

**Franciscan Rome**  
**Basilica of Saint John Lateran**  
*Tree of Life: Jesus' Gift of the Holy Spirit from St. John's Gospel*  
fra Michael Lasky

**Franciscans at the Lateran**

*Francis, go rebuild my church.* These words of Jesus still speak to us today, as they once did for Francis and for Franciscan hearted people throughout the ages.

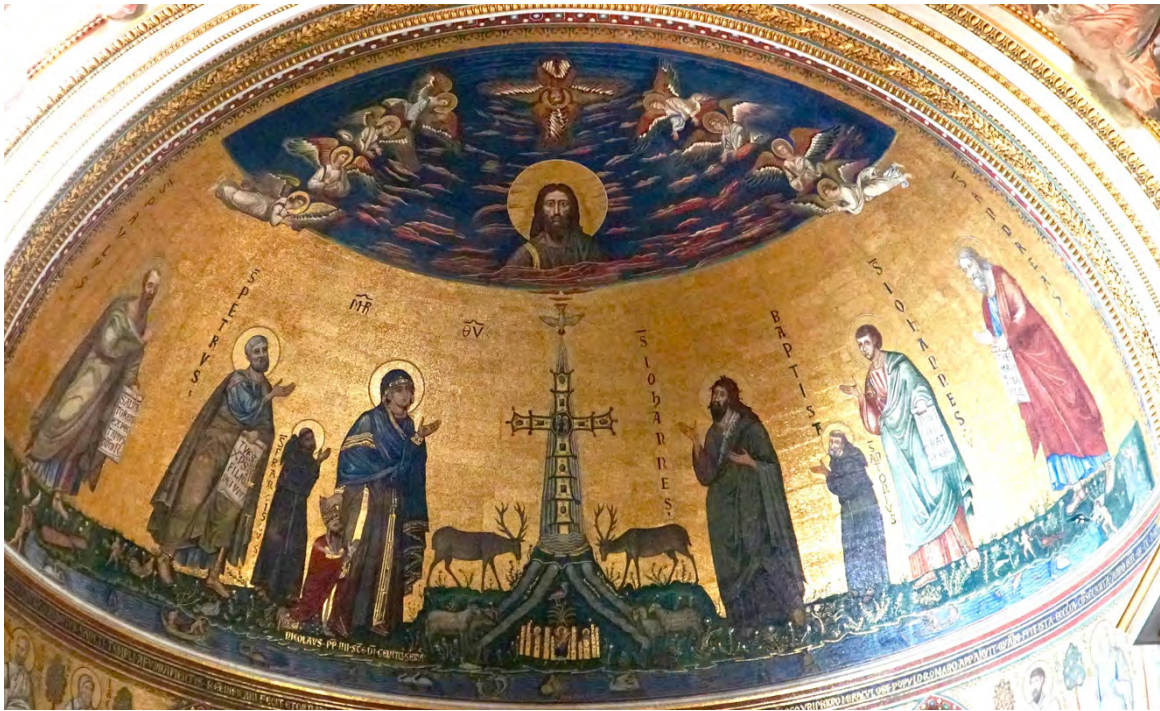
We now find ourselves in the oldest of the major basilicas, the cathedral of Rome. While this church is dedicated to both John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, its first name was *Holy Savior*. The name Lateran refers to the hill upon which it was built.

It was in this church that Francis and his early companions received the blessing of Pope Innocent to: *"Live the Gospel of Jesus Christ"*, but only after the Pope had a dream of Francis' upholding this basilica, preventing it from falling into ruin. Seventy-nine years later, the first Franciscan Friar to be elected Bishop of Rome, Fra Jerome Masci, became Nicholas IV as he took possession of this cathedral.

Like all Franciscans, Nicholas himself heard a call from Jesus. For him it came from the image of Christ in the large mosaic of this basilica, *"Please, Nicholas, repair my church, in particular this mosaic which is falling into ruin."* So, like Francis and his early companions, who together repaired chapels in Assisi, Nicholas turned to his brothers for help in repairing this basilica. Friars Jacopo Torriti and Jacopo of Camerino came to Rome and began disassembling the mosaic. Under the guidance of Nicholas, the friars reassembled the mosaic adding a Franciscan touch that bridged early Christian apostolic fervor with a Franciscan zeal for rebuilding the church.



