

## GLOSSARY OF CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS

A symbol is an object or other visible (perceptual) sign pointing to a reality greater in meaning and power than the sign itself. Christian symbols which occur in worship gather and combine ranges of meaning that no literal statement or representation can fully communicate. Thus, over time, the worshiping community deepens its faith experience with the symbols since they open up several levels of meaning. Sometimes they hold certain meanings in tension. For example, water may signify both life and death, cleansing and chaos. Yet the symbol of water as it is encountered in the Easter Vigil, for instance, conveys all of these at once. As the praying and celebrating community grows in the Word of God and experiences its own life in ministry, the signs become symbolic by opening up maturing levels of insight into the gospel.

In the history of Christian worship, many different types of symbols occur. Some—the cross, bread and wine, water—are primary. They are found widely in scripture and are linked directly to specific ways in which God has acted toward the world. Others, such as an emblem of a triangle or a circle, may refer to a particular doctrine or to an attribute of God—the Trinity and eternity, respectively. Still others are figures or images associated with divine realities such as the dove and the Holy Spirit, the ark and the history of God's promises, the pelican and Christ's redeeming nurture. These latter two categories belong to Christian symbolism that is derived from the primary type. Finally, there are actions or gestures that are symbolic of the divine-human interaction in worship itself, such as the kiss of peace or the laying on of hands.

All of these are depicted and used in various ways in liturgical art—in stained glass windows, stoles, altar frontals, furnishings, architecture, and the like. The following list of symbols is not exhaustive, but it is intended to be a guide to the major types of symbolism that occur frequently in the art and ritual related to Word and sacrament over the course of the Christian Year.

**Agape (Love feast):** A simple, ritual meal in the context of which hymns are sung, Scripture is read, and testimonies and stories of faith are shared. John Wesley instituted this after the Moravian pattern. All such meals derive from Jewish and early church meals such as are referred to by Paul, and they symbolize the unity of fellowship in the love of Christ which the saints at rest will share. Signs of the agape are the loving cup and bread.

**Alpha and Omega:** The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They are used to refer to Christ's

person and work in the book of Revelation, and they are often depicted as a monogram or emblem of his comprehensive revelation. His eternal reign is expressed in the phrase: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:13).



**Altar:** The focal point of sacramental encounter with God, the place of offering and receiving God's

self-giving. The altar gathers meaning from ancient Hebrew holy places (for example, Shechem or Peniel) which acknowledge and honor Yahweh and, more specifically, are places of sacrifice and prayer. For Protestants, the altar is symbolic of kneeling before God in self-surrender and the table upon which the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

**Anchor:** Often used as an emblem or image of hope, the anchor is related to the ship as a type of the church. The anchor image derives from Hebrews 6:18-19.



Anchor

**Anointing (with Oil):** Anointing with oil recalls the Old Testament anointing of prophets, priests, and kings, signifying God's power to empower and confirm particular virtues and roles in the community as well as the authority given to fulfill these respective roles. Anointing with oil is also a profound symbol of healing and, hence, of God's goodness toward all.

**Ark:** One of the earliest Christian symbols for Christ and the church and, more generally, for salvation, derived directly from the story of God's covenant promises with Noah. More recently it has become a common ecumenical symbol of the whole church. (See also Ship.)



Ark

**Ashes:** A primary symbol of penitence and mourning found in several instances throughout Scripture and brought to particular focus in Christian rites of Ash Wednesday and in the burial rites. Thus the words: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Ashes are also used as a symbol of mortality.

**Banners:** Signs of victory and triumph, originally used in the context of battle to lead the way or to identify particular groups. Specifically in the ancient hymn "Forth the Royal Banners Go" Christ's redemptive work is heralded by their appearance. More recently banners have become specially designed for processions or for wall hangings, often bearing specific seasonal symbols and texts.



Banners

**Baptismal Font:** The place of water for the sacrament of baptism. Originally large and suitable for immersion, the font has classically been at the entrance of the church or in the chancel area on an axis with altar and pulpit. Fonts are focal points for remembrance of covenant for initiation, cleansings, incorporation, and the many levels of association with the primary symbol of water and water imagery in Scripture.



Baptismal Font

**Bible (Liturgical books):** The primary book is the Bible which, when opened on the lectern or pulpit, signifies the opening of God's living Word for the people. When carried in procession at the beginning of worship, or in preparation for the reading of the gospel, for example, it shows the movement of God's Word toward us and creates the symbol of the Word in the midst of the people. There are other liturgical books, such as a Psalter or a lectionary, which may become visible signs of the Word of God and the responsive word of the church's worship.

