross

Column 1 (top)

Black Cross - New Mexico The innate power and integrity of this cross, eloquently confronts viewers with the compelling reality of Holy Week's equally bold calling: Yes! Your will, not mine!! Like most works of artist Georgia O'Keeffe, what she has to say is uncompromising in form -- an in-your-face, evocative meditation. She, herself was a deeply pensive observer of the world around her, and approached her subjects whether buildings or flowers, landscapes or bones, by intuitively magnifying their shapes and simplify their details to underscore their essential beauty. A pioneer American semi-abstract artist, O'Keeffe says of this image, I painted just what I saw: many crosses big and strong, and behind them those hills of New Mexico that go on and on." The Black Cross is partly biographical as she lived in and loved the Southwest landscape in its empty, wide haunting panorama -- strong in its contemplative simplicity. During her late night walks in the desert, she encountered mysterious crosses, one of which became the Black Cross. These sacred monuments she believed were probably erected by Los Penitentes, a secret Catholic lay brotherhood who reenact, privately each year, the passion of Christ, quite literally from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday.

Column 1 (bottom)

Jesus Receives His Cross an African setting for Jesus' accepting his cross is appropriately a wasteland, a deserted wilderness in the shadow of distant mountains, but home for the Turkana people. A local policeman and an armed soldier in modern clothes, guard Jesus as he reaches to receive His cross -- a branch from the tree of his judgment and condemnation. Clothed in a blood-red robe, He has become for the local people a model of courage and integrity in facing His own death. In imitation of His journey to Calvary, the people daily embrace their cross of illnesses and poverty while continuing bravely to bring economic improvements to the village. The Stations of the Cross for the Lodwar Cathedral grew from a Bishop's Synod naming enculturation as an urgent priority for African churches, such as producing authentic African religious art as a path toward rooting the Gospel more firmly in their lives. Journeying with the stations, we have become more aware of the political and social unrest in this East African country, and are now invited to pray in solidarity with the people of Kenya.

Column 2 (top)

Jesus Carries the Cross of a Mayan's child's coffin in war-torn Guatemala. This photo-poster from the missions in Central America is the work of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

Column 2 (bottom)

Jesus Takes up The Cross This copper station, made by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange for their convent, was accompanied by a prayer from the Lamentations: My transgressions are bound into a yoke, they weigh on my neck sapping my strength; the Lord handed me over to those whom I cannot withstand; the comforter is far from me. Later, the stations had been moved outside where they were partly destroyed by fire. All but two of the copper plates were strewn over several acres. The two that remained were both stations that Jesus Falls and became a symbol for people who were affected by the fire to get up and go on. The Stations now restored are still beautiful and have a character of their own, having survived the fire.

Column 3 (top)

Jesus Takes up His Cross. British artist Ken Cooke painted the Stations of the Cross for his local parish and in the style of O'Keeffe, he rendered Christ's journey in bold strokes - up-close and unavoidably intimate. We may linger in the powerful and personal import of Jesus' acceptance of His difficult calling in our own lives, but the Gospel renders this particular moment poignantly brief. Even so, we may silently read between the lines: After they had finished making fun of him, they took off the purple robe and dressed him in his own clothes. They led him out to crucify him.

Column 3 (bottom)

Jesus Takes up the Cross In a daring and persuasive manner that has offended some viewers, New York artist Gwyneth Leech contemporized her stations, borrowing images of the Iraqi war from newspaper photos. Her paintings are unorthodox and shocking to some who see the soldiers carrying rifles and wearing Italian uniforms from World War II and Christ wearing a contemporary red Muslim robe. Leech explains that Christ's ethnicity as well as others on the way to Calvary changes through the series as do the soldier's historic dress. While the paintings are cathartic to some, to others they are uncomfortable. But Leech reminds her critics that In Middle Ages, the Stations of the Cross, intentionally made contemporary references to drive home the message of Jesus suffering in terms that people could understand. Rector Nicholas Lang adds that these stations commissioned by his parish are "Not a political statement, but a theological statement about suffering in the world. The reality is that war, no matter why it is fought, has got to be viewed as tragic." Christ's rejection, humiliations and condemnations are sufferings still present in today's frightening world of war, violence and terrorism.

