



Reflection On Christ in the Nuclear Age

Incinerated by wildfire, the magnificent saguaro burned up and died and still stood tall and strong in the desert. I'd never seen anything like it. When I showed my photograph to good friends who had lived with me in Sedona, Arizona decades ago, both had the same response, independent of one another: "It looks like the crucifix that used to hang in Holy Cross Chapel." I gasped. I'd had a profound relationship with that crucifix. No wonder my own response to the saguaro was so visceral.

The controversial Christus by Keith Monroe hung over the high altar at Holy Cross Chapel in Sedona for years as an integral part of the west window. It was hard to look at, for me neither ugly nor beautiful but arresting. At first, I couldn't take it in. Then I came to love this terrible, black, ravaged Christ "stretched on the rack... too cruel for contemplation... the Christ of the atomic age," as my friend Cornelia Sussman described it. Many viewers turned away in horror from this interpretation of the crucifix, but I was transfixed.

Open Mouth a Protest

Monroe said he felt "reassured even by the most violent rejection of it." The piece went way beyond the sculptor's intention, as great works of art often do. Later he wrote that the extreme attenuation and tension of the figure and the strain and agony of the whole

piece, the pain Christ felt, should disturb our consciences: “Brother still crucifies brother – a continual nourishing of agony and violence. The open mouth is, of course, a protest and a call to end this inhumanity.”

I meditated and prayed before this crucifix for six years when I arrived in Sedona in 1967 to join the Spiritual Life Institute, official administrator of Holy Cross Chapel for ten years. It was the first of many crucifixes to captivate me, to disturb and enlighten me, plunging me deeper and deeper into the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of death and the passover into resurrection and new life.

Gone Forever

And then suddenly this Christus was gone forever. Marguerite Brunswig Staude, who commissioned it for the chapel she built to honor her parents, said it gave a “message of horror and despair... not the message of Jesus Christ,” and she never wanted it in the chapel anyway. She claimed it would hang somewhere outside in Sedona’s red rocks with spotlights on it at night so that more people could see it as “a work of art.” This never happened, and the Christus disappeared.

It was the summer of 1973. The new Diocese of Phoenix had been created with a new bishop. The Spiritual Life Institute’s contract to administer the chapel was not renewed. Holy Cross Chapel ceased to be a central part of our life as a contemplative community. We no longer celebrated our Thanksgiving festivals there or masses on Sundays and feast days. I was devastated by the loss, the first of many in my almost forty-year SLI history.

Crown of Thorns

Somehow the crown of thorns from Jesus’ head was preserved. I don’t remember how it came to us. (I think Jessica Danson was involved.) I forgot about it for decades. Then in September 2020, as I was moving back to Arizona and leaving Colorado forever, I put the crown of thorns in a memorial I created for my father outside my hermitage on San Isabel Creek. The new owners were hunters and corporate “water barons” trying to take water out of the San Luis Valley and pipe it to Denver. I wanted them to find the thorns and be mystified. And it was time for me to let go of this treasure as part of yet another loss in my SLI life.

To this very day I am haunted and inspired by the hollow eyes of Keith Monroe’s Christus and the great open wound of his blackened body, a perfect depiction of Christ’s *kenosis* or emptying out, his self-sacrifice total and complete for the sake of the world. The incinerated saguaro reminds me. – Tessa Bielecki

Tessa Bielecki represents three rich streams in the Christian contemplative tradition: Carmelite, Celtic, and the spirituality of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. For over fifty years she lived in solitary wilderness hermitages in the U.S., Canada, and Ireland, in deserts, mountains and woods.