**Bread:** This inexhaustible primary symbol functions as a natural representation of food and also in the Scriptures as God's Word—the "bread of life." This in turn connects bread with Jesus Christ who speaks in John's Gospel of himself as the "Bread of Life." As employed in the Eucharist or Lord's Supper, bread becomes the transforming, living sign of Christ's presence. Throughout the Christian Year we encounter many references to bread in the Scriptures—manna in the desert, the cakes made by Sarah for the three visitors, the feeding of the multitudes, and the bread of the Last Supper, to name a few. The loaves and fishes thus are a powerful symbol of nurture, and the relationship between bread broken, bread scattered, and bread made one refers to the reality of the church as Christ's body.



Bread

**Butterfly:** A symbol of the resurrection, or of transformation of life, frequently used on a Christon Tree but also on Easter banners during the Great Fifty Days.



Butterfly

**Candles:** Candles or lamps are places of light and illumination; hence, they refer to the archetypal symbol of light. The paschal candle is the chief symbolic candle in the Christian tradition, standing for the risen Christ beginning each year at the Easter Vigil and remaining during the Sundays of the Great Fifty Days, used also at funerals and occasions of great solemnity referring to death and resurrection. Candlelight services, especially at Christmas Eve, are times of group symbolization of the divine illumination. (See also **Light**.)

**Chalice (Cup):** A symbol of Christ's self-giving in the Eucharist. The chalice has come to signify the whole of his suffering for us and the redeeming benefits of his passion as well. In various periods the chalice became heavily adorned with designs and jewels, expressing the honor and preciousness of the blood of Christ. Occasionally, a monogram with a pointed cross in the cup is used to indicate this particular symbol as a cup of the passion, while the cup and a radiant host just above it symbolize the whole of the eucharistic presence and self-giving sacrifice of Christ.



Chalice

**Chi Rho:** A chief form of sacred monogram signifying Jesus Christ by using the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos*. It has appeared in many forms since the fourth century, including without the "P" as ✱ or ✱ as well as elaborated combinations with the Alpha and Omega ✱ sometimes surrounded by a wreath of leaves signifying victory.

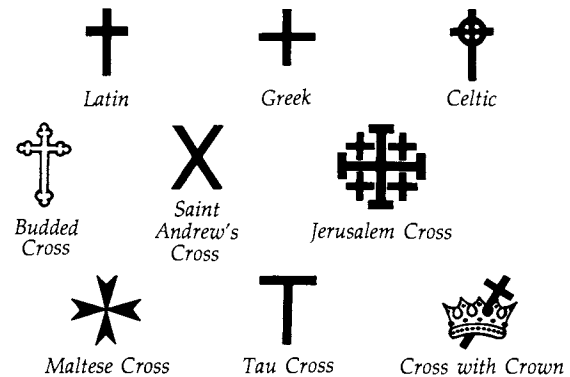


Chi Rho

**Chrismon Tree:** This tree, used by many congregations instead of a secular Christmas tree and placed in the sanctuary, is decorated with various monograms and emblems standing for Christ and the story of salvation. Several of these "chrismons," or Christ monograms, are mentioned in this list—for example, the Chi Rho, butterfly, the Alpha and Omega, and the letters IHS.

**Cross:** Perhaps the fundamental symbol in Christianity representing the whole meaning of Christ's saving death and resurrection, life and ministry, incarnation and coming in glory. There are many forms of the cross, including the crucifix with the suffering figure of Christ and a cross with a triumphant Christ upon it, reigning and exalted. Some of the most common resurrection, or empty,

crosses are the *Latin*, with lower arm longer than the others; the *Greek*, with four arms of equal length; the *Celtic*, with a circle symbolizing eternity; the *Budded Cross*, with a trefoil on each end of four arms signifying life and the Trinity; the *Saint Andrew's Cross* shaped like an X; the *Jerusalem Cross*, representing the spread of the gospel to the four corners of the earth; the *Maltese Cross*, whose spreading arms and eight points show human regeneration and the eight Beatitudes; the *Tau Cross*, named for its shape resembling the Greek letter *tau*; and the *Cross with Crown*, either of thorns or of a kingly crown.



**Cross, Sign of:** In some traditions, especially in Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Anglicanism, the gesture of crossing oneself—head, heart and both shoulders, or with small crosses on the forehead, lips, and breast—is an act of devotion in response to the trinitarian name.

**Dove, Descending:** Symbolizes the Holy Spirit, originating in the account of Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:16. It sometimes refers to the peace of God.



