Boston Catholic Journal

NIHIL NISI IESUM

A Primer to Catholic Symbolism

Contributed to the Boston Catholic Journal by a Cloistered Poor Clare Colettine Nun

Catholic Symbols

Select a symbol below to explore its meaning.

- Alpha and the Omega
- Anchor and the Cross
- Ship
- Fish
- Pelican
- Chi Rho

- IC XC NIKA
- IHS
- Cross
- Jesus and Mary
- Lamp
- Crown of Laurels
- Lion
- Stag (Deer)
- Keys of the Kingdom
- Peacock
- Eagle
- Lily
- The Sacrificial Lamb of God
- The Sacred Host

Catholic Symbolism is an artistic representation, an outward expression, or a treasury of objects, that has shades of various, often hidden meanings. The most commonly used symbol is probably that of the Cross. For each of us, the Cross has various depths of meaning according to our life's experience. This symbol can convey a wealth of ideas, concepts, scriptural quotes, experiences of suffering etc.

We need symbols in our spiritual journey, points of focus that lead us into deeper prayer and each of them possesses a profound, and often historical, spiritual dimension.

They are part of our patrimony in the Church and perhaps it would be a good idea to explore again — or possibly for the first time — the inner meaning and the message contained within them.

In the early era of the Church, especially during the times of Christian persecution, the use of symbols was very prevalent, especially in the way of identifying oneself as belonging to Christ, to other Christians. They were, if you like, passwords to a community of Christians who themselves were suffering severe persecution.

Christian symbols can be seen carved upon the graves and walls of the early Christian catacombs in Rome, especially St. Priscilla, Domitilla, and Calixtus.

By taking time to reflect upon each symbol we are brought into timeless contact with our brothers and sisters of the Catholic Faith down through the ages — and at once we are called to vivid remembrance of that beautiful Catholic teaching on the *Communion of Saints*, all those past and present: the *Church Militant on Earth*, the *Church Suffering in Purgatory*, and the *Church Triumphant in Heaven* — are alive to one another, ceaselessly praying, interceding, for one another.

Our Christian symbols can especially be used with great creativity and to great effect within the catechetical field where children, and those young in the faith, will grasp them in their beautiful simplicity and begin to appreciate the profound meaning within them, for they contain an entire treasury of profound thought, together with a repository of the experience of life lived vividly in the Faith in its many joyful, painful and hopeful dimensions.

Let us together explore these symbols.

The Alpha and the Omega — the Beginning and the End

"I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Apocalypse 22.13)

The Name Jesus takes to Himself in the last book of the New Testament: the *Apocalypse* or the *Book of Revelation*.

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The Anchor and the Cross

The anchor has always been a sign of safety, ***hope***, and security, for its primary function is that of mooring a ship or boat. The safety of a ship in specific dangerous waters could depend entirely on its ability to throw the anchor and stabilize the ship. The early Christians combined the symbol of the anchor with that of the Cross, thus proclaiming that Christ and His saving Passion were the one true security, the one sure way to attain Heaven. In times of persecution this symbol was a powerful image to those caught up in the various reigns of terror.

It witnessed to the fact that Christ was the true anchor in the storm of life, the true security, and that His Cross, the path of suffering, would lead all eventually to the heavenly shore, beyond all pain, suffering and anguish. Hope in Christ (see Hebrews Ch. 6 verse 19) was seen as the soul's anchor.

The whole imagery brought back to the memory and minds of the early Christian the life and experiences of the Apostles, so many whom had lived the lives of fishermen, and in light of the fact that Jesus called them to be, "Fishers of men." (St. Matthew 4.19).

In these changing times we would do well to reflect on Christ as the anchor and our one true hope.

This symbol of the Anchor and Cross is very easy to draw, and this simple exercise has the potential to root the concept in our mind, and in times of trouble we will be able to recall it, for the benefit of our souls.

