

Catholic

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Sacred Symbols

AN INVITATION TO PRAYER

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Our churches are filled with images that speak about our faith. Although we may not always be aware of them, symbols surround us and connect us to sacred imagery, reminding us of our faith, and supporting us in our prayer as we celebrate the sacraments and engage in private devotions. They serve as testimonies to our Christian history, and honor the saints who led the way. Sometimes these images are borrowed from other religions, but most often they are of Christian origin. Some are quite obvious, such as a cross or crucifix. Others need to be explained, like a fish or a pelican.

That which appears simple or ordinary can hold great meaning. In a religious context, symbols enable us to express our faith in ways that would be impossible if we were to rely exclusively on words. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a symbol is surely worth a million. However, much of this witness is no longer recognized or understood because the meaning of imagery has been lost, forgotten, or distorted. If we wish to fully receive the messages behind these symbols and accept the invitation extended—to honor Jesus' name—it's important to recover an understanding. Let's begin by exploring related sacred monograms, acronyms, and images.

Sacred Monograms

Monograms and acronyms were used to communicate, in a partially hidden way, that a home belonged to a Christian family or that a tomb held the body of a Christian. This was especially important during times of persecution. Monograms combine two or more overlapping letters to form one symbol.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Today, you can see monograms and acronyms carved into altars, painted on church walls, or embroidered on vestments. What do they mean? Many monograms refer to the name of Jesus Christ. The most common and ancient of Christ monograms is the combination of the Greek letters *chi* (X) and *rho* (P). These are often superimposed with the X placed slightly beneath the P. They are the first two letters of the Greek name for Christ, *Kristos*.

Another Christ monogram consists of three capitalized letters, IHS. These are the first two letters and the last letter of the Greek name of Jesus, which have been transliterated using the Latin alphabet. IHC is similar. Here, the letter *sigma*, the last letter of the Greek name of Jesus, is transliterated into a C, not an S. Another version is formed when I is replaced with J. The letters I, J, C, and S were interchangeable in the Latin alphabet until about the eighteenth century. In keeping with this pattern of transliteration, you might see IHS, IHC, JHS, or JHC.

All are monograms, or concealed ways to express the word Jesus. Another version of the Christ monogram is ICXC. This includes the first and last transliterated letters of the Greek version of Jesus (IC) and Christ (XC). Painted icons often contain these letters, but they are split on either side, with IC for Jesus on the left and XC for Christ on the right.



Sacred Acronyms

In addition to monograms, another combination of letters, acronyms, are a series of initials that only those initiated into the faith could read. A common example is INRI. Most crucifixes have these letters carved in the wood

above the head of Jesus or written on a small plaque nailed to the cross. This acronym stands for the Latin phrase *Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum*, translated as: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The text is derived from the Gospel of John (19:19–20).

It’s believed that when St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, traveled to the Holy Land, not only did she recover parts of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, she also found the shroud in which the body of Jesus had been wrapped and the tablet with this inscription placed on the cross by Pilate. The tablet is known as the *Titulus Crucis*. It was brought to Rome by Pope Gregory the Great at the end of the fifth century and has been preserved in the church of Santa Croce (Holy Cross) in Rome since 1124.

Another popular combination of letters is ΑΩ, the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega*. These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and refer to Christ as expressed in the Book of Revelation, “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty’” (Revelation 1:8).

In addition to the many Christ-centered acronyms, another refers to Mary—the letters A and M. They represent the first words spoken by the archangel Gabriel greeting Mary at the annunciation. These first words were *Ave Maria*, meaning “hail” or “hello, Mary.” They’re also the first words of the popular prayer to Mary of that same name, Hail Mary.

Like the Christ monograms, acronym letter combinations

are constant invitations to prayer. INRI reminds us of Christ’s sacrifice. ΑΩ reminds us who Christ really is. AM reminds us of the role Mary played in the mystery of our salvation as the Mother of Christ.



all over it. What’s the meaning of the fish that’s carved into the walls of the catacombs and found on key chains, T-shirts, and bumper stickers? Where do these come from, and what do they mean?



Fish

Like monograms and acronyms, the fish was introduced as a sort of “secret code” image to allude to Christianity, used because the word for fish in Greek is *ichthys*. This also happens to be an acrostic or puzzle for the Greek *Iesous*

Christos, Theou Yios, Soter, which means “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” The first letters of each word of the Greek version of this Christological title spells out *ichthys*, or fish.

