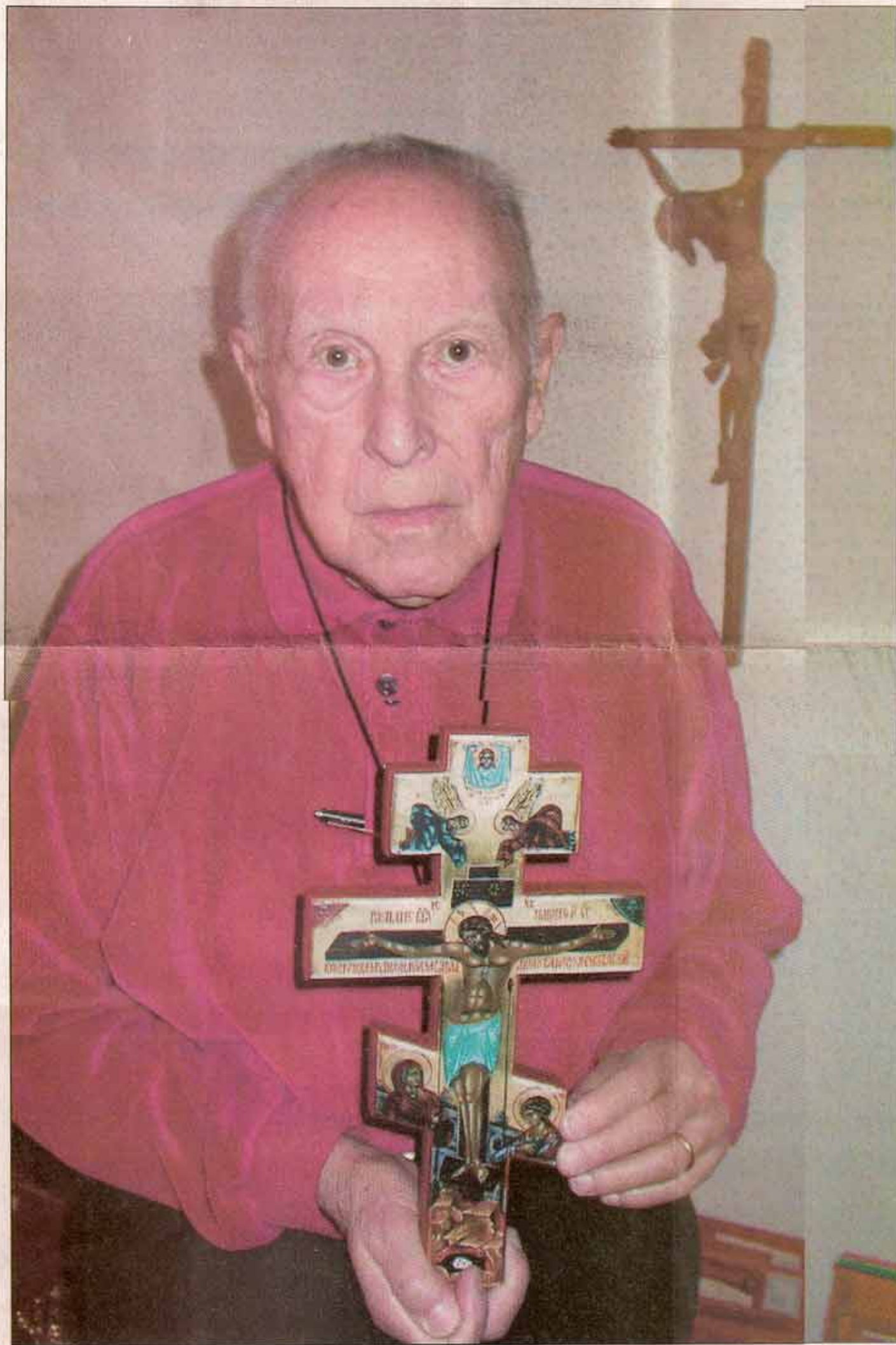


Cross cultural collection

Stiver loves to tell the story of his crosses



His eye is always looking — scanning storefronts, shelves, catalogs and airport gift shops.

When it comes to hunting crosses, the Rev. Stanley Stiver rarely takes a rest, especially on the Sabbath. Despite a collection that has grown to include more than 1,000 symbolic representations of Christianity, Stiver said he will always seek more.

On a wintry afternoon, Stiver does what he loves. He shares his collection, and a few of the stories, representing crosses from cultures and countries from around the world.