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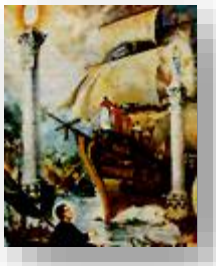

The Ship

Many of the early Church Fathers refer to the Barque, the ship of Peter. The symbol of the ship represents Holy Mother Church upon the high seas of life.

It is the nature of a ship that it is always on a journey, it has a destination and a purpose. It will traverse many dangerous waters and pass through many trials but with Jesus (our Compass) we will arrive upon the Eternal Shore.

A good crew will be faithful to their Captain, no matter how difficult and life threatening the paths through the waters may be, they will never abandon the ship — and neither must we for She is our Mother.

Mary, the Mother of God depicted as a ship is also an image of the Church.

The following medieval carol expresses this very well. It is profoundly beautiful and well worth reflection.

The Ship

There comes a ship a-sailing
with angels flying fast;
She bears a splendid cargo
and has a mighty mast.

This Ship is fully laden
Right to her highest board;
She bears the Son from Heaven
God's High Eternal Word.

Upon the sea unruffled
The Ship moves into shore
To bring us all the riches
She has within her store.

And that Ship's name is Mary
Of flowers the rose is she
And brings us to her baby
From sin to set us free.

The Ship made in this fashion
In which such store was cast
Her sail is love's sweet Passion
The Holy Ghost her mast.

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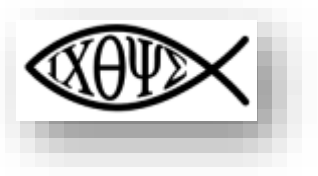

The Fish

The symbol of the fish has been used from very early Christian times (second century) — it can be found in the Catacombs of St. Callistus (our 16th Pope).

The Greek word for fish is **ICHTHYS**.

The first Christians spontaneously represented Christ by the emblem of the fish, whose letters, as an acronym, stood for:

Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter
Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior

Iesous (Jesus), **Xristos** (Christ), **Theou** (God), **Yios** (Son), **Sotare** (Savior). The Greek letters are *Iota, Chi, Theta, Upsilon, Sigma*.

Because of the miracle of the Loaves and the Fishes, it is also associated with the Holy Eucharist.

The whole of the gospel is contained in these words: Jesus ... Yeshua, Savior. Christ ... the Anointed One. Son of God. The One Who saves.

It is a complete prayer in itself and as such has been used by countless millions down through the ages. In particular it recalls to mind all "Pilgrims" who carry nothing for the journey, and for whom this is their constant prayer; in fact, faithfulness to this prayer alone can bring a soul to great holiness.

For some people, the concept of "Fishers of men" is actually repugnant and offensive; they feel it implies a trap or a snare. Not so: to the Semitic mind, the sea was a place of danger, a place where the evil spirits resided ... they understood this call of being fishers of men a call to save others from sin and the power of the evil one.

May the Holy Name of Jesus always be on your mind and in your heart.

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The Pelican

The Pelican in Christian art is a symbol of ***charity***, and a symbol of the ***Holy Eucharist***.

The symbol depicts the Pelican plucking at her breast with her beak, then feeding her young with the blood that issues forth.

It has therefore come to symbolize Christ's sacrificial love for the whole of mankind.

In the beautiful Latin hymn, *Adoro te devote*, in honor of the Blessed Sacrament, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote:

> *Pie pellicane, Jesu Domine,*
> *Me immundum munda tuo sanguine.*
> *Cujus una stilla salvum facere*
> *Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.*
>
> ***(Saint Thomas Aquinas)***
>
> Translated by the poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins as:
>
> Bring *the tender tale* true of the pelican;
> Bathe me, Jesus Lord, in what Thy bosom ran —
> Blood whereof a single drop has power to win
> All the world forgiveness of its world of sin.

