

1937

EC5540 The Hidden Meanings of Religious Symbols

Ruth J. Easterday

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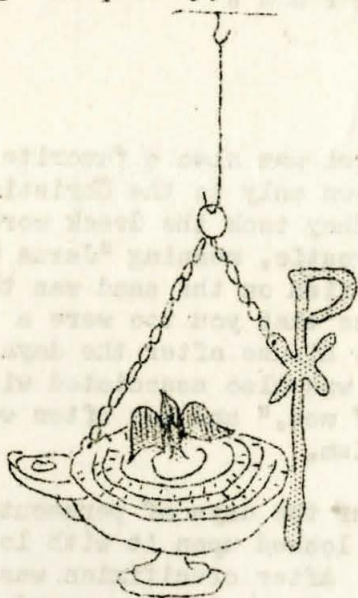
THE HIDDEN MEANINGS OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

By

Ruth J. Easterday, Lincoln

Symbols are pictures with hidden meanings. These symbols may be in religious paintings, on Christmas and Easter cards, or illuminated manuscripts, in stained glass windows, or wood carvings, or stone sculpturing in churches. You will be surprised how many there are.

Symbols were used by the early Hebrews and the ancient Egyptians, and many other peoples, but their use was greatly increased by the early Christians in the days of their persecution. A symbol has always been a sign of something higher than that which meets the eye. It has been something which "awakens us to the invisible." In the days of persecution the symbol had profound significance to the Christians but conveyed no meaning to others. These early Christians used fish, doves, monograms, and ships frequently, and each with a deep meaning.



My own interest in symbols was fanned into a flame when I received a little bronze lamp, a replica of one found in the catacombs. Its handle is a monogram of the interlaced Greek letters, Chi and Rho; and a dove forms the knob of the cover. I knew these must have a special meaning, and immediately I wanted to know how such lamps were used in the catacombs. This took me searching in encyclopedias and books on symbolism. There I learned about those underground passages outside the city walls of Rome and other Italian cities, with corridors often several tiers deep and hundreds of miles in length. This was the burial place in those days. Each tomb was an oblong niche cut into the wall. The body was sealed in with a plate of stone. Upon this covering inscriptions were cut or painted. The Christians always designated theirs with a Christian symbol. These symbols on the wall had

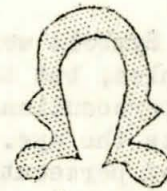
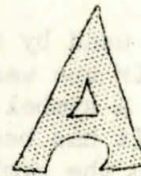
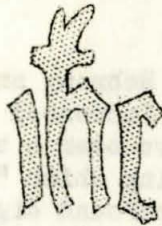
another use -- they were sign posts to indicate the route to larger corridors or chambers far distant, which were used as chapels by the Christians in those days of persecution. One could easily become lost in the intricate maze of passages, but by noting certain symbols one could chart the way to the place of worship. All along the passages were small niches where lamps of terra cotta or bronze could be placed to light the way. Other lamps were hung by chains from hooks in the ceilings.

Hatred of pagan idolatry and the fact that the Jewish religion prohibited outward representation of the divine, made these early Christians use symbols with hidden meanings instead of pictures of Jesus.

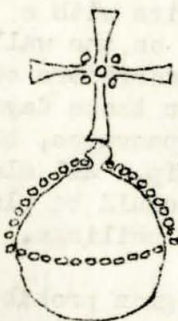
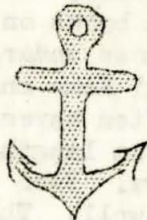
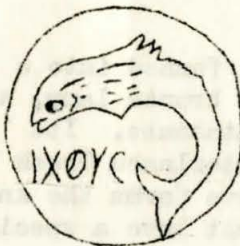
The earliest and most generally used were the Sacred Monograms. The favorite one was the first two letters, Chi (X) Rho (P), of the Greek word for Christ, ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ. Sometimes they used the $\overline{\text{C}}$ with the $\overline{\text{X}}$, this being the first 18412s

and last letters of the Greek words for Jesus Christ, $\text{I}\text{H}\text{C}\text{H}\text{O}\text{Y}\text{C}\text{H}\text{R}\text{I}\text{S}\text{T}\text{O}\text{C}$. The small curved line above the letters denotes an abbreviation. This $\text{I}\text{C}\text{X}\text{C}$ is used on Greek Orthodox crosses, and is the reason for a peculiar arrangement of Christ's fingers in many ancient paintings and murals. The fingers spell $\text{I}\text{C}\text{X}\text{C}$ (See illustration of Hand of God on page 3.)

