

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

By Mary Skinner

This is a very brief introduction to a very large subject. Pictures, diagrams, monograms, actions and the spoken word can all be symbols. For further details of some of them please see Fact Sheets 24, 18A, 41, 47, 55 and 59A.

THE CROSS This is, par excellence, the Christian symbol which is universally recognised. Whether it stands alone or marks a building, chalice, book, vestment or anything else it symbolises the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ in whom all Christians put their trust. Christians are themselves signed with the Cross at their Baptism, and many choose to make the sign of the Cross over themselves during their worship. At the end of the Creed the sign of the Cross is a reminder that this is the faith into which we are baptised: at the absolution, the Communion and the Blessing it is an acknowledgement that all of these come through the Cross. The Cross can be illustrated in many ways - more than 60, certainly. Two of the more interesting versions to be found in the Minster are the Tau Cross mentioned on the Talbot memorial in the Airman's Chapel, and the rooted tree shown in the window in the Pilgrim's Chapel.

GOD THE FATHER In addition to pictorial representations of God in Heaven, The Father is often symbolised by an open hand, a hand raised in one of several portrayals of blessing, or a hand holding the souls of the righteous. Another symbol is the All-seeing Eye. Pictures and symbols of the Father are usually surrounded by a cruciform nimbus (a halo with a cross in it), as are those of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

GOD THE SON There are various monograms of Jesus.

IHS or IHC = the first three letters of IHCOYC, which is Greek For Jesus.

(Sometimes interpreted as Iesus Hominum Salvator, Latin for Jesus the Saviour of men.)



or XP the first 2 letters of XPICTOC, Greek for Christ.

AΩ = the first & last letters of the Greek alphabet and symbolise Jesus (or God), the beginning and the end.

INRI = the first letters of Pilate's superscription on the Cross, meaning Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

Candles represent Jesus, the Light of the World. The two candles on an altar point to his two names, true God and true man.

A lamb - the Agnus Dei - the pure, sacrificial victim.

A lamb with a flag - the victorious lamb - the Resurrection.

A lamb on a book with seven seals - see Revelations Chapter 5.

A pelican feeding her young with her own blood - Corpus Christi, Jesus in the Sacrament of Holy Communion (see Pilgrims' Chapel).

A fish, or ICTHUS, being the first letters of the Greek words for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT The most common symbol is that of the dove descending, as at the Baptism of Jesus.

Also flames - see Acts Chapter 2 -

A sevenfold flame, or seven lamps recall the seven gifts of the Spirit - see also Revelation Chapter 4.

THE HOLY TRINITY The most common symbols for the Holy Trinity are probably the trefoil leaf and the equilateral triangle - three equal parts making one whole. We also see 3 equal-sized and interlocking circles (the perfect circle being a sign for God) and the triquetra, which is the 3 pointed design formed at the centre of those interlocking circles. You can see a triquetra, set within another circle, on the green frontal on the nave altar. Often one sees three fishes placed head to tail in a triangle.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY is frequently represented in art by a lily or by the fleur-de-lis (derived from the Madonna lily). An ornate monogram M is often seen, sometimes beneath a crown, as in so many of our

Kempe windows. Sometimes we read **MA**
DI standing for Mater Dei, Mother of God. A heraldic rose recalls our Lady's title "the mystic rose". A pierced heart recalls the words of Simeon (Luke 2.35), and a star illustrates a Marian devotion - 'Hail, o star that pointest towards the port of heaven'. We frequently see a crescent moon in pictures of the Virgin Mary reminding us that as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so the Mother of Jesus reflects the glory of the Sun of Righteousness.

THE CHURCH AND ITS BUILDINGS The Church itself is often represented by a ship or by an ark in which the redeemed find salvation (the word Nave comes from the Latin navis, a ship). Sometimes the symbol is a rock, a vine, a seven branched candlestick, or wheat and tares - all scriptural.

The orientation of old churches is significant. The altar is at the east end of the church so that the faithful face the rising sun - the Sun of Righteousness again. The north side of the church, being the sunless side, is considered 'dark'. In some places the north is known as the "sinners' side" and in days gone by people were not buried on that side of the church. During Holy Communion services the altar book is moved from the south side to the north side of the altar, symbolising the light of the Gospel being carried into the darkness. The lectern often takes the form of an eagle on a ball. The ball stands for the world, while the eagle is the strongest of birds which flies furthest and highest, and is fit to be the bearer of God's Word. A light burning near an aumbry or tabernacle indicates the Presence of Christ in the Reserved Sacrament.

THE CHURCH'S YEAR The colours which are used throughout the liturgical year, and the ceremonies which mark all the Festivals, have their symbolic significance (see Fact Sheet 55).

WORSHIP In addition to the specific ceremonies which mark Advent, Christmas, Candlemas, etc., and the use of colours and lights, incense is used on special occasions to symbolise our prayer rising to God. We stand, kneel, bow and genuflect as signs of worship, adoration and humility. Even 'hands together, eyes closed' is a sign of our intended attention.

The various SACRAMENTS have their individual outward signs, words and actions to symbolise their "inward and spiritual grace".

VESTMENTS See Fact Sheet 41.

SAINTS There are hundreds, or thousands of known, named saints, and each has a symbol. These are given in many books. See also Fact Sheets 18A and 59A.

NUMBERS feature prominently in the Bible, 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, 40, 50, 70, & 1000 being particularly significant. I will leave you to think of the times when these numbers occurred - and of when they occur in our own daily lives and in the Church.

PLANTS, ANIMALS AND THE GREEN MAN Many, many plants and animals - especially those mentioned in the Bible - have a symbolic meaning, and folklore everywhere attributes powers to the natural world. Our wonderful Chapter House (and, mirroring that, our lovely Simpson choir stalls) abound with symbolic carvings (see Fact Sheet 47). In these days when a visitor can ask directions to "the Chapel of the Green Man" and when many people are looking to old beliefs, we must be careful to point out, as Jos Hall said in Fact Sheet 47, that the Church 'absorbed and sanctified' the old superstitions and so emphasise the Christian interpretation: new life through the resurrection.

Countless books have been written about symbolism in its many forms. I have but scratched the surface. If I have encouraged you to look at what you see, to watch what you witness, to wonder what and why and then to find out, I have done what I set out to do.

M.E.S.