

## Saint John Lateran Apse Mosaics

The conch mosaic divides into two sub-registers. The upper part depicts the bust of Christ in a dark blue empyrean with the red clouds of dawn, accompanied by four angels on each side and with a six-winged seraph above. Here, Christ is being depicted under his aspect of the Rising Sun (Malachi 4:2, Luke 1:78). It is thought that the seraph replaced a Hand of God which, with Christ and the Dove below him, would have given a Trinitarian iconography. The seraph was probably part of the Franciscan theme.

The depiction is not merely iconic, but an allusion to the tradition that the face of Christ appeared miraculously in the apse soon after the original consecration of the basilica. See the fresco in the left hand side of the transept for a depiction of this event.

The main sub-register, below this, has a gilded background and focuses on a jewelled cross which is a depiction of the True Cross formerly venerated in Jerusalem. This is another part of the 13th century mosaic which might have come from an earlier work, perhaps 9th century. It bears a central medallion showing *The Baptism of Christ*. Above, the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* emits seven streams from its beak which are symbolic of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. These streams form a pool in which the cross stands, and from this flow the four rivers of the Garden of Eden, which also symbolize the four Gospels. Two deer (Ps 42:1) and six sheep drink from these, which run into the River Jordan (labelled as such), itself a symbol of Baptism. It is worth examining the little scenes of life on the Jordan, which runs along the bottom of the conch. In between the rivers is the Heavenly Jerusalem, guarded by St Michael the Archangel and ruled over by SS Peter and Paul (their busts are tiny, and hard to see). In the city the phoenix, a symbol of immortality, is perched on the Tree of Life.

To the left of the central motif, and venerating it, stand the *Blessed Virgin*, *St Francis of Assisi* and the Apostles *Peter* and *Paul*. To the right are *SS John the Baptist*, *Anthony of Padua*, *John the Evangelist* and *Andrew the Apostle*. The figures of the two Franciscans are smaller than the others, and look rather squeezed in, this is persuasive evidence that the 13th century mosaicists were copying an earlier work. The pope kneeling close to the Blessed Virgin is the Franciscan Nicholas IV, who was praised for his work at the Lateran by Dante in *Paradiso*. The Virgin places her hand on his head, as a sign of her protection. The saints stand on a flowery meadow.

Between the windows below are mosaics of the remaining nine Apostles, again standing on flowery grass and accompanied by stylized trees, with the two Franciscan mosaicists at their feet. The latter have their own tools, the set square, compasses and mason's hammer. This lower register is separated from the upper by a single-line epigraph recording the commissioning of the original mosaic by Pope Nicholas, and from the large epigraph below by another little single-line text which proclaims that the seat beneath is reserved to the Pope.