Descending Dove

**Eggs:** While this tends to be a secular symbol outside the church, in some Christian traditions elaborately decorated eggs symbolize new life. They are painted with icons and used in ritual acts following their distribution at the church.

**Fire:** Especially at the Easter Vigil, the new fire kindled symbolizes the dawning of the resurrection and the light that shines with the splendor of day in the darkness.

**Fish:** The figure of the fish was first drawn by early Christians in the time of persecution as a mark of identity and it appears in early Christian iconography. The first letters of the Greek words "Jesus

Christ, God's Son, Savior" also make up the word *fish* or *ichthus* in Greek.



**Footwashing:** Symbolic of Jesus' own act of ministry to the disciples, used in some traditions on Holy Thursday and other occasions. A sign of the love and care the Christian community has from Jesus.

**Fraction:** The breaking of the eucharistic bread, occurring just after the eucharistic prayer, of Christ's body for the whole world.

**Ichthus:** (See *Fish*.) Sometimes written IXTHUS.

**IHS:** The first three letters of "Jesus" in Greek (IHSOUS).



**Incense:** Deriving from several uses referred to in Hebrew scripture, the sweet fragrance and sight of the upward movement of the smoke have come to symbolize the prayers of the saints (cf. Ps. 141) and are a primary sign of honor and sanctification, both of the people and of the altar, book, and sanctuary.

**Keys, Crossed:** A sign of the "keys of the kingdom" given to Peter (Matt. 16:18-19), hence of the authority of the church. Keys are also used as a basic image in the O Antiphons to refer to the "Key of David" and, therefore, are an image of messianic hope in the prophetic literature.



**Kiss of Peace:** A sign of fellowship, greeting (as in Rom. 16:16 and I Pet. 5:14), and reconciliation, used in various liturgies. More recently it has been restored to a place between the prayers of the people and the offertory in reformed eucharistic rites.

**Lamb:** Often depicted standing with a banner of victory flying from a cross held by the front leg of the lamb, this emblem signifies the victorious nature of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; but it is also a figure of the Lamb of God "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8 κρν). It is a symbol of the eternal redemptive work of Christ.



**Laying on of Hands:** A gesture used in various services, such as in baptism, confirmation, ordination, and investiture, to signify the conferring of the Holy Spirit. It is also used in healing services where it symbolizes both the conferral of the Spirit and the role God gives human touch in empowering and healing.

**Lectern:** A reading stand upon which the Bible is placed. It symbolizes a reading of the Word and singing of psalms and canticles.

**Light:** The archetypal symbol of light is found throughout Scripture and finds many expressions in Christian worship—the lights of evening, the vigil lights, processional lights, and the like. Not only a natural symbol for life and the visible goodness of creation, light in the Bible is associated with the divine activity and with the very nature of God in Christ ("God from God, Light from Light"). Christ is referred to as the light of the world. God's acts are epiphanies of the light of the divine nature, from the burning bush and the pillar of fire by night to the vision of the new Jerusalem where God will be the only light required.

**Lily:** A flower of the resurrection, but also a symbol of the care of God, as in the Sermon on the Mount: "Consider the lilies of the field" (Matt. 6:28). Also frequently used as a symbol of the Annunciation in which the angel extends a lily to the virgin—an allusion to a christological interpretation of the frequent image of the lilies in the Song of Solomon (especially 2:1).



**Menorah:** The seven-branched candleholder from Jewish tradition, often said to represent the seven-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit.



**Monograms:** Emblems of Christ or of some aspect of his person and work, usually based on Greek letters such as IHS. Monograms may also be shapes of specific symbols used on a Chrismon Tree.

**Oil:** A primary symbol of anointing, used in various aspects of initiation, healing, and renewal.

**Paraments:** Linens and cloth hangings used to adorn altars, pulpits, and lecterns, bearing the symbolic colors of the Christian Year and often adorned with specific emblems appropriate to the seasons—the cross, the crown, the Epiphany star, or the trefoil.

**Passion, Symbols of:**

**Crown of thorns**—mockery, humiliation, and suffering.



*Crown of thorns*

**Crowing cock**—the warning and rebuke of Peter and, generally, of Peter's denial of Jesus.



*Crowing cock*

**Palm leaves or branches**—entry into Jerusalem; honor and victory.



*Palm leaves*

**Scourge and pillar**—symbolizing Jesus' physical suffering and humiliation.



*Scourge and pillar*

**Ladder crossed with reed and sponge**—symbolizing the crucifixion, and the cruelty of the vinegar given him (Matt. 27:48).