As he files through stacks of display boards covered in velveteen, burgundy cloth, Stiver looks for one of his favorites — a replica of the cross that spoke to St. Francis of Assisi. Stiver finds the cross, and holds it up to the light in a solemn gesture. From around his neck, there shines a Byzantine-style cross, clad in brass and suspended from a black leather cord. As he rises to his feet, he clutches it closely to his heart, while holding a painted, wooden relic in the other hand.



"This cross, here, is perhaps one of the most famous crosses in all of history," Stiver said. "It is believed to have had quite a powerful influence on one man in particular. His name was Francis of Assisi."

Stiver recalls the story, and the day when a young Francis was praying at the church of San Damiano during the 1200s.

"It was a little church," Stiver said, "and one that was quite old, and fallen into ruins. Amidst all that ruin, there was an altar with a painted wooden crucifix behind it. It was while Francis was praying that he heard a voice. It was the voice of God, asking him to rebuild his church. And so he did."

According to Stiver's research, that very cross can still be seen today at the Church of Santa Chiara at Assisi. It is a Byzantine crucifix, painted upon wood with vivid colors, and a very alive Christ looking out over a suffering world. As Stiver pauses to reflect on his replica of the cross, it is the simple beauty, he said, that strikes him most.

The first cross to ever catch his eye, according to Stiver, was a tiny silver one, purchased from an airport in Pittsburgh, Penn. Soon his travels abroad to the Holy Land, Russia and most of Europe, would allow that single cross to be the basis for an inspiring collection — one that has even peaked the interest of Stiver's son, David.

"For me," Stiver said, "collecting crosses is a hobby, an obsession. For my son David, collecting and researching crosses has almost become a life's work."

Stiver and his son have been collaborating on several projects; with the most recent being plans to compile and publish an extensive book. Together, they seek to tell the story of the cross.

Based on the Stivers' research, the cross remains the one universally recognized symbol of Christianity. The initial story is just this simple.

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Above, Rev. Stanley Stiver, holds an Orthodox cross from his collection. This cross slants to depict the story of the good and bad thieves, crucified alongside Jesus Christ; at right inset, Stiver demonstrates how to open a relic cross, once worn by priests to hold the ancient remains of saints.

O-N-E photos by Marykatherine Creel

Crosses

Continued from 1

"Nearly 2,000 years ago," Stiver began, "a single wooden cross was erected on Calvary, and Jesus Christ, our saviour, died on that cross for the sins of all mankind, and for the salvation of all believers. Three days later, he arose from the dead."

The cross, Stiver said, contains the most widespread significance and importance than any other emblem in the world.

While the story behind the cross itself is specific, styles and renditions of the cross vary, as do the meanings and symbols many of them depict.

Each country, and culture, it seems, has its own distinctive cross.

"From country to country," Stiver said, "each cross is different. Since my trip to the Holy Land in 1967, it has been my obsession to collect all of these crosses."

There are crosses from Ireland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, England, Portugal and Spain — just to list a few. Stiver has been to all of these countries, each journey gaining him a new addition to his collection, and a new perspective of the cross as a symbol of Christian faith, and hope.

Likewise, the materials and illustrations of Christ depicted among the crosses also vary. To decipher these differences, symbols and stories, Stiver said once he finds a unique cross, he reads everything he can get his hands on.

"I once asked a driver in the Holy Land to 'stop the bus,'" Stiver said, "so that I could run in a store and buy a Byzantine cross hanging on the wall. Later, after much research, I found it contained an unusual depiction of St. John the Baptist, holding a sword in one hand, and his head in the other hand."

That particular one, a vesper cross, now hangs on the doorknob, just outside of the room that houses Stiver's collection. Amidst a library of historical books and religious references, Stiver's crosses are filed according to nation of origin, and other points of distinction.

The oldest among these is a Byzantine cross made of bronze, which dates back as far as 600-900 A.D. Stiver digs it out of an envelope he once received in the mail from his son.

"One thing's for sure,"

Stiver said, "our mailman knows me very well. Almost every day, he says to me, 'Looks like you got another package from David. Is it another cross?'"

For more than 15 years, Stiver's cross collection was on display at the Southern Christmas Show in Charlotte.

"I attended the show, but wondered where the cross was," Stiver said. "The collective exhibit was supposed to be about Christmas, but there wasn't a cross to be found."

Stiver contacted the coordinator of the Southern Christmas Show. It wasn't long before Stiver found himself commuting to Charlotte, with his growing collection of crosses in tow. He did this for the better part of 15 years.

