Symbols in the Sanctuary

A guide to the art, images, colors, and numbers that visually present the Christian faith in worship.

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Etched Glass

These symbols are based on traditional and legendary stories about the Apostles.

**Greek Crosses** have equal length arms, while Latin crosses lengthen the lower bar of the cross—compare the crucifix above the altar. There are fourteen windows dividing the sanctuary from the narthex, so our twelve disciple windows are flanked by two Greek crosses.

**St. James the Greater** A pilgrim’s staff and wallet recall his 14 years of traveling after the death of Jesus while sharing the Good News of the Gospel. His death at the hand of Herod is mentioned in Acts 12.1-2, and according to legend (via Clement of Alexandria), his preaching converted the soldier assigned to lead him to execution.

**St. Thomas** The Apostle to India is reputed to have built a church at Malipur with his own hands that still stands today, hence the carpenter’s square. The spear is a symbol of his martyrdom at the hands of upper class Indians fearful that Christianity would undermine the caste system.

**St. Bartholomew**, also known as Nathaniel, was seized by the governor while preaching in Albanople, flayed alive, crucified, and then decapitated with a scimitar after his death. The three knives of his symbol are flaying knives.
St. Matthew is represented in our windows by three purses, representing his former profession of tax collector. Every person can be changed by God and live a new life. He brought the Gospel to Ethiopia, and eventually was crucified on a tau (T-shaped) cross and decapitated with an axe.

St. John was the only apostle to die of old age, so stories about him focus on him nearly being martyred. This symbol tells the story of him miraculously surviving an attempt to murder him with a poisoned chalice.

St. Jude often traveled with St. Simon on missionary journeys over the sea. Because of this, he is often symbolized by a boat hook. His martyrdom story is not clear, with some stories saying he was beaten and others that he was crucified. Either way, he was martyred in Beirut around 65 AD.

St. Philip’s cross with two loaves of bread recalls his remark when Jesus fed the multitude, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (John 5.7). One martyrdom legend about Philip is that he was crucified upside down.

St. Peter’s keys represent the “Office of the Keys,” or the authority Christ gives to pastors in Matthew 16.13-19 to forgive and retain sins. Peter is sometimes symbolized with an upside-down cross because he was crucified upside down, thinking himself unworthy to die in the same position as his Lord.
Judas Iscariot is the only non-apostle represented on our windows. He is the man who betrayed our Lord in exchange for thirty pieces of silver, shown in an arc above a purse. Judas kept the money for the disciples and stole from it (John 12.6).

St. Andrew, like Peter and others, did not want to be crucified in the same way as Jesus, so he asked to be crucified diagonally. He was put to death in Greece for preaching the Gospel. Many places, notably Scotland, have adopted this symbol in his honor.

St. Simon was regarded as a great fisher of people through the power of the Gospel, and thus his symbol combines his former career of fisherman with his God-given vocation of Apostle.

St. James the Lesser is represented by a saw because of the gruesome legend associated with his martyrdom. As a 96 year old man, he was hauled to the top of a tall building near Jerusalem and pushed off. Surviving that, he continued to beg the Lord to forgive his enemies. He was stoned, was beaten with a fuller’s bat, and then was sawn apart.
Peter Walking on Water

*But when [Peter] noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’* - Matthew 14.30

Peter stepped out of the boat and walked upon the water in faith, but when his faith failed, he began to sink and cried out to the Lord for help. This window is to remind us to call upon Christ for help in every need.

**Circles and Orbs** have many meanings in Christian symbolism. They may be symbolic of the fullness of the Earth or the completeness of God. Additionally, the oval forms may represent eggs, symbolic of Easter and new life in
Roses and Lilies

All of the floral patterns built into our sanctuary are beautiful and decorative, but some have extra meanings.

Just as we decorate the altar with white lilies during the season of Easter, we find them featured on our stained glass windows year-round. White is a symbolic color for purity, and the lily commonly blooms at Easter. The three dimensional crosses on either side of the west windows (*shown left*) also feature seven green leaves on each side, a symbolic number representing God. Smaller versions of this design adorn the north window (*shown bottom right*).

The rose (*shown bottom left*) on the end of each arm of the crucifix above the center of the altar refers to the prophecy of Isaiah 35.2 that the desert shall “blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.”
Jesus Coming on the Clouds

Jesus said, ‘I am; and “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power”, and “coming with the clouds of heaven.” ’ - Mark 14.62

“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” - Nicene Creed

This window, perched high above the altar, connects the center of our worship life with the return of Christ. At the heart of our worship is Word and Sacrament. Word is both Holy Scripture and Christ Himself, the Living Word. The sacraments are also encounters with Christ, who is really present in the bread and wine of Holy Communion and whose Spirit works through the waters of Holy Baptism.

Just as we are reunited with God through Word and Sacrament each week at worship, we look forward to Christ’s return, where he will right all wrongs and injustices, heal all sickness and difficulties, and be constantly present to us. This beautiful window encourages us to trust him and await that day with faith and hope.
Christ Blessing the Children

*But Jesus called for them and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.’* - Luke 18.16

This window is a very famous scene, reproduced in many churches around the United States. Our version of the window is significant in that it favors bolder colors above fine details of texture in the individual glass panes.