Another of the Sacred Monograms is the IHS or IHC, these being the first three or first two and last letters of the Greek word for Jesus. These letters are embroidered on altar cloths, communion linen, Bible markers, and quite often are on altar crosses of brass. They may be carved on the wood panels of the altar or communion table itself. Sometimes the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega appear with these monograms. The meaning then is "Jesus Christ is the beginning and end of all life."



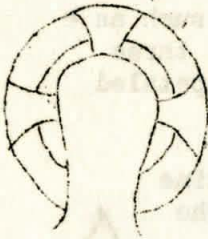
S a c r e d M o n o g r a m s



In the days of persecution the fish was also a favorite symbol. Its significance was known only to the Christians and was meaningless to others. They took the Greek word for fish $\text{I}\text{X}\text{C}\text{H}\text{O}\text{Y}\text{C}$, and made an acrostic, meaning "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour." To draw a fish on the sand was the secret way of telling someone else that you too were a Christian. This symbol fell into disuse after the days of persecution were over. The fish was also associated with baptism, and "Christ, a fisher of men," and was often worn as an amulet at the time of baptism.

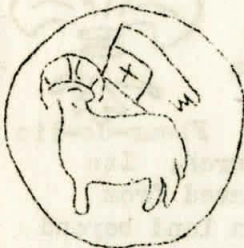
The cross was not used until after the days of persecution were over. The early Christians looked upon it with loathing and abhorrence like the gallows. After crucifixion was abolished by Constantine the cross began to be revered. The cross did not appear in art until about the fifth century. The anchor was used by the early Christians. Its meaning is, "Our hope is in Jesus Christ." The anchor is shown with the arms in the shape of the cross. They felt that their anchor, Jesus Christ, kept them (the Christians) from being carried away by the storms of life.

Another symbol associated with the sovereignty of Jesus Christ is the cross on the orb. A variation of this symbol is greatly in evidence on the crown and sceptre of the King of England. Its meaning is the triumph of our Lord or the Gospel over all the world. This appears often, both as a ball in Christ's left hand, and at the end of His sceptre in His right hand in paintings, murals, mosaics, and illuminated manuscripts. The cross on the orb (or ball) surmounts many Roman Catholic church steeples and is shown on processional crosses in Episcopal Churches.



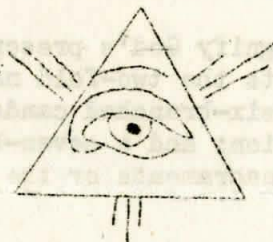
At Christmas time there are many nativity pictures. One can always distinguish a picture of the Christ-child by noting the halo, or nimbus as it is more properly called. Any one of the Holy Trinity is pictured with a nimbus of three rays.

The lamb is another symbol for the Christ. "Agnus Dei" is the correct name of this symbol. The lamb, to be a symbol of Christ must have the nimbus of three rays. John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God," and that is the reason for this symbol's being associated with him.

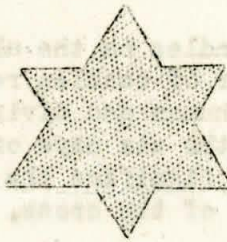


For the first person of the Trinity, God the Father, there are many symbols. Some of these are: The All-Seeing Eye, the Creator's Star—one with six points or two interlaced triangles, the Crown as a symbol of God and His sovereignty, and the "Manus Dei" or the Hand of God.