The tender tale was according to **Physiologus**:

> *"The Pelican is very fond of its brood, but when the young ones grow they begin to rebel against the male bird and provoke his anger, so that he kills them, the mother returns to the nest in three days, sits on the dead birds, pours her blood over them, revives them, and they feed on her blood."*

We are fed upon the Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. The New Covenant of Love was written in the very Blood of Christ; how blessed we are, how blessed, to receive the very Blood of Christ — of which one single drop can wash us clean of all our sins ...

Love HIM totally Who has given Himself totally for you.

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The *Chi Rho* Monogram

This is a Greek abbreviation of the title, "***Christ***."

"Chi" and "Rho" are **the first two letters** in the Greek word ***Christos*** or "Christ." In Greek capital letters they appear as **X** and **P**.

In Greek *Chiro*, to anoint, and in Hebrew *mashah* denoted a cultic consecration. Through consecration, a king, a priest, a prophet, an altar were specially set apart. The anointing would confer the Holy Ghost's power, making Him (Christ) the anointed one, in Hebrew, the Messiah of the Lord.

The New Testament applies to Jesus the Old Testament texts concerning the anointing of the King-Priest. A priestly anointing was not narrated of Jesus, because He was the high priest, not like Aaron but according to the order of Melchizedek.

While a prophetic anointing had been attributed to Jesus it was related to His baptism.

Jesus is the anointed Messiah.

We have all been anointed at Baptism and are called to be other Christs, in our own vocations, *other* "Christs" — in our being Catholic Christians.

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The Christogram
IC XC NIKA

This Christogram IC XC NIKA is often seen on both Greek and Russian Icons. They form the first three letters of the Greek name of Jesus, Iota-Eta-Sigma, or IHΣ.

It stands for *Christ the Conqueror*, from the Greek contractions IC (Jesus), and XC (Christ); Nika is Greek for Conqueror.

Let us remind ourselves that Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death, He is the Ultimate Ruler of all. He is Lord.

We all know that in an earthly sense a conquering hero has fought many battles ... but Jesus Christ is the final Victor over all conflicts and wars.

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ΙΗΣΟΥΣ
ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ

The Christogram
IHS

A Christogram for the name of Jesus using the first three letters of the word in Greek. The Greek Christogram ΙΗΣΟΥΣ (**IHS**OUS) for Jesus, and in Latin *Jesus Hominum Salvator*, "Jesus Savior of mankind."

JESUS, the only Name under heaven by which we may be saved. Jesus, the Holy Name, the name so loved by so many Saints of the Church. It is said of St. Francis of Assisi that when he uttered the Holy Name, he licked his lips, for he said the name of Jesus contained such sweetness.

The Franciscan St. Bernadine of Sienna did a great deal to promote the praying of the Holy Name. *The Name of Jesus should be held in the greatest of reverence and respect — and never profaned.*

Our God has allowed us to call Him by His Name!

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The Crucifix, or Cross

Probably the most recognized and most loved of the Christian symbols is the simple sign of the Cross with the Corpus Figure of Christ.

How many prisoners and captives have found solace and strength in beholding an indentation in the soil traced out as a cross, or have drawn upon a dirty window pane the form of the Cross, or even observed the crossing of two blades of grass, or branches of a tree?

How many soldiers far away from home who fell in battle, have had their mortal remains marked with a line of pebbles, or intertwined twigs forming the Cross of Christ?

Many people have been saved from suicide after having focused their attention upon a Cross, whether a man-made symbol or a sign within nature.

A simple Cross or Crucifix is a sign of salvation and hope, a reminder of the jewel of our Christian faith; we are also comforted in our belief in its power to defend us from evil and to overcome the great adversary, the devil and his demons.

We are, however, accustomed to consider the Sign of the Cross (*Signum Crucis*) as wholly a Christian symbol, originating with the crucifixion of our Redeemer. This is quite erroneous. In ancient Carthage it was used for ornamental purposes. Runic

Crosses were set up by the Scandinavians as boundary marks, and were erected over the graves of Kings and heroes.

Cicero tells us that the augur's staff with which they marked out the heaven was a cross.