Children in the time of Jesus were not treated as valuable and loved as they are today—they had no rights and were not worthy of time or attention. Jesus’ message of new life is for everyone in the world, including children, the poor, the marginalized, the outcast, and those who look and act differently than us. We are the ones Jesus has picked to carry his message to the world.
Behold, I stand at the door and knock

*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*—Revelation 3.20

This window depicts Jesus wearing a traveler’s cape and holding a walking stick, knocking at the door. We believe that he knocks at the door of each of our hearts, always seeking entrance—in short, that every person is part of God’s chosen ones. When we feel discouraged or abandoned, this window is intended to encourage us.

**Tau Cross**

This cross, named after the Greek letter having the same appearance, is found in the Narthex. It reminds us of the confession of the thief on the cross, who is traditionally depicted dying on this kind of cross.
Around the Altar

Adorning the front of the altar and the processional cross are two artistic renderings of the letters IHS. The letters are a Greek abbreviation for the name IHSOUS, *(pronounced ee-AY-zoos)*, the name of Jesus in Greek. Unlike English, in Biblical (Koine) Greek, abbreviations of words are often formed by the first, sometimes the second, and the last letter of the word. Typically these abbreviations have a horizontal bar above them. When the letters are lowercase, the “h” is often artistically bent to represent that bar, as in our processional cross *(shown bottom right)*. The artist who carved our altar inscription *(show bottom left)* used capitals, and thus included a cross both to further symbolize Christ and to provide the horizontal bar for the abbreviation.

Both symbols below are wrapped in a four lobed figure called a quatrefoil, a Celtic figure representing all of life or life in God.
The Crucifix depicts the central event of Christianity—the death of Jesus Christ. His clothing is blue and gold—blue represents heaven, and gold represents divinity. Thus, the dying body of Christ is simultaneously clothed in divinity, reminding us that Christ was both human and divine, and that we can truly say that “God died on the cross.”

The inscription INRI above Jesus’ head is an acronym of the Latin phrase IESVS· NAZARENVS· REX· IVDÆORVM, (Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum), which means “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” All four Gospels tell that Pilate challenged Jesus to deny this appellation; the Gospel of John records Pilate refusing to soften the inscription to “This man said he was the King of the Jews” (John 19.20-22).

The crucifix stands as a potent reminder of the amazing gift we have been given by God: new and eternal life with God through the innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross.
Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ - Luke 3.21-22

The dove is the traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit, and it can be found in banners all over the sanctuary year-round, but especially in the season after Pentecost. The dove was seen at the baptism of Jesus, quoted above, but also at other important points in the Biblical story. The dove brings news of the end of the Noahic flood, and thus news of peace with God. It was also a symbol of innocence, and was commonly offered in sacrifice at the Jerusalem temples.

The flame above the dove’s head reminds us of the Pentecost event, where tongues of fire came to rest on the heads of the disciples, and they began to understand each other’s foreign languages. Pentecost is the birthday of the Church.
'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' - Revelation 22.13

The Paschal Candle (or Christ Candle) (shown right) is a symbol of Christ’s presence for us in worship. It is lit for worship each Sunday as a reminder that Christ is the light of our lives, and it symbolizes Christ’s eternal presence with us, his people. The Greek letters Alpha and Omega remind us that Christ is the Word through whom the world was created and the one who will come to judge the living and the dead at its end. Our candle features palm branches, a sign of peace with God, as well as five wax “nails” symbolic of the five wounds of Christ.

The Sanctuary Lamp (or Eternal Flame) (shown left) in Lutheran churches represents the continual presence of God among his people in his sanctuary. Moreover, it shows us that the light of Christ continues to shine even in a sin-darkened world.
The Ceiling is an abstract pattern of crosses and crowns. The crosses represent Christ, and are found in groupings of one and three. The single crosses remind us of the oneness of God—at its core, Christianity, like Judaism before it, is a monothestic religion. The three crosses remind us of the Trinity. Moreover, three is a perfect number, and in Christian symbolism often represents the divine.

There are over 400 cross-like patterns with symbolic meaning to humans. Of those, Christians commonly use 50. The eight large crosses (one is shown inset, below) on the ceiling are properly termed “Crosses Patee’ Concave and Quadrate.” “Crosses Patee’” are crosses that flare outward. “Concave” indicates that the ends of these crosses are scalloped inward. “Quadrate” means that the cross is superimposed on a square.

The crowns on the ceiling remind us the Christ is Lord of Lords and King of Kings.
Other Symbols

**Symbolic Numbers**

- 1 = the oneness of God
- 2 = the two natures of Christ; fully human and fully divine
- 3 = the Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- 4 = Four Gospels, Four Corners of the Earth, Four Seasons
- 5 = Five Wounds of Christ; hands, feet, and side
- 6 = Creation in six days, Imperfection (it is one less than seven)
- 7 = Perfection
- 8 = Regeneration, Resurrection
- 9 = Mystery and Angels
- 10 = Completion; ten commandments, ten plagues, etc.
- 12 = Church; twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, etc.
- 13 = Betrayal; thirteen people present at the Last Supper
- 40 = Trial or Testing; 40 days/years in the wilderness

**Symbolic Colors**

- **Red** = blood, the saints and martyrs, fire; Pentecost
- **White** = purity, innocence, holiness; Christmas and Easter
- **Purple** = penitence, mourning, royalty, Advent and Lent
- **Green** = triumph of life over death; Epiphany and “ordinary time”
- **Blue** = heaven, truth, the sky; Advent
- **Black** = sin and death