## Tree of Life & Gift of the Spirit



The central action of the mosaic is that of Christ the Savior giving his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, depicted as the dove above the cross. In John's Gospel, Jesus gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples at the foot of the cross.

The great Franciscan Theologian and Seraphic Doctor of the Church, St. Bonaventure, speaks of how the Tree of Life is mentioned at the beginning, middle, and the end of the Bible. In Genesis we find the Tree of Life in Eden, possessing within it the knowledge of good & evil. In Proverbs it is referred to as wisdom. While, in Revelation, John's vision of the heavenly paradise has the Tree of Life growing by a river, bearing fruit every month, and providing its leaves for soothing medicine.

In all these instances, the Tree of Life symbolizes Jesus the Christ, who was nailed to a tree and from whose side flowed the waters of baptism, to renew all of creation. The effect of this abundant grace of the Holy Spirit can be seen in this mosaic with the flowing streams that find their origin in the crucified Christ and produce lush plant life on the banks of the flowing streams where people and sea creatures rejoice and are glad.

### Witnessing to Jesus the Christ

Below the cross there are two deer, who invite us to reflect upon Psalm 42, "*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul yearns for you, O God.*" As if having responded to the deer's invitation to drink, and having quenched their thirst for the Lord, the patron saints of this basilica (John the Baptist and John the Evangelist) give witness to the saving mystery of the cross. They are joined by Mary, Peter, Paul, and Andrew.



While John the Baptist (the last prophet of the Old Testament) and Mary (the first disciple of the New Testament) silently contemplate this sacrificial act of love in the fulfillment of God’s promises, the others speak to us of their own stories of witnessing to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

On the scrolls held by these apostles, there are written the words of their personal experiences. Each giving witness to having once panted with great longing for the Lord. Then, having quenched their thirst through their personal encounters with Christ Jesus, they share with us the sweet taste of the waters of salvation by saying:



- John the Evangelist: *“In the beginning was the Word.”* -John 1:1
- Peter: *“You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”* -Matthew 16:6
- Paul: *“Looking for the blessed hope and the coming of the glory of the great God and our savior Jesus Christ.”* -Titus 2:13
- Andrew: *“Thou art the Messiah.”* -John 1:41

### The Franciscan Confession of Faith

Here in the Lateran, we find 13<sup>th</sup> century innovation added to a 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaic. The small figures of Francis, Anthony of Padua, and Pope Nicholas are squeezing themselves into the larger scene of salvation. They are true friars minor, represented in their short stature. The two friars Jacob, who restored this mosaic, also make an appearance just below the waterline, each of them depicted with the tools of their artistic craft.



Seeing these two Franciscan saints joined by the two friars Jacob in their simple wool spun habits, evoke within visiting pilgrims a sense of closeness of God, who has a special concern for the poor and outcast of society. With these thoughts, it is but a short step for pilgrims to be able to see themselves within the mosaic, as little sisters and brothers who can comfortably mingle with the friars and thereby draw closer to Christ.

Gazing above Jesus’ head, we find a single seraph joined by angels to each side. The presence of this seraphic angel of love brings the message of Francis’ having received the sacred stigmata, from Christ crucified in the form of a seraph, to bear upon the message of the mosaic. This Franciscan emphasis on the poor and crucified Christ, who is close to us and accompanies us on our journey through life, was the creative language expressing eternal truths in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. So, this new version of the mosaic, “2.0 with Franciscan Updates” was really an expression of the Church reading into the signs of the times and proclaiming the Gospel in a way that was more understandable to the People of God.

### Personal Meditation

Imagine yourself somewhere in this scene:

What do you look like? With the other figures in the scene, raise your hand toward Christ and the Tree of Life from which He gives you the Spirit.

What words come to your heart and mind as you point to Christ Jesus? How do you name Him?

In concluding your meditative prayer, imagine your description of Christ written on the unfurled scroll in your other hand.