The ancient Egyptians employed the same as a sacred symbol, and we see on Greek sculptures, a cake with a cross.

It was also a sacred symbol among the Aztecs long before the landing of Cortez.

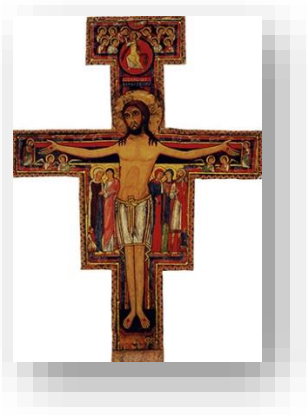
All this can be seen as a prefiguring, a preparation of humanity for the greatest Cross and Self-giving in love that the world would ever know, on Calvary.

It also adds weight to the fact, considering its primitive religious associations, that crucifixion was a deliberate mockery of the "gods." The barbaric Roman practice of crucifixion was for the lowest and most heinous crimes.

But by Christ's sacrificial offering on Calvary, the hitherto sign of shame became a sign of glory.

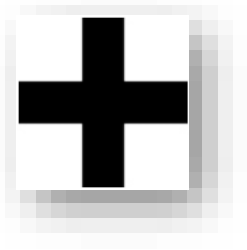
In heraldry there are twelve different crosses.

The Cross as a mystic emblem can be reduced to these five:



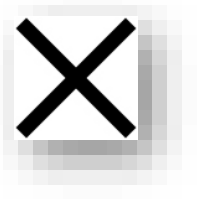
San Damiano Cross
of St. Francis of Assisi

Greek Cross



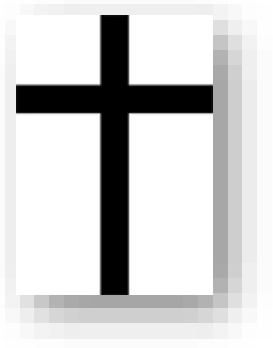
A Cross commonly used as early as the 4th century.

St. Andrew's Cross



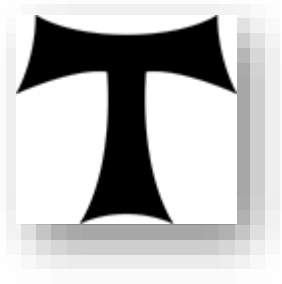
A saltire (X-shaped) cross upon which the Apostle Saint Andrew was crucified, considering himself unworthy to be crucified as Jesus was.

Latin Cross



Initially used solely by the Catholic Church, it became the universal sign of Christianity.

Tau Cross



Also called the Cross of Saint Anthony of Egypt.

The symbols above are of interest to us as Catholics inasmuch as they underscore our understanding of the development and journey of humanity ever deeper and deeper into God.

We should treasure and reverence the sign, the mark, the symbol of the Cross; in darkness and suffering, it is the symbol that will bring the greatest solace and blessing to our souls.

"We adore you O Christ and we bless you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world!"

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Jesus and Mary

Signifying the union between Jesus and Mary: Jesus Christ in the *Incarnation* took *His flesh* from Mary even while He remained eternally God with the Father. Hence, we state in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is *True God* and *True Man*.

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The Lamp

In the time of Jesus the lamp was molded out of clay, it was round and flat, had a pinching on one side to contain the wick, and was fuelled with olive oil. (Olive oil had many uses and was considered precious, as it was a valued foodstuff, also it was a source of light, it could alleviate pain, cleanse wounds, strengthen the sick, and mixed with perfume it was offered to guests as a sign of respect).

The Lamp once lit, was placed on a stand and was never permitted to go out, it burned, bringing warmth and light within the house day and night. It was also regarded as being made for enlightenment, and could symbolize vigilance, the prophetic word, and the presence of God. It was a reminder to the Jew of the Holy Tabernacle, and so therefore had deep religious significance.

