

Christian Symbols and Their Relevance Today

Every group and religion has its own unique symbols. Often, just seeing the symbol evokes images of the group or religion. The “Stars and Bars” is the unmistakable symbol of the United States, the “Maple Leaf” is Canada, the “Star of David” is Judaism, and the “Crescent Moon” is Islam. For Christians, the most obvious and long-lasting symbol is the Cross.

Symbols invest objects or actions with an inner meaning. Symbolism is effective when it appeals to both the intellect and the emotions. Christian symbols have existed since the time of the Apostles. Some symbols evolved out of a need to remain secret during times of persecutions. Others elevated common objects to sacred levels. Many symbols are rooted in ancient beliefs or customs that were “converted” to take on developing Christian theology.

Among the symbols employed by the early Christians, the Cross and the Fish seemed to have the greatest importance. The Cross is a direct connection to both the cross of Jesus Christ and the challenge that those who are followers must “take up your cross and follow me!” The Fish is directly related to the image of Saint Peter, the “fisher of men.” The fish came to represent the followers of Christ early in the life of the Church. Ancient tombs and altars were often decorated with fish symbols.

Not all symbols stand the test of time. Some are so bound to cultural attitudes they have lost some meaning as generalists pass and cultures change. Over the years, I have come to appreciate many Christian symbols – their history, their theology, and their beauty. Three of these symbols stand out, not only because of their rich heritage, but because the power of these symbols is still powerful today in our current time of trial.

The Peacock

Adoration of the Magi

- Fra Angelico



The foundation of the use of the peacock as a Christian symbol is found in the ancient belief that peacock did not decompose after death. People in the ancient world believed the flesh of the dead peacock did not suffer the effects of death. The theology that death is not the end of life is at the heart of Christianity. It is easy to see why the incorruptible peacock became linked to the Resurrected Christ and the theology of the resurrection of the body.

In Christian art, the peacock was often the central image depicted in the Tree of Life. As we face the greatest threat to life in generations, the need to find support in the Christian theology that life is eternal is clear. The fragility of the body in the face of the COVID pandemic challenges us to accept that our morality exists only in the here and now – that, in Christ, we hold eternal life. Those who die in Christ, live in Christ for all time.

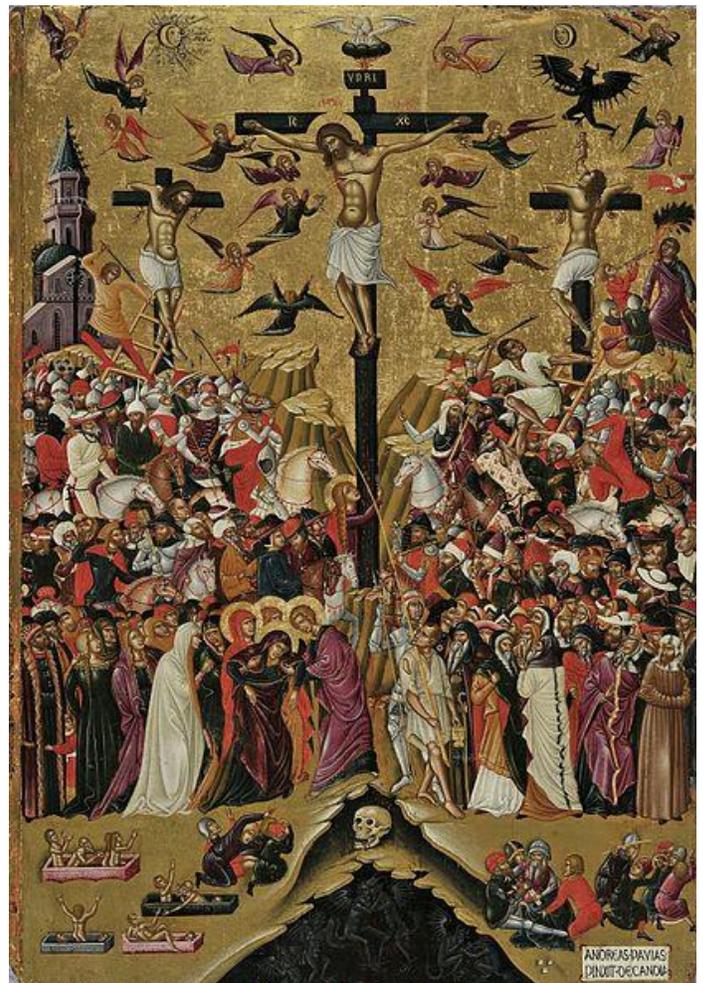
The Pelican

The Crucifixion

-Andreas Pavias

The Pelican is a Christian symbol that represents atonement and self-sacrifice, highlighting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In ancient time it was believed that if the mother pelican did not have enough food for her chicks, she would pierce the side of her body with her beak and feed her chicks with her own blood.

Today, we know that pelicans regurgitate food for their chicks and this often has a red color.



However, the image of a pierced side with life-giving blood flowing freely is a powerful reminder of the salvation in Christ's Passion and Death. When we picture Jesus on the cross, his blood flowing out, it is easy to see how the pelican became a symbol of the sacrifice of Jesus for the salvation of his people.

Consider the countless number of people in the medical and helping professions who have literally given of their lives in order to save those infected with the COVID virus. They have given of themselves so that others, often complete strangers, might survive.



This type of self-sacrifice is a core virtue of Christian life. Think of the many martyrs who lay down their lives for the sake of others.

Anchor

In the ancient world, anchors symbolized safety. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews used this symbol as an example of the hope Christians have in Christ: “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 6:19-20)

The anchor has a direct connection with two other early Christian symbols – the fish and the boat. The Greek word for fish is *Ichthys*, which, when using the Greek alphabet, makes up the initials of each word for the Greek phrase “*Iesous Christos Theou Huios Soter*” (“Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”). An anchor is critical to a boat, a symbol of the Church headed by Peter, who Jesus commissioned to become a “Fisher of Men”.



In a time we all feel isolated and stressed, the hope and security of the Church of Jesus Christ is more than an anchor. Christ reaches out through the Church to feed the needs – spiritual and physical – of its members and others, who are also the children of God.

The peacock, representing life beyond death, the pelican, representing self-sacrifice, and the anchor, representing hope, are virtues we all need in these days. We can look to Jesus, we can look to the Church, and we can look to those who live in Christ to hold us up, to give us life, and to provide a safe harbor.

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May 2020