As with many symbols, once created, others attach additional meaning to them. An obvious connection may be found in the baptismal theology of Tertullian, who refers to Christ as the big fish and all Christians as little fish. Tertullian’s writing and other theological interpretations, such as linking the fish to the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fish, add to the richness of the symbol.

The Christian fish symbol has become so well-known that Darwinists, who study evolution, have adopted it as their own—with some changes that mock Christianity. The Darwinists’ fish symbol is turned around to the left, little feet are added, and Darwin is written within the outline of the fish.



The Pelican

A popular medieval symbol for Christ is the mother pelican surrounded by her chicks. In most of these images, the mother pelican is shown picking her chest and allowing her chicks to feed on her blood. The Christian connection

is clear: The mother pelican gave her life to save her chicks, like Jesus gave his life so we might live. However, if we do not know the story of the pelican, it’s easy to miss the power of this symbol.

The pelican image is most often seen on altars, altar hangings, vestments, tabernacles, and ceilings of eucharistic chapels. Its image is also present in the hymn “*Adoro te Devote*,” composed by St. Thomas Aquinas for the feast of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Christ. The second-to-last verse reads in free translation, “Lord Jesus, Pelican of Mercy, with your precious blood, cleanse me from my sins.”



Tetramorph

Tetramorph comes from the Greek words *tetra*, meaning “four,” and *morph*, meaning “shape.” It refers to a combination of four different shapes that together make a whole. In Christianity, this term is used to refer to the symbolic

representation of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The different shapes attributed to each apostle are based on the description of the four living creatures in the Books of Ezekiel and Revelation.

Their faces were like this: each of the four had a human face, and on the right the face of a lion, and on the left, the face of an ox, and each had the face of an eagle.

—Ezekiel 1:10

In front of the throne was something that resembled a sea of glass like crystal. In the center and around the throne, there were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and in back. The first creature resembled a lion, the second was like a calf, the third had a face like that of a human being, and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight.

—Revelation 4:6–7

Based on these texts, artists began to depict the four evangelists as the four living creatures surrounding the throne on which Christ is seated. In some cases, the evangelist is depicted in the form of the symbol that represents him, such as St. John being shown as an eagle or Luke as a winged ox. Sometimes they are represented in human form, with an image of their living creature next to them. A popular location for a tetramorph is near the ambo, the place from where the Gospel is proclaimed. Sometimes the *Book of the Gospels* itself is decorated with a tetramorph as well as altars and baptismal fonts. This signifies it is through baptism that we are baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as proclaimed by the evangelists. Baptism is also our entrance to the Eucharist, where we celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as narrated in the Gospels.

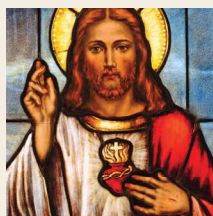


Saints and Their Attributes

In the same way that the evangelists are depicted with their

symbols based on one of four living creatures, most saints are represented with a symbol that allows us to identify the specific saint. For example, we might see St. Peter holding a key signifying that Jesus gave him the keys to the kingdom, or St. Clare holding a monstrance that’s reminiscent of when she defended her convent while holding a

monstrance that warded off the enemy. It’s helpful to know a bit about the lives of the saints so their identities are more easily recognized.



The Sacred Heart of Jesus

Specific devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus did not exist until about the tenth century and were mostly private. Public devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus evolved in response to the visions of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, a Visitation

sister who lived in the seventeenth century. In her visions, Jesus spoke of his love for the people and his disappointment about the lack of love that he saw reciprocated toward him. As a result of St. Margaret’s visions, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was founded. It is still celebrated today on the Friday after the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.

The image of the Sacred Heart shows Jesus presenting his heart to us—a heart on fire with love for people. It is topped with a crown of thorns, reminding us of Jesus’ sacrificial love. Like Jesus, we are asked to love without condition, even if that means giving our very life for our neighbor.



Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception

Representations of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, are found in most every Catholic Church. Images of Mary also reveal the many different visions or theological understandings of her role in the

history of salvation. They are but a small representation of the many ways that our blessed Mother shows her infinite care for humanity as the Mother of our Lord.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, pronounced in 1854 tells us Mary was born without personal or original sin.