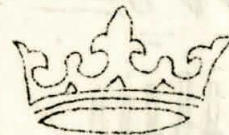
The symbols for the Hand of God have interesting variations. In the Latin form the thumb and first fingers are extended and the third and fourth fingers are closed. The three pointing up represent the Trinity, and the two closed, the two-fold nature of the Son, human and divine. In the Greek form the fingers spell . (See also paragraph about Sacred Monograms on Page 2.)



The All-Seeing Eye

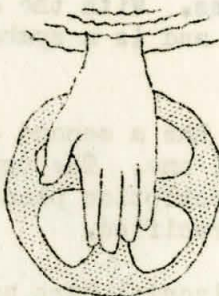


The Creator's Star

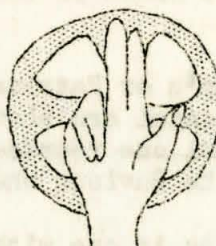


The Crown

SYMBOLS FOR THE FIRST PERSON OF THE TRINITY, GOD THE FATHER



"Manus Dei"



Latin Form

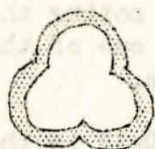


Greek Form

VARIATIONS OF SYMBOL FOR THE HAND OF GOD



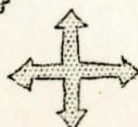
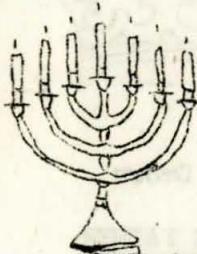
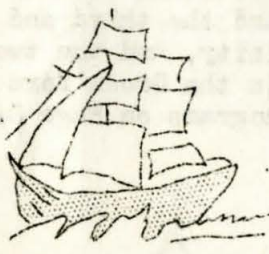
The only symbol for the Holy Ghost is the dove. It must, however, have the tri-radiant nimbus if it means one of the Trinity. The dove without the nimbus symbolizes peace or meekness.



A trefoil



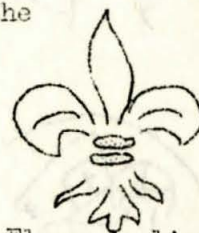
A triquetra



There are also many symbols for the Trinity, such as a single triangle, or two triangles interwoven, three circles or a trefoil (a three-lobed or three petaled figure).

The triquetra is a figure with a continuous line suggesting eternity, and interwoven to show the indivisibility and unity of the Trinity.

The fleur-de-lis with its three petals signifies the Trinity. This is often found as a decorative unit on altar crosses and on altar linens, as well as vestments.



Fleur-de-lis

The ship has long been the symbol of the Church. Its origin was Noah's Ark in which souls were saved from destruction,—"It is a ship that steers to a land beyond the horizon." From the Latin word for ship - navis - we get the name of the central seating place in our Gothic churches, the nave.

Candles represent Christ's own words; "I am the Light of the world."

Lighted candles on the altar signify God's presence with us. A pair of candles represents the two-fold nature of our Lord, human and divine. A six-branched candelabra signifies the six days of Creation; and a seven-branched candelabra signifies the seven sacraments or the seven last words of the cross.

Crosses are very numerous and are rich in variation. The tau or "T" cross is known as the cross of the Old Testament and as the "anticipatory cross." It was the symbol of eternal life with ancient Egyptians. The early Christians of Egypt used it instead of other forms. With the circle above it it is known as the Nile Key, and is a symbol of eternal life.

The Archbishop's or Patriarchal cross has a second and shorter horizontal arm above the usual one. The upper arm above the usual one represents the inscription placed over the head of the Saviour when He was crucified.

The Papal cross is one with three horizontal bars and may be used by none other than the Roman pontiff.

The Greek cross is like the letter "X" and the Latin form is like that on which Christ was crucified.

The Cross Crosslet is made up of four Latin crosses, to represent the spread of Christianity to the four corners of the earth--the missionary cross.

The Maltese cross with eight points is symbolic of the Beatitudes. The Cross Barbee, with hooks or barbs of various sorts reminds us to be fishers of men, and it is

used on evangelistic books as a decorative unit. The Fellowship of Prayer, issued by the Commission on Evangelism of the Federal Council of Churches, for devotional use during Lent, usually bears this symbol.



