Behold the Lamb

An Introduction to the Signs and Symbols of the Church
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Concordia Publishing House - Saint Louis
What are Symbols?

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

JOHN 1:29

God gave John the Baptist eyes of faith to see that Jesus truly is the Lamb of God who came into this world to save all people.

When sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, our heavenly Father promised to provide forgiveness and salvation through a Messiah, a savior from sin. This Savior would become the ultimate and perfect sacrifice for sin. As God’s people waited and watched for the promised sacrifice, they offered lamb and other animals on altars as payment for their sins. The value of these sacrifices was that they pointed God’s Son, Jesus Christ, as the only sacrifice that would destroy sin. Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection is the sacrifice that won victory over sin and death for all people.

John the Baptist’s words tell a story and give us images that help us understand what he is saying. From the beginning, God has used language, which forms pictures in our minds when He talks to us. The Christian Church, too, has used the language of pictures or symbols to point people to God, who is our only salvation from sin, death, and the devil.
Today, when God’s people see an image of a lamb with a victory flag, they understand that this is a symbol of Jesus, who died on the cross to take away the sin of the world.

You may already know many of the symbols used to tell the Church’s story of salvation because they are found many places in your church, such as on the walls, windows, banners, and altar. No matter which symbol you look at, all are part of the story of your salvation, each symbol pointing you to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!
Symbols about God

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.”

**Luke 3:21–22**

Our God, the only true God, is a triune God. Triune means “three in one.” The true God is three distinct persons in one divine being. How this is possible is a mystery that we cannot explain or understand.

The Holy Trinity is eternal, without beginning or end. At the creation of the world, God said, “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). At Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan River, God the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove, and God the Father’s voice proclaimed that Jesus is His Son. In the Church, Christians are baptized into the name of the triune God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Long ago, in the days after Jesus ascended into heaven, there were false teachers who did not believe in the triune God. The first Christians defended the teaching of the Trinity by composing three creeds or confessions of faith: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Some of the earliest hymns sung in churches teach about the Trinity. The Church also developed a number of symbols for the Trinity, which helped to speak the truth. Each symbol tells the story of one God in three persons.

The first and most common symbol of the Holy Trinity combines three circles, one for each person of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The circles are intertwined to show that these three persons are joined as one. A trefoil, a leaf with three circle parts like a clover, is similar in meaning.

An equilateral triangle is one of the oldest symbols for the Holy Trinity. Its sides and angles are of equal length, none of them greater than the other. Sometimes the three circles and the triangle are combined along with the symbols for each person of the Holy Trinity.

The creeds lead us in confessing that God is three persons in one. The creeds, sometimes called symbols, help us understand what cannot be seen. The symbols like the triangle and the interlocking circle help us visualize the Holy Trinity.

Lord God Almighty, unto Thee be glory,
One in three persons, over all exalted!
Glory we offer, praise Thee and adore Thee,
Now and forever. *LSB* 504:4
Symbols of God the Son

[I believe] in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

—The Apostles’ Creed, Second Article

Using God's Word as their guide, the first Christians developed many symbols for Jesus. They used symbols in underground caves and caverns to mark the graves of those who had died. Later, symbols were painted and carved on the walls and furnishings of churches. Today, these same symbols are recognized and repeated by God's people in homes and churches all over the world.

Jesus told His disciples that He was the true vine and that those who trust in Him for salvation are branches of the vine. In order to produce fruit and stay green, the branches need to be attached to the vine. We stay attached to Jesus through His Word and Sacraments. Church art uses the symbol of the vine to represent Jesus, the true vine, and our relationship with Him.
Worthy are You, to take the scroll and to open its seals, for You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.

REVELATION 5:9–10

The Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God, is one of the most frequently used symbols for our Lord Jesus Christ. The lamb reminds us that payment for sin required a sacrifice, and that Jesus was the ultimate and final sacrifice for sin. Jesus is the Lamb of God foretold by Isaiah and John the Baptist. The Agnus Dei stands with a victor’s flag and tells the story of Christ’s victory over sin and death. The Agnus Dei is sometimes shown resting on a book with seven seals. This symbol comes from Revelation, where St. John tells us that the Lamb of God is the only one who can break these heavenly seals and open heaven to us.

At the Lamb's high feast we sing
Praise to our victorious King,
Who has washed us in the tide
Flowing from His side. LS8 633:1
Evangelists and Apostles

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

MATTHEW 28:18–20

When Jesus walked upon this earth, He gathered to Himself a group of men. The men left their work and their homes to follow Jesus. These companions of Jesus became His disciples. God used these men in special ways, working through them to establish the Christian Church and to preach and record God’s Word.

The first of these men are the four evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Their symbols date to the early days of the Christian Church. An evangelist is one who proclaims the Word of God. Their symbols help us to understand what these men thought important to
write down about Jesus. Their writings are the first four books of the New Testament, known as the Gospels. In each of the four Gospel writers' symbols, the wings and the nimbus tell us that Jesus was true God.

The symbol of St. Matthew is the winged man that looks much like an angel. In His Gospel, Matthew wrote about Jesus' human family and His incarnation, the fact that Jesus is both true God and true man.

St. Mark's symbol is a winged lion because the beginning of Mark's Gospel is about John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. His preaching about Jesus was bold like a roaring lion.

A winged ox is the symbol for St. Luke. This symbol reminds us that Luke gave the fullest account of Jesus' suffering and death as the sacrifice for sin. An ox is an animal of sacrifice. Jesus is the final and complete sacrifice.