"I probably saw some 40,000 people," he added, "each time that show was held. Displaying my crosses there, and sharing their stories with the people, has probably been the most evangelistic thing I have ever done."

Stiver's evangelism includes being pastor of St. Marks Lutheran Church in Claremont for 31 years. These days, Stiver is a retired pastor, but serves as an interim with St. Andrews Lutheran Church in Hickory.

"Most of my time is spent making visitation in hospitals and nursing homes," Stiver said. "I take my crosses with me, and share the stories with them as well."

Stiver's collection has also been on display at Claremont City Hall since 2000. There he rotates his collection, to keep the story of the cross interesting, and alive.

"Even when I lecture, and give talks on my collection," he added, "I take different crosses each time, to keep the stories fresh in my own mind."

There is a story, Stiver is quite fond of. It is the story of a relic cross, and a gift. As he locates this particular one from within his collection, he opens the cross, like a fan into two different parts, and points out where the bones of saints were once kept.

"The relic cross is familiar to many people," Stiver said. "This particular relic cross was a gift from someone, whose family has kept the cross since 1903."

"As it turns out," he continued, "this woman's husband was on a boat in China, when a man fell into the water. Her husband jumped into the

water and when he pulled the man safely back onto the boat, the priest gave him this cross from around his neck."

Along with Stiver's displays, there is always a brief description of each cross and a history of the symbol's evolution over the centuries. According to Stiver's research, early Christians seldom used any material image of the cross, and never wore or displayed the crucifix. To do so, Stiver said, would bring danger to themselves.

Stiver also reminds today's believers that in those days, crucifixes were still in use, and were considered among the most degrading forms of punishment. Up until the time of Constantine, according to Stiver, people employed the use of "disguised crosses" such as the ankh, the anchor cross or the Chi Rho (X intersected by P), which are the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ.

With time, Stiver said, the cross began to be carved in public monuments. The figure of Christ wasn't always included among depictions of the cross until after the sixth century. Until then, a lamb resembled the savior.

"Up until the 13th century, the Christ figure was always illustrated as a living Christ on the cross," Stiver said. "Those types of crosses evolved, as the need to show the blood of Christ and his suffering."

"That transition," he added, "often resulted in extreme depictions, showing the Christ as starving and bent over in serious suffering."

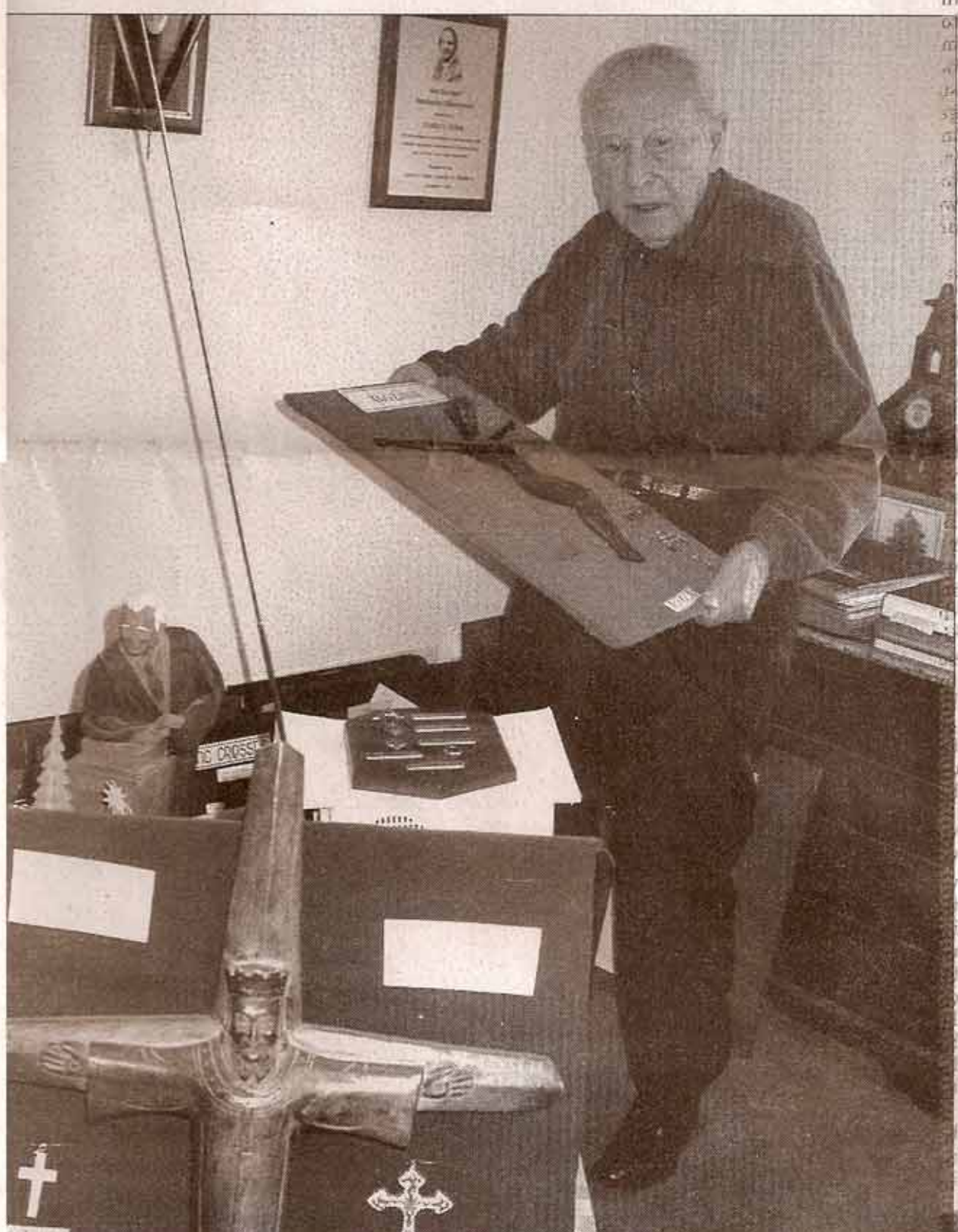
This new image of Christ, Stiver added, was meant to enhance the humanity of Christ, liking him to a suffering, helpless man, that was of flesh and blood, just like those he died for.

