GONE FISHING:
THE USE OF SYMBOLS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

I caught the tail end of the Jesus Movement just as the ’60s were slipping out of sight. Like most teens of the time, I was casting in the waters of experimentation, but I stayed fairly close to the shores of orthodoxy. I came away with a fish, the *ichthus*—that cryptic and ancient Christian emblem—and with a curiosity over how the early church communicated her faith though symbols. Though scant, the visual art of the pre-Constantinian church, as seen in its usage of aniconic symbols, is reflective of its theological beliefs and furnishes us with a code of understanding the earliest doctrine.

Symbolism

Symbols are to art what notes are to music, as elemental as the alphabet of story. The dot where pencil meets paper is the initializing point of visual art; two crossed brush strokes reproduce the meaning of salvation. Symbols as they were used by the early church were the beginning of “Christian art”—that is, the great body of European ecclesiastical masterpieces. We need not look at the symbols themselves as works of art. They are more important for their subject matter and content than for design and composition, their purpose to make vivid or elucidate the represented subject.[1]

To undertake a study of symbols and begin to interpret the meaning in the mind of the artist within the context of his setting is the beginning of communication with him. Once we understand in a systematized manner the patterns that recur, and comprehend the intention of the pattern maker, we begin to see meanings everywhere. Verbal explanation is necessary to begin

[1] Albert C. Moore, *Iconology of Religions: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 18, 139.

with, in order to shed light on symbols—which are enigmatic, part of their very purpose as code. The symbolism behind the simple drawing gives it a new attribute, a deeper purpose.[2]

Having wandered through many a gallery, I can agree with art historian Kenneth Clark when he wrote, "If we do not know what a picture or series of pictures represents, our attention soon wanders, and our so-called 'aesthetic experience' is curtailed."[3] There is danger in seeing only the form or style of any artwork; symbolism in its primitive demeanour insists we do not overlook its deeper meaning. A symbol in its stark simplicity is almost cartoonish and cannot usually stand on its own artistic merit. It is obviously indicative, its meaning immediately and generally recognizable to us. (Think of our famous modern-day symbols, McDonald's golden arches or Mac's apple.) By studying symbolism, we can learn a tongue the ancients spoke and read again the messages on their hearts.

> Early Christian art, both in the East and in the West, was an act of symbols . . . Symbols constitute a language, and . . . tend to isolate and emphasize some dominant element of the person or thing symbolized. [They] are more likely to be peculiarly decorative as well as expressive of intense inner significance. [4]

A major purpose of art—readily seen, for example in the highly developed works of the Italian painter Caravaggio—was to "teach Christian lessons to a largely illiterate public through precise and literal visual images."[5] The art of the early church was neither decoration nor purely narrative depiction, but rather expression of religious truth.[6] Since literacy was so low and Christianity was a book-based religion, symbolism acted as a bridge of communication until the Scriptures were fully canonized, providing a language accessible to all. The first generation of believers avoided direct portrayal of physical likeness, and here we must make a distinction

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[2] Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1986), 6.
[3] Kenneth Clark, "Foreword" in *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* by James Hall (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), vii-viii.
[4] Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1936), 215.
[5] Gertrude Grace Sill, *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1975), xi.
[6] Bernard S. Myers, *Art and Civilization*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), 121.

between the iconic (literally, "with a likeness") and aniconic ("without a likeness"). When a piece of art becomes realistically pictorial (that is, iconic), it is in danger of losing its symbolic purity beneath the application of formal artistic style. (Compare the symbolism of the second-century laurel victory wreath with sixteenth-century Raphael's complex "Resurrection of Christ," in which Jesus in a red robe grasps a cross-topped, military-style flag as He rises above an open marble sarcophagus, attended by winged angels. Though the symbolism of the second is strong, concerted analysis is required to see past the visual stimulation of the style, technique, and artistic cleverness.) "A symbol is infinitely richer than an actual portrayal . . . [for] symbols do not simply express what things look like—they express what things *are*. That is the principle behind all good art."[7]

Influences

Some scholars have critically have maintained that paganism deeply influenced the choice of symbols by the early church; for example, Didron held that the nimbus was an attribute of pagan divinity.[8] Others allowed for the use of pagan schemas if accompanied by the infusion of Christian content and interpretation, adding new significance. "The fish was already a religious symbol in Judaism and cults of the ancient world," iconology scholar Albert C. Moore wrote. "The whole art and culture of the Roman Empire was connected with ancient myth and ritual and it was no matter of easy tolerance or indifference when Christians came into conflict with the culture."[9] Even in these earliest days of Christian art, the question arose about the line

[7] Canon Edward N. West, *Outward Signs: The Language of Christian Symbolism* (New York: Walker and Co., 1989), 24.
[8] Alphonse Napolean Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages* (New York: Frederich Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), 37.
[99] Moore, 232, 235.

between sacred and secular subject matter, yet the greater argument concerning the use itself of symbols was over the question of idolatry.