In the book of Exodus, the Lord speaking through Moses says:

"And you shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that the lamp may be set up to burn perpetually. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout all generations by the people of Israel." (Ex. 27.20)

Judaism was the cradle of Christianity, and the light that burnt before the Tabernacle in the wilderness was a forerunner to the Vigil Light that ever burns before Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

Lamps and lights have been used symbolically to represent the life and existence of the soul, both among the living and the dead. The Romans are said to have preserved lamps in some of their sepulchers for centuries. In the papacy of Paul III, one of these lamps was found in the tomb of Tullia (Cicero's daughter) which had been shut up for 1,550 years.

At the dissolution of the monasteries a lamp was found which is said to have been burning for 1,200 years. Two are preserved in Leyden Museum.

Jesus Christ is the Light of the World, the Light of the cosmic world and the light of our inner world; He is the Light that the darkness can never extinguish. His word is a lamp to our path (Ps. 118). Lights are signs of hope, symbols that draw us to the Eternal Light. A wonderful image of the vigilance of the faithful awaiting the Second-Coming of Christ is found in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Saint Matthew 25:1-13).

Lamps and light are bound to this world, to our earthly pilgrimage, and we need the Light of Christ to bring us to the Blessed Kingdom ...

Light is only needful where darkness falls. Be it actual or spiritual, let us follow the Light of Christ.

One day all flames will be extinguished, for He Alone will be our Light:

"Then he showed me the river of life, clear as crystal, gushing from the throne and from the Lamb ... The throne of God will be in the city and God's people will live in

His presence. They will see His face and His name will be upon their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of lamp or sun for God Himself will be their light and they will reign forever." (Apocalypse 22)

Shine upon us, O Light of Christ!

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The Crown of Laurels

The Laurel figures largely in history, even to this day. The Laurel is an evergreen tree which carries large, oval, hardy leaves. The Greeks gave a wreath, a crown (*stephanos*), to the victor in the Pythian games. The Romans gave a crown of triumph made of laurels to a general who obtained victory. St. Paul likens the spiritual journey and mission to that of a runner at the games.

"Have you learned anything from the stadium? Many run, but only one gets the prize. Run, therefore intending to win it, as athletes who impose on themselves a rigorous discipline. Yet for them the wreath is of laurels that wither, while we run for a wreath that will never die."
(1 Corinthians 9.24)

We have all seen the spectacle of the Olympic Games in Greece and elsewhere, the efforts that all participating had to make, but they kept the goal ever in view. So we, too, need to keep our eyes on Jesus, and run ahead for the crown that awaits us in Heaven.

When a Poor Clare Sister makes her Profession of vows, the choir sing, *"Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life."*

When a sister dies, she is placed in her coffin fully dressed in her habit, veil and kerchief, a crucifix in her hand, her vow card upon her heart, and upon her head a crown of laurels, interspersed with flowers, for she has run her race and now awaits the crown of glory she will receive from her Lord.

There is a beautiful reading in the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras, chapter 2.42 onwards.

"I, Ezdra, saw an enormous crowd on Mount Zion, too many people to count. They were all singing and praising the Lord." Standing in the middle of this crowd was a very tall young man, taller than any of the others. He was placing a crown on the head of each person, but he towered above them all. I was spellbound by the sight and I asked, "Who are these people Sir?"

He replied, "These are the people who have taken off their mortal robes and have put on immortal ones. They have confessed their faith in God, and now they are being given crowns and palm branches as symbols of their victory." Then I asked the angel, "Who is the young man who is putting the crowns on their heads and giving them the palms?" "He is the Son of God," the angel replied.

Let us keep the goal in mind, let us keep our eyes on Jesus, Heaven awaits us, all is passing ... Jesus will be our prize and the joy of the Blessed Kingdom.

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The Lion

The lion is considered to be the "King" of all beasts, no doubt due to its great muscular power and agility, its strength and ability to dominate all other species. In its natural habitat it is indeed a magnificent creature. Many great monarchs and Kings have taken the Lion as a title.