Stiver said he has been especially interested in the different symbols that seem to emerge among the crosses he collects.

"The Italian Passion Cross, for instance," he said, "is full of symbols, telling the story of the life of Christ."

Stiver lists them with expertise — hammer and nails, as driven in Christ's palms, a set of pliers to remove the thorn in his side, a chalice cup, a spear and a sponge, once brought to his lips when in extreme thirst. There is also a pair of dice, and a robe, whose significance are a little less known, Stiver said.

"The pair of dice, often seen on passion crosses, tell the story of the soldiers, gambling at his feet," Stiver said. "They were on 12 circles, representing



O-N-E photos by Mary Katherine Creech

Above, Stiver is in his element — a room where he stores his collection of more than 1,000 crosses, symbolic of the life and death of Jesus Christ; at left inset, a Celtic cross from Stiver's collection; and below, an Italian cross displays the symbol of the passion. Some of the 1,000 crosses in Stiver's extensive collection are on display at Claremont City Hall. The display is rotated periodically, Stiver said. Meanwhile, Stiver often spends much of his free time giving lectures on the crosses he has collected from around the world.



would get Jesus' robe."

There is also a rooster, taken from the biblical text and a skull, which Stiver said, typically represents Adam.

"The blood of Christ is often shown, dripping onto this skull, located at the foot of the cross," Stiver said. "That is symbolic of Jesus' blood cleansing the sins of all mankind, beginning with Adam, who was the first man."

One of the most unusual crosses in Stiver's collection is a cross made from camel skin. Like leather, it is made of tightly bound coils, in 12 circles, representing

"This cross was a gift from a priest," Stiver said, "who used it to tell the story of Jesus and his friends. The 12 circles, here, are the 12 disciples, of course, and the four in the center, represent Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, authors of the Gospel, and Jesus' closest friends."

The story, Stiver added, not only teaches children about Jesus and his friends, but that Jesus died on the cross, not only for his closest friends, but all of mankind.

When it comes down to sharing his cross collection with people, Stiver said his wishes are simple.

"I just hope they feel the same way that I do," he said, "and know that Jesus suffered and died on that very cross, so that they could have forgiveness and salvation."

In addition to that wish, Stiver said his cross collection

gives him purpose.

"Since I've retired, I've given almost 200 talks on the cross," he added, "in at least 14 years. I'm still talking about the cross."

Although Stiver's travel abroad have not been as frequent, he still hunts crosses via the Internet, where the resources are also great.

"Oh, the Internet is a wonderful tool," he said, "that and there are so many catalogs from museums and historical associations. And David, he sends me crosses in the mail. I never know what aspect of that wonderful story (of the cross) will reveal itself next."

As Stiver continues to collect crosses from all over the world, his collection can be seen at Claremont City Hall, where different crosses are displayed and rotated periodically.