There is a symbol for each of the four Evangelists, used since the fifth century.

Matthew is the Angel because he tells of the Incarnation of the Son of God;

Mark, the Lion because he emphasized Christ's kingly character;

Luke, the Ox because he tells of the passion of our Lord and His sacrificial death;

and John has the eagle because he rises to such spiritual heights.

An excellent example of these is found in a window in the Temple Church in London, a drawing of which is to the left of this page. Note also other symbols evident in the design.

Colors also have their meanings--white is innocence, holiness and joy; bright yellow, love, constancy and wisdom; dull yellow is jealousy and deceit; red is ardent love, the Holy Spirit; green is the springtime color, typical of fertility, abundance and hope; blue is constancy because like the sky it endures forever; blue also represents faith and truth; purple means royal majesty and imperial power--but ecclesiastically it means penitence and fasting.

Liturgical colors used on the altar are limited to red as a symbol of love, holy zeal, and martyrdom, pentecost and Witsuntide; green as a symbol of growth, life, hope and fidelity, and is used in the long Trinity season; violet to symbolize penitence, humiliation, the passion, Advent and Lent. Black signifies mourning and death, and is used on Good Friday. White symbolizes purity, virginity, innocence, Christmas, Easter, the Annunciation. White is also used for Baptisms, weddings and confirmations.

Some of the special ecclesiastical meanings of numbers are:

One - unity of the God-head.

Two - the Incarnation, the human and divine nature of Jesus Christ.

Three - the Holy Trinity.

Four - usually the four evangelists, or the four corners of the earth.

Five - the five wounds of our Lord.

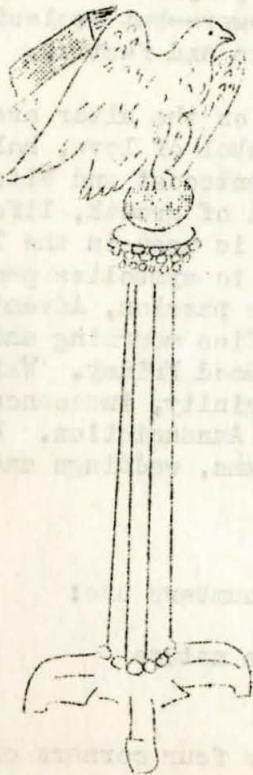
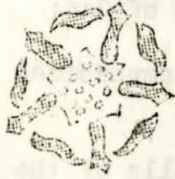
Seven - the perfect number, seven sacraments, et cetera.

Eight - the regeneration, the eight souls saved from destruction in the Ark. The baptismal fonts are often eight-sided for this reason.

Ten - the Ten Commandments.

Twelve - the twelve tribes, twelve apostles.

The various flowers have their meaning in the church. The rose signifies divine love. This is the flower of the virgin. It is often in pictures of the Madonna. The tulip is symbolic of the chalice or sacrifice. The lily symbolizes purity, a virgin, eternal life. The palm is a symbol of victory. The pomegranate represents fruitfulness and immortality. This was associated in the Old Testament with the priest and his message. The vine means dependence of Christ's followers on Him. A vine with twelve branches of grapes signifies Christ and the twelve apostles. A vine with wheat recalls the Last Supper; and a vine with birds in the branches means souls abiding in Christ. Wheat in the sheaf, means the bounty of God.



Animals and birds have hidden meanings. The peacock always means eternal life and the glorified soul. The pelican is the symbol of atonement. The phoenix represents the resurrection of our Lord. The butterfly symbolizes the resurrection also. Watchfulness and vigilance are symbolized by the cock. The hare represents persecution--being hunted amid secret burrows of the earth (catacombs).

The eagle, because it flies the farthest of all the birds, is used as the design for the lecturn, a stand on which the Bible rests when it is being read, for we desire the Gospel to be taken to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Without that first Christmas long ago, religious symbols would be few; but because Christ came, life is richer and we have countless signs to remind us that though invisible He is near.

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