*Ladder crossed with reed and sponge*

**Money bag and/or silver coins**—symbolizing the treachery of Judas (Matt. 26:15).



*Money bag*

**Pelican:** A redemptive figure of Christ derived from the popular belief that the pelican gives of its own

blood to feed its young, usually depicted in wood carvings or drawings with a brood of young.



*Pelican*

**Pulpit:** The place of preaching, generally symbolizing the proclaimed and living Word, as well as the authority of those called to preach.

**Salt:** A sign of incorruptibility (Mark 9:50), integrity, and wisdom (Col. 4:6), used as a chief image by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:13). The liturgical use of salt is related to the baptism of infants and in rites with catechumens, persons preparing for baptism.

**Shell:** A symbol of baptism, sometimes used in the rite to administer the water.



*Shell*

**Shepherd:** One of the earliest iconographic depictions of Jesus, often shown with a lamb about his shoulders, deriving from the scriptural identity of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.



*Shepherd*

**Ship:** A symbol of the church. (See also **Ark**.)



*Ship*

**Stars:** The five-sided star with rays symbolizes Epiphany and the star followed by the Wise Men. Six-sided star (or shield) of David, a common Jewish symbol also used by Christians.



*Epiphany Star*



*Star of David*

**Stole:** A symbol of authority worn over the left shoulder by deacons and around the shoulders of

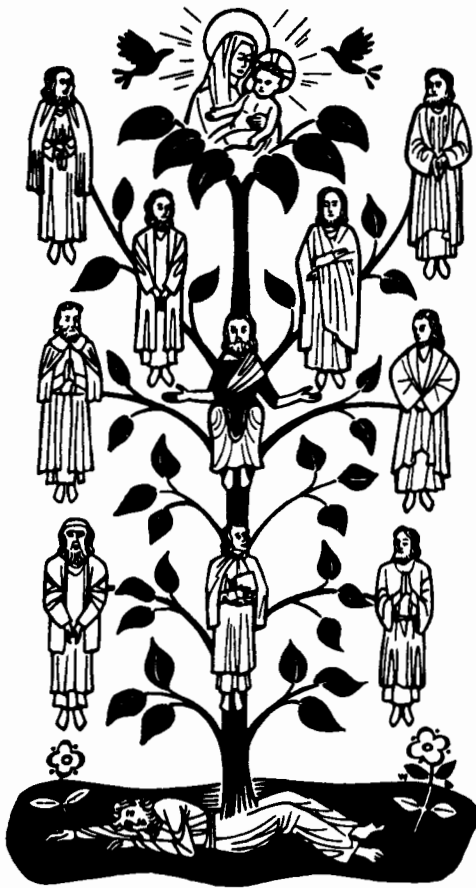
bishops and presbyters (elders). It can be adorned with specific symbols such as cross, chalice, and host or with seasonal symbols.

**Towel and Basin:** Symbols of Christ's servanthood, especially shown in his act of washing the disciples' feet on Holy Thursday. Images are interwoven into the Holy Thursday ritual.

*Towel and Basin*



**Tree:** The Jesse Tree, derived from Isaiah 11:1, decorated with biblical images and figures. The general symbol of life and death, found in Genesis—the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden signifying human choice for good and evil. Symbolic connections are made in many traditions between the tree of life and the tree of Calvary—the cross made of wood, especially in the Good Friday liturgy. (See also **Chrismon Tree**.)



*Jesse Tree*

**Trinity, Symbols of:**

*Fleur-de-lis:*



*Shamrock:*



*Three intertwined circles:*



*Trefoil:*



**Triquetra:** The three equal arcs represent eternity in their continuous moving form and indivisibility in their interweaving. The center forms a triangle, itself another symbol of the Trinity.



*Triquetra*

**Triangle:** Either a simple equilateral triangle or one with the all-seeing eye of God looking out of it.



*Triangle*

**Water:** A primary symbol related especially to baptism, with a wide range of meaning: cleansing, life-giving, chaos, death-dealing, womb and birth, rebirth, the river Jordan, the Red Sea, and the crystal fountains and rivers mentioned in the book of Revelation. Water is used in several of the rites of initiation and in various purification rites.

**Wheat and Grapes:** A chief natural symbol set related to the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, from which bread and wine are made; but also signifying harvest, feasting, and plenty—the goodness of God's creation. In addition there are overtones of the gifts of Jesus Christ to his people. The gifts of creation, made by human hands offered in thanks to God, and received transformed by God's grace in Christ.