- Al Hadira A.D. 62 was called The Lion of God, because of his religious zeal and courage.
- Arioch BC 1927 The Lion, King of Assyria.
- Henry, Duke of Bavaria was called "The Lion," because of his daring and bravery.
- Richard I, *Coeur de Lion* (Lion's heart) so called for his bravery.
- ... and many, many others.

But the greatest to ever bear this name, is Our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was a descendant of the principal tribe of Israel, the tribe of Judah. Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. The word Judah means, praise. He is the one to Whom all praise and honor are due, He is the Lion enthroned upon the praises of Israel. Jesus is the ruler, the King to Whom rightly belongs the blessing of Jacob.

"Judah, a young lion! You return from the prey, my son! Like a lion he stoops and crouches, and like a lioness, who dares to rouse him? The scepter shall not be taken from Judah, nor the ruler's staff between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, and who has the obedience of the nations."
(Gen. 49.9-11)

There are many expressions of Lions within Heraldry, numerous postures being assumed, as well as many stories pertaining to lions in Classical mythology.

Probably the most familiar Christian symbol of the lion is applied to St. Mark, who is depicted as a lion. The origin of this is said to be the fact that St. Mark begins his gospel with scenes of John the Baptist and Jesus in the wilderness. Indeed at the time of the writing of the gospels, lions still inhabited caves within Palestine.

A less known concept is the Lion as a symbol of the Resurrection. According to tradition the lion's whelp is born dead, and remains so for three days, and when the father breathes on it, it receives life.

Probably the most beautiful usage of the lion imagery in recent years are the allegorical stories of C.S Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in which the main figure is the lion, Aslan (an image of Christ). These stories are in one way timeless, showing the fight between good and evil, of which Aslan is always the victor. The central theme of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* within the Narnia Chronicles is the Pascal mystery.

One of the children in the story asks, "What does it all mean?" "It means," said Aslan, "that though the witch knew the deep magic, there is a magic still deeper which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and darkness before time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who has committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and death itself would start working backwards."

The symbol of the Lion is a powerful one, if you have not read the chronicles of Narnia, please do, they are suitable for children of all ages, as well as adults, and can be understood on many levels.

The Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered!

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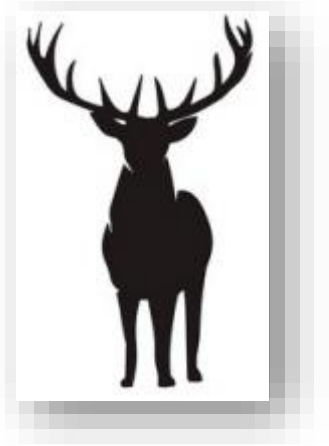

The Stag (Deer)

In Christian art the stag has come to typify piety and religious aspiration and longing. The Stag symbolizes solitude, prayer and purity.

"As a Deer longs for running streams,
so my soul longs for You O, God.
My soul thirsts for the living God."
(Psalm 42)

This beautiful animal is possessed of such grace and majesty, and deservedly is used to represent the human soul. Indeed the famous Victorian engraver Edwin Landseer called the stag, "The Monarch of the Glen."

His freedom of mobility captivates our imagination and speaks to us of the freedom of soul we would like to have. His fearlessness in combat is what we would like to imitate in our encounters with evil.

Who could ever forget seeing the silhouette of this noble animal against a lonely sky?

According to Pliny, the reason why the stag symbolizes Christ is the superstition that it draws serpents by its breath from their holes, and then tramples them underfoot.

The Stag is also depicted in artistic representations of some Christian Saints, St. Julian the Hospitaller, St. Felix of Valois, and St. Aidan being among them.

"As the deer longs for running streams ..."

Let us too long for the Living water symbolizing, the Word, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ himself.