St. John's symbol is an eagle flying upward to the sky. The Gospel of St. John is written in such a way that its words seem to soar as if on eagles wings and thus reminds us of Christ's ascension to heaven after Easter.

Saints, see the cloud of witnesses surround us;
Their lives of faith encourage and astound us.
Hear how the Master praised their faith so fervent:
"Well done, My servant!" *LSB 667:1*
Adonai. Hebrew for "Lord"; a name for Jesus.

Advent. From Latin *advenire*, meaning "to come unto." The season of preparation marked by the four Sundays before Christmas. During this time the Church looks forward to Jesus coming into the world.

Agnus Dei. Latin for "Lamb of God"; designation given to Jesus by John the Baptist (John 1:29).

altar. A stone or wooden structure at the center of the chancel. Church altars provide focus of the congregation's worship and the sacramental focus as the place from which God gives His gifts.

apostle. One sent directly by Christ into the world to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20).

Apostles' Creed. See Creed.

Athanasian Creed. See Creed.

Baptism, Holy. Sacrament by which the Holy Spirit creates faith through the application of water connected with God's Word.

chalice. From the Latin for "cup"; traditionally a gold or silver cup lined with gold; used to distribute wine at Holy Communion; may be made of ceramic, glass, or even wood.

Christmas. The time of the Church Year that focuses on the Father sending the Son to save the world; includes the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany.

Church Year. The Church's calendar organized to observe the events in the life of Christ and the Church.

Communion, Holy. See Sacrament of the Altar.

covenant. From the Hebrew word for "to fetter," meaning "to bind or restrain." A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties or a promise made by one party to another.

creed. From the Latin word *credo*, "I believe"; a summary of what the Church believes; refers to any of the three Ecumenical Creeds used in worship: the Apostles' Creed, used at Baptisms, funerals, and non-Communion services; the Nicene Creed, often used at services with Holy Communion; the Athanasian Creed, often spoken on Trinity Sunday.

crucifix. A cross with the figure of the crucified Christ upon it.

disciple. A student or follower; one who follows Christ Jesus and His teachings.

Easter. The celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord, the day when Jesus rose from the tomb. The date of Easter is determined by the date of the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox.
Emmanuel. Hebrew for “God with us”; a name for Jesus.

Epiphany. The day celebrating Jesus’ “revealing” as God in the flesh to the Gentile Magi; the eighth day after Christmas, January 6.

Eucharist. See Sacrament of the Altar.

evangelist. From the Greek words for “Gospel” and “messenger.” One whom the Church has sent to preach the Gospel. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the four evangelists in Scripture.

fair linen. Long, fine linen cloth placed over the altar and draping nearly to the floor; usually has five crosses representing the wounds of Jesus, symbolic of Christ’s burial cloth.

font. Large basin or pool that holds water for Baptism.

Gospel. The Good News of God’s gracious love in Christ for the redemption of the world; the first four books of the New Testament.

host. Latin for “sacrifice or victim”; individual Communion wafers; Christ Himself, who serves His gathered guests.

ICHTHUS. The Greek word for “fish”, ICHTHUS is an acronym from the first letters of the Greek words “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.”

Lent. From the Latin for “spring”; a season of forty weekdays before Easter; a time of preparation and repentance before the celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord.

Lord’s Supper. See Sacrament of the Altar.

Manus Dei. Latin for “the hand of God.”

martyr. From the Greek word for “witness”; someone who voluntarily suffers the penalty of death for witnessing about the Savior.

nave. Latin for “ship”; the main portion of a church building where people gather to worship and pray.

Nicene Creed. See creed.

nimbus. Latin for “cloud”; the round shape with a cross in it that often accompanies pictures or symbols of God the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit.

Office of the Keys. The authority given to the Church by God to forgive the sins of repentant sinners and to bind the sins to unrepentant sinners.

paraments. The colored cloths that are used to decorate the altar, pulpit, and lectern according to the seasons of the Church Year.
Passion of our Lord. The time of Jesus' suffering and death as recorded in the Gospels.

Pentecost. From the Greek meaning "fifty." The day when the Holy Spirit gave the apostles the ability to preach the Gospel in many different languages, celebrated on the fiftieth day of Easter.

Sacrament of the Altar. The celebration of Christ's true body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine; Christians eat and drink this sacrament for the forgiveness of sin; also called the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, and Holy Communion.

Sacrament. From the Greek word "mystery"; a sacred act instituted by God in which God Himself has joined His Word of promise to a visible element and by which He offers, gives, and seals the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ.

sacrifice. To give up or destroy something, often in exchange for something else (verb); something offered to God (noun).

sign/symbol. A visual image that points to or represents something else, a greater reality.

Trinity, triune. One true God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

vestments. The special clothing that the pastor wears during the Divine Service. The various vestments have symbolic meanings that teach us about the pastoral office. For example, the alb is the white robe the pastor wears at the Divine Service: it symbolizes the white robe of Christ's righteousness, which covers ours sins and thus "covers up" the individual person of the pastor who stands in the stead of Christ when he preaches God's Word, forgives sins, and conducts the Sacraments.

Words of our Lord. The words spoken by Christ when He instituted the Sacrament of the Altar (Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–25); the pastor speaks these very words of Christ in the Service of the Sacrament at the consecration of the bread and wine.
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**What are Symbols?**

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In *Behold the Lamb*, the author explores the various symbols used in the Church. You will learn what the different symbols represent and how they are used.

*Also available: Worshipping with Angels and Archangels: An Introduction to the Divine Service (22-3094)
and Ordering Our Days in His Peace: An Introduction to the Christian Church Year (22-3103)*