Believers in the first centuries were steeped in the knowledge and tradition of Judaism. The abundant literary symbolism of the Old Testament stories provided eminently transferable subject matter, yet the prohibition against graven images disallowed the flourishing of a Jewish visual art (although one could argue that the tabernacle and priestly vestments were a highly symbolic artistic development). Israel was particularly careful to never picture the person of God, whose holy name must not even be uttered. This stricture was probably the cause of early Jewish Christians' hesitation in portraying deity as a person and their choice of symbols in alluding to the eternal qualities and divine attributions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In an article entitled "Jewish Tuna and Christian Fish" discussing the classification of religious art, one academic explored the complex issue of differentiating the characteristic features of each.[10] For example, the symbol of the *menorah* has been archaeologically and historically viewed as a strictly Jewish indicator, and the *chi-rho* as Christian, but they are not in fact mutually exclusive, as seen in the pluralistic blending of religious communities in turn-of-the-era Syria. The Dura-Europos Synagogue (one of the oldest in the world), uncovered in 1932, is an example of deviation from the Jewish prohibition against making a likeness; it is "a splendid synagogue covered with paintings, a sort of illustrated Bible, revealing the existence of a Jewish art and a Jewish iconology."[11] The frescoes of Dura and the Catacombs of Rome comprise the greatest bulk of pre-third-century biblical art available for study. This relative

[10] Ross S. Kraemer, "Jewish Tuna and Christian Fish: Identifying Religious Affiliation in Epigraphic Sources," *Harvard Theological Review* 84:2 (1991): 141-162.
[11] Bernard S. Meyers and Trewin Copplestone, *The History of Art: Architecture, Painting, Sculpture* (New York: Exeter Books, 1985), 187.

dearth of explicitly Christian art before the time of Constantine and the Christianizing of culture has been explained by Moore:

> The message of Christianity took written form in the New Testament as the Christian complement to the Jewish Bible, and it shaped the life and ministry of the church with its teachings and sacraments. But it did not at first stimulate the visual arts, and during the first three centuries Christians had neither the opportunity nor the need for much more than aniconic symbols. When the church ceased to be a suspect minority and received imperial support, there developed new and impressive church buildings, accompanied by decorations, images and ultimately a proliferation of Christian art throughout Europe.[12]

The early church, rather than viewing symbols as a contravention of God's Old Testament proclamation against graven images, may have deliberately employed them as an act of worship. In the Pentateuch, God told the Jewish people (and, the earliest Christians would have believed, told them as well) to tie His commandments as "symbols" [from *avah*—"to draw"] on their hands and to bind them on their foreheads, to write them on the doorframes of their houses and on their gates (Deut. 6:8-9). The Jews took this passage literally by hanging phylactery on their bodies and doorposts, while the early Christian believers apparently appropriated the command by drawing symbolic art on their possessions. Christians may have justified this by remembering that God Himself had set a rainbow in the clouds as a "sign" (also from *avah*—"to draw") of His covenant (Gen. 9:13). The existent Jewish practices based on the Law, in combination with the wealth of literary Old Testament symbolism and the influence of pagan culture, may have provided the early church with the impetus to launch out into the creative waters of "doing art."

Because the canon of Scripture had not yet been finally delineated, the attitudes of the ante-Nicene church fathers towards the portrayal of doctrinal truth in pictures were also very

[12] Moore, 228.

influential; their works were widely read and generally regarded as authoritative.[13] Clement of Alexandria took a hard line against any painting and sculpture as "heathenish," but did allow for the use of gold finger-rings as a tool for sealing household goods for safekeeping—instructing Christians to use designs that would symbolize spiritual subjects (such as baptism).[14] After discussing the meanings of the symbols used in the tabernacle and its furnishings, which God Himself had artistically designed, Clement differentiated between using symbols and making idols—leaving room for man's creativity on the basis of God's creating, and even encouraging the use of the symbolic to veil the truth from profane unbelievers.[15] Tertullian, for his part and despite his strong stance on separating Christianity from culture, was not against the arts but approved the crafting of useful items and ornaments in place of reproducing likenesses of the gods currently in demand.[16] (This was not a question of creating images of saints; the time was as yet too early.) Origen wrote, "We do not imagine that these images are representations of God, for they cannot represent a being who is invisible and incorporeal," drawing a clear line against picturing deity but perhaps not against the portrayal of other subjects.[17]