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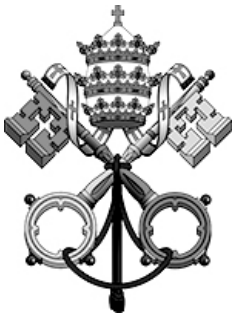

The Keys of the Kingdom

The Keys, permitting the opening and closing of doors, symbolizes the one who possesses authority and dominion over a kingdom.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah Ch. 9, Verse 5-6 we read:

"A Child is born to us, a Son is given us; the royal key is laid upon His shoulder, and His name is proclaimed: 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'"

And in Isaiah chapter 22 verses 20-24 we read of Eliakim being invested with authority and power, through the bestowing of the key:

"On that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah. I will clothe him with your robe, I will strengthen him with your girdle, I will give him your authority, and he will be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the people of Judah. Upon his shoulder I will place the key of the house of David: what he opens, no one shall shut; what he shuts, no one shall open."

The ancient keys were about a yard long, made of wood or metal. On public occasions the steward placed the key on his shoulder, hence to have the key upon one's shoulder meant to be in authority, to have the keeping of something.

The power of the keys was given to St. Peter by Jesus Christ himself:

"And now I say to you. You are Peter (or, the Rock) and on this rock I will build my Church; and never will the power of death overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and what you unbind on earth will be unbound in Heaven." (Saint Matthew 16:18-22)

The power of the keys is the supreme authority vested in the pope as successor of St. Peter. St. Peter is always represented in Christian art with two keys in his hand, they are consequently the insignia of the papacy, and are borne saltire-wise, one of Gold and the other of Silver.

The supreme Pontiff has the God-given authority to open or close the doors on the Treasury of the Faith and its practice, and to unlock and reveal the truth to us as children of the Church. Ours is to offer loving obedience to the Church, obedience in the fullest sense of the word of listening and putting what we hear into practice.

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(Peacock from the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome circa 3rd century A.D.)

The Peacock

The symbol of the Peacock was used in art very early into the Christian era, it decorated some of the tombs and walls in the actual catacombs. The Peacock represented immortality, this stemmed from the ancient legend that the flesh of the

peacock did not decay, thus its association with the Resurrection of Christ. In addition, the "multitude of eyes" upon its stunningly beautiful fan tail, suggested the all-seeing eye of God and that of the Church.

This beautiful bird is indigenous to India. It was brought to King Solomon by his ships from Tarshish, in which case its origin was probably the Malabar Coast or Ceylon.

It is a great pity that this colorful and captivating bird is mostly associated in our minds as a symbolism of pride, "Proud as a Peacock."

"By the Peacock!", was once a common oath which was thought to be sacred, precisely because of it being a *type* of the Resurrection.

In the book of Genesis we read of Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, being cast out into the wilderness. There in the desert Hagar experienced God, as *the One who Sees*! In other words, God was aware of the insecurity, pain and desolation of her life; He saw, and had Hagar, with her unborn child, and their future all in his heart and hand!

Hagar gave to The Lord who spoke to her, the name of *El Roi*, for she said, "I have seen the One who sees me." That is why this well is called the well of *Lahai-Roi*. (Genesis 16.13)

We should take courage from this story, that whatever predicament, trouble, trial we find our life to be in, God sees it all, He KNOWS! And He is loving us through it, and calling us beyond it ... He is the God Who sees! He notices us, small and insignificant as we are.

Truly our God is a God of consolation.

Let us look upon the Peacock with new eyes and reflect on what its eyes say to us!

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The Eagle

The eagle is a magnificent bird with a large wingspan. It nests in inaccessible rocky crags, in high places, which make it a symbol of heavenly beings.

"Is it at Your command that eagles fly, and build their nest on high?" (Job 39.27)

When the time comes for young eagles to learn to fly, the mother takes one eaglet upon her wings and soars high above the land. She then shakes the young one off to make its first attempts at flight. If she sees her young in any trouble, she dives beneath it, catches it on her wings and soars aloft again to repeat the learning process.