However, devotion and depictions of the Immaculate Conception, predates this dogma by several centuries. Details of this depiction may differ from image to image, but most renditions show Mary standing on the moon and crowned with twelve stars, as referenced in the Book of Revelation 12:1.

A popular addition to the imagery is the serpent trampled by Mary’s foot, referring to the original sin that came into the world through the cunning of the snake and the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Mary, as the new Eve, crushes the snake because she will give birth to the Savior who will reopen the gates to heaven.

In 1847, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception was declared the patron saint of the United States of America. Devotion increased substantially in 1858, after the apparition of

Dig Deeper

Discover monograms or acronyms in your church. Learn why they’re located there and share their meaning with others.

Reflect on which Christian symbol is most powerful for you. How can it support you on your faith journey?

Find statues of unfamiliar saints. Look for visual attributes and research their meaning.

Mary to Bernadette Soubirous, a young French girl. Bernadette quoted Mary as saying, "I am the Immaculate Conception." This encounter led to the famous Our Lady of Lourdes grotto and many miraculous healings associated with prayer to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Her feast is celebrated on December 8, and is a holy day of obligation in the United States.

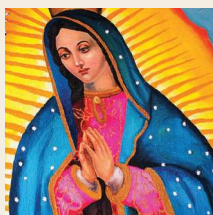


Our Lady of Czestochowa

The image of Our Lady of Czestochowa holding the Baby Jesus is recognizable by the fact that their faces are black and there is a double scar on Mary's right cheek. She is also known as the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. The history of

this icon is complex and wrapped in mystery. Some people say it was painted by St. Luke and handed down through history. What is certain is that this icon has been in Czestochowa, Poland, since 1381.

The black color is the result of a fire that occurred in the church. Our Lady of Czestochowa is credited with having saved the church from complete destruction. Thieves, who robbed the church, are thought to have inflicted the scars on her face. Attempts to restore the painting failed. Our Lady of Czestochowa was declared the queen and protector of Poland in 1656. Today her shrine remains the most popular shrine in Poland, and people of Polish descent throughout the world revere her.



Our Lady of Guadalupe

Throughout Christian history, Mary has appeared in almost every part of the world to encourage people, give them hope, or call them to more holy lives. In nearly every one of those instances, she has presented herself in the image

of the people to whom she appeared. The most well-known apparition in the Americas is Our Lady of Guadalupe. In 1531, she appeared as an Aztec princess to Juan Diego, a peasant. When his bishop asked for proof of her appearance, our Lady showed Juan Diego a rosebush that was blooming in winter. She told him to wrap the red roses in his mantle or poncho and bring them to the bishop. When he opened his mantle to show the roses to the bishop, an exact image of the lady Juan Diego had seen appeared on the mantle. The mantle, made from yucca fiber, is still preserved and on display, with the image intact, at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Our Lady of Guadalupe is most often depicted with references to the Book of Revelation, chapter 12. She is clad with the rays of the sun, standing on the moon, and her blue mantle is covered with stars.

Today many churches host an image or a shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her feast is celebrated on December 12. Saint John Paul II named her the patroness of the Americas in 1999.



Saint Joseph

Next to the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph is one of the most popular saints. He is usually depicted as holding the Child Jesus with his left arm and a blooming staff of lilies in his right hand. The meaning of the lilies is a bit complicated.

One explanation is that the lily is a symbol of chastity, since we praise Joseph as the most-chaste spouse of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The initial origin of the flowers speaks to the selection of Joseph as Mary's husband. According to this story, Joseph, like all men who were eligible for marriage at that time, was given a walking staff. When it was given to the others, nothing happened, but when given to Joseph, the staff started to bloom and brought forth the lily. The elders saw this as a sign from God that Joseph was the chosen one. Thus the flower symbolizes the fact that God chose Joseph to be the father of Jesus on earth.

Explore your church and locate particular images that you might not have realized were there. Look to the altar for animal images that speak of sacrifice and Christ's selfless love. Look to the area of proclamation or the *Book of the Gospels* to find expressions of the holy apostles who recorded the testimonies of those who encountered Jesus' teaching and took on the task of passing them down to future generations. We're each called to pass on the stories of our faith by understanding and sharing the meaning of the symbols that are alive within the Mass and beyond. Knowledge of our faith is a wonderful gift. How will you share your gift with others?

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