Whatever their positions on painting, carving, or sketching in artistic representation, the early fathers were highly symbolic in their own literary exposition of church doctrine. Tertullian, for example, wrote, "But a 'sheep' properly means a Christian, and the Lord's 'flock' is the people of the Church, and the 'good shepherd' is Christ."[18] The martyrdom of Polycarp, "a goodly ram out of a great flock [taken] for an offering, a whole burnt offering made ready and acceptable to God," was described in word pictures: "The fire made the appearance of a vaulted

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[13] Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., "Introductory Note to the Works of Origen," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. IV (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 223.
[14] Clement of Alexandria, "Exhortation to the Heathen" and "The Instructor," *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. II, 223, 285.
[15] Clement, "The Stomata, or Miscellanies," *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. II, 452-3, 458.
[16] Tertullian, "On Idolatry," *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. IV, 65.
[17] Origen, "Against Celsus," *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. IV, 637.
[18] Tertullian, "On Modesty," *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. IV, 80.

roof, like a ship's sail filling out with the wind . . . the body . . . a loaf baking."[19] These themes were employed by subsequent artists, seemingly copied from the metaphors within the fathers' teachings, the "language of theology assuming shape under them."[20] Although the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the following two centuries had not yet played out, "the main line of doctrinal development was already established."[21] As doctrine matured, visual symbolism grew alongside.

Symbols and their Doctrines

From the earliest Roman Catacomb murals in the first century until the catalyst of official clerical art in the fourth, symbols proliferated. Frescoes on plaster walls, carvings on sarcophagi, lamps and jewellery, and etchings on coins, seals, and household utensils of the ordinary folk repeated themes over and again that ripple down the years to us today. Although the archaeological record is incomplete, the consistency of the patterns leads to easy identification of the most typical and recurrent symbols.

Tertullian wrote, "Happy is our sacrament of water."[22] Indeed, water is related to many symbols as well as to the maturing doctrines of the early church—which grew up, after all, on the shores of a sea. It was over the waters that the Spirit hovered in creation, and from the waters of baptism that the early believers "obtained" this Holy Spirit. The Flood brought the judgment of God—or salvation from it. The tears of Christ expressed His great love for Lazarus and foreshadowed resurrection, while the tears of the repentant woman bathed the Saviour's feet. Water figured in Christ's first miracle at Cana, and in His cleansing of the leper, and in His

[19] "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337*, ed. James Stevenson (London: S.P.C.K.), 22.
[20] Roberts and Donaldson, 223.
[21] Stevenson, 63.
[22] Tertullian, "On Baptism," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III, 672.

crucifixion as it mingled with His blood. One day the Lord will invite each in the universal church to take freely of the water of life.

Into this perspective of water, then, swims my fish—the *ichthus*. In early Christian art and literature, the fish was the symbol for Christ.[23] Origen sited Christ as the *ichthus*.[24] According to some, the fish is the earliest of Christian symbols, used by persecuted believers to covertly identify themselves to one another because, to the uninitiated, the fish was mere decoration.[25] The Greek letters for the word "fish" form an acrostic for the title "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour" and, while possibly pagan in origin (it appears in the gnostic Sibylline Oracles), the symbol was used even by the Jews to refer to feast days and to the coming Messiah.[26]

Tertullian wrote, "But we, little fishes, after the example of our *Icqus* Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water."[27] Baptism is a theme found in Christian art of all periods, indicated at times by the presence of three fish (a very early depiction as well of the Trinity) or the dove.[28] The later, more complex ecclesiastical paintings of the baptismal scene employ the symbol of the fish or dove developed in the first century. Jesus promised to make the disciples fishers of men, affording another watery picture to the early church—that of the fisherman with his net, a net that "can contain all without breaking."[29] The act of removing fish from their life-giving environment became

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[23] F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 514.
[24] Origen, "In Leviticum Homilia," quoted in N.J. McEleney, "153 Great Fishes (John 21, 11)—Gematriacal Atbash," *Biblica* 58:3 (1977), 417.
[25] Sill, 20.
[26] Cross and Livingstone, 514; Kraemer, 141; Arthur deVries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, 2d ed. (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1976), 189.
[27] Tertullian, "On Baptism,"*Ante-Nicene Fatthers*, vol. III, 672
[28] James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 39; Roland H. Bainton, *Behold the Christ: A Portrayal in Words and Pictures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 78.
[29] West, 14.

synonymous also with eschatological hope, emphasizing the salvation of the Christian fished up by the net of faith.[30]

Floating over the hostile waters of the world is the ship, or the ark of Noah, signifying again the salvific function of the church—the "ship in which the faithful found safety and were borne to salvation."[31] Tertullian compared the place of worship itself with a ship; hence, the word "nave" from the Latin *navis*, meaning "ship." As has been noted, "The mast is generally in the form of a cross and may be surmounted by a dove. Sometimes the ship is borne on the back of a fish, the early symbol of Christ."[32] According to Hippolytus, Bishop Callistus in about 220 A.D. used the comparison of Noah's ark to the church.[33] Early jewellers and gravediggers—the *fossores* who decorated the tombs—found the boat a suitable design.