The eagle is also often depicted as the bird that takes, carries a person from danger up to a safe place. "*I will bear you up, on eagles wings!*" one popular hymn tells us.

And from the book of Revelation we read of the woman who had given birth to a male child (Jesus) and was in danger of being consumed by the great dragon (the devil).

"Then the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly into the desert where she would be looked after ..."
(Rev. 12.14)

The eagle was used as an emblem long before the Christian era. It was the ensign of the ancient kings of Babylon and Persia. The Romans adopted it in conjunction with other devices, but Marius made it the ensign of the legion.

The Romans also were accustomed to let an eagle fly from the funeral pyre of a great emperor.

An Eagle in the heraldic language stands for fortitude.

An interesting symbolic expression of the eagle is that seen on some lecterns or ambos in churches. The eagle is the natural enemy of the serpent. The two Testaments are the two outspread wings of the eagle. On which can often be seen a large open Bible.

Its historical usage has led many to utilize the image to signify power, authority and strength, among them Austria, Former Prussia, and Russia, to name a few.

Many poets and artists have written about the eagle, and it continues to fire the imagination of man.

Who can forget that wonderful scene from “The Return of the King” (the last film in the Ring Trilogy), where the hobbits Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, their mission accomplished, sitting upon a lonely craggy mound, surrounded by the disintegrating mountain, and rivers of molten lava ... when all seems lost ... The exhilarating sight of the appearance of the great eagles coming down to rescue them and carrying them away from the fire and darkness!

The eagle in Christian art is emblematic of St. John the Evangelist, because like the eagle he looked upon, “the sun of glory.” The Word of God has the power to raise us up on eagles wings and bring us to Heaven.

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The Lily

The Lily in Christian art is a well known symbol of chastity, innocence and purity.

In pictures of the Annunciation, or Salutation, the Archangel Gabriel is sometimes depicted holding a Lily branch, or Mary herself is clasping a Lily, or there is a Lily in the vicinity.

“Hail Mary fairest flower
O Lily glistening white and stainless!
I greet you at this time with
Gabriel’s words sublime,
Ave O maid so highly favored!”

There is an old tradition that the Lily sprang from the repentant tears of Eve as she went forth from paradise. Here Mary can be seen as the New Eve, the Mother of life, who bore the fruit that redeemed us all from sin and every fall.

The Lily in the language of flowers means, “Majesty”. The Lily as we know it today is a trumpet like flower, stately and noble. Its large petals open and surrender to the light. It exudes a beautiful perfume, and bears a high pollen yield. The white Lily when it is full open resembles a star. It is a flower of great beauty and it is easy to see why artists have so often placed it within pictures of the Holy Virgin.

However, in Biblical times Lilies, *shushan* was a collective term for all the various flowers of the field, lilies, crocuses, irises, tulips, narcissus, all of which came forth from a womb like tuber.

“Blessed is the fruit of thy womb!”

A solitary symbol can be a great focus for reflection and prayer, perhaps you would like to obtain a Lily and place it at your shrine, prayer space, or take to the classroom. A lily is not very easy to draw but a symbolic Lily could easily be made out of white paper. It could be a catechetical focus and also to give added meaning; put, or ask the children to place their prayer petitions in its centre and then present the flower to Mary ... pray and use these symbols creatively. They blossom, all of them, in eternity.

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The Sacrificial Lamb of God — Jesus Christ

"The next day, John saw Jesus coming to him, and he said: Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who taketh away the sin of the world." (St. John 1.29)
"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb without voice before his shearer, so openeth he not his mouth." (Acts 8.32)

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The Sacred Host imprinted with the Christogram

The Body of Jesus Christ — *really and truly* (not symbolically) — after Consecration by the priest during the Canon of the Mass and received by the faithful during Holy Communion.

"Then Jesus said to them: Amen, amen, I say unto you: Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you." (St. John 6.53)

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By a Cloistered Poor Clare Colettine Nun in a Papally Enclosed Monastery
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