SYMBOLA CHRISTI

Symbols of Christ

Monograms, creatures and images by which the Church has represented Our Lord for two thousand years, and the meaning behind each one.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life." — John 14:6



Francisco de Zurbarán, Agnus Dei, c. 1635–40, Museo del Prado. The bound lamb on the altar: Christ, the willing Victim.

From the catacombs onward, Christians have spoken of Christ through signs. Some are **letters** drawn from His Name; some are **images** taken from Holy Scripture; some come from the nature lore of the ancients, which the Fathers and the medieval bestiaries read as a book written by God about His Son.

A symbol is not a mere decoration: it teaches. The illiterate faithful of past ages could read the Faith on the walls, windows and vestments of their churches.

Monograms and Letters

☧

Chi-Rho

The first two Greek letters of ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, Christ.

Constantine saw it in the sky before his victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 with the words "In this sign conquer," and placed it on the imperial standard, the *labarum*.

WHERE SEEN On altars, vestments and tombs

IHS

The Holy Name

The first three letters of ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, Jesus, in Greek capitals.

Spread by St Bernardine of Siena, who preached devotion to the Holy Name, and taken by the Jesuits as their emblem. Later read in Latin as *Iesus Hominum Salvator*, "Jesus, Saviour of men."

WHERE SEEN On hosts, chasubles, doorways

Α Ω

Alpha and Omega

The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

"I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Apoc 22:13). Christ is eternal and the end of all creation. They are cut into the Paschal candle at the Easter Vigil.

WHERE SEEN Paschal candle, catacombs

ΙΧΘΥΣ

The Fish

Greek for "fish," an acrostic of the Faith.

Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour." Used by early Christians as a hidden sign in times of persecution, and recalling the miracles of the loaves and fishes and the call to be fishers of men.

WHERE SEEN Catacombs, early Christian art

INRI

Title of the Cross

Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum.

"Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" — the charge Pilate wrote in Hebrew, Greek and Latin and fixed above the Cross (Jn 19:19). Meant as mockery, it proclaims the truth: Christ is King.

WHERE SEEN Atop every crucifix

✠

The Cross

The instrument of our redemption.

Once a sign of shame, the Cross became the sign of victory: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). The crucifix shows the Body of the Lord, keeping His sacrifice always before our eyes.

WHERE SEEN Feasts: 3 May, 14 Sep

Images from Scripture and Nature

AGNUS DEI

The Lamb of God

The Paschal Lamb and the Victim of Calvary.

"Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). Foreshadowed by the Passover lamb, whose blood saved Israel. Shown with a banner of victory for the Resurrection, or on the book with seven seals (Apoc 5).

WHERE SEEN Recited three times at every Mass

PIE PELLICANE

The Pelican

The bird that feeds its young with its own blood.

Medieval bestiaries told that the mother pelican pierces her breast to revive her young. So Christ feeds us with His Blood in the Eucharist. St Thomas Aquinas sings in the *Adoro te*: "O loving Pelican, Lord Jesus, cleanse me with Thy Blood."

WHERE SEEN Tabernacles, altar frontals

PASTOR BONUS

The Good Shepherd

The Lord who seeks the lost sheep.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep" (Jn 10:11). The young shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders is one of the oldest images of Christ, painted on the walls of the catacombs.

WHERE SEEN Second Sunday after Easter

LEO DE IUDA

The Lion of Juda

The royal and victorious Messias.

"Behold the lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David, hath prevailed" (Apoc 5:5; Gen 49:9). Christ is King and conqueror of death. Medieval lore said lion cubs were born lifeless until their father breathed on them on the third day — an image of the Resurrection.

WHERE SEEN Also the symbol of St Mark

SOL IUSTITIAE

The Sun of Justice

The light that rises on the world.

"Unto you that fear my name the Sun of justice shall arise" (Mal 4:2). Christ is the Dayspring, *Oriens*, of the O Antiphons. Churches were built facing east, and priest and people faced the rising sun together at Mass.

WHERE SEEN O Oriens, 21 December

LUX MUNDI

The Light of the World

The flame that drives out darkness.

"I am the light of the world: he that followeth me walketh not in darkness" (Jn 8:12). The Paschal candle, carried into the dark church at the Easter Vigil with the chant *Lumen Christi*, is Christ risen from the dead.

WHERE SEEN Easter Vigil, Candlemas

VITIS VERA

The True Vine

Christ the vine, we the branches.

"I am the vine; you the branches. He that abideth in me bringeth forth much fruit" (Jn 15:5). Vines and grapes also signify the Precious Blood of the Eucharist, as wheat signifies His Body.

WHERE SEEN Chalices, church carvings

ANCORA

The Anchor

Hope, and the cross in disguise.

"Hope, which we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm" (Heb 6:19). With its crossbar, the anchor was a hidden cross for the first Christians, carved on tombs in the catacombs.

WHERE SEEN Catacombs of Priscilla, Domitilla

PETRA

The Rock and Cornerstone

The foundation that cannot be moved.

"The stone which the builders rejected; the same is become the head of the corner" (Ps 117:22). St Paul says the rock that gave water in the desert "was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4).

WHERE SEEN Dedication of churches

PHOENIX

The Phoenix

The bird that rises from its ashes.

Ancient legend told of a bird that dies in flame and rises again after three days. Pope St Clement of Rome (1st century) used it as an image of the Resurrection, and Christian art took it up.

WHERE SEEN Apse mosaics in Rome

PAVO

The Peacock

Incorruptible flesh and eternal life.

The ancients believed the peacock's flesh did not decay (St Augustine, *City of God* XXI). It became a sign of the Resurrection and of the immortality of the soul, often drinking from the fountain of life.

WHERE SEEN Early Christian tombs, mosaics

COR IESU

The Sacred Heart

The Heart that has so loved men.

The pierced Heart of Jesus, crowned with thorns and burning with love, revealed to St Margaret Mary Alacoque in 1673–75. It signifies His love for men, returned with so much ingratitude.

WHERE SEEN Friday after Corpus Christi octave