

Art & Belief

The missing nails in Dalí's Christ of Saint John of the Cross

The differences between Salvador Dalí's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* and the source of its inspiration, the sketch done by St. John of the Cross, offer a meditation on the nature of forgiveness.

While meditating, Spanish friar and mystic St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) had a vision of Christ crucified, which prompted him to create a sketch depicting the moment where Christ surrenders his spirit. This tiny drawing (about the size printed on this page) remains his only known artwork. This tortured image of the crucifixion demonstrates Christ as "pierced through for our transgressions [and] crushed for our iniquities..." (Is. 53:5). From large protruding nails puncturing Christ's hands the weight of Christ's body hangs heavily stretching and twisting his arms painfully. The remarkable point of view "from above" has been interpreted as a view of the crucifixion from God's perspective.

Perhaps that of Jesus in spirit form as He views the fleshed form with which He walked the earth.

In 1641, the sketch was placed in a gilded, wooden monstrance displayed at the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation in Ávila, Spain. Centuries later, it influenced Spanish Surrealist artist Salvadore Dalí, who explained, "This drawing so impressed me the first time I saw it that later in California, in a dream, I saw the Christ in the same position but in the landscape of Port Lligat, and I heard voices which told me, 'Dalí, you must paint this Christ.' The next day I began the painting" (letter from Dalí to the *Scottish Art Review*). Dalí's Christ has a young, strong body—modeled by a Hollywood stuntman who hung for hours by his arms so that Dalí could accurately paint the effects of gravity on the body.

What I find most intriguing is that Dalí chose to exclude the nails and crown of thorns, which are the visual representation of our sins. From a theological point of



Salvador Dalí, *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 80.7 x 45.7 in. Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland.

view, the absence of the nails and crown could present a sin forgiven. On the cross, Christ cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know no what they do" (Luke 23:34). God says, "I am the one who blots out your transgressions for My own sake and will not remember your sins" (Is. 43:25) and "For I will forgive their iniquities and will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12). God is omniscient, so this forgetfulness is another word for mercy. The nails are absent because of God's mercy for us and all our wrongdoing. God forgives even the big sins, those that make us feel unworthy. From God's point of view, we are forgiven, we are worthy by His grace and mercy. The nails are missing because they are our sins forgiven.

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St. John of the Cross, *Drawing of the Crucifixion*, c. 1574-1577. Ink on paper, 2.25 x 1.9 in. Monasterio de la Encarnación in Ávila, Spain.