Every ship needs an anchor, and it is no surprise to find this depiction favoured among early artists. A coin marked with an anchor twisted about by a dolphin was circulated during the reign of Titus in 70-81 A.D. Many writers—among them John Chrysostom (d. 407)—have attributed to the anchor the significance of hope, which steadies the vessel of the church in rough seas.[34] However, the anchor poses an unusual aberration in the study of symbols, as it virtually disappeared from art about the end of the third century, just when Christianity was gaining a hopeful foothold and other symbols were on the increase. It has been suggested that the anchor was not a symbol of hope after all, but a type of cross combined (in pun) with the Greek word *ankura*, which sounds like the phrase *en kurio* for "in the Lord"; then, when Latin became the dominant language, the pun lost its clever meaning and the crucifix took its place.[35]

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[30] McEleney, 416-7.
[31] Cross and Livingston, 87.
[32] Hall, 221.
[33] Hippolytus, "Refutation of all Heresies," *A New Eusebius*, 166.
[34] Charles Kennedy, "The Early Christians and the Anchor," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 38:3-4 (1975), 119.
[35] Kennedy, 115-124.

Although the anchor might not stand for hope after all, this characteristic is not left without representation. The immortality, triumph, and victory of the resurrection of Christ and, ultimately, of all believers is modelled by a crown of laurel leaves. A main doctrinal theme since the beginning of the persecuted church, the resurrection of Christ from the dead does not appear in realistic Christian art for a millennium, probably due to the aversion inherited from the Jewish Old Testament against the direct portrayal of God. Another green plant, the vine, was constantly used as a decorative motif even in pagan religious art, an example of how early Christian painters gave new meaning to traditional forms. This vine reminded the first believers of the nourishing attribute of Christ, with the vineyard of the church producing fruit of the Holy Spirit.[36] Within the practices of this vineyard, worship and the *agape* meal were prominently featured, resulting in the two more symbols: The *orans* was a simple figure with upraised arms indicating an attitude of prayer, and a basket of bread and fish came to represent the meal or Jesus' miraculous feeding of the multitude. (A famous example of the bread-and-fish combination is the fresco on the crypt of Lucinda, Catacomb of Callixtus, one of the oldest in Rome.) A common misreading of the loaves-and-fishes symbol is that it typifies the Lord's Supper, a pictorial representation found only after the time of Constantine.

> The Eucharist—the consecration of the elements—was not separated from the common meal, the *agape*, or love feast, for some time . . . We do have a number of representations of the love feasts of the catacombs, but these are not to be interpreted as portrayal of the historic Last Supper. They depict the actual love feasts of the Christian congregations.[37]

The cross, existing today in hundreds of variations, is a symbol from deep antiquity, its use in crucifixion probably conceived by the Phoenicians.[38] In fact, in the first art of Christendom it is hardly found at all, not being a happy subject, and Christ on the cross does not

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[36] Jennifer Speake, *The Dent Dictionary of Symbolism in Christian Art* (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), 151.
[37] Bainton, 111.
[38] J.D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 273.

appear until the middle of the fourth century (some scholars dating its appearance as late as the sixth century). Early believers tended to focus on miraculous healings and the victories of resurrection and ascension. The suffering of the Saviour was gently and more optimistically reflected by Christ as sacrificial lamb; in later art, the lamb was festooned with crosses, haloes, and banners as the theology of the "suffering Christ" underwent further cultural changes. But the most popular symbol of Christ until the reign of Charlemagne was likely the good shepherd with a sheep about his shoulders.

The X-shaped cross, very common in the first three centuries, might have had nothing to do with the cross of Jesus' crucifixion; the Greek *chi*, representing the first letter of the name of Christ, was an acceptable sign for the sealing of household possessions of believers—and remains a legal signature even today for the illiterate. The combination of the *chi* (X) and *rho* (P) formed the abbreviation for the word *chrestos* ("auspicious") and was the earliest monogram or initial for Christ, another symbol that began simply and developed an elaborate history. The *chi-rho* (X overlaying P) looks similar to the Latin word *pax*, meaning "peace"; it was used as a good-luck charm even before Constantine appropriated it as his own on behalf of Christianity. So the cross is not as established an early symbol of Christ as is the fish.

Ah, that ancient fish! He has been swimming in and out among the swarm of early church symbols through the rivers of time, representing Jesus Christ Himself, "the great fish taken by the fish-hook of God . . . whose flesh nourishes the world."[39] The faith of the early church believers, springing from Scripture and affected by tradition, resulted in an art steeped in aniconic symbol.

[39] Julius Africanus, quoted by Tertullian in James Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